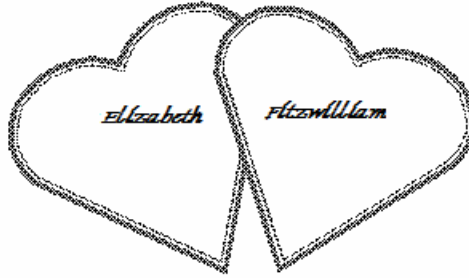


# *The Darcys at Year's End*



*By Sharon Lathan*

# **The Darcys at Year's End**



A Novel by

Sharon Lathan

# **The Darcy Saga**

*'Two Shall Become One ~ Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy'  
'Journeys Beyond Pemberley'  
'The Darcys at Year's End'*

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Sharon's website: [www.darcysaga.net](http://www.darcysaga.net)

## **Cast of Characters**

*Fitzwilliam Darcy*, Master of Pemberley in Derbyshire: 29 years of age; born November 10, 1787; parents- James and Lady Anne Darcy, both deceased; married Elizabeth Bennet on November 28, 1816

*Elizabeth Darcy*, Mistress of Pemberley: 22 years of age; born May 28, 1795; second Bennet daughter

*Georgiana Darcy*: 17 years of age; guardianship shared by her brother and cousin, Col. Fitzwilliam; companion is Mrs. Annesley

*Col. Richard Fitzwilliam*: 31 years of age; cousin and dear friend to Mr. Darcy; second son of Lord and Lady Matlock; regiment stationed in London

*Lord Malcolm Fitzwilliam*, Earl of Matlock: brother to Lady Anne Darcy; ancestral estate is Rivallain in Matlock, Derbyshire

*Lady Madeline Fitzwilliam*, Countess of Matlock: wife to Lord Matlock; mother of Jonathan, Annabella, and Richard

*Jonathan Fitzwilliam*: Heir to Matlock Earldom, eldest Fitzwilliam son; wife is *Priscilla*

*Charles Bingley*: longtime friend of Mr. Darcy; residence Hasberry Hall in Derbyshire

*Jane Bingley*: elder sister of Elizabeth; wife of Mr. Bingley; oldest Bennet daughter

*Caroline Bingley*: unmarried sister of Charles Bingley

*Louisa Hurst*: married sister of Charles Bingley; husband is *Mr. Arbus Hurst*; residence London

*Thomas and Rose Bennet*: Elizabeth's parents; reside at Longbourn in Hertfordshire

*Mary Bennet*: Elizabeth's sister; middle Bennet daughter

*Katherine (Kitty) Bennet*: Elizabeth's sister; fourth Bennet daughter

*Lydia Wickham*: Elizabeth's sister; youngest Bennet daughter; married to *Lieutenant George Wickham*, stationed in Newcastle

*Edward and Violet Gardiner*: uncle and aunt of Elizabeth; reside in Cheapside, London

*Dr. George Darcy*: Mr. Darcy's uncle; brother to James Darcy

*Lady Catherine de Bourgh*: Mr. Darcy's aunt; sister to Lady Anne Darcy; residence Rosings Park, Kent

*Anne de Bourgh*: daughter of Lady Catherine; Mr. Darcy's cousin

*Stephen Lathrop*: Cambridge friend of Mr. Darcy; resides at Stonecrest Hall in Leicestershire; wife is *Amelia*

*Henry Vernor*: family friend of the Darcys; residence is Sanburl Hall near Lambton, Derbyshire; wife is *Mary*, daughter is *Bertha*

*Gerald Vernor*: son of Henry Vernor; childhood friend of Mr. Darcy; wife is *Harriet*; reside at Sanburl Hall

*Albert Hughes*: childhood friend of Mr. Darcy; wife is *Marilyn*

*Rory Sitwell*: Derbyshire resident and Cambridge friend of Mr. Darcy; wife is *Julia*; residence Reniswahl Hall near Stavely

*George and Alison Fitzherbert*: Derbyshire residents and friends

*Clifton and Chloe Drury*: Derbyshire residents and friends; residence Locknell Hall near Derby

*Dr. Raul Penaflores Aleman de Vigo*: Spanish associate of Dr. George Darcy

*Joshua Daniels*: son and partner of Mr. Darcy's London solicitor, *Andrew Daniels*

*Charlotte Collins*: Longtime friend of Elizabeth's; married to *Rev. William Collins*; resides at Hunsford, rectory of Rosings Park in Kent

*Mrs. Reynolds:* Pemberley Housekeeper

*Miss Jameson:* Assistant Housekeeper

*Mr. Taylor:* Pemberley Butler

*Mr. Keith:* Mr. Darcy's Steward

*Samuel Oliver:* Mr. Darcy's valet

*Marguerite Charbonneau:* Mrs. Darcy's maid

*Mrs. Hanford:* Nanny to Darcy firstborn

*Mrs. Henderson:* Midwife

*Mr. Clark:* Pemberley Head Groundskeeper

*Mr. Thurber:* Pemberley Head Wrangler

*Mrs. Langton:* Pemberley Head Chef

*Mr. Anders:* Head Pemberley Coachman

*Phillips, Watson, Tillson, Georges, Rothchilde:* Pemberley footmen

*Mrs. Smyth:* Darcy House Housekeeper

*Mr. Travers:* Darcy House Butler

*Reverend Bertram:* Rector of Pemberley Chapel

*Parsifal:* Mr. Darcy's stallion

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## **1 – Snippets of a Physician's Memoirs**

*June 23, 1817*

*Darcy House, London*

Imagine my surprise to realize it has been over a month since last jotting my musings in this fine book. Of course, writing while at sea is inconceivable. Egad, I abhor being at sea! Luckily the remedies for seasickness liberally doused down my gullet by the ever faithful Dr. Penaflor staved off the worst of the hideous symptoms. I even managed to walk about a bit on deck. Bracing sea air, my derriere! Nonetheless, I was abed for the bulk of the trip, wallowing too far in my personal hellish misery to complain about the narrow confines of our cabin and odiferous mattress. East India trading ships cater to the needs of cargo far above passengers. We disembarked at Ramsgate. I was quite happy to embrace the rigors of overland travel rather than proceeding up the Thames, but several days of subsequent immobility were required to restore my equilibrium ere we moved beyond that lovely seacoast town. Raul, bless his Spanish heart, rather delighted in my incapacitation as it allotted him the opportunity to ramble through the streets and relish the sights. Poor man has never seen England. How does one live, I ask arrogantly?

Eventually we set off. I did manage to post a letter warning William of my arrival. I hoped it would arrive well enough in advance, although that did not prove to be true. Apparently the mail service of my great country has not improved. Not all can be perfect. Oh well, that is the way of family! I flattered myself that his astounding joy would be profound enough to overwhelm any irritation at my besieging of the newlyweds. This did prove to be true as well as fortuitous as William had hurt himself, again, and I am sure it was only my timely arrival that saved him from a life of handicap! Ha! However, I am getting ahead of myself as you know, dear Jharna, I am wont to do.

This trip home has been so anticipated, sea travel notwithstanding. Naturally I was thrilled that Raja wished to accompany me, but even without the boy's companionship I would have had to come. How many hours did I bore you with memories of my homeland,

Jharna? Always wishing and praying that you would agree to travel with me. Perhaps I should have prayed to your gods rather than my own. Ah well, here I now am and never has the green English countryside and crowded London streets filled me with such joy. It is almost impossible to recollect how anxious I was to leave all those decades ago. Perhaps I am getting old as you would tease.

Darcy House stood shining in the afternoon sun, undiminished in her grandeur and loveliness. Moderate chaos reigned, much to my delight, when I crossed the threshold. It was a scene evocative of my youth when all us rowdy children would be tearing about the foyer: Alex sliding down the banister to mother's dismay, Estella hiding in order to frighten delicate Mary, and James doubled over in mirth while I performed some feat of acrobatic skill. Yes, I must be aging if the frequent jaunts down memory lane are any indication. If the obvious affection between William and his bride are evidentiary of their marital relations, then Darcy House will yet again display such a scene. In fact, they are already on the way as Mrs. Darcy is with child.

How can I describe Elizabeth Darcy? Clinically, emotionally, or both? Physically she is a tiny slip of a girl, although actually of moderate height. Strangely, considering the stature of William, she on the one hand is dwarfed by his bulk while simultaneously looming larger than life. Sheer force of personality and presence overcomes her physicality. With chestnut hair, enormous brown eyes, dainty features, and delicate bone structure she is a picturesque counterpart for my nephew. They compliment each other well on numerous levels. However, it is the aforementioned presence that I know has captured William, as I imagine it does all who know her. She is witty, intelligent, sparkling, kindness itself, courageous, and loving. I can readily find no faults, and you know Jharna what a penchant I have for divining deficiencies!

I will confess that I assumed William, like the vast majority of men in his class, had acquired a wife from the leeches of proper British society. Someone poised, of excellent family, and acceptable, but likely dull, vapid, and shallow. My years away from my favored nephew, his character largely gleaned through James's letters and later his own, fostered the theory that he would take the safe and acceptable road. I cannot claim to have an overly intimate relationship with him, but could have stated with absolute certainty that taking such a path would have rendered him miserable within a year. James always told me that his son's intelligence and restrained intensity mildly intimidated him, William possessing a nature far too zealous and exacting to comfortably fit within the confines of stifling English society. Yet, he would lament, William

seemed determined to do so even to the point of suppressing his inclinations.

As I recall musing in previous journal entries while visiting home, my impressions concurred with James's. William as an adult and Master of Pemberley appeared to be fulfilling the best of James's predictions and the worse of his fears. That he was brilliant as the estate manager and guardian to Georgie was evident, but there was a sadness and stoic quality to him that even I could not crack significantly. A mere smile or laugh was a rare event and I think he was frankly relieved when I returned to India.

Estella's letter after the wedding filled me with some hope, her impression of the new Mrs. Darcy and W's emotions all favorable. She also related that Elizabeth was neither of society nor even the best family. Lady Catherine flatly refused to acknowledge the union, shockingly I write with towering sarcasm! Anyway, I am repeating myself. I guess it is just the surprise of the development that still staggers me. James, of course, had married for love, but I know how rare that is. Would even my dear brother have done so if Lady Anne Fitzwilliam were not of the highest caliber and breeding? I do not know. Regardless, W has found his match in every way in Elizabeth. Theirs appears to be the deepest of loves. I cannot be happier for them.

Ah, Jharna, how amazing it is to be in the bosom of my family! For too many years I have been adrift with only you to really turn to. Now you are gone and I have longed for the reestablishment of roots. Who would have thought it? And I know you are laughing from wherever you now reside! Be that as it may, I must attempt to smother my sentimental tendencies and write of my days here clinically or I will fill the remaining pages with nonsense.

My dearest Georgiana has evolved into a woman in my absence. She is more beautiful and graceful than I would have imagined her awkward and skinny little girl shape to grow into. So like Anne in every way. W's personality was always more of a melding of James and Anne, his humor and playfulness there, but reserved. More like my sister Mary or brother Phillip. Actually, as I think on it, he receives that trait from my mother! Interesting. Or, with further staring into space recollections, very like the old Lord Matlock, Anne's father. There was an intimidating man! I doubt he ever cracked a smile as the world is yet in one piece.

No, Georgie is a straight replica of dear Anne. Blonde, blue eyed, dainty, soft spoken, charming, innocent, yet with a sharp humor, intelligence, and quick wit hidden behind her naïveté. It is providential that I arrived at this moment in her life. She is the proverbial girl on the

clasp of womanhood; one hour a silly child and the next wise and mature. I am gleaning via oblique hints that W and E walked a rocky course on their way to felicity, G the stabilizer for my nephew's turbulent soul. I do not know the details, although the curiosity is killing me (do not snicker Jharna). I will figure it out in due time!

The first several days of our dwelling have been hectic, hence why I have yet to create an entry here until today. Within days of my arrival I met E's entire family, Lady Catherine and her daughter Miss Anne, a number of W's friends and business associates, Mr. Bingley and Miss Bingley, and my old friend Malcolm Fitzwilliam and his family. The Darcys hosted a ball that Raja and I were in time to attend. It was marvelous to see old faces again, even Lady C. She has always been fodder for entertainment; this time it a confrontation and subsequent dubious apology for some sort of infraction against E. I am still working out the details, but apparently she refused to acknowledge W's marriage basing her disdain for E's country upbringing, as well as a misguided belief that Anne and W were destined to wed. I recall James speaking of this a time or two with humor, saying once that it would be incestuous considering how close the two were as youngsters. Be that as it may, Lady C never gave up the idea even after W made it abundantly clear his leanings were elsewhere. The boy has a mind of his own, make no mistake! Even I could have told Lady C that.

Mr. Bingley has matured nicely since I met him two years ago, and married E's sister Jane! Mrs. Bingley is a blonde beauty with stunning blue eyes, far quieter than E, but well suited for Mr. Bingley. The two seem very happy and I can only imagine how delighted all the individuals involved must feel to be so closely intertwined. Mr. Bingley's sister is a beauty as well. Striking red hair rarely seen without the accompanied poor complexion Miss Bingley thankfully is not stricken with. She, however, is the quintessential product of the English ton. Always the excellent diagnostician of character, it was clear to me that she fancied W and was less than pleased by the choice of E, or Mrs. Bingley for that matter. It was all so amusing. Of course, she is the sort I expected W to end up with and after studying all the varied interactions I can only be thoroughly elated that W's backbone and good sense prevailed. With each passing day I am coming to admire the boy more and more. James would be so very proud of his son. Pity how those events unfolded.

E has a large family. Her mother is rather ridiculous, but her father is an interesting man. There is no doubt where E gets her character from. We older gentlemen hit it off quite well, kindred spirits to a degree. She has two younger sisters, but I frankly had little time to

become acquainted. The room was filled to overflowing, literally. I am certain Darcy House has not seen such an extravaganza in years. E was the perfect hostess, W his usual reserved self but with a foolish grin frequently gracing his features and eyes that literally lit up whenever he gazed upon his wife, which was constantly. I can remember James having much the same expression whenever he even thought of Anne. I was young enough then to tease him mercilessly about it! Now I guess I am a bit wiser and assuredly older, so these displays of affection do not annoy me as profoundly. In truth, the heart gets all fluttery, but I would not admit that anywhere but within these pages! Still, as moving as it is, even this new sentimental me is relieved to know I was never blatantly moony every time you were nearby, Jharna.

Raja charmed all the available women, and many of those who are not. That man is far too handsome for his own good! It was requisite for me to play down his assets, so to speak, to avoid a matrimonial plot by E's mother. I find myself curious as to what part she may have had to play in her eldest daughters wooing such eligible bachelors. No insult intended, as both Elizabeth and Jane are excellent ladies, however their class is clearly not equal to a Darcy. Not that I ever attributed much worth to that nonsense, but it is the world we live in. Perhaps Mrs. Bennet played no part as both men are clearly smitten with their wives, but she is the type and I have witnessed such manipulations dozens of times. More history for me to unravel. Yes, I know Jharna, I am a busybody.

Day two was spent in the company of Malcolm. He dragged Raja and me to Whites for an afternoon of debauchery and indolence. I recognized a few faces, but the truth is my years of studying in London did not allow for leisure time, nor was I one to overly hobnob with society. I could have participated more, naturally, being a Darcy, but was looked at askance for my chosen study. I was not of the Cambridge or Oxford elite, nor did I care to be, so it created a mild stigma. No one knew quite how to deal with me and since I could care less, it was easier to avoid it all. I sensed some of the same hesitation at Whites. I am still a Darcy and in the company of Lord Matlock, so cannot be shunned. Yet I am also a mere doctor wearing strange clothing and toting a Spaniard in my wake! I doubt even listing Raja's pedigree would have helped! Ah well, we had a delightful time nonetheless, the liquor as excellent as always and billiard room elegant.

The remainder of the evening has been lazy. The loving couple had a prior engagement, so Raja and I stayed with the girls. G's pianoforte skills have improved dramatically since I was last here. She is

quite proficient. What a shame that women cannot pursue careers in the arts. It has never made much sense to me that our culture expects an accomplished woman to play an array of instruments, speak and read several languages, paint and draw, be expert in all methods of needlepoint, yet do nothing with any of it beyond amuse themselves and their inner circle. I can speak several tongues, having inherited that gift from my mother, but cannot play a single instrument, cannot draw beyond vague sketches of bodily parts, and can only wield a needle when sewing flesh, yet I am considered a more valued member of society! I personally think all men should be forced to observe a woman in childbirth. That would make them think twice about the so-named weaker sex!

Rambling again. Forgive me, my faithful journal! So, here I now am reposing in my luxurious chambers at Darcy House. I am content to be home, quite delighted to be on vacation with minimal expectations on my person, not yet feeling guilty for leeching off my nephew's kindness, experiencing an odd mixture of lethargy and exuberance, sipping a fine glass of whiskey, and doing nothing more laborious than putting quill to parchment. Or rather, steel tipped pen to parchment. Amazing invention! W seems to have inherited a curiosity of modern innovations and mechanical gadgetry from my father. I wonder if W remembers his grandfather's obsession for science and machinery? After all, the majority of the Pemberley fountains and equipment are of his designing. I shall add that to my list of topics to discuss with my nephew. For now, staring at the fire and early to bed are the only agenda items. Good night lovely Jharna, wherever you are.

*June 24*  
*London*

Spent the day trudging through the haberdasheries of Bond Street with Raul. I am exhausted! How do the ladies do this day in and day out? Boggles my mind. Anyway, Raja, nobleman instincts rising to the fore, decided he required a completely new wardrobe of latest English fashion. So, yesterday he inquires of W as to the best places to shop. W jumps up with unveiled enthusiasm, proceeding to jot down the finest establishments London has to offer. Raja is flushed with happiness, eyeballing W's impeccably clad figure with obvious hankering. W, while ostensibly addressing Raja, is glancing pointedly toward me and offering graciously to arrange an appointment with Mr. Renault his personal tailor. E met my raised eyebrow with a barely hidden laugh. (Her face is

so expressive!)

Oddly, that particular afternoon I was wearing my most demure salwar kameez, the beige one with turquoise trim. He should be thankful I left all my dhotis behind in India! Even I did not think the English public prepared to view my legs unbound by trousers. Nevertheless, I suppose there is a logical point to my nephew's unspoken plea. All the English suits I own are woefully outdated and threadbare. I imagine there may be the occasional soiree or festivity where a proper suit will be necessary. So, alas, I did the unthinkable and allowed Raja to drag me from shop to shop, endured two hours of measuring and clucking tongues from Mr. Renault's assistants. Raja nearly bought out each establishment, any initial contempt expressed at his dark skin and accent rapidly evaporated by the wad of cash displayed. I, on the other hand, purchased lightly, acquiring only four suits and sundry accessories. How I will ever survive a choking cravat is frankly beyond my comprehension. Ah, the extents we will go to for love of family!

*June 26*  
*London*

Raul and I reported to Company headquarters, signed the obligatory documents, and spoke with the Director (a Mr. Allison now). He was not too pleased that we refused to give a definite date for our reenlistment, or even if we will. Apparently Raja's reputation has preceded him with his services in prime demand. This thrills me, not only because I trained him, but because his skills truly are astounding and I am delighted to see this recognized. I was a bit surprised that Raja demurred regarding his conscription, he having not alluded to any uncertainty in his future. I chose to leave the subject alone for the moment, Raul mature enough to make his own choices. Whatever his decisions for the future, I am confident he will do well.

Met W and Col. Fitzwilliam for luncheon and drinks at Estad's Saloon. I cannot believe the eatery is still standing. I remember the first time I ate there: I was thirteen, still mourning Alex, and father decided to treat me to a gentleman's outing as a way of cheering my gloominess. Additionally he thought that I was finally capable of playing the part of a gentleman. Ha! So Pearson, James's valet, dressed me in my Sunday finery complete with pocketwatch and fancy fob as well as a walking stick that I dearly wanted to wave about and poke people with, but resisted the urge! The simple fear of what my father would do to me not worth the fun I might have had. Anyway, James was in his final year at Cambridge,



joining us for a few weeks while in Town for the season, and I recall that I did feel vainly dashing and arrogantly mature squired about with my distinguished father and dandified older brother. I honestly do not recollect the food served, but the atmosphere was awe inspiring to a thirteen year old. James acted all sophisticated and snobbish while winking at me when father was not looking. Yes, fun times.

Of course, I have since dined at Estad's many times, although it has been a few years. Impeccable and delicious as ever. Delightful afternoon, especially as with just the four of us I had my first real opportunity to communicate intimately with my nephew. We were there for hours, sipping excellent red wine from France and engaging in lively discourse. Naturally we were approached by a dozen fellow diners who knew W, who in turn departed the establishment with four additional commitments to the already busy schedule of he and E. I only knew Lord and Lady Standish. He was a crony of James's who visited Pemberley a time or two with his wife; she a dear friend of Anne's. We spent a few minutes reminiscing.

This evening W and E have a planned engagement at the Countess Lieven's salon. To my incredible shock an invitation arrived yesterday for Raja and I. I suppose I should not be too surprised by the infamous Countess knowing all that goes on in the city, but why she would extend an invite to two traveling physicians is beyond my comprehension. Nevertheless, even I would be foolish to pass up an opportunity to meet the famous woman herself so Raul and I will attend.

*June 28*  
*London*

Been a couple busy days. First I must describe the evening at Countess Lieven's salon. I contemplated wearing one of my new suits, but decided that if it was exotic foreign gentlemen the Countess wanted, then sobeit! Yet to compromise and not embarrass my formal nephew I wore my finest sherwani of grey wool. I figured that if it was acceptable for official British East India Company affairs then it should serve. I even topped it off with matching fez, quite dashing if I say so myself. I know you would have appreciated it, Jharna, as it was the outfit you gifted to me on my fiftieth birthday. Of course, I do think it was primarily out of your desire to see me properly attired for one of your father's ceremonies! I digress, however.

The Lieven mansion on St. James's Place was stupendous, as expected. All the lights were lit, some to my astonishment created with

gaslight! The glow was incredible, the entire Square lit as if noontime. Even though it was well after the dinner hour, the Square was bustling with nearly every house plainly hosting some soiree or ball. The Ambassador's dwelling was no exception. The door was standing open with footmen checking invitations as folks freely walked in and out. Music and laughter from within was audible without. It was so hectic and boisterous that I find it difficult to describe with any clarity.

The whole concept of salons, as popularized by the forward Frenchwomen with designs of intellectual conversation amongst artists and philosophers, has evolved with the Countess into a place to influence political matters. Much of the former reigned here as the evening's guests included writers William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Leigh Hunt, and artists John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, among others I did not have the chance to meet or was unfamiliar with. E gravitated to the artists, clearly enamored by Mr. Wordsworth and Mr. Constable. The latter, especially, as apparently she and W have recently viewed an exhibition of his works, purchasing two paintings.

I confess with shame that I was astonished at how easily E mingled with the plethora of dignitaries and their wives. As I have written, I am delighted with W's felicity and good sense to marry a woman of true value. Nonetheless, aware of E's provincial upbringing, and having had minimal opportunity thus far to talk to her seriously, I did not quite fathom how intelligent she is. Clearly W was somewhat surprised as well. Even from his perch across the room, while discussing politics with several members of Parliament including Earl Charles Grey and George Canning (would love to have been privy to that discussion!), I noted his eyes often on his engaging wife with immense pride, but mild amazement. I guess I can read W so easily as his face is so like my father's, and mine to a great extent. Quite uncanny to view another who is nearly a mirror image, but I am digressing yet again!

E did not appear the slightest bit nervous. Perhaps that is innocence to a degree, but she conducted herself with a confidence and poise marvelous to witness. I rarely had the opportunity to join into the conversation surrounding her, my own attention captured as I will relate in a moment, but it was obvious that the people around her, both male and female, were favorably inclined. Her manners were impeccable as far as I could discern, not that I am a very good judge of proper English behavior, God knows! Still, W never seemed dismayed in any way, as I am sure he would have been if there was cause; my nephew for all his numerous excellent qualities is still one who keeps a tight rein on propriety and social class. Poor boy!

Raja and I found ourselves chatting part of the evening with a group of East India traders and directors. Talking shop, so to speak. The politics behind the Company never fails to make me yawn, but I suppose I do have some insight, having served for nearly thirty years. Some of the politicians in the assembly joined in, even W for a spell as he, like most wealthy Englishmen, holds stock in the Company. As a physician I never have paid much attention to the trading aspects, although I too have invested monetarily. However, as long as the revenues roll in, I really do not care how. Raja argues with me endlessly as to my lackadaisical attitude, to which I counter that if I desired to be a businessman I would have stayed home and assisted in the management of Pemberley as my father wished! So there!!

The truth is that any Englishman worth his salt can talk politics and business, after discussing fine spirits and food that is. It is in the blood, apparently. That and horses. And gambling and cigars. Beautiful women. Hunting and foxing. Maybe billiards too. OK, I confess, I am still much an Englishman as you would always say, Jharna, despite my love of Indian culture!

Be that as it may, Raja and I were largely occupied and fascinated by a group of inventors and physicians added to the mix. I do not know if the inclusion of Raja and I to the guest list was due to the already invited scientific folk, or if the Countess's attendees are always so varied. Of special interest was a Dr. Albrecht from Germany, Dr. Shore from Manchester, and Dr. Nomikos from Greece whom all teach at my old alma mater! We compared notes for the bulk of the evening. It was marvelous to hear of the changes to the Royal Academy as well as those things and professors that are unchanged. Raja and I were extended an invitation to visit the following day. I had planned to do so anyway, wanting to show Raja where I received my education, but having a formal invitation, luncheon included, is superior to merely spontaneously appearing at the gates and declaring myself!

Inbetween the medical discussions, Dr. Nomikos showed us his latest acquisition: one of the new stethoscopes recently invented by the French genius Dr. Rene Laennec. I know I wrote at least a page worth of my amazed excitement at the invention when I read about it last year, so will not do so again. However, actually seeing one of the devices and testing it on a live individual was a thrilling experience beyond conveying. Dr. Nomikos traveled personally to Paris to study with Dr. Laennec and now teaches dissertations on the innovative physician's discoveries of auscultation, pulmonary and liver diseases. Without a doubt Raja and I will attend one of his classes on the subject.

There were so many other notable persons that it would be impossible for me to list them all. Naturally the Ambassador prowled through the room, although he clearly left the prime hosting role to his illustrious wife. The Countess is everything one has read about her: physically rather plain, but with a wicked wit and gregarious personality. She floated about the room with apparently ceaseless energy, charming and gracious, entering flawlessly into each conversation with her Russian accented English inerrantly offering brilliant insight no matter the topic. I spoke with her only briefly, the strange woman frankly unnerving me as she seemed to know precisely who I was, how long I had been with the Company, my professional credentials, and so on. She was enchanting and amiable in all ways, yet one got the feeling that there was clairvoyance at work! Apparently not as she did not comment on Raja's family connections, greatly ignoring him beyond a polite greeting in fact, but it was nonetheless oddly disconcerting. I was relieved when she moved on to the next group. I could readily ascertain that she unsettled W as well, but then he does not acquit himself well in many social situations I have found. I must teach the boy to release his subdued charm. After all, if he so physically resembles me then the personality must be akin, yes?!

We tarried until two in the morning, E clearly too fatigued to linger longer. W worries about her so, a trait I find adorable, but considering her condition I tend to agree with him. She certainly appears healthy enough for such a minute creature, but one cannot be too careful. W shared the details of E's recent accident with me, the event observably yet distressing to him, while we managed a time alone last evening. The duel itself he glossed over with regulated humility, although the lingering anger toward this nefarious Marquis was clearly evident. The description of E's fall and subsequent unconsciousness and injuries was rendered with an attempt to relay in a detached manner, but the poor boy nearly broke down several times. How horrific for him! For the first time since my arrival I saw behind the careful regulation he wears in public. I must say, despite recognizing the affection between the two, I had not fully comprehended the deep love. What a marvel! Yes, Jharna, we loved. Deeply. But I do not think even we reached these depths. I know I miss you, your death a profound shock that I will never recover from, but have I literally ceased to exist? No, my dear, I am sorry to say I have not. Does that make me less of a man? Less of a devoted lover? I do not know, nor do I wish to wholly consider the subject as it may hurt too much to reveal the flaws in my character. Sometimes introspection is best avoided. I prefer to think it just how we are designed or what fate allots

us. We found each other, Jharna, and were blissfully content for many years. I do not regret it nor do I believe I have missed something better along the way.

I recall the altered tenor of James's letters after Anne died, and the one time I visited afterwards was a staggering blow. He was utterly bereft. I have never witnessed anything quite like it. I know the poets would say that love of such a consuming nature is worth all the pain. I do not know if I concur. Maybe I simply despise pain in all its manifestations too greatly to be able to willingly place myself in its path. No, do not dwell on it! Best to be thankful for the course set for my life, thankful for the relationships I have established, and delight in the joy my dear nephew has found. What a blessing it is to be a part of it! Yes, Jharna, I am happy to be home.

*July 5*

*London, England*

Finally a positive development on the Anne de Bourgh assignment! You know how this has intrigued me, Jharna, from my first introduction to her at W's ball. Every encounter with the dear girl has further piqued my interest, but not as fully as Raja. I am not surprised particularly as he is as terrible with a medical mystery before him as I, and can never resist bringing home the wounded puppy, literally! Still, his focus and near obsession on the matter has stunned even me. I daresay the sadness involved with seeing a person suffering when the belief is that assistance can be offered is agonizing. I, however, have had many more years of experience than the youthful Dr. Penaflor with bizarre cultural beliefs which occasionally prohibit me performing the healing I know I could if allowed. Perhaps my heart has hardened a bit....more introspection I prefer to avoid, thank you very much!

Anyway, it was a plea from W himself that encouraged me to break my silence on the subject and put myself on the line, so to speak. I did not quite realize how close the two were, the affection real even if not of a romantic nature as Lady C desired. He approached me several afternoons ago while in the library. I love how he does this! As I have related previously, the boy's affection toward me is growing, as is mine toward him, maturing into a real relationship beyond what was anticipated for kin. A bit of a shock, actually, and faintly unsettling in its unexpectedness, but strangely comforting. Hmmm....I must dwell on the emotions a bit at a later time.

So, Miss Anne.... W has picked up on Raja's absorption,

overheard a smattering of conversations on the topic, and so asked me frankly what my opinion was. Naturally I gave it to him, not a problem for me to do so! He was very serious and deeply troubled. “Uncle, do you think you could really help Anne? Because if you truly do then I would support you one hundred percent in discovering a way to overcome Lady Catherine’s dominance. My cousin has suffered for too long, and if you are correct in your diagnosis, has suffered falsely. This is intolerably. What can we do?”

It was so heartfelt that I could not not accept the challenge. And yes, I confess the vision of ruffling Lady C’s feathers was appealing! He chuckles evilly. That aside, the question was how to wisely go about the issue. It was my brilliant idea to talk to Malcolm. The power and prestige of Lord Matlock and all that rot. He was frankly stunned at our diagnosis from afar, having only heard the conclusions from Lady C’s medical hacks. He was a bit skeptical, naturally, and I was sagacious, humbly demurring that we could be in error (although I was certain we were not), but would not know until we could physically examine the girl. The more we talked I could discern that he rather savored the idea of hassling his overbearing sister, although he would never admit to the emotion, so I let it pass. Yes, Jharna, I can be politic when I deem it proper! Now we will wait and see what transpires. Raja, bless his soul, is glowing in happiness. Very odd.

*July 9*  
*London*

Whew! What a week! Besides the numerous dinner engagements, musical entertainments, and so on (Egad, how do people do this year in and year out?), Raja and I finally were allowed to examine Miss de Bourgh. It would take the entire book to fully detail the drama and even then I do not think I could do it justice. Let me attempt the highlights.

What Malcolm said or did I have no idea. Today, as we sat about after breakfast doing basically nothing, a message arrives from Malcolm insisting Dr. Penaflor and I hasten to the de Bourgh townhouse immediately. Thankfully doctors are used to such summons, so we grabbed our bags and were ready before the carriage had been brought around.

We were greeted by Malcolm, who steered us quickly into the small parlor. “I have badgered Catherine for days and she has finally relented, sort of. Actually it is Anne who called for you to be here, standing up to her mother as I have never seen before. I was unaware

that she even knew of the interest and discussion of her health. Frankly I am still abashed and I do not think Catherine will ever recover! I suppose we have for too long thought of her as a child. Be that as it may, she is waiting and Catherine is momentarily stupefied, so follow me.”

The examination was proceeding well, and as we expected, until we were interrupted by Lady C’s London physician barging in. Apparently she was not as stupefied as Malcolm thought.

As an aside, I was dressed in my typical attire; cool and altogether comfortable as well as roguishly handsome I might add. Raja was dressed in one of his new suits. As impeccable as W always is, somehow managing to look serene and breezy despite the scorching climate and humidity. Handsome to be sure, but one would think he Adonis incarnate the way Miss Anne’s eyes roosted on him, all aglow and adoring. She ignored me completely. Maybe I am losing my charm. I was amused and disconcerted simultaneously. However, there has been no time to explore the sentiments, nor was Raja anything but the consummate professional. Very odd.

Dr. Hayes, fifties, short and obese, naturally florid and profusely veined face not benefiting positively by a bellicose fit, was quite verbose in his opinion of our medical expertise. His command of the English language was impressive, I will give him that, at least for a time that is. Eventually the silent disregard from Raja and I wore on his nerves, either that or the screeches of Lady C began to bother him as well, because he began to splutter a bit and repeat himself. Malcolm had a hold of his arm, to keep him from rushing us I presume, but was unable to drag him away. Poor Miss Anne was mortified, Raja and I unable to focus on her while we tried to speak rationally to the raging man. It was messy and extremely perturbing, even to me who rather wallows in drama.

I do think we were all at an impasse, no one coherently paying attention to anyone, when a sudden shrill whistle pierced the air. It was Anne! She was sitting up in bed, her face undoubtedly ruddier than it has been in years, eyes flashing, and jaw clenched alarmingly. Needless to say, we were all speechless. “You!” She snapped in a ringing voice, pointing a rigid finger at the nearly apoplectic doctor, “Will leave this instant! How you can barge uninvited into a lady’s room in this manner is unconscionable! Uncle Malcolm, take him away. Mother, I wish for you to stay, but remain silent, I beg you. I need to hear what they have to say! Please, allow me this.”

Then the poor dear seemed to deflate as a balloon, collapsing onto the pillows with tears falling and the rush of color fading drastically to leave her paler than ever. Broke my heart. Raja was giving her his

patented empathetic face that I have seen melt many a folk, and animal for that matter. Finally the atmosphere calmed and with Lady C observing avidly from the side, Raja and I resumed. Aided tremendously by our new stethoscopes and with the knowledge gleaned from Dr. Nomikos's lecture, we confidently concluded our original diagnosis. Miss Anne, per her answers to our questions, began feeling ill in her late teens. Fatigue of a general type that gradually increased, pallor, faint tremors with exertion as well as dyspnea and vague heart palpitations, muscle spasms, loss of concentration, occasional ulcers to the corners of her mouth, and flattened brittle fingernails. Classic signs of anemia. Her heart was strong if beating a bit too fast, although whether that was from her illness or recent distress is impossible to say. I confess that Raja and I both listened for an inordinate amount of time to her heart and lungs, the stethoscope enabling us to hear sounds crisper and simply undetectable by placing an ear to the chest. Quite amazing and far less embarrassing to the patient, but I digress.

We spoke at great length to both Miss Anne and Lady C. Anne's eyes glowed with a hope that was heart wrenching to witness. I stressed that although we were certain of the diagnosis, the cause is impossible to pinpoint. The treatments, mainly of a dietary nature with supplements of an iron rich tonic and various herbals brewed into tea, will absolutely improve her condition, but will not be a cure and the degree of improvement can vary. Lady C seized upon that unsurety, apparently gleaning some sort of bizarre joy in knowing that we could not cure her daughter. How very sad it was, Raja unable to hide his disdain. Anyway, we finally departed with the promise to check on her again and provide the tonic's formula to the apothecary of her choosing. All in all a good day's accomplishment!

*July 15*  
*London*

W, E, and G will be departing on the morrow for Pemberley. I have been rather torn. My heart desires to view my ancestral home with a tangible ache, but I am also enjoying the wonders of this great city. Raja is complacent, leaving the decision up to me. Col. Fitzwilliam, however, has arranged some time away from his Regiment and was hoping we could stay around for the type of diversions only bachelors are allowed to partake in. As he put it, with a wink toward a scowling W. Under the awkward circumstances I chose not to point out that there is many a married man who continually partakes in such diversions. I do believe W



would have tossed me out of the house if I had joked in such a manner. The boy has a wicked sense of humor, but not about topics moral.

Ah, William! What an amazing young man! As I have related in numerous passages, I am continually startled by his intelligence and breadth of knowledge. James and Anne would be so very proud. The past several days have allotted us many hours to commune privately. Raja has been so busy with his daily visits to Miss de Bourgh, cavorting with the friends he has made, and the lectures on Spanish and Indian medicine he has been giving at the Academy that I have not seen much of him. W has concluded the bulk of his business affairs and with E and the girls busy most afternoons at teas or shopping or whatever else it is women do in their spare time, W and I have been left alone. As you would always say Jharna, I do have a lazy streak in me, so lying about on the comfortable chairs in the library has been a delight. Since W attends to his business in there, and also has a moderate lazy streak I have noticed as well as a love of literature, we end up conversing without really planning it.

Today he rather haltingly asked my opinion on E's health. She has been rather like a bustling bee, flittering from one event to the next with seemingly inexhaustive energy. However, I, like W, have noticed grey shadows under her lovely eyes. Apparently W discussed his concerns with Madeline and her advice was to leave it be and trust. I concurred, especially as they will be leaving tomorrow for the quiet restfulness of Pemberley. The conversation flowed and before I really know how it happened he was telling me the entire tale of how he met the beautiful Miss Bennet and their convoluted history toward matrimony. Quite the story! No, Jharna, I did not badger it out of him! He offered it up freely, not that I can pretend that my curiosity over the subject was not high.

Further proof of what I had already surmised: this is a relationship and marriage of extreme emotion and the truest love I think I have ever witnessed, except perhaps for James and Anne. What a marvel it is! I must say, as he related his first encounters with E and how his infatuation grew, it brought back memories of you, Jharna. Not that our liaison was remotely the same, quite the contrary in fact, which is why I found myself musing on it. There were no sparks when we met the first time at your father's fiftieth birthday gala. Lord that man can put on a party! I was so young then, only in India for one year, and still captivated by the cultural differences. We have laughed on it often since, my dear, how you thought I was foppish and vain while I barely glanced your way. Of course you were married then, so I would have been a louse to do so! I was instead intrigued by the dozens of other beautiful women

about, including your sisters! My, how things may have gone differently if any of them had paid me any mind!

No, it is not the similarities but more the oddities of how life weaves loose threads into patterns of beauty even with the knots and errors visible. I loved your husband, Jharna. Kshitij Ullas was one of the finest physicians I have ever met in all my travels and taught me more than any other single person. He was my mentor, friend, father, and companion. I grieved when he died, more than many who claimed to do so. Despite the love that grew between us, dearest Jharna, and the joy we shared, I would still to this day give my soul to have Kshitij Ullas alive and scolding me for some dim witted mistake! Yet, at the same time, I cannot imagine the fifteen years we spent together passing in any way but in your arms. I have long since given up trying to find the logic in it. I suppose it is as W said while telling me his tale, some things are simply meant to be. Karma, you would say in that imperiously serene tone which I adored, nodding sagely.

My admiration for W grew exponentially during those hours. And my happiness for what he has built with E. They are almost nauseating in their adulation for each other, the barely suppressed passion humorous to observe and tremendously refreshing. The man that W has become, the husband and soon to be father, is a man worth knowing. It comes back to timing, Jharna, or karma if you prefer. Your death nearly two years ago (Lord, has it really been that long?!) was the greatest loss I have ever experienced, except perhaps for Alex. I have gone on living, fairly easily I thought, with my usual eccentric habits and optimism and jocoseness intact. Yet, my continual dreams of home and family invaded my tranquility, so much so that I reckoned a visit to the homeland was beckoning. The news of W's marriage lent credence to the excursion. The excitement to be home I anticipated, although I have been surprised at my lack of restlessness. Of course, it has only been a month. What I honestly did not anticipate was the developing relationship with William. Frankly, the staid W of my previous acquaintance was not really the type of person I gravitate towards, nor do I believe I was more than a vague annoyance to him. It is vastly different now, he is different now. As am I, I suppose. Whatever the case, I am highly enjoying our evolving friendship. And E and Georgie! My, it has been many a year since I have been surrounded by such a wealth of female attention! Even E's sisters are beginning to loosen up a bit and falling under the charms of George! Ha!!

Yes, I hear you laughing Jharna.

*July 25*  
*Pemberley, Derbyshire*

Home at last! We arrived yesterday, the weather precisely as I remember it being this time of year. Hot and dry, sun shining beautifully and touching the Peaks and fields below with rays of gold. Stunning. All the pastures are a vivid green that almost hurts the eyes. And Pemberley, Ah my beloved Pemberley! How beautiful she is. Mr. Clark is still the head groundskeeper, W informs me. Obviously he has followed in his father's footsteps with equal skill as the gardens are perfection. I rose before dawn today in order to meander through the pathways in solitude as the sunrise woke the flowers, the aromas rising deliciously. I was almost late for breakfast so lost in my reverie was I! I know, me late for a meal!

I did not have the chance to write ere we departed Kent. Miss de Bourgh was finally allowed to accompany us, but it was a dramatic scene I am told. Raja and I stayed at the Inn while Malcolm and Madeline confronted Lady C. Clever W and E had clearly addressed the formal invitation to Miss Anne only. I know for a fact they rendered no formal invitations to anyone else, the Festival primarily for the staff, and the inclusion of family a given. That W was quite put out by Miss Bingley insinuating herself into the company was obvious, at least to me. One annoying relative is enough, so they were succinct in their invitation to Miss Anne.

She is responding very well to the treatment. I have noticed a number of revealing glances between Miss de Bourgh and Raja. Not sure how I feel about it. I would be thrilled to see both young people find love, Miss Anne especially as she deserves some reward for tolerating her mother all these years with stoic patience. However, it is easy to misplace gratitude for affection. What is surprising is that Raja seems to be drawn to her and he has never taken his innate empathy to such degrees. I will study the situation carefully, not there is much I can do to halt it, but I do not wish to see either hurt unduly.

E, I am relieved to note, appears her old sunny, exuberant self. Her pregnancy by all appearances seems to be progressing without complications. W is walking a foot off the ground, his eyes following her every move, not that they did not do so before. The day we arrived he was retrieving furniture from the attic. I was delighted to see the old cradle. I remember Phillip lying in it, as well as W so many years later. I know it is an heirloom, probably slept in it myself, although as there were

two of us I truly do not know what mother did! Should ask W if he unveiled a second cradle in the attic. Interesting.

I am anxious for the Festival. E is being quite secretive about the planned activities, although I can readily discern from her smug expression that it is to be an extravaganza extraordinaire! I have such fond memories of past Festivals. Mother vainly tried to keep us inside, but we always snuck out and mingled with the servant's children, all of us getting filthy and eating until we were literally ill. Good times. I specifically recall that it was the day before the Festival when James turned twenty, home from University for the summer and to celebrate his birthday on June 4 that my parents invited old Lord Matlock and his family to the Manor for the party. It was the first James, or any of us for that matter, had seen the Fitzwilliam girls for a number of years. Malcolm and James were at Cambridge together and close friends so father decided to include them on the guest list. Anne was fifteen, I think, and absolutely stunning. So was Muriel actually. Catherine was not there, as I remember, probably married to Sir Louis, now that I consider it. Anyway, even Alex and I at twelve could appreciate an attractive female, but James? Lord Almighty! One would think by his age he had seen his share of gorgeous ladies, but apparently not. Or, more to the point, I now know in my age earned wisdom, not the one who would steal his heart. James took one look at Lady Anne and fell head over heels. It was clear to everyone present; James completely tongue tied and goggled eyed. Ridiculous, in fact, and Alex and I loved it! Teased him mercilessly, but he was undeterred, even when threatening to beat us senseless. Yes, indeed, happy memories!

*July 31*  
*Pemberley*

Visited Rowan Lake today for a refreshing picnic organized last minute by Pemberley's most excellent Mistress. However, before I relate the day's fun, I must jot down the astonishing and amusing conversation with W earlier in the morning.

He discovered me where I was hiding in the library, entering sheepishly and carrying an enormous book in his arms and asking if he could have a private chat. It was exactly the opening I had been waiting for without even realizing it. He had questions about E's pregnancy and birth, all understandable and typical questions, but the very fact that he was inquiring about a delicate, female related topic proved to me even further the superior nature of the relationship they have. I teased him a

bit as it still sends me into near hysterics how a grown man, married to boot, can blush so readily! Brilliant! I was kind though, turning on my Dr. Darcy pose and launching into it.

His quick grasp of matters obstetrical did not surprise me in the least, W's intellect no longer a revelation, nor was I overly shocked that he would be intimately curious about his wife's condition. I suppose I should have been though as it is highly irregular, yet for some reason I was not. Everything about the Darcys' relationship has amazed me. Their level of intimacy shared so blatantly apparent to anyone with a moderately discerning eye is profound in its depth, so it seemed natural that he would want to know what to expect and what his beloved wife would suffer. Nonetheless, I was stunned on two counts: One, I suggested he consider being with E during her delivery and after only a brief moment of flabbergast, he embraced the notion utterly and with an obvious relief that was uplifting to witness. Second, and secretly for the time being, I realized that I want, more than anything I have wanted in recent months, to be the one who delivers their baby! I truly did not anticipate the emotion and was frankly overwhelmed. Luckily W was caught up with his own emotions and did not notice me swallowing repeatedly and furiously blinking my eyes! Heavens! What is happening to me? I swear I have become a sentimental old fool overnight!

We talked for a long time, covering everything I could think of about the remaining months of her pregnancy and the birth process itself. No matter how delicate or vague I attempted to be, W always asked something pointed, frequently grasping a concept yet elucidated or leaping forward several steps while I was still explaining the fundamentals! Wonderful boy! All blushing ceased, W immersing himself so fully into the topic that I think a herd of elephants could have roared through the room and he would not have flinched. I have never seen a person focus as he does, except perhaps me when dealing with a medical trauma. I was frankly exhausted, truly at a loss as to what other information to impart, but he kept on, always thinking of something or referring to some obscure line in the textbook, which I think he has memorized cover to cover. I am quite certain we would still be in the room if not for E interrupting to drag us away for the picnic.

Her brows rose dramatically at noting the book, but she said nothing. "Uncle and I were talking," W says with dry understatement, meeting E's glittering gaze candidly. The humorous lilt to her lovely lips was telling though and I swear the two exchanged a full conversation without uttering a word. Marvelous!

*August 7*  
*Pemberley*

Seems as if I barely arrived and now I am leaving! Not sure what came over me yesterday, but tomorrow we are all departing, except for W, E, and G, of course. Actually I know what it is. No, Jharna, not my usual restlessness. Quite the opposite in fact. These past weeks have been so marvelous and being at Pemberley has filled my soul with a peace I honestly have not felt in decades, even with you, my devoted lover. It is home. Perhaps I am sensing my mortality creeping up on me, not that I plan on departing this earth anytime soon. Fifty-three is far from old, I declare with shaking fist to the heavens! No, it is still this blasted sentimentality that has invaded my person. Ga!

The simple truth is that I feel the complete opposite of restless. What would that be? Calm, abeyant, satisfied? All of the above I suppose. So, I want to take advantage of the fine weather and visit a few more old friends in London and the surrounds, and then visit Estella. All of this traveling and imposing on other's hospitality welcomed with great anticipation, yet also because I want to be done with it and return to Pemberley before the winter and before Baby Darcy is born. I planted the seed yesterday, both W and E surprised by my hint. I do hope they take this separation to get used to the idea because I will deliver their child if I have to apply my brutal strength to the task and physically evict the midwife from the room! Of course, they adore me so I do not think that will be necessary. Yes, Jharna, smug as always.

Additionally, the lovers need some time alone. I swear those two are as transparent as glass. I know a gentleman should not entertain musings of another's sexual relationship, but it is nearly impossible not to do so around them! Poor Georgiana. Good thing she is used to being on her own because I seriously doubt she sees any more of her brother now than she did before! Be that as it may, they are rather cute together (awful word but it is apropos in this case), so I am casting no negative judgments. Warms the heart, actually, which is another reason I need to depart for a while: I am becoming far too maudlin with all this romance in the air. Time for the Colonel and me to remember we are bachelors, loose and unencumbered!

Raja, I am coming to accept with equanimity and happiness, shall likely not be counted amongst the unattached for very much longer. As I have written, the affection, nay Love...call it what it is George...is genuine between he and Miss Anne. His plan, he tells me now, is to work

his charm on Lady C. I advised him just to tell her he is royalty and that will be that; but he is far too noble, wants to earn her approval on his own merits, gain respect, etc. I just laughed, slapped him on the back, and wished him well in the endeavor. So first I absolutely have to tarry in Kent as I would not miss this for the world!

Malcolm and Madeline are off to tour through Wales, taking G with them. Leaves the newlyweds utterly alone, which I know pleases them. They intend to take a small jaunt through the lower Midlands, W told me. He wants his wife to be familiar with her new shire. Plus I think they plan to purchase baby essentials. I thought it odd they did not denude London of every last diapering cloth or bonnet. Apparently they have chosen to strip Derby bare instead! First, however, he asks me seriously if I felt a woman in her fifth month should travel. I assured him that pregnant women are truly not all that fragile, especially with husbands who dote and fret so ridiculously. He was not particularly amused, but reassured.

Anyway, I am off to Kent and then Darcy House for a spell before Devon. No agendas! Absolutely not! Allow the wind to carry me wherever it sees fit. Perhaps no longer restless per se, but definitely insouciant and aimless!

## **2 - Correspondence**

My Dearest Lizzy,

My heart nearly stopped as you related your trauma with the bandits! Oh, dearest sister, how absolutely awful an experience! I am trembling yet at the horror of it and the thankfulness in your recovery. How proud of Mr. Darcy you must be! Charles was not at all surprised. I recall him telling me once that Mr. Darcy was an excellent marksman. Of course I am quite certain he never anticipated his dear friend utilizing his skills so. Has papa written you? Undoubtedly he shall relate the episode in an amusing manner, but mama was quite taken by your mishap. Her nervous attack was of stupendous proportions. She has been abed for two days, despite yours and Mr. Darcy's assurances that all was well. Papa retreated to his library as usual, appearing only to halt the mournful letter she had penned to you! Therefore you shall necessarily be required to affect commiseration when next you write to mama.

Thank you for relating your excursion abroad the Derbyshire countryside. What a marvelous idea! I must share this tidbit of humor: Charles was reading Mr. Darcy's letter as I was reading yours when suddenly he snorted in disgust. I inquired at to his concern and he recalled Mr. Darcy boring him nearly to death while in France with the endless tours of old castles and ruins. I chuckled so, dear Lizzy, as your letter expressed such joy over the adventures! Of course, I can empathize with my husband as such diversions are not appealing to me, however I am cognizant of how you adore them, so was thrilled you two embarked on the endeavor.

If you have received a letter from papa then you know he accepted the news of Charles and me relocating with serenity. I know he is saddened, and perhaps he has communicated his distress to you, nonetheless he understands and has given us his blessing. Mama, shockingly, was in hysterics. Oh Lizzy, it was awful! She wailed and moaned, lamenting how all her daughters have deserted her and she would never be able to kiss her grandchildren. Poor Charles was frantic. Papa took her in hand, but it was terrible. I must confess, as horrendous as your crisis, it did succeed in deflecting mama's anxiety from me! Hopefully for both our sakes, Mary will proffer a blessed announcement

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forthwith to further avert mama's absorption and cheer her spirits.

As for Charles and me, we are proceeding as planned. I do believe Charles would have packed up and departed within the week, but I have given him pause. It is a difficult move for me, Lizzy dear. You know that change is not embraced as easily by me as you. While we were yet in Derbyshire my enthusiasm was as profound as Charles's. Now that I am home, Hertfordshire continually draws me in with all her lures and homey comforts. Yet oddly I find that with each passing day the sense of belonging, especially at Netherfield, ebbs. Charles speaks of Hasberry daily and I am beginning to long for the charms of the house. Mostly, of course, my heart yearns to please my husband. I am so proud of his spirit and zeal as well as the serious maturity he displays in regards to this new undertaking.

Caroline has returned to London, abiding with the Hursts for the present, although I do believe she plans to vacation in Essex with a friend next month. As you and I were discussing, Caroline continues to puzzle me. Over time the worst of her disdain for me has vanished and she actually appears pleased for Charles and me in our obvious felicity. However, try as I might, we cannot establish a sisterly relationship or a particularly friendly one. I know you shrug her attitude away, Lizzy, believing me silly for fretting so, yet I persist in wishing it otherwise. The oddest part is how her personality vacillates. She spoke of her trip to Essex with a queer expression. She almost appeared dreamy and her eyes softened. Then it was as if she caught herself and rapidly followed with a snippy comment about the dreariness of Meryton. I do wish I could laugh at her as you do. Oh well, she is gone now and peace reigns.

Lizzy, I am pleased that your pregnancy progresses without complications. The nursery as you describe it sounds beautiful. Who would have thought to have clouds painted on a blue ceiling and a pastel landscape over one wall? I confess I have difficulty envisioning the scene. How ingenious of the decorator to suggest such a masterpiece! You did not, however, mention horses grazing upon the painted grasses. Charles and I immediately noted the omission and mutually decided it was an oversight on your part as assuredly Mr. Darcy would insist on horses! I am pleased to hear of the cuckoo clock finding a home where your child will grow amid the sweet music as we all did. I believe I shall have to hint of the same when the time comes for Charles and me. The lace curtains are a perfect touch. You amaze me, dearest sister, in your sudden embracing of domesticity. Knitting and sewing! Astounding! The needlepoint pillows and pictures I can comprehend as you have ever adored embroidery, but making your own curtains? I truly must see it

with mine own eyes to fully believe. I told mama, but she thought me jesting. Perhaps the concept of babies brings out one's creativity as Caroline did complete the quilt. I must say, it is a skillfully wrought item and beautiful. You will love it.

Charles has finished his missive to Mr. Darcy, so I shall close for now. You absolutely cannot tell mama or papa, but I am so very thrilled that we shall be close Lizzy. I miss you so very much and want our children to grow dear to each other. Before I finish I must thank you for your timely advice at our last private chat. You were right in all aspects and the results are as you presupposed. We truly are the most fortunate of women in our marriages, are we not dear sister? If only all could be so blessed. Imagine how wonderful the world would then be? I love you Lizzy and yearn for your companionship. Take care on your journey to the seacoast.

Always, Your Jane

\* \* \* \*

Lizzy was smiling broadly and chuckling as she refolded Jane's correspondence. "What does your sister have to say which so amused you, beloved?" Darcy asked, his voice rumbling over Lizzy's back.

It was evening and they reposed on the chaise in their sitting room with Lizzy nestled between her husband's legs, back pressed tightly against his bare chest. Darcy was still attempting to catch up on the stack of correspondence that had accumulated during their absence while traveling through Derbyshire. Currently he was reading a long and detailed letter from Georgiana while toying with a lock of his wife's hair. Lizzy had received the letter from Jane that day, amazed at her timely response.

"Have you read the letter from Charles yet?" She asked, turning her head to peer up into Darcy's face as he shook his head negative. "Apparently he related with disgust the reminiscences of your journey to France. You were not exaggerating as to his feelings on museums and ruins."

Darcy chuckled, "I could almost generate some pity if it were not for his avengement."

"You never did tell me the story of your waltz experiences, beloved."

"I suppose I can now see humor in the situation, and knowing the dance has benefited me most delightfully in the present so thus eases the painful memory." He paused to stroke her cheek and lean forward

for a tasty kiss.

“You were saying?” Lizzy interrupted in a throaty whisper.

“I was saying?” He repeated, brushing her lips with insistence, but she withdrew with a giggle.

“About the waltz, William. You were going to tell me the story.”

He sighed theatrically, “Very well then, but do not forget where we were my lover.” She solemnly nodded, eyes twinkling. “As I told you, I first danced the waltz in Vienna. When I was twenty-five I traveled to Austria to visit my Aunt Mary. The waltz is quite popular there and before I hardly knew what was happening, my cousins were grasping my hands and propelling me onto the floor of their music room. You need not imagine anything untoward, love. They are all quite older than me and married.” Lizzy harrumphed and Darcy grinned.

He resumed, “They considered it a hideous lapse in my education to only know the stilted dances of the English. The Austrians are looser and prefer lively, intimate dances such as the tarantella, lavolta, courante, and galliard. I shall confess that I actually enjoyed myself and, risking the label of arrogant, I learned quickly and was quite excellent! As you now are aware, I do find dancing pleasant, provided I am familiar and comfortable with my partner.” He kissed her nose, stroking along her neck. “In Vienna I reluctantly was induced to dance a few times at the balls we attended, although I refused other than my aunt or cousins. They thought that was hysterical and teased me mercilessly.”

Lizzy laughed, “Ah, the poor broken hearts extend all across Europe. Those woeful Austrian ladies with their sad faces moping despondently about the ballroom.”

Darcy reddened, but grunted, “Unlikely, Elizabeth.” Lizzy smiled, again amused at how innocent and obtuse he was in regards to his attributes and allure. “Anyway, two years later Bingley and I are in Paris at a soiree hosted by the Comte and Comtesse Petain. I did not wish to attend, not surprisingly, but Bingley adores such entertainments and despite his allusions to the contrary, I was perceptive to his annoyance and remorseful for dragging him along on my adventures. During dinner the conversation turned to the ball and the anticipation for the waltz. Bingley, sweet, seemingly scrupulous Bingley, manipulated the topic masterfully. Within minutes the entire table accounted me a veritable waltz virtuoso and I was slated to dance with five ladies, three of whom were the Comte’s excessively homely daughters!”

Lizzy was laughing so hard she could barely breathe. Darcy shuddered in memory, but then laughed as well. “He completely blindsided me. I do confess it was rather inspired maneuvering and his

goal of humiliating me worked brilliantly.”

“Did you trip or forget the steps?”

“Very amusing, Mrs. Darcy. No, I did not. I was graceful and flawless.” He grinned. “So elegant and debonair that I believe it is fortunate we departed the next day as I may have caused the entire assemblage to fall madly in love with me.”

He meant to elicit further laughter, but she smiled into his eyes instead and caressed his cheek. “Yes, I am sure they did. A host of broken hearts once again.” Pulling him down for a deep kiss, Darcy happily complying. The spell was broken when he reached to embrace her waist and Georgiana’s letter, still clutched in his left hand, crumpled against the swell of her belly.

“Oh dear!” He exclaimed, “I should finish this before mutilating it.”

“What does she have to say?”

“You must read it, dearest. Of course, it is addressed to you as well. She is having a marvelous trip. When she dispatched this, they were at Aunt Madeline’s brother’s home in Rhayader. I believe they have probably moved on from there to Aberystwyth by now, but she says the mansion is enormous with all sorts of secret passageways, unused wings, a bell tower, and supposedly a ghost from the 12th century. Listen: ‘Suzette,’ one of the cousins, ‘declares with firm belief that the ghost is a woman who died from a suspicious fall from the bell tower. She swears, William, that she has seen her gliding about the north wing with flowing robes of white and a sad face. I asked why all ghosts are required to wear white. Is it a metaphysical law of some sort? Suzette did not find my cheekiness amusing. Needless to say, I have not seen this ghost, although despite my skepticism I do not intend to wander the empty corridors in the dead of night, which is, naturally according to those laws previously mentioned, the only time the ghost will appear!’”

Darcy chuckled. Lizzy was reading ahead to the following paragraph, asking, “Who is this Lord Gruffudd that she mentions horseback riding with?”

Darcy frowned, “A Welshman who lives in the vicinity and is obviously close friends with Mr. Hamilton, Madeline’s brother. That is the fourth time she has noted his presence involved in some activity partaken. Why would she remark about an old neighbor?”

“Perhaps he is not old. You came into your inheritance young, as do others sadly. Maybe she is smitten. Did you read this? ‘Lord Gruffudd is nearly as excellent a rider as you, dear brother. You always told me that a person borne in the saddle is instantly recognized. Lord Gruffudd has

such a demeanor. It was an entertaining ride about the moor with all in high spirits despite the drizzling mist as Lord Gruffudd's wit and humor is enlivening.' Sounds like a wee crush to me!"

Lizzy chuckled, glancing to Darcy. Her laughter froze at the thunderous expression on his face. His eyes skimmed over the remaining two pages, counting Lord Gruffudd's name five more times ere her best wishes and signature. Lizzy opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but the words failed when Darcy abruptly launched from the chaise as if sprung. Her jaw clamped shut from the sudden jolt as she fell into the space vacated by his absent body, sprawled into a bizarre angle.

Darcy paced as if caged, muttering, and clenching his fists. As typical when deeply disturbed or perplexed, he ended by a far window, staring sightlessly. Lizzy struggled up from the chaise, approaching him cautiously. "William, whatever is the matter?"

He did not glance to her, shaking his head brusquely before responding in a flat, icy tone. "I never should have let her go. It is my duty to protect her from such things and I allowed my selfishness to overrule my reason."

"I do not understand, dearest. What 'things' are you concerned about? She is having a delightful time and so what if she has an infatuation? She will be eighteen in two weeks. It is rather normal for a girl her age to notice a handsome man, assuming that is even the case here."

Darcy pivoted her direction, the anger and self loathing on his face propelling her backward a pace. "Need I remind you how the last infatuation she experienced concluded? Think Elizabeth! I am aware it was before your time, however, surely you know enough of the details to comprehend why I do not wish for her to suffer such heartache again?"

Lizzy's anger flared and she placed her hands onto her hips, answering him with equal vigor. "Do not talk to me that way Mr. Darcy! Georgiana has shared all her emotions of the Ramsgate affair with me, probably to a degree not even shared with you, but that is beside the point. You are being idiotic to equate a few mentions in a letter with the Wickham incident and you grievously insult both your sister, who is far wiser than you give credit, and your aunt and uncle!"

"Idiotic?! Really?"

"That is the least harsh term I could conjure." She crossed her arms and cocked her head slightly, a tiny smile lifting her lips at the sight of her husband attempting to glower and rage while dressed in naught but his breeches. "What truly bothers you, love? That she may experience a mild heartbreak or that she is admiring a man besides her idolized older

brother?”

“That is ridiculous, Elizabeth.” His denial was speedy, but the tone betrayed him. He glanced back out the window, avoiding her eyes, and ran one hand through his hair. “I feel helpless so far from her. What if she needs me? What if he is a scoundrel? What if.....? Aach! I shall go insane!” He dropped his hands futilely to his sides.

Lizzy smiled, planting herself squarely in front of him and placing her palms onto his chest. “I think you are worrying for nothing, William. Georgiana will not be leaving us anytime soon, although it shall happen in due course so you must prepare yourself for the eventuality.” He grunted, staring over her head, but he did clasp her waist with both hands. “I promise I shall forever idolize you and need you, beloved. I will even endeavor to do something stupid now and again so you can protect me! That way you shall never feel worthless.” She smiled dazzlingly, Darcy unable to maintain his vexation. With a sigh and faint chuckle he embraced her, deciding with effort to relinquish his fear and trust his uncle and aunt, although he did hastily dispatch a sternly worded response.

\* \* \* \*

Dear William and Elizabeth,

Greetings from Devon! Yes, I finally made it, warning Estella of my pending arrival a whole five days ere I barged in. Forgive me for not writing sooner, although I have no excuse for having not done so other than my raging irresponsibility. I trust you both adore me, worship the ground I walk upon adequately so as to not require I fabricate false pretexts or humility. In fact, be overjoyed as this will likely be the only correspondence you receive from me! In an attempt to placate, I shall endeavor to make it an extensive one with witticisms and information. Here goes:

The ride was uneventful, as you undoubtedly have heard from Col. Fitzwilliam or Mr. Bingley or Miss de Bourgh, all whom are likely to have written prior to me. We tarried at Netherfield for two days. It has been longer than I can recall since I visited Hertfordshire. Elizabeth, your home Shire is lovely. Like William, Derbyshire will always be dearest to my heart, but the lush farms of Hertfordshire are beautiful. Meryton so reminded me of Lambton that I had the most annoying sensation of déjà vu! We dined with your parents, Elizabeth. I must say again how delightful I find your father! Capital fellow. Quite an impressive library for so small a room. Be prepared, William, as he is chomping at the bit to

ramble through Pemberley's bookshelves. Your mother, Elizabeth, bless her heart, seemed all atwitter by my presence. Odd, as I rarely have such an effect on folks, being so calm and serene of spirit. (*Lizzy and Darcy snorted simultaneously at this blatant falsehood*) I did my best to be charming and endearing, and believe I succeeded as she actually smiled and blushed when I said my adieu. I seem to have this effect on women despite my attempts to submerge my natural magnetism. It is a Darcy trait, right William? (*Only Lizzy snorted at this point, Darcy nudging her in the ribs*)

Leaving Hertfordshire we leisurely drove to Kent. Miss de Bourgh did not strike me as being too anxious to return home. She continues to thrive, her color improving daily, even the trip not upsetting her health. Raja is thrilled. I do hope you have no qualms as to the nature of the relationship between him and your cousin, William? I know how dear she is to you. I shall confess that initially I was concerned as it is not an unusual phenomenon for patients to become enamored with their physicians. Happens to me all the time! Ha!! Seriously, as the weeks progressed I have realized that Raul's feelings are genuine. Thus, my greatest concern was that Miss Anne's feelings may not be reciprocal and that my dear friend would be hurt. I no longer entertain this notion, as I have seen the affection between the two.

Now here is the fun part! We arrived at Rosings, Lady Catherine as enchanting as always. (*'I cannot imagine my aunt ever being enchanting,' Darcy mumbled, Lizzy opting not to respond beyond nodding her head.*) Raja and I were ignored. Col. Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh were both embarrassed, bless their souls, by our obvious slighting, but Raja and I found it highly amusing. I do not think either of you grew to know Dr. Penaflor well, but let me assure you, the man has a backbone to rival even you, William. We settled at the Inn in Ashford, happy to bide our time for one evening. Raja, however, had a plan with no intention of being waylaid. I do not know all the details, but it was clear to me by this point that he and Miss de Bourgh had reached an agreement of sorts. I know he has not formally proposed. You see, formality and propriety are vitally essential to a man such as Raul Penaflor and nothing short of a proper courtship will do. (*Lizzy interrupted to envy the fortunate Anne in enjoying a regular courtship as befits a lady. Darcy replied that courtships are a waste of time, Anne preferring to just get married and skip to the fun part. He grinned salaciously, eyes raking over her body which raised a blush to her cheeks and halted any further snappy comments.*)

You two may not quite understand Raja's circumstance. He was raised in the courts of Madrid and Palencia. His blood is as blue as it gets and his wealth transcends yours, William; radically transcends. I honestly do not know how affluent he is, but I have gathered much and it is

extensive. Additionally, his connections are superb. I do not think any of these facts interest Miss de Bourgh in the least, but Lady Catherine is another matter entirely. However, I am getting ahead of myself in the tale.

So, day two: We are invited, by Miss de Bourgh, to dine. She is showing a strength to her beyond merely physical and I do not judge Lady Catherine is pleased by that development. Nonetheless, we arrived for dinner to the sweet charm of Miss Anne, the booming effervescence of Col. Fitzwilliam, who I believe intended to stay around at the risk of court-martial for abandoning his post rather than miss the spectacle, (*Darcy laugh aloud, certain that this was about the truth knowing Richard and his delight in subtly tormenting their aunt.*) and the sour disposition of Lady Catherine. Most delightful dinner engagement I have ever been a part of! Lady Catherine had invited her Vicar, Mr. Collins, and his wife. Lovely woman Mrs. Collins, but more on her later. Her husband, however, I am sure was included on the dinner list as an ally in the anti-foreigner and strange distant relative front. (*Lizzy's comment on Mr. Collins shall not be repeated here.*) Dinner itself went well enough. The food was marvelous, Raul and Miss Anne made doe eyes at each other throughout, Lady Catherine's face pruned increasingly, Rev. Collins waxed philosophical on the virtues of chastity and morality, Mrs. Collins and Col. Fitzwilliam and I hid our smiles, and the palpable tension nearly manifested physically. As I said, it was stupendous!

As we rose from the table, Raja requested to speak alone with Lady Catherine. She demurred, pointedly stating that anything he wished to say could be said in front of us all. I tried to have the good grace to look embarrassed, but simply could not muster the emotion. Raja was prepared for any eventuality, so her presumptive hope to unman him failed. Upon arrival in the parlor, he boldly asserted himself, Miss Anne sitting with quiet grace but steady strength. I think I can closely relate the entire conversation:

"Lady Catherine," Dr. Penaflor began, "I am sure you are aware that Miss de Bourgh and I have grown friendly over the course of our acquaintance. Although initially my interest was as a physician and strictly professional, I soon realized that my respect and admiration for her as a person had risen. With each passing day I am amazed at the intelligence, kindness, grace, and humor that are only a fragment of the positive attributes which your daughter possesses. I am beyond fortunate to have met her and would appreciate your permission to formally court her with the definitive intention of securing her hand in matrimony when, or if, she deems me worthy of her." (*Very well done,* Darcy murmured. *Yes,* Lizzy



*responded, 'well thought out as all the right things a girl needs to hear to render an affirmative response to a proposal.' She laughed, patting her husband's red cheek.)*

"That is a wonderful speech, Dr. Penaflor. What assurance can you offer me that any of it is the truth?"

"Time, Lady Catherine, will prove the truth of my words. I am honorable and a gentleman. I would not state such praise in the presence of a lady without fully meaning it; however, I shall take no offense as you do not know me well. Therefore, time and permission to intrude upon your home is requested so all parties involved can feel certain of the relationship."

"Tell me Dr. Penaflor, as a gentleman claiming to care for my daughter, do you account a mere doctor as adequate to husband the daughter of a Lady?"

"I suppose the answer depends on what you consider an adequate husband. My profession, my Lady, is of no import in regards to my love for her, and my desire to ensure her happiness and welfare. That comes from my heart. If you are referring to monetary issues, I assure you I can more than adequately provide for her needs."

"What you really mean is that in marrying her you will not have to worry about money!"

"Mother!" Miss de Bourgh declared, but Lady Catherine and Dr. Penaflor ignored her.

"What I mean, Lady Catherine, is precisely what I said. I can more than adequately provide for her needs."

"How do you expect to do that on a doctor's income? I do not know what the status of physicians is in Spain, but in England they barely scrape a living!"

"Lady Catherine, allow me to make several things perfectly clear for all our sakes. First, I am proud of my chosen profession and will make no apologies for it. I am not a doctor for the financial benefits, although I do not see that aspect as bleakly as you do. Secondly, Miss de Bourgh is a great Lady and as such deserves only the best. If I did not think I could provide this, I would not offer, no matter my feelings. You asked if a mere doctor was worthy of your daughter and I would concur that the honest answer in light of English societal mores would be no. My personal opinions of this fact are inconsequential as I have qualification beyond my calling."

"What sort of qualification could a vagabond from Spain possibly possess?"

Raul smiled, glancing to Miss de Bourgh and then to me. Here comes the humorous part, but I also know Raja, and he abhors touting

his connections. Few know anything beyond that he is a Spaniard. “Lady Catherine, my father is Duke Manuel Penaflor Aleman de Vigo. My mother is now the Duchess de Vigo, but was born an Infanta of the royal house.”

He went on for quite a bit, outlining all the various interconnections in his family, none of which I can unravel and remember. All the while Lady Catherine’s face was paling further. Frankly, I drifted off for a spell as I always do when Raja elaborates on his family relationships. I was brought to wakefulness by the blessed sound of utter silence. Now, Elizabeth dear, do not read this next part as I intend to reveal my evil nature and as you esteem me nearly god-like in your adoration, I would hate to burst your bubble. (*Lizzy dissolved into laughter, wiping tears from her eyes as she gasped, ‘Oh William, I so adore your uncle!’ Darcy smiled, offering his handkerchief.*) William, your aunt was white as a ghost and literally stammering inarticulate noises. Col. Fitzwilliam was red as a beet in an attempt to not laugh, Mrs. Collins stared into her lap with magnetic intensity, Rev. Collins was gazing at Raul with pure worship, and Miss de Bourgh was glowing with pride. I am quite certain he could have dropped to one knee and secured her hand on the spot. Anyway, I could not tear my eyes from Lady Catherine. I have rarely known such joy! She was completely at a loss for words, so I bluntly filled the gap.

“Well, Catherine, seems to me that Dr. Penaflor outranks you. My, my, my. What shall you do? Cannot very well withhold consent to a genuine royal, can you?” Yes, yes! I enjoyed myself immensely and could only wish with all my being that James were there. Lord, how he disliked Anne’s sister!

Well, there you have it. I know you continued to read, Elizabeth, so can only pray you still love me and want these hands to deliver your baby. Lady Catherine eventually consented to Raul’s courtship and I departed two days later for London, leaving Raja to his pursuits. Have not heard from him since, but suppose I shall need to find a new associate. Col. Fitzwilliam accompanied me and we two bachelors managed to have a bit of fun ere my departure to Devon. Do not worry, William, Mrs. Smyth would not allow me to ransack Darcy House too profoundly. It remains largely intact. (*‘Better be or there shall be hell to pay,’ Darcy murmured with a smile. Lizzy was dazedly imagining the vision of a pestered and flustered Mrs. Smyth with no small amount of pleasure.*)

The family here in Honiton greets you both. They have nothing but praise for Elizabeth, to all of which I wholeheartedly concur, and entreat me to send their congratulations on your blessing. I do pray your

child is half as adorable as Cousin Nicole's two. They have the roundest brown eyes and are simply sweet enough to eat! Naturally they love me and I am having a marvelous time. However, I will return to Pemberley in late September, or sometime in there. I deem it only polite to visit with Mrs. Smyth again for a spell as I am sure she misses me greatly. I do hope all is well with you both. Enjoy your vacation at the seaside. Oh, I nearly forgot! Mrs. Collins's pregnancy is progressing nicely, not that we spoke of it naturally, but I could readily discern that all was well. She is a delightful woman. So warm and humorous. She spoke of you, Elizabeth, with tremendous affection. We had no opportunity to speak privately, not that this would have been appropriate, but I wanted you to know her status.

With deepest regard and love to you both, George, alias Dr.  
Darcy for you Elizabeth

\* \* \* \*

Darcy was grinning as he folded the letter. Glancing into his wife's dreamy face, he reached to brush the back of his fingers over a velvet cheek. "Do not fear, love. I am positive our baby shall be the loveliest on the face of the earth."

Lizzy laughed, turning to kiss his knuckles. "Yes, surely. However, I was lost in the delicious vision of a harried Mrs. Smyth." She sighed deeply, an evil twinkle in her eyes.

Darcy assumed a stern face, although his eyes twinkled as well. "How unbecoming of you Elizabeth Darcy. I am aghast."

Lizzy merely laughed further while Darcy rose to deposit the letter onto his desk. They sat in his study, the late afternoon August sun blazing through the open windows. No breeze was forthcoming, had not been for days upon days, therefore the room was stifling. Lizzy wore the thinnest dress she could find, refusing a petticoat thicker than the sheer muslin one which meant that her legs did show slightly, but she was tolerably cool. She observed her husband, dressed to the nines although in a light kerseymere, and wondered for the thousandth time how he can appear so comfortable. Not even a sheen of sweat along his brow. Of course, Darcy was perpetually collected and calm.

"I certainly enjoyed your uncle's version of events over Miss de Bourgh's," Lizzy said. "Although the emotion in her letter was so touching."

"Yes," Darcy replied from his desk chair where he was rifling through a stack of folded parchment envelops, "and, if you recall, my

dearest, she expressed her wish to forgo the long courtship and hasten to the marriage part.”

“She did not!”

“I beg to differ. Ah! Here it is.” He fluttered the pages with a flourish, smirking at his wife, and then clearing his throat as if preparing to address Parliament. “She writes, and I quote, ‘In the end mother did consent to allow Dr. Penaflor the right to court me. Oh William! I cannot express my happiness. I must thank you for encouraging me to follow my heart and to trust. I have no doubts regarding my feelings toward Dr. Penaflor and know he feels as strongly. Love at nearly first sight! I never anticipated this happening to me. Honestly I had relinquished all hope of finding love and cannot repress the trepidation that I shall wake to discover it is all a dream. I appreciate Dr. Penaflor’s design to court me properly and comprehend it derives from his esteem; however I must confess a desire to hasten time. Is this selfish of me William? My life has altered drastically these past three months and my joy is nearly complete. Suddenly my wildest wishes are within my grasp and I am aware that the natural womanly response is to revel in the season of wooing and flirtation. Nonetheless, my greatest urge is to be married to sweet Raul and begin our life together.’”

Lizzy assumed a haughty pout in the face of Darcy’s smug grin. “Very well, Mr. Darcy. I shall admit my error; however I detect only the yearning to be bonded in matrimony and no allusion to ‘fun’ as you so called it.”

“The fun is implied, love.”

Lizzy laughed and shook her head, turning to another letter waiting on the table. “Shall I read papa’s letter aloud?”

“It is addressed to you, Elizabeth. You can share with me later if you wish as I must currently attend to this boring albeit necessary business packet from Mr. Daniels.”

Thereafter, in quiet harmony they concentrated on their individual undertakings while ever with an unconscious awareness of the other’s presence.

\* \* \* \*

My dearest Lizzy,

My beloved daughter, why do you insist on exponentially whitening my hair even further? When you were two years of age you toddled outside and narrowly avoided falling into the duck pond, saved by Mr. Hill who happened to be walking by. From that day onward, my

precocious second daughter, I awaited the day when some brave man would assume caretaking duties allotting me the opportunity to breathe freely. Overall I judge Mr. Darcy has adequately fulfilled the role, but armed bandits? Heavens child!

Naturally I maintained my equilibrium, trusting in Mr. Darcy's assurance that you and the child are well. Your mother, however, dissolved into nervous prostration, taking to her bed in a near swoon. Kitty attended to her with a diligence that surprised me. I confess to retreating to my study having divined ages ago that my presence is in no way placating. Suffer no guilt, my dear girl, as you know your mother fairly wallows in her misery. Dear Jane was secretly relieved as your trauma diverted mama's flustering over their relocation.

Luckily, fortune smiled on us all as joyous news was forthcoming. I will proceed in the hope that the latest Bennet blessing is revealed by me. Three days after receiving your missive, your mother yet abed, I was visited by Mr. Joshua Daniels. As you likely have already postulated, he rode to Hertfordshire to obtain permission to wed our Mary. Naturally I deemed it my right and duty as father of the intended to toy with him a bit, make him sweat as they say. I daresay he reacted with far greater amusement than either Mr. Bingley or Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bingley was simply too befuddled to even ask my permission for Jane's hand, an oversight I reluctantly reckoned merciful in light of the general mayhem of that day. Mr. Darcy, of course, captured me utterly unaware. My usually rapid mental faculties were dulled by surprise and the ungodly hour of the day. If I did not know the truth of the situation I would hazard to guess he planned it that way! Besides, he was so disarmingly charming and pathetic that I could not muster the heart to trifle with his frayed emotions. Well, not too much anyway.

Mr. Daniels, on the other hand, was an expectation. Via correspondence from your Uncle Gardiner, I knew the courtship was progressing at a stately pace so rightly figured it was merely a matter of time. I did not anticipate his arrival on that particular day, but was prepared for the eventuality. In the end, of course, I gave my blessing as I fully intended to do all along. He is a delightful young man and I have no doubts will care for our Mary. By the way, thank your husband for his personal endorsement of and information about the young solicitor. Having not had the luxury of acquainting ourselves with him to any great degree, your mother and I are eased by Mr. Darcy's recommendation. Of course, Edward and Violet have become quite familiar and praise him glowingly. Mary is prosaic in her commentary, but there is an underlying emotion which belies her conservative pose. All in all, we are delighted

with her choice.

I do not know when they plan to wed, nor where. I chose not to question Mr. Daniels on the particulars as I had no desire to have the boy faint in my study! London would be my guess, although Mary is very fond of our vicar and the Meryton Chapel. I have not yet heard from Mary as all this transpired just yesterday. So, it has been an eventful two weeks between the Bingley's news, your adventure, and Mary's engagement. I almost, for once, pity your mother's theatrically fraught nerves. Now, luckily for us all, she has rebounded and nearly has the wedding all planned. Or at least I am assuming so as that is all she speaks of. I, as I can only confess to you my dear Lizzy, ignore her most awfully.

Well, there you have it! Life at Longbourn treads on with the usual undulating waves consisting of valleys of monotony and peaks of drama. I have resigned myself to Jane's departure with equanimity. In truth I have long suspected they would move and am thrilled for them. We do look forward to visiting, if you all will have us, at some point this winter. I must see if the Pemberley library is all I have been led to believe it is, and we wish to tour Hasberry and Pemberley. Of course, the premiere draw will be my first grandchild. Yes, Lizzy, even beyond the library!

Please take care of yourself, my darling daughter. Dr. Darcy said your confinement is proceeding without mishap and as he appears determined to attend the birth, I am greatly comforted. Nonetheless, I know you Lizzy! Do not be foolish. Rest and listen to your husband, who I know has far greater sense and wisdom than you!

With all my love, Papa

\* \* \* \*

Darcy had diligently applied himself to Mr. Daniels's correspondence, but was fully aware of his wife's constant chuckles. Therefore, he was not the slightest bit surprised when she jumped out of her seat and crossed to his desk.

"You must read this William!"

He took the proffered letter and sat back with a contented sigh, his father-in-law's writing always amusing. Lizzy rang for refreshments, it having been over two hours since lunch and the baby demanded nourishment. She stood by the window, rubbing her belly while their son somersaulted, and watched Darcy's face as he read.

He smiled, laughed, and grunted precisely as she knew he would during certain sentences, adding an occasional comment. "Brave am I?

Yes, that is true.....Poor Mr. Daniels! .....Pathetic? Well, I suppose so..... ‘Not too much’ he says! The man tortured and terrified me.....Hmmm....You are welcome, Mr. Bennet.....There shall be the test, my love. I will have you and our son stand across from the library door and see where he goes first.....Ha! ‘Greater sense and wisdom.’ From the mouth of your father. Surely you cannot argue with that?” He grinned up at his wife, who ignored the query.

Mary’s correspondence arrived three days later. Lizzy sat on the terrace, fanning herself and praying for a breeze, no matter how faint. Darcy was at the stables. On occasion Lizzy would accompany him for a spell, but today he planned to assist with breaking a horse and Lizzy absolutely refused to watch. The process terrified her and she fretted all day while he was at the endeavor. Darcy knew her fears and generally evaded elaborating on his planned activities, but if she pointedly inquired, he would not lie. He deplored worrying her, but could not resist the lure of the corral. Lizzy recognized his love for the work so attempted to hide her anxiety and disapproval, learning it best to not ask his agenda for the day.

Therefore, it was painfully obvious when he was to train! If Darcy’s docket included riding about the farms, or visiting a fishery or mill, or checking on the breeding proceedings, he was open in sharing, giving her a complete rundown of his time so she would know precisely where he was and when he expected to return. If, on the other hand, he remained mum or became vague, she knew it meant a day of vigorous and dangerous exercise with a wild horse.

Such had been the case this morning. He woke her early, the sun barely illuminating the room. Lizzy groaned and vainly attempted to ignore the sweet kisses being rained along her shoulder and the insistent hands roaming freely. Her husband, however, was in a mood and as was generally the case finagled matters to arrive at the outcome he wanted. Afterwards, just as a blissfully content and tingly Lizzy was drifting back into sleep, she asked groggily, “What are your plans for the day, beloved? Are you staying with me or going for a ride?”

She could tell instantly by the silence and slight stiffening of his body that the news was unfavorable. Darcy was a terrible liar and even after all this time had yet to arrive at a plausible alibi. “I shall be riding, yes, then I....have business with Mr. Thurber and....um, well, boring ....issues to attend to, and...I do not know when I shall return, but certainly for dinner, my love, so do not worry. I love you.”

Now, staring at the rippling water of the lake, Lizzy sighed deeply and gave up on her prayers for a cooling wind. A sudden burst of

restlessness consumed her and grabbing her bonnet she rose to her feet, deciding that a walk among the trees was essential. She pivoted to the door, nearly colliding with the maid Abigail.

“Forgive me Madame. I was bringing these to you.” She held out two envelopes. “The post just arrived.”

“Thank you Abigail. Could you please inform Mrs. Reynolds that I will be walking the north trail to the rock pond?”

The trail leading to the pond skirted the edge of the forest. The canopy of leaves coupled with the perpetually damp loam of the floor created a significantly cooler atmosphere. Lizzy immediately perked up under the shade, rejuvenated to the point of adequately relinquishing the unrelenting angst over Darcy’s employment. Sitting on one of the artistically arranged and sheltered rock benches beside the pond’s rim, Lizzy removed her shoes and commenced reading.

\* \* \* \*

Dear Lizzy,

I am sincerely praying that my news will reach your ears via my pen rather than papa’s. Although, in the end it matters naught as long as you are made aware of a fabulous occurrence. For cert it shall be no great marvel to you as I have spoken of little else in each letter I have sent. Yes, dear sister, naturally I speak of Mr. Daniels and me. He has proposed! I feel as if I should insert the caveat ‘finally’ although in truth our courtship has advanced speedily. Odd, is it not, how when the correct mate appears it simply fits? I imagine it must have been the same with you and Mr. Darcy as your relationship transpired in short order. Of course you know I tend to not be gushy or emotional by nature, but Mr. Daniels does elicit sensations of tenderness and whimsy unfamiliar in me. Now I comprehend at least some of the ridiculous expressions you would share with Mr. Darcy! Hopefully we are not as nonsensical. Anyway, I should describe the proposal as all my new women friends are consistently inquiring so I have deduced it is of vital interest to others.

I have ascertained that Mr. Daniels, albeit sensible and serious, does have a romantic disposition and can be mildly impatient. Therefore, it was of no great surprise that he rode off to Hertfordshire, unbeknownst to me, and asked papa for my hand. Is that not sweet? Apparently papa teased him a bit, but eventually gave his consent. That evening, just two days ago now, Mr. Daniels arrived for dinner, having conspired with aunt and uncle to secure a span of time alone with me. I was momentarily shocked when first aunt left the room, followed ten



minutes later by uncle, both mumbling something vague in excuse. Naturally I am not totally dull and presumed his intent before he dropped to his knee. Oh, Lizzy it was so very cute! Mr. Daniels, if you recall, is quite bashful in general, however we have reached a place of relative ease with each other. So, to see him blushing and stammering was fairly amusing. I maintained my calm and waited in serene silence until he finally (and here the word applies) blurted out the actual words Will You Marry Me.

Oh the urge to laugh! However, I did not. Despite the humor of the situation I was, and am, deeply moved and exceedingly content. I said yes, obviously, and tried to get him off his knee, but he stubbornly remained until the ring was secure on my finger. Now it is official. His family is delighted. They, I say with a slight blush, adore me. I truly care for them as well. We have yet to decide the wedding details. I wanted to write you as soon as possible. Lizzy, as generally unromantic and stoic as I am, I want you to know how blissful I am. Also, I want to thank you and Mr. Darcy most profoundly. The sequence of events which led Mr. Daniels to my side is all because of you two. I shall be eternally grateful and I know Mr. Daniels feels the same. He wishes to thank Mr. Darcy as well and asked me to convey his heartfelt gratitude as it would be inappropriate, his words, to personally write to a client.

One point we are mutually firm on is dating the wedding for after your baby's birth as we insist on the presence of you and Mr. Darcy. Probably mid to late January if this seems feasible for you? We need the time to plan as Mr. Daniels intends to purchase a house for us and I wish to spend a few more months in Hertfordshire. I will keep you informed. I hope all is well with you and the baby. Please take care Lizzy. Give my sincerest regards to Mr. Darcy. I know Georgiana is traveling so have written to her via Pemberley. Feel free to share my news if you write to her prior to her return. I love you Lizzy.

God Bless, Mary

\* \* \* \*

Lizzy reread the letter several times. Partly this was due to her overwhelming joy in her sister's good fortune. Additionally it was due to a lack of enthusiasm toward reading the second letter.

It was from Lydia.

Lydia had written to Lizzy exactly four times, including this one, since riding off with Mr. Wickham to Newcastle nearly one year ago. Lizzy had written a dozen times, considered it her duty to do so, but in

all honesty did not exalt in her sister's responses. Aside from the fact that she and her flighty youngest sister had never been tremendously akin, there was the uncomfortable reality of her marriage and current living situation that drove a deeper wedge between them. Lydia's letters were typical of her personality: self-centered, erratic, and unintelligent. Top that with incessant references to 'my dear Wickham' and Lizzy was nauseous and headachy each time.

To make matters worse, it was the only area of her life she did not share with Darcy. He knew that she wrote to Lydia and was aware that she received the occasional reply, however he never asked for details. He wished no ill upon Lydia in her marriage. Rather he harbored extreme guilt over the arrangement, knowing it was his involvement which shackled her to Wickham, even though there was no alternative as she had flatly refused to leave her sweet Wickham's side. Darcy told Lizzy, much later, that his intention was to use all the considerable means at his disposal to hush the scandal and restore Lydia to her family. Wickham was perfectly amenable to taking the money Darcy offered and disappearing, but Lydia refused to leave. He could not very well drag her away kicking and screaming, although it had crossed his mind, but then the scandal would be far more difficult to smother. Plus there was the potential consequences of the illicit affair that would prevent concealing the situation; a deed that he had prayed to impede by a timely rescue, but that hope was instantly proven vain by the brazen appearance of a nightdress clad Lydia in Wickham's rented room. Therefore Darcy had been forced to increase the sum offered Wickham in order to secure him marrying her, a step he patently had no previous intention of taking. Even then, Darcy had worried that he would not follow through while simultaneously praying that he would run away and save Lydia the sad fate of being his wife.

During their engagement the topic had come up only once in a rebuttal to Mrs. Bennet discussing the guest list. Darcy bluntly stated that under no circumstance was Wickham to be invited to the wedding. Mrs. Bennet had moaned and dithered, muttering uncharitable comments about Mr. Darcy's character until Lizzy nearly snapped, saved only by her father steering her mother out of the room for a stern lashing. It was awful, increasingly so by the intense distress and anger of Darcy. Of course, the whole episode was unnecessary as Lydia was far too involved in her own affairs to bother traveling the distance to her sisters' wedding, nor would Wickham have endured Darcy's ire.

Upon the receipt of Lydia's first correspondence after Lizzy's marriage, a full one month after in fact, Lizzy finally heard the entire

story of Darcy's search for Wickham and Lydia. Her husband's lingering pain over the situation, remorse for being unable to rescue Lydia, and hatred toward Wickham was profound. Reliving the episode was tortuous, augmented by a residual grief due to his belief at the time that Elizabeth was beyond his reach. The last pieces of the mystery were revealed. They hugged, kissed, and made love, then vowed to never speak of it again.

It was not that Darcy refused to utter Wickham or Lydia's name or hear them spoken in his presence; he merely preferred to avoid the topic. Therefore, Lizzy chose to facilitate tranquility and impede any suffering touching her husband by hiding the letters received and never mentioning her sister. Fortunately it was not a difficult chore, but she still hated anything remotely secretive between her and her spouse.

"Quit stalling Lizzy," she chided herself, opening the letter with a sigh.

\* \* \* \*

Dear Lizzy,

You are pregnant! Oh Lizzy, I completely forgot. I was cleaning out my desk and ran across one of your letters, how do you have the time to write so much Lizzy? Unbelievable! Anyway, I reread it and remembered. Congratulations! You are happy, are you? You said you were and I am sure Mr. Darcy wishes for an heir. I do not think I am at all ready to have a baby. Growing fat and being sick, Oh how horrible! I do hope that does not happen to you Lizzy. Of course you are far thinner than me so maybe it shall not affect you so. The Major's wife had her third baby six months ago, three! Can you imagine? Anyway, she is still huge, poor dear. I heard she was about my size once, so I fear that could be my fate! My dear Wickham is in no hurry to have babies so I need not concern myself yet. So are you feeling well? Have you been sick? I do pray the delivery goes well. I hear people die when having babies! Of course mama had no problems so hopefully you will take after her. I daresay you and Mr. Darcy desire a male? Yes? I am doing fantastically! Newcastle is a huge city, Lizzy! There are so many diversions here. The parks are beautiful, the sea shore is near although far too cold this far to the north, the shopping is fantastic and the theater is amazing! Better than London most people say. I adore all the parties. Lizzy, the dancing is frequent and so delightful. Balls nearly every Saturday! I have made so many friends. There are so many Scots here! They talk with a strange accent, a burr it is called, and they are big and

sweaty usually. Scary but intriguing. My dear Wickham is busy so often, spends so many nights working, poor darling. His superiors torture him! Work, work, work all the time. He comes home at the wee hours of the morning tired and mussed up. Luckily my lady friends keep me entertained. Everyone is so kind! I never lack for dancing partners as the officers sympathize with my sweet Wickham's absence, poor baby! You would think that working such long hours would mean he is paid more yet we barely manage to survive! He tries so hard, my dear husband, but there is only so much one man can do. He does try to win at the tables on occasion, just to augment our income you understand, but the scoundrels cheat so here! Of course, you do not have to worry about money! So fortunate. Mama wrote about your fine carriage and jewels and gowns. My Georgie said it is expected as a Darcy and that Mr. Darcy would have it no other way. Well, do not worry about me Lizzy. I admit I envy you just a small bit! Nonetheless, I am happy with my friends and my dear Wickham. See, it all turned out wonderfully despite Mr. Darcy and Uncle fretting so. Oh, I hear my dear Georgie downstairs! I must close now Lizzy. I know you will write me soon. You are so good! I do not know how you find the time. I thought being Mistress of Pemberley would keep you occupied. My Wickham says it is probably because Mr. Darcy does all the work himself and does not trust you to do anything. I do not believe this as I know how bright you are, but do not tell him I disagree! Give my best to Mr. Darcy. I love you Lizzy!

Your sister, Lydia Wickham

\* \* \* \*

"Oh Lydia, you silly, naïve fool," Lizzy whispered, folding the letter slowly. She retrieved a handkerchief from her pocket to dab at teary eyes, rubbing her thumb gently over the parchment while losing herself in sad musings. With head bowed and thoughts drifting, she did not note the faint crunch of boot heels on sandy path.

"Elizabeth? Are you well?"

She glanced up, mildly startled, but recognizing her husband's voice instantly. He stood a couple feet away, the sun blocked by an exceedingly tall body thus throwing his face into shadow. The tone of concern was unmistakable, however, even without visualizing the creases between furrowed brows.

Lizzy smiled, brushing quickly at her eyes and flipping the letter over. "I am fine, dearest. What are you doing here?" She held out her hand and he approached, sitting onto the bench beside her.

“I was told you had walked here and since my heart was breaking with my need to see your face I decided to forego washing up or changing, hastening here to find my beautiful wife with teary eyes and sad face.” He fingered across her cheeks, nodding toward the letter, “Distressing news?”

“No, no. The opposite actually. I heard from Mary. She shared her blessed news with her usual aplomb, insisting I thank you specifically for the initial introduction. Mr. Daniels considers you a matchmaker extraordinaire.”

Darcy laughed, “How kind, although if I recall, I was out of Town at the time and had little to do with the meeting. Still, it is an excellent match and I am very happy for her, for them both actually. Mary is a lovely girl and will make a steady, faithful wife.” He continued to caress her cheek, staring intently into her eyes all the while. “However, I sense dissimulation on your part, beloved. These are sad eyes, not happy eyes.”

Lizzy dropped her gaze, the intensity of his stare unnerving her. “It is nothing, William. Better if we do not speak of it.”

He frowned, transferring his hands to clasp both of hers, silence falling for a brief time. “Elizabeth, I appreciate that I have no right to insist you divulge all information to me. Secrets are a natural human necessity, I suppose. However, I would hate to think you felt you *could not* share something troubling with me. That I had somehow given you reason to conclude I was disinterested or vexed with any issue related to you. If the former, then simply say so. If the latter, then we must talk about it.”

Lizzy shook her head, actually chuckling slightly as she returned her gaze to his serious face. “William, you truly are too amazing. I could almost become annoyed at that fact alone if it was not so wonderful.” She sighed, patting his puzzled face. “I only wish to spare you pain, my love. I...It is a letter from Lydia, is all. She is well,” she hastily added, Darcy’s countenance instantaneously darkening with sorrow. “Too well, in fact. Giddy with the joy of balls and friends and her dear Wickham.” She shrugged, staring into the pond. “I likely read too much inbetween the lines as she never relates anything but her bounding happiness. I am not sure if I am sad or thankful for her perpetual immaturity and gullibility.”

She leaned against Darcy’s side, his arm surrounding her with a gentle squeeze. Silence fell again, the soft chirping of birds and steady trickle of water over rocks serenely persisting despite the mild tension in the air. When he broke the calm, his voice was quite low and hesitant,

“Does he....harm her in any way do you think?”

“No. I am certain even foolish Lydia would recognize and not tolerate physical violence. As I said, she seems happy. She says he works until morning and that they have little money and that he gambles, only to make money of course. I suppose it is uncharitable of me to immediately leap to negative conclusions, but I rather doubt he is working or that he gambles out of duty!”

Darcy released a guttural sound which clearly relayed his views on Wickham’s behavior. “It is as I imagined it would be for them. I did harbor some hope that matrimony and the responsibility incurred would breed a sense of honor in Wickham, and perhaps it may yet to some degree. At least he has not abandoned her and is maintaining his post.” He paused, shifting on the hard rock and pulling her tighter into his side. “Elizabeth, I have a confession. You know I do not enjoy speaking of...him, and the guilt which abides in my heart has caused you to not broach the subject. In truth I am relieved and I do appreciate your compassion. Nonetheless, I do not wish for secrets between us if at all possible to avoid.”

She glanced up quickly, tears springing to her eyes, “Forgive me William! I did not mean....”

He halted her with a kiss, smiling as he resumed, “Allow me to finish. The secret I refer to is my own. I have vast connections, as you know, and have utilized my contacts to keep abreast of Wickham’s activities both personal and professional. I receive regular dispatches, in fact. So I am asking you to forgive me for not sharing what I know.”

Lizzy’s mouth had fallen open and her eyes were wide. Darcy kissed her cheek, holding her gaze as he continued, “It is as you have deduced. Wickham is not faithful to your sister, although I am assured that he is discreet, which is a surprising improvement. He gambles too much and drinks, but he does pay his bills, adequately fulfills his duties, has been in no serious offenses, and by all outward appearances cares for Lydia’s needs. As you say she claims, my sources assure me that she is content. How much she is aware of Wickham’s activities, I do not know. Many women in her place simply deny the truth, living in a state of willing blindness. I would have wished more for her in life, as I know you would as well my love, but it is not as horrible as I envisioned.” He smiled wryly, “I guess that is enough to be thankful for.”

Lizzy was dumbfounded. “Why would you do this William? Lydia freely placed herself in this situation. It is not your fault! You have no reason to exert such efforts or worry so.”

“Logically I comprehend the truth of your assertions, Elizabeth.

Lydia is a foolish girl to be sure; however you know she would not be in this particular situation if not for me. My damnable pride and sense of politesse, not wanting to cause scandal to my family. It allowed a villain to roam free. To charm, flatter, and destroy young girls at will. And I was forced to see them married!" He shook his head and closed his eyes briefly. "Nonetheless, I watch over Lydia not out of guilt....well not completely anyway, but because it is ethical and obligatory. She is your sister, and thus my family. I will not allow overt harm to come to her. If Wickham's behavior becomes unmanageable or hurtful, I have people in place who will remove her, forcefully if necessary."

Darcy cupped her cheek, smiling in peace. "Let us make a new vow, my precious. I shall put the past affairs with Wickham behind me once and for all, and we shall share our future knowledge freely. I cannot promise to embrace lengthy conversations on the subject, but I will not avoid them or wince overly. Deal?"

Laughing lightly, Lizzy kissed him in joy. "Have I told you lately, beloved, that you are the best man in the world?"

"Yes, but you may say it again if you wish," he offered with a grin.

She encircled his neck, drawing his forehead to hers. "You are the best man in the world, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and I love you."

### **3 - A Game of Riddles**

Samuel Oliver and Marguerite Charbonneau were joined in Holy Matrimony on September the third in the intimate Pemberley Chapel. The groom wore a fine suit of black, dashing and elegant despite the blush upon his cheeks and trembling hands. He was attended by a livery garbed, wigged, and smiling Watson and Phillips, the latter yet leaning on a crutch and pale. The bride was resplendent in a white taffeta gown, her golden hair for once not in a severe knot but stunningly curled and piled atop her delicate head. She was attended by Miss Jameson and her sister Dominique, a ladies maid at the Inn in Matlock where Marguerite had once been employed, both women wearing lacy gowns of rose organdy. Aside from a few bouquets of late summer flowers and ribbons upon the pews, the chapel was left unadorned, its natural beauty and reverent essence shining brighter than any decoration would have.

Reverend Bertram, dressed in his finest vestments, performed the traditional ceremony. Marguerite was baptized a Catholic, as were most French, but since residing in England from the young age of eighteen, religion had not played a large part in her life. Therefore, she had readily embraced the Anglican views and had met with Rev. Bertram several times to familiarize herself with Samuel's chosen faith. Essentially it was the blessing of God that was of vital importance to both of them. The entire household staff, a handful of outside staff, a few other friends from the community, and Samuel's father, a Butler at Yeldersley Hall near Ashbourne, was present to witness the union. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy sat in the front pew, adding their blessings to the solemn event.

All plans had proceeded as initially outlined a month ago. Darcy arranged for a coach to transport the newlyweds to Windermere where they would vacation for two weeks. Samuel was consulted on all arrangements, but offered little in the way of feedback, generally far too uncomfortable merely by being in his Master's study to even consider carrying on a collaborative conversation. Lizzy had better luck with Marguerite, although her involvement was minimal, primarily allowing her maid to do whatever she wished in regards to the wedding. Therefore, like most women throughout the ages, Marguerite and her bridesmaids organized the bulk of the ceremony's provisions, Samuel



essentially required to simply show up at the appointed time.

Mrs. Langton and Mrs. Reynolds hosted a reception in the staff quarters with feasting and merriment. The Master and Mistress extended their heartfelt congratulations to the blushing groom and radiant bride, departing to the Manor and allowing the couple to celebrate at leisure with their friends. The Olivers would spend their wedding night in their new apartment on the Pemberley lower level, Samuel's mortification far too profound for Darcy to more than hint about providing a place of greater privacy.

Lizzy and Darcy ate a light repast in the dining room, the muted sounds of revelry drifting from below, and then retired to their sitting room for the remainder of the night. Of course, this was not unusual, but tonight they would essentially be on their own as the entire staff was likely to be occupied toasting the new couple for many hours to come. Despite Samuel's fretting to the contrary, Darcy managed perfectly well with performing his personal toilette and with only his wife to assist him in undressing. Lizzy, too, was quite capable and since they both actually rather enjoyed caring for each other, not having their individual servants attend them was a common occurrence. For the two day interim before they departed to Yarmouth, Darcy would be served by Willis, a manservant from the Osprey Inn in Brawley, and Lizzy would be assisted by Marla, one of the maids. Darcy was still not sure whether Samuel was relieved to have his Master cared for or appalled at the concept of a strange servant handling Mr. Darcy's personal effects! Whatever the case, the Darcys each released a huge sigh of relief to have their servants safely wed and on their way, the organizing frankly frequently annoying with Samuel blushing and stammering incessantly.

The fourth of September dawned brightly, Lizzy reaching sleepily for her husband only to find his space vacant and cool. He had not specifically mentioned leaving early for a ride or other duty, not that he necessarily was required to do so, but he generally did. Normally this desertion would have caused no dismay or perplexity; today, however, Lizzy was shocked to find him absent. Darcy had made no reference of a specially planned celebration for this day, but Lizzy had anticipated something even if only a romantic morning interlude. Well aware of how sentimental her spouse was, Lizzy's expectancy had grown and her first waking emotion was crushing disappointment.

"I told you not to spoil me so William," she murmured to the empty air. "You have set the standard impossibly high." She sighed, further chastising herself for being so foolishly saddened when overall he was far and away the best man on planet earth. The baby suffered no

such sense of disillusionment, jumping about on her bladder and demanding nourishment posthaste as usual.

Crossing the threshold to her dressing room moments later, Lizzy's emotions were again assaulted only now with soaring amazement and glee. Hanging on a hook placed above her vanity was the very dress that she had worn one year ago today when she first set eyes on Pemberley. Laughing joyously, she reached tremulous hands to unpin the note secured to the bodice.

*My dearest wife,*

*Surely you did not honestly believe that I would allow this gown to be discarded? My foolish, beautiful Lizzy! If I knew of a way to have it preserved forever, I would. Madame du Loire has altered it to fit your current shape. If I may be so bold as to insist you don this garment, for me?*

*I pray you entertained no doubts that I would revere this day, beloved. How could I not exalt the day my heart began to beat again? For certain you know where I currently wait, breathlessly anticipating beholding your beautiful face as I did precisely 365 days ago, with the same yearning desire unabated. Only today I shall kiss you as I urgently ached to do then.*

*Of course, I can never express my love for you simply, so I am sending you on a quest. Solve the riddle and follow the trail for the prizes earned. I shall await you at the end, my unfailing love your ultimate reward. Hurry, my heart!*

*Always yours, William*

*Mrs. Darcy, my pearl ~ kisses by moonlight and starlight ~ coming home never so sweet ~ cold of stone and air eradicated by ignited hearts and lips ~ the flame of a torch dim compared*

Lizzy smiled, instantly solving the riddle. Dashing through the time consuming routines, she nonetheless freshened carefully with a splash of jasmine and gloss to her lips. The dress, supposedly disposed of months ago as no longer appropriate nor wearable, fit perfectly. The bodice seams were let out and altered with a lace insert to provide space for an ample bosom, the appearance mildly different but lovely with the creamy tops of her breasts displayed. The skirt was already adequately gathered and full, no adjustment needed to accommodate the swell of their child. She pinned her hair up in a loose bun as she had worn it then, with wisps of hair framing her face.

After a last inspection and pinch to her cheeks, Lizzy hastened to the balcony. Lying on the table near the site of passionate kisses upon Lizzy's first night at Pemberley as Mrs. Darcy, she spied a single red rose

and folded piece of parchment. Attached to the rose's stem with a slim white ribbon was a velvet pouch holding two lustrous pearls.

*Illusionary clouds and sky ~ horses run fruitlessly ~ familial chimes to count through the ages ~ a head in miniature lies abed ~ swaying rhythms under the power of love*

Giggling like a child herself, Lizzy ran to the nursery. The room was sunny and cheery. As always when she entered this room Lizzy paused on the doorstep, marveling at the joy which permeated her soul. Resting her palms over her belly, she gazed about the chamber, eyes alighting on each precious item. The decorating was complete and the Darcys were delighted with the outcome. The entire wall opposite the three tall windows facing east was painted with an elaborate pasture scene. All in pastels, the scene was illusionary as Darcy stated in his riddle, yet so incredibly detailed that one expected the pale green grass to smell and the brook of periwinkle to babble and pink sheep to bleat. Horses of white and grey grazed and ran amongst the sheep and multihued flowers. The lacy blue and yellow curtains Lizzy had sewn hung from rods of polished oak, falling in soft waves to brush the hardwood floor. Several plush rugs dotted the floor, spaced at careful intervals to mute heavy footsteps which might disturb a sleeping infant. The newly installed, modern Franklin stove waited to be lit, freshly laid marble tiles reflecting the gleaming metal. An enormous dresser with padded top sat against the right wall, the door to Mrs. Hanford's chambers to one side and the door to the small closet on the other. To the left, as in Lizzy's dream, stood the cradle and cushioned rocking chair. Above the cradle hung the cuckoo clock gifted on her birthday, pendulum swinging and ticking faintly. Darcy had refinished the rocking chair, it now glinting from where it sat beside the white satin and lace draped cradle. Inside, resting on the tiny pillow was another red rose, pearls nestled in a sack.

*Constellations touchable ~ define the gods immortalized therein ~ paint your own designs, if you dare ~ passion flares beside tubes of metal ~ seeking eyes meet seeking hands*

Blushing and laughing, Lizzy left the nursery, traveling down the long third floor corridors to an empty chamber on the opposite side of the manor. Here, on the covered balcony, Darcy kept his telescope. It was a frequent game, especially during the long winter months, to pad silently in half dressed states and gaze at the stars when visible on clear

nights. Darcy instructed, Lizzy absorbing his knowledge, but ultimately losing the patterns in the jumble of heavenly bodies. She realized that she simply did not have the eye to discern the varied configurations, so would teasingly create her own. Initially Darcy had found this irritating, but over time he accepted it and enjoyed the humor of the situations. He reasoned that although his wife did not share his affinity for astronomy, she did adore stargazing in general; and as they possessed a plethora of common interests, one or two divergent ones made no difference. Besides, the lure of starlight and close proximity as he assisted her education inevitably led to far preferable amusements, often their lovemaking blissfully transpiring on the balcony's chaise.

This is where Lizzy now found the third rose, pouch of two pearls, and next riddle.

*Military might slumbers ~ relative humor questionable ~ amusement and faithfulness assured ~ matrimony avoided, any ideas? ~ effervescent strength*

Sedately down the stairs to the second floor under the watchful eye of a rigidly poised Watson to the last door on the west passageway. Richard's chambers. The first time Lizzy had ever entered these rooms was during her beginning weeks at Pemberley, on one of those days when Darcy was busy with Mr. Keith so she utilized the time to wander about, learning her way. The vast percentage of Pemberley's guest chambers had a long disused quality to them readily discernable. This room, unknown as Col. Fitzwilliam's, had instantly struck her differently. She discovered later that Richard was a frequent visitor, actually residing more often here than at his ancestral home, Rivallain, and the mark of his ebullient presence had seeped into the very walls.

The rose lay serenely at the foot of the bed. Two more perfect pearls added to the others in her pocket.

*Hall of living stone ~ sightless eyes bore into your soul, loving you eternally ~ loneliness allayed forevermore ~ my beloved in perpetuity*

Lizzy's heart leapt. She rushed from the room, slowing under the vigilant gaze of Watson, undoubtedly planted there to ensure her caution. She smiled at him brilliantly, dropping a curtsy. The footman bowed, his lips lifting slightly. At the corner she glanced behind, Watson's eyes upon her, and waved airily with a tinkling laugh before launching into a brisk sprint to the sculpture gallery.

Darcy's bust was the obvious answer to the puzzle, although the

last phrase was unclear. *Her* beloved was in perpetuity, but Darcy was writing the riddle and referring to her. She had a guess as to the solution and rounding the corner gasped nonetheless when she found she was correct.

While in London, Darcy had taken Mrs. Lathrop's suggestion to heart and Lizzy spent a few hours sitting for a sculptor. Darcy made no further mention of her bust, Lizzy choosing to let the matter lie, knowing that he would prefer to surprise her in some manner.

Well, he had succeeded. Her likeness etched in cold white marble sat on a pedestal beside her husband's. Every detail flawless, her tender smile and glowing happiness magically captured. As when she gazed upon his bust or all the other amazing statues in the gallery, Lizzy was awed by the art form. She had blushed and mildly resisted having a bust made, but now that it was here beside her husband in this place where it would sit for generations untold, Lizzy could only feel deep pride. She paused a moment more, as she could never refrain from doing, and stroked his luminous cheek.

"I love you William," she whispered with a smile, retrieving the rose and note lying on a tiny table near the pedestals.

*Prose and poetry ~ classic and contemporary ~ silent contemplation amongst the dust  
~ romance amid the historical ~ favored master retreat*

No hesitation, pivoting toward the far door and short corridor leading to the library. His clues were obvious, but the room was gigantic, offering any number of places to place a rose. She rather thought his chair a logical place, but was unsure based on the allusion to romance, which could easily refer to the time they made love between the shelves of history texts. Of course, they had made love numerous times in the library, she recalled with a blush and heavenly sigh, so he was likely being general.

She was correct in her initial assumption. The rose, pearls, and paper lay on his massive leather chair. Lizzy's stomach released a loud growl, tremulous hands reminding her that she had eaten nothing yet this morning. As delightful as his little game was, she sincerely hoped this was the last as she was famished. Alas, not yet.

*A precious presence sensed ~ heart awakens as eyes lock momentarily ~ a dream? ~  
a delusion? ~ or the beginning of life lived abundantly and completely?*

"The latter, my heart, the latter," she murmured, kissing the

folded parchment. Fourteen pearls now weighted her pocket and her hands were encumbered with parchment and roses as Lizzy headed toward the music room.

Memories flooded her as she entered through Darcy's study door: Observing Georgiana, recognizing who the young piano player likely was and momentarily losing herself in the daydream of imagining her as kin, only to be jolted at the appearance of Mr. Darcy. She had instantly known it was him, even with a mere slip of fabric covered arm visible. A hidden voice had screamed for her to leave, but the desire to spy him unobtrusively in the flesh for this last time in her life had been too great a yearning to combat. Then he laughed! A sound she had not once heard from the stoic Mr. Darcy. It pierced her soul, further knifing her heart when he twirled about and she glimpsed his brightly smiling face. In those minute seconds before he saw her, Lizzy's thought was of how beautiful he was, how carefree and joyous. "You should always smile, Mr. Darcy," she had thought with emotions overwhelming.

Then he had seen her! Lizzy suffered a searing stab of panic and embarrassment unlike anything ever felt in her entire life, yet that heartbeat span of time that their eyes locked caused her spirit to lurch. With no time to unscramble her whirling emotions, she bolted, vaguely hearing her name called, but so utterly mortified that she ignored him. Even as she ran in raging fright, his laughter echoed in her head and unbidden the thought came: "He never laughed for you and he never will."

Lizzy swept the tears away, opening the page to his fine writing.

*Beloved,*

*A year ago today the road to my rebirth began. The interrupted journey of our destiny as one was resumed. Paths trod are frequently rend with hazards and washed away areas, but the wise pilgrim presses on and picks up the trail inerrantly. By the grace of God such are we, my wife. Fate shone and brought you literally to my doorstep. Never will I doubt the hand of the Almighty on our life and will forever be thankful for the mercy shown me. The quest, both the one which brought you to me then and which brought you to this note, are over. Come to me, my love! William*

Snatching the rose off the pianoforte, Lizzy pivoted and bolted, following the same steps frantically and blindly taken a year past. Through Darcy's study into the wide hallway, and out the southern entryway to the terrace beyond. She was halfway down the stairs before she noted that Darcy was nowhere to be seen. She slowed, heart racing, and calmly crossed the stones toward the small table set for breakfast

precisely on the spot where she had nervously stood in bumbling conversation with Mr. Darcy.

The round table was covered with a fine green linen tablecloth, an empty vase of Waterford crystal in the center, a china pot of tea, plate of sliced fruits, and two formal settings. Lizzy glanced around, fully expecting her husband to materialize from behind a potted bush or the lawn beyond, not that it is easy to hide a frame his size. She placed the roses into the vase, hand yet encircling the stems when she heard the unmistakable sound of boot heels striking stone. With memories again flooding, she whirled about to see Darcy rapidly descending the stairs. He was dressed in the exact outfit worn a year ago from boots to cravat, only rather than an expression of stunned befuddlement and nervousness his countenance was radiant with broad smile and glittering eyes.

Lizzy could only stare, an odd sense of *déjà vu* overlaid by vaulting ecstasy and love. How he stole her very breath away! His dimples flashed, teeth sparkled, eyes reflected the azure blue of the sky, and entire body exuded strength and energy. Purposefully he strode toward her, gaze never faltering, not pausing or slowing until a mere inch from her body. Without preamble he encircled her waist with one arm, pulling her into his chest while clasping her neck gently with his hand, leaning for a consuming kiss.

Lizzy moaned, hunger forgotten in the haze of instant passion as her hands slipped over his shoulders and twined into his hair. Darcy growled in his throat, kissing with ever increasing fervor, slow to be restored to anything remotely resembling rationality. Gradually the feverish kiss abated, Darcy brushing lightly over her lips, withdrawing to rest his forehead on hers with eyes closed in rapture and sighing heavily.

“Oh god, Elizabeth, I have been waiting for hours it seems with a rising need to kiss you! Whose foolish idea was it to send you scurrying about the house rather than running into my arms?”

Lizzy laughed shakily, “I shall not answer that question, love.” She rose on tiptoes, nestling her cheek against his, “Mmmm, William, you smell delicious. Promise me something?”

“Anything, dearest.”

“Always hold me securely when you plan to kiss me so marvelously so that I do not collapse into a heap at your feet?”

He laughed, kissing briefly before stepping back a pace. He caressed over her cheek, speaking softly, “You must be famished, my darling. I thought it might be nice to breakfast in style for a change. Sit and have some tea and fruit. I shall inform the kitchen we are ready to dine.” He pushed her chair in, kissing the top of her head before

disappearing into the house.

Lizzy did pour a much needed cup of tea and nibbled on a prune while she waited. It was not for long, Darcy briskly returning, followed by Mr. Taylor and three maids, all laden with trays placed onto a small linen draped sidebar. Lizzy was starving, but found it hard to focus on food with her husband staring at her with fiery intensity from his seat mere inches away.

In due time the first course was set and the servants departed, the butler to loiter inside the doorway awaiting summons from his Master. For Darcy the interval of attendance was an agony of forced propriety when he wanted nothing as much as to touch his wife, a mission promptly executed the second they were alone. He leaned forward, lips gliding over her neck while he clasped one hand tightly and gently massaged over the bulge of their child with the other.

“Thank you for wearing the gown.” His voice was husky and muffled against her skin, Lizzy shivering from the combined sensations. “I adore all your old gowns as they each spark such delightful memories, but this is my favorite.” He lifted to kiss her lips. “Sweet. Delectable. I love you so Elizabeth.” He gazed into her eyes with pure adoration, Lizzy misty from the emotions elicited. “Do you know how often I dreamt of you in this gown?”

She smiled, running her fingertips over his face. “Apparently the answer is many times. How often, dear love, were you removing said gown in your dreams?”

He chuckled, unperturbed by the query, “Hundreds, although often I was at this spot in broad daylight articulating brilliantly all the proper phrases which *should* have occurred to me a year ago, and then I would kiss you precisely as I did a moment ago. So, dreams do come true.” He kissed her again, deeply, clearly insatiable with the need to taste her entire mouth. A rumble from the vicinity vaguely under his hand erupted, Lizzy blushing but Darcy laughing. “I am keeping you from your nourishment, forgive me beloved.” He withdrew with a final pat to her womb, “Forgive me, my son, but your mother is irresistible.” The baby answered with a well aimed kick to his father’s palm, Darcy’s eyebrow arching in surprise. “My! Feisty, like his mother.”

Laughing, they attended to their plates, Darcy likely hungrier than Lizzy, having been up for hours arranging his surprise with barely a few sips of coffee taken. Vastly differing from the afternoon encounter being commemorated, they conversed easily about all manner of subjects, their clothing being the only similarity.

“William, your clever treasure hunt was inspired. How do you



invent so many wonderful adventures?”

“Impressed, Mrs. Darcy, by the ingenious schemes from your admittedly dull witted spouse?” He asked with a grin.

“You declared it, not I,” she said with a smirk. “Yes, I am impressed, and delighted. I had a wonderful time, although I shall confess to being thankful the quest complete as your son was demanding food and I was aching to see your face.” She reached across to caress his cheek, Darcy snatching her hand for a tender kiss to the wrist. “Thank you, dearest, for the pearls. They are beautiful. Do you have a specific thought as to what I should do with them?”

He shrugged, “I had imagined a bracelet to accent your necklace. However, you may choose anything you wish. They were part of a shipment on one of my ships, gemstones and pearls from the Orient. My ears perked up, so to speak, when I read the cargo manifest. I acquired a handful of diamonds and emeralds as well, if you want them to accompany the pearls. They would combine to create a beautiful brooch or hairclip. They were a fortuitous parcel as I honestly did not have a planned gift for this day.”

“Really? Perhaps my initial impression when I awoke was not far from the truth.” She spoke teasingly with a caress to his hand.

He arched a brow in question, “What was your initial impression?”

Lizzy reddened slightly, “Well, I confess I was disappointed to find you absent. You have spoiled me, beloved, even further after today. I anticipated at the very least arising to have you staring at me and caressing with obvious intent. I hoped for that, I should say. Anything else would have been a bonus.” She fluttered her lashes and he burst out laughing. “Therefore, when you were not in our bed I was crushed. I thought you had forgotten,” she finished in a small voice.

“Elizabeth,” he whispered roughly, grasping her hand, “how could you think I would forget one of the happiest days of my life? The pearls were an afterthought, but I have been laying plans and composing riddles for a week. You know how pathetically maudlin I am, my love, thus you should never be surprised overly nor despondent. And as for caressing with obvious intent – that shall occur in a timely manner I can assure you, several times if I have my wish.” He grinned, bringing her hand to his mouth for well placed kisses and nibbles.

Feeling rejuvenated after a full meal, Lizzy was ready for whatever her husband had planned for the day. Darcy rose from the table, assisting his wife from her seat. Lizzy’s belly was not yet to the point where rising or sitting was laborious, in fact her grace was unfailing,

however Darcy was prudent. A maid was sent to retrieve a bonnet and gloves for Mrs. Darcy, which Darcy placed on his wife himself, kissing and tenderly caressing throughout the procedure that should have only consumed a minute, but instead lasted close to ten.

Lizzy smiled into his eyes, fingers yet nestled under her chin ostensibly straightening the bonnet's bow. "Where are we headed, love?"

He smiled enigmatically, offering his arm, tucking her securely against his side, and steered toward the steps leading to the lawn; the very steps she had agitatedly dashed down a year ago. "I have thought often of what I should have said to prevent your departing. At the least I should have insisted on walking you to the village myself. In truth it would have been wise and gentlemanly of me to do so as you were not familiar with the area and could easily have been lost. Frankly, once my wits were restored, I fretted greatly over that and was relieved when your aunt and uncle assured me you were safe in your room preparing for dinner."

He glanced at her, but her face was hidden under the bonnet's wide brim. "How did you unerringly know how to return to Lambton? It is quite a distance to walk, not that that fact astonishes me, but you walked over the fields and not on the road. How did you not get lost, Elizabeth?"

She looked up into his puzzled face with a laugh. "The truth? I have no idea! My father always said that I was like a bat. They have an innate mechanism of some nature which ensures they never lose themselves. All I knew was that Lambton is southwest of Pemberley. For the first mile I was walking blindly, guarded by angels assuredly as I have no recollection of the terrain traversed. All I could see was your face and my acute shame clouded my vision further. I eventually paused at the stone wall, the ruins of the old hunter's lodge beyond the ridge?" He nodded. "I sat there for a spell, collecting my thoughts. Finally I took note of my surroundings, shaking off the humiliation of my flustered, imbecilic intrusion of your home, and realized I had no idea where I was."

They reached the serpentine hedge and began weaving their way through the maze. Lizzy continued with a chuckle, "I panicked for a moment, but it was not the first time I had found myself in such a predicament. When I was young and first began venturing far afield I had a terrible habit of reading or daydreaming as I strolled, only to perceive that I was ending in unfamiliar surrounds. That is when I identified my gift of exact orientation. Anyway, I sat on the wall tearing my thoughts away from you forcefully, which was not an easy task let me assure you,

but although the sun was distorted by the haze, I instinctively knew which direction to travel. Luckily there were no major ravines or rivers to cross or I may have been in trouble! It was actually a very pleasant stroll and I was in a much calmer state by the time I reached the Inn. Until I saw you talking to my aunt and uncle, that is!”

They reached the center of the maze, an exact circle of clover precisely thirty feet in diameter with an enormous elm tree in the center girded by a low brick bench. The entire maze spanned two hundred feet with four entrances, north, south, east, and west. The paths weaved and twined with a combination of curves and angles, ultimately intersecting and leading to four equally spaced exits in the middle. All throughout the labyrinth were niches cut into the hedge with statues or ornamentally sculpted bushes. Lizzy loved the maze. It had not taken her long to figure her way through all the pathways, probably aided by her superior sense of direction, and was one of her favorite haunts.

She and Darcy strolled about the perimeter in contented companionship, smiling in remembrance. Lizzy broke the silence first, “What did you finally decide you should have said to halt me, William?”

Darcy laughed lowly, shaking his head, “I never did decide on a sure phrase. Oh, I came up with all sorts of clever witticisms or irresistible banter in my musings, none of which I would have remotely conjured at the time even had I not been nonplussed. Obviously if enchanting conversation were a forte of mine I may not have been in such a predicament in the first place!” He squeezed her arm, Lizzy chuckling.

“No, I stood there and moronically watched you walk away. For at least ten minutes I could not think coherently. If it were not for the lingering scent of your perfume I may have convinced myself I had finally succumbed to my fantasies.”

Lizzy stopped and was staring at him with skepticism. “You did not seriously smell my perfume?”

Darcy’s brow rose, “Yes, I did. Lavender. It was in the air long after you departed.” He leaned over, burying his face into her hair and inhaling deeply. “As I thought. Lavender. You splashed with jasmine,” he nuzzled her neck, “but your hair wash is lavender, as it was at the Netherfield Ball.” He paused to bestow a smattering of gentle sucks over her collarbone, Lizzy instantly shivering but also shaking her head.

“I cannot believe the details you recollect. Even after all this time you can yet dumbfound me, William. How did you note I used lavender?”

Darcy flushed slightly, taking her hand and sitting onto the bench

under the tree. “While we danced, naturally. Unfortunately I only had that one opportunity to get close enough to you, but I noticed your scent. It was intoxicating, but then everything about you intoxicated me, even your arguing as it showed your spirit. At Kent I deduced it must be your favorite perfume as you always wore it.” He caressed her fingers, staring at her hands entwined in his. “When I returned to Pemberley....after....I had the potted lavender outside my study window removed. I ordered Mrs. Reynolds to banish all lavender from the house. She must have thought me mad, although that oddity was the least of my peculiarities last summer.”

He smiled wryly, glancing into her eyes. “You know the strangest part? Three weeks before you visited I was in my study, staring out the window as I do when cogitating. I was not thinking of you at that moment. I did, frequently, but was gradually finding the pain not as severe but more....bittersweet. The memory of your face and voice had become a part of me. The sadness of loss was as intense as ever, but had been tempered by the joy of having known you, even if superficially. Anyway, I was dwelling on a business issue, the very one that would take me to London, when I glanced to the patio stones and marked the stain from the pots of lavender I had ordered removed. Instantly I thought of you, your face as clear to me as it is now. As an epiphany it abruptly struck me that I no longer wished to erase you from my memory. I held no hope at that point, but knew with certainty that I would never love another as I did you and I did not want to forget that feeling. So, I rang for Mr. Taylor and asked him to discover where the pots were and to have them returned. I felt...happier, somehow, once they were back and the scent was comforting.”

“Perhaps it was a sign,” Lizzy spoke softly.

“That you would return to me as well? Perhaps. Although I still was flummoxed to see you.” He laughed, “I do not believe I have ever been so confounded in all my life! As I said, I stood rooted to the terrace, smelling lavender, and utterly at a loss as to the logical course of action.” He continued to chuckle with the recollection.

“What did you finally do? I mean, I know you came to the Inn, to my increased embarrassment and astonishment, but how did you reach that decision? It seems so unlike you.”

He sighed, “Well, that is the crux of it, love. I had to do something radical. I stood on the terrace confused, but knowing for cert that I was being offered a second chance. You were obviously nervous, but as I mused over your words and demeanor you did not impress me as harboring hostility or distaste toward me. I refused to assume too much

and your flat refusal to allow me to accompany you to the village gave me pause, but I could not believe it an accident that you were here. Of all the manors in all of England, you were here! The probability of this occurring by random chance is astronomical. I decided it had to be by Design, an opportunity for me to mend the damage I had inflicted.”

He turned to his wife with a beatific smile. “Of course, all those thoughts flashed through my mind in a chaotic whirl. The foremost sensation was quite simply a gut wrenching surge of desire and need. It all was back in a gush of emotion. My love for you as desperate and intense as ever. How I stood upright yet amazes me as I could barely breathe so agonizing my yearning to kiss you and hold you and tell you how passionately I loved you.”

“Fitzwilliam,” she breathed, reaching to cup his face, “How star-crossed we were! I had recently been gazing at your bust with such aching hunger, if only you had known. You could have swept me into your arms right then and I would have melted, never to depart this place until I was yours completely.”

Moving simultaneously, their mouths met. The spoken remembrances of craving igniting a tangible firestorm of passion as they devoured breath and essence. Lizzy clambered onto his lap, Darcy embracing tightly. Hands were everywhere, voraciously kneading. For long minutes it continued, mindlessly releasing buttons and untying cravats.

“Lizzy! God, I must love you, but not here. Wait, beloved! Please, come with me.” He rose, lifting her from his lap and setting her unsteadily onto her feet. He palmed her cheeks, kissing lightly. “Come,” he repeated, taking her hand and leading infallibly along the twisting path.

They exited the maze to the south, wending past the lily pond located before this opening, under the stone archway, and then across the extensive lawn rolling up the gentle slope beside the Cascade Falls to the Greek Temple. It was a significant distance, easily traversed, but necessitating reining in the rushed pace. Lizzy was panting imperceptibly, at times the added weight to her slender frame affecting her. Darcy kept a firm grip on her hand, always a step ahead, but cognizant of his wife’s struggles so quelled his verve. By the time he parted the hanging branches screening the trail to the grotto, the worst of their flaming fervor had ebbed, although it was not entirely abated to be sure.

Lizzy released a booming laugh. Somehow in the midst of all his organizing he had managed to additionally assemble a romantic tableau of blankets and cushions over the soft grass plain in the grotto. A basket sat on a flat rock, waiting.

“When in the world did you find the time to do this?”

“I told you I arose quite early this morning,” he whispered near her ear from his stance behind her, hands resting lightly on her waist. “I have taken to keeping the blankets and cushions in the Temple since we inevitably find our way here now and again.” He nibbled her lobe, initiating his travels over the long expanse of her glorious neck.

Lizzy sighed, leaning onto his hard chest and clasping his hands. Five times since returning from London in July they had managed to finagle time to visit Darcy’s hidden sanctuary; twice planned, but the other three spontaneous trysts as their feet veered toward the dell while walking. They were both coming to discover the delight of fresh air and balmy breezes over naked flesh irresistible and slightly addictive. The effect on their libido was remarkable, not that their mania for each other needed a stimulant.

“Do you require refreshment or rest, my love?” He asked, tone clearly indicating his fervid hope that the answer was negative.

Lizzy smiled tenderly, stroking his long fingers, “Nothing my darling but you. Always, only you.”

Unhesitatingly, he resumed the unfastening of buttons albeit leisurely now that they were alone with passion cooler. His left hand released the tie and clasps located on her left side, the other fingers laced with hers over their child. “So tell me, my husband, how did the dress removal fantasy unfold?”

Darcy smiled against the nape of her neck, “Hmmm.... A myriad of ways, in truth, my lover. In this position I imagined your body pressed into me with your dainty hands stroking over my thighs...yes, rather like that Elizabeth. Then I would lavish your creamy neck with adoring kisses and nibbles. One reason I so admire this dress is the miniscule number of clasps securing it to your perfect body. See, just that easy and it is undone! It peels off so delicately, your skin revealed to my touch. Ah! A delight I had not anticipated....the cool air raising tiny bumps over your succulent flesh and your nipples hardening like little pebbles. Wonderful!”

“That effect transpires from your touch, beloved,” she whispered hoarsely. “What next?”

He cleared his throat, resuming, “Then you stand in your shift. Of course, I had never seen a woman’s undergarment except on Georgie once or twice when ill, so my memory was vague, but I rightfully imagined something lacy and mildly transparent. So incredibly feminine and soft, caressing your skin and silky under my palms. I can feel the warmth of you through the linen, the trembling as I arouse you and

revere your body. Oh my love, how utterly beautiful you are! Summertime clothing is light and airy, so fewer layers, and no corset to encumber my access now that you are pregnant. So freely liberated is a shift, falling to your lovely feet handily. Now, here you are my precious wife, flushed and naked in my arms. Aflame with desire for me, because of me. My Lizzy, I love you so! I must love you!"

She pivoted in his embrace, leisure forgotten with resurgent yearning. The loosened, dangling cravat was pulled away, Darcy already removing his jacket. He encircled her again, grasping her bottom and pressing into his pelvis as she attacked the buttons of his waistcoat. Thus locked and entwined, they dropped to the blankets. Words were lost as mouths became occupied in sensuous pursuits. His shirt pulled off and tossed by Lizzy, who expeditiously moved in to kiss his chest while he struggled to discard boots and trousers.

Stretching onto the plush covering they paused, eyes riveted with seething desire and profound love. Darcy smoothed the loose hair from Lizzy's brow, bending to kiss her forehead then temple.

"Elizabeth, my wife. I love you."

Claiming her mouth thoroughly, virile frame swathing her totally, he drove home. Beautiful rhythm as ecstasy rose higher with hearts fluttering. The warmth of September was diminished substantially under the thick branches and with breezes filtering through the brush over chill water, nonetheless their bodies bathed in sweat from the exertion of intense ardor. Despite the fervid urgency of their mutual passion, neither rushed to attain fulfillment. Rather they danced with patterns of languid movements of extreme tenderness conjoined with periods of furious momentum. It was a prolonged, varied engagement of indescribable lovemaking culminating in due course with stunning rapture, their cries of sublime joy uninhibited and explosive.

They lay entwined on the pillows, as close as two bodies could manage, skin touching on every plane. Darcy lay on his side, cuddling Elizabeth into his chest with both silky legs trapped between his muscular ones, playing with her hair while watching their son's lazy pushes. The baby's sturdy kicks could now be visibly discerned as Lizzy's abdominal skin rose and rippled bizarrely. These humorous waves were a new development, first noted by a doting father two mornings ago while studying a slumbering wife. His infatuation and ebullience was infectious, Lizzy not sure what thrilled her greatest: the visual evidence of their child's vitality or her husband's giddiness.

Darcy pressed one finger onto a tiny bulge, grinning ridiculously. His animated face rested inches from Lizzy's, breathe tickling her cheek

when he spoke, “Do you think it a foot or elbow perhaps? Simply amazing! He must feel compressed, yearning for more space. Or merely exercising his muscles. Like either you or I, beloved, needing action and movement.”

Lizzy lay her hand atop his, giggling at the wonder on his face. Darcy ignored her, mesmerized by the antics of their baby and the marvelous changes to his wife’s body. Her breasts had not increased further for the past couple months, but were heavier, the nipples darkening slightly. Her belly had grown considerably, no gown able to hide the swell. The skin remained soft, supple, and void of stretchmarks, thanks to his uncle’s ointment and Darcy’s diligent massaging, but her navel was flattening and a faint shadowy line was visible from the umbilicus to groin. Her waist was thicker although the primary expansion was frontal, Lizzy still not noticeably gravid when viewed from behind. Her hips seemed a wee bit wider and she occasionally complained of mild joint pain, a result, the book assured them, of muscles and ligaments preparing for childbirth.

Overall her health was as vigorous as always. The rare and thankfully minor contractions of the womb, faint twinges in her hips and lower back, occasional breathlessness if she overexerted, and infrequent heartburn were the only annoying complications thus far endured. What weight she had gained apparently all resided in her midsection and chest as the remainder of her frame was as slim, or bony as Lizzy teasingly called it to Darcy’s irritation, as ever.

It was this very frame, sumptuous and toned and lissome to Darcy’s eyes, that he now caressed with avid intensity and devotion. He quite simply never tired of touching and gazing upon his wife. Lizzy’s idolization toward her husband’s physique was as fanatical; therefore she admiringly brushed over his chest and abdomen with the back of one hand while the other was lovingly clasped in Darcy’s embracing one.

She turned her head and kissed him fleetingly, smiling into his blue eyes, “You did not finish your tale, my heart. You left off standing on the terrace in a state of paralysis.”

Darcy chuckled vibrantly, “How apropos of you to call it paralysis, love. It truly was. I think my brain even shut down as I do not recall what, if anything, I said to you. I do not honestly know how long I stood there after you had gone, but the stasis abruptly fell from me and I spun about and lurched up the stairs. I am certain I appeared the utter fool, all grace and dignity of station vanished. My only thought was that I could not let you go. Georgiana, bless her heart, had been unceremoniously shoved away when I ran after you.” He laughed and



closed his eyes in embarrassed remembrance. “She was waiting for me in my study, pacing and bouncing on her toes. Of course, she knew the whole story of our relationship thus far, but was highly confused by my behavior especially since she had not noted you in the doorway. All she knew is that I thrust her away, yelled ‘Elizabeth,’ and scurried from the room crazily. After my actions earlier that summer I believe she thought I had mentally snapped!”

Lizzy was laughing at the vision. “Did she see you talking to me on the terrace? I am surprised she did not follow you.”

“I am as well, actually. From my study or music room windows one cannot see to the end of the terrace. Georgie could only view a sliver of my backside, she told me, but figured I was talking to someone, you she supposed based on my outburst, so judged it wise to leave me be. Actually, I rather wish she had followed. Perhaps her presence may have bought me the time necessary to restore clarity to my befuddled mind! Be that as it may, she instantly inundated me with questions upon my reemergence, none of which I think I answered with any coherency. I bumbled some sort of explanation, enough that she gathered you were visiting with your aunt and uncle in Lambton, and that I intended to delay your departure and restate my feelings. You understand, Elizabeth, I had no plan, was largely inarticulate and mildly deranged. I dashed out of the music room, nearly bowled over Mrs. Reynolds in the hall, barked an order to resaddle my horse, and vaulted up the stairs with the vague intent to freshen up, as if washing my face and adding cologne would somehow cause you to fall into my arms!”

They were both laughing loudly at this point, Darcy having rolled onto his back and wiping at his eyes. “I was wholly nonsensical. In truth my irrationality of the moment lead to the fortunate byproduct of rapidly barreling up a flight of stairs and endless corridors rather than attempting to find you while yet at Pemberley, the outwardly logical choice, as I am certain your uncle would have deemed me insane and spirited you away forthwith! By the time I reached my rooms, wheezing and palpitating, I had no option but to collapse onto the bed. I am athletic and vigorous, but I do think I was near to a heart seizure. While struggling to merely survive, cold rationality was reestablished. It was while I sat there calming that I decided to invite you and the Gardiners to dine. The logic of having you in my home with me and Georgiana for hours uninterrupted was beyond appealing and kept my heart racing despite my efforts at serenity.”

He rolled back toward Lizzy, stroking her face. “You know the rest. I did hope to see you at the Inn for no reason other than my desire

to gaze upon your face. I stalled, praying your arrival, but mindless chatter is not my strong suit, and I feared creating a negative impression, so was brief. Nonetheless, I was horribly disappointed not to see you.” He smiled and kissed her.

“I saw you talking to my aunt and uncle, but I hid.”

Darcy arched his brows in surprise, “You did! Why?”

Lizzy reddened slightly, tracing her fingertips over his nose and chin, “I still felt so mortified and confused, I suppose. You had every reason to despise me or at least be indifferent. If ever one had given you cause to lose your good opinion it was me! Like you, I had not sensed distaste in your words or posture, but I would not have predicted you wanting to dine with me or allowing me anywhere near your sister. I was truly shocked.” She giggled suddenly, fingers on his lips, “By the way, I never told you my aunt’s words. She said you were charming and that there was, and I quote, ‘something pleasant about his mouth when he speaks.’”

Darcy blushed scarlet and Lizzy giggled, placing her lips softly on his. “She is correct, you know. I watched your mouth quite avidly all the next day, your smiles and laughter, and could not believe the thoughts rushing through my mind.”

“What sort of thoughts?” He asked huskily.

“Let me show you,” she murmured, proceeding to feather playfully over his mouth utilizing teeth, lips, and tongue to great advantage. Darcy quickly lost all sense of anything but his rising fever, hands moving as he responded vehemently to her actions. Lizzy teased languidly over his body, proficiently driving him insane, eventually astride his hips and blissfully united.

Darcy arched and groaned, hands about her waist and face flushed, “Elizabeth, I stand in awe at your imagination, but rather doubt you envisioned this or anything remotely similar merely by looking at my mouth!”

Lizzy laughed, falling to his chest and kissing his pulsing throat. Rocking gently, she trailed over his neck, capturing an earlobe and licking. “I confess the specific details have evolved over time, my lover, but my desire for you was blossoming, aided in no small part by your sensuality and flawless physique.” She rose to gaze upon his brilliant face, eyes glistening with love and astounding passion as the pace increased. In a gruff whisper she continued, “I may have been innocent then Fitzwilliam, but I knew I wanted you. God how I wanted you! How I still want you, all of you, always. Oh lord, William! Please.....”

He crushed her tightly, moans arising as they loved. Moments

before reaching the pinnacle of heavenly gratification, Darcy whispered, “You shall always have me, Elizabeth. Always.”

## **4 - Toes in the Sand**

Exhaustive deliberation had preceded Darcy's decision to vacation at the seaside resort town of Great Yarmouth in Norfolk. For hours he poured over maps of England and discussed the possibilities with various friends before deciding on the relatively unknown port town on the North Sea.

The seed of this excursion with his wife had been planted while yet in Hertfordshire. Between games at the billiard tournament in Meryton, Darcy and Bingley had engaged in conversation with Sir Lucas and a man named Houghton about the fad of seabathing and 'taking the waters' which had risen to nearly fanatical heights since the 1750's. Spa Towns, such as Bath and Cheltenham, with their hot mineral springs and clean air, had been popular for centuries. The elite had long ago divined the healing aspects and pleasure gleaned from immersion in these natural pools and an entire tourist trade had arisen. So much so that trips to Bath were an essential part of societal demands irrespective of the springs themselves. The open ocean, in contrast, was viewed with skepticism if not downright hostility and horror. The thought of placing one's body, willingly, into the cold, salty water of the sea was unheard of until the early 1700's when several physicians began writing of the curative properties of sea water combined with sea air; Dr. Richard Russel being the prime example. Cynicism was rabid in some quarters, but popularity grew nonetheless. This led to a wild emergence of seaside resorts, many no more than tiny fishing villages attempting to profit by the craze.

Darcy had vacationed at numerous shoreline locales and spa towns both in England and in France over the years. He tremendously enjoyed the freedom and exhilaration of swimming in the cold water, the experience reminiscent of his youth when stripping naked with his boyhood friends and diving in Rowan Lake and secluded coves along the River Derwent was a regular summer pastime. He remained somewhat dubious regarding the rather lofty claims of miraculous healing from saltwater, but could not deny the sensations of vigor and health when merely standing on the sandy beaches, let alone the vitality engendered after a brisk swim.

A great part of Darcy's infatuation with the experience was the

lure of the sea. He was not overly fond of ships and sailing. Sea voyages were a necessary part of getting from England to literally anywhere else, but not an undertaking particularly sought after by the landlubbing Darcy. However, the power and majesty of the ocean was entirely different. Nothing quite compared to the untamed wildness of the tides and waves and brisk winds and roars of the sea. Thus it was that when Sir Lucas and Mr. Houghton began talking about the mania sweeping through the country, Darcy began to contemplate taking Elizabeth. He was further convinced of the brilliance of the idea when a casual fact-finding remark to his wife revealed that she had never seen the ocean.

He seriously debated the matter, as is typical of the ever guarded and comprehensive Mr. Darcy. The coastal areas of southern England are warmer and provide the best shorelines in all the country. This was without dispute; however the distance to Cornwall or Sussex is too great for Elizabeth to travel in her condition, in his opinion. Nor did he wish to visit a primary tourist destination. His desire to be alone with his wife for this perchance last occasion for years to come now that their family was beginning was too great a draw. Ramsgate was out of the question, Darcy probably never setting foot in that town for the rest of his life. From Pemberley to either the east or west coasts were roughly the same, travel wise. He considered Liverpool or Blackpool on the west coast, but, again, he wished to avoid highly trafficked areas plus he did not personally care for the ocean to the west. Somehow the nearness of Ireland, although not actually seen, prevented it feeling like open waters. By process of elimination, this left the eastern coastline. Here is where the meditation and questioning truly began. Darcy had visited none of the North Sea bordered towns except for Newcastle nearly ten years ago when Richard was stationed there during his training as a cadet. Yarmouth, or more precisely the hamlet of Caister-on-Sea three miles north, was his ultimate decision thanks to Mr. Henry Vernor and his wife Mary. The elder Vernors had vacationed there the summer past and therefore knew the area well. Darcy conferred with Mr. Vernor, trusting in his recommendations, and listened penetratingly to Mrs. Vernor's gushing narrative, even jotting down her rambling comments.

The roughly one hundred seventy miles to Great Yarmouth on the eastern coast of Norfolk was a full two day journey. Darcy refused to rush the pace, not only due to consideration for Lizzy's condition, but for the enjoyment of leisurely sightseeing. They departed Pemberley early on the morning following the anniversary of their reunion. As with the previous two times Lizzy waved adieu to her new home, the emotions were bittersweet. She leaned forward and stared until the Manor was

complete out of sight, reclining onto her husband's waiting chest with a deep sigh of sadness. Darcy enveloped her, resting one hand over their child and caressing her cheek with the other, kissing her head, and saying nothing.

They rode in the elaborate and roomy coach, completely revamped and repaired from the Chesterfield bandit fiasco. The enormous carriage was plush enough normally, but Darcy had added several cushions just to be sure. Aside from gratefully accepting a small pillow to ease the mild strain to her lower back, Lizzy suffered no adverse effects.

At Derby they veered east on the same road traveled three weeks prior to Wollaton Hall, afterwhich the route would all be new to Lizzy. Through the southern edges of Nottingham to Grantham and then south to Peterborough where they halted for the night. They paused frequently along the way, Darcy obsessively diligent to Lizzy's needs. She laughed at him, assuring that she did not require stretching her legs every twenty miles, but he ignored her.

Darcy kept a running commentary as they rode, being moderately familiar with Nottinghamshire and Cambridgeshire from his University years, and did stop for a few sights along the way. They tarried for nearly two hours in Grantham, the town so teeming with historical significance and astounding architecture that they could not pass the opportunity by. They ate lunch there at the Angel and Royal Inn, a hotel over four hundred years old. The landscape, like most of the Midlands, was boundless rolling plains of green with innumerable rivers crossing. Lizzy lost count of the bridges traversed and small villages passed. The Cathedral at Peterborough, a structure from the 12<sup>th</sup> century that was truly beyond stupendous, was visited after dining. The magnificent church of combined Norman and Gothic styles, although yet in a state of partial ruin from the 1643 English Civil War, was nonetheless an incredible sight and the Darcys were tremendously moved. They attended a quiet service, Darcy especially never able to bypass a chance to worship and pray, and then viewed the burial place of Katherine of Aragon, Henry VIII lamented first wife.

The second day dawned bright, Lizzy now fully reveling in the anticipation of journey's end. Darcy had ruminated over the route to take. Not knowing the region of Norfolk, he had asked the Vernors as well as several other of his friends for advice on the roads and coastal views. In the end, as long as Lizzy was physically managing the extended carriage ride, he decided to swerve to the north from Swaffham through Fakenham onto Cromer, where Lizzy would catch her first glimpse of

the sea.

The carriage windows were open as they rode; the air noticeably cooler the closer they drew to the water. Darcy smiled indulgently at his wife's childlike enthusiasm, quite acclimated with the way she sat on the edge of the seat with her face almost out the window. It was endearing, this excitement she displayed, and he could not imagine even their children being more juvenile. He altered between reading while massaging her back and answering her numerous questions.

"Is it true that you can smell the salty air long before you see the ocean?"

Darcy laid his book aside, again, looking up at his wife's inquiring visage. "Yes, it is true. How far away depends on the breezes of the moment and obstructing landscapes. Also some areas have a stronger scent dependent on fishing activities or the roughness of the surf. Yarmouth is a major herring port, so the odor is reportedly strong. That is one reason the Vernor's recommended Caister."

A while later, "Have you ever found a shell with the sound of the ocean waves inside?"

Darcy smiled, "Georgiana did. When she was four we traveled to Devon to visit my aunt and uncle. We spent a week at Sidmouth. My father thought the air and sea water may help my mother." He paused in mournful remembrance, Lizzy grasping his hand and caressing. He smiled and continued, "Georgie loved the ocean. It was her first time on the sand and I remember she threw an absolutely horrid tantrum each time Father carried her away. It was she who discovered a perfectly intact conch, a huge thing with swirls of pink and turquoise. I am certain she yet has it in her possession. Anyway, you can hear the waves very well. We shall stay on the alert, beloved, eyes keenly searching and perhaps you shall be so fortunate."

Another time, "Will we see seals and sea lions, do you think?" Darcy jumped slightly, thinking Lizzy asleep.

He glanced to her face where she lay on his lap, noting her eyes still closed. Chuckling and brushing strands of hair from her eyes, he answered, "I am positive we will. Hopefully we shall be so fortunate as to glimpse whales or dolphin swimming by. There will be a vast array of wildlife unfamiliar, dearest. I confess that zoology and marine biology were not subjects I studied so my working knowledge is minimal. I brought two books I found in the library as well as another on coastal plants. I thought we could learn together."

Lizzy had turned and was looking up at her husband with a smile. "Never pass up an opportunity to educate, William? Even on vacation?"

“Life is about growing wiser, Elizabeth. A true student should never bypass a ready chance to learn.” He spoke with a tone of pomposity, Lizzy laughing aloud. Darcy ignored her, returning to his book with pursed lips.

Lizzy continued to giggle, fingering the gold etched title on the book binding. “*De l’esprit des lois* by Montesquieu,” she read in butchered French, “Educational, Mr. Darcy? Or a French romance disguised as didactic? Of course you could tell me anything I would know no difference.”

“You know very well who Montesquieu is Mrs. Darcy. However, the concept of possible enlightenment engendered via a French romance should not be unwelcomed by you.” He maintained his pose of haughtiness, but with shining eyes staring raptly at the pages.

Lizzy reached up to play along the edges of Darcy’s cravat and lowered her voice an octave, “Read to me in French, Fitzwilliam. That will be highly welcomed by me.”

Darcy glanced at his wife, color rising to his cheeks. Clearing his throat, he began to audibly recite the text. Lizzy bit her lip, tugging on the dangling fabric of his necktie, truly affected by his resonant articulation. Darcy’s reverberant voice thrilled Lizzy in any language, but there was a particular inflection he adopted when quoting literature that was especially lush and mesmerizing. She loved to tease him about his flair for drama, but the truth was that Darcy could have easily been successful as an actor, if he managed to overcome the whole being the center of attention facet! She had attended numerous plays in her life, especially most recently while in London, and knew that voice modulation and command coupled with theatrics was far more important than one’s physical appearance on stage – not that her husband did not fulfill that feature adequately as well.

She listened, pulse racing, and wished fervently that they were not currently in a traveling carriage with open windows. Spellbound, she did not realize his cravat was undone until he faltered briefly when her fingers brushed over the hollow in his throat. He resumed, eyes riveted to the page with deliberate intensity, even when she rose and replaced her fingertips with her lips. Lizzy felt the vibrations created as he spoke, kissing tenderly over his neck and upper chest as buttons came undone.

One hand held the book in a white-knuckled grip, the other about her waist, voice growing fainter with each word uttered until failing completely. “Continue sir,” she whispered into his ear, Darcy attempting to comply with limited success.

A smattering of French phrases later, one short paragraph



finished haltingly and with poor enunciation, and Darcy renounced the endeavor. Instead, he tossed the book randomly, clasp her hair firmly to pull her away from his neck and leaning with a groan to assail her mouth. Once, while returning from London to Pemberley, they had made love in the carriage, initiated by Lizzy, but wholly welcomed by her adoring spouse. It was a strange experience with the carriage swaying and the awareness of persons literally hovering above them, but denying their desire for each other when it arose was never a feat either could adequately achieve. The bliss attained was well worth the slight discomfort in the location and since making love outside their bedchamber happened rather frequently, both Darcys had learned ways to curtail their vocalizations of pleasure and muffle their culminating screams of happiness. Luckily the Darcy carriages were all constructed stoutly and well insulated, noises from both the outside and vice versa not transmitting unduly.

This solitary event flashed with alacrity through Darcy's mind and fully intending on a repeat engagement, he bodily lifted his wife onto the opposite seat, turning rapidly to close the windows and lower the shades. This accomplished with due haste, he returned to his grinning wife.

"Do not utter a word, Elizabeth," he ordered in a terse whisper, Lizzy shaking her head with a smile. Darcy took the time to lavish kisses over his wife's beautiful neck and bosom, Lizzy's head thrown back in delight, while carefully and speedily removing all encumbering fabrics. Within minutes they were one, joined so perfectly, the rhythm of the rocking carriage aiding. They clung together, kissing and caressing, absorbing the joy and rampant electricity flowing through their bodies and felt in the other with even clothing not a barrier.

"Beloved, talk to me in French. I love your voice in French," Lizzy murmured breathlessly.

Darcy obeyed, hoarsely and sporadically interjecting an endearment in whispered flawless French. Lizzy shivered, mouth pressed tightly into his shoulder and hands through his hair. The sensations rose, heights gradually spiraling to astounding levels, both attuned to the reality that a peak of blinding rapture was nearing. Darcy released a sustained groan into Lizzy's neck, his grip to Lizzy's hips hardening, when suddenly a sharp series of raps blasted through the carriage from above.

They both instantly froze. Darcy's face twisted in an agony of interrupted desire, ragged breaths suddenly astonishingly loud in their ears.

"Yes, Mr. Anders," Darcy's voice boomed, startlingly normal and steady, given the circumstances.

“Sir, we are a mile or so from the seaboard,” Mr. Anders informed, voice faintly heard from above.

“Thank you, Mr. Anders.” Darcy responded in a clipped tone, a weak moan escaping. Lizzy was stifling a giggle, body shaking in mirth with legs clutching Darcy’s hips as she slowly continued to sway and pull. “You are naughty, Mrs. Darcy! Pure evil, I daresay,” he whispered tightly.

“Punish me, Fitzwilliam.” She met his glazed eyes with an impish smile, rapidly lost in a crushing kiss. Darcy shoved massively and in seconds they were replete, gasping and panting in each other’s arms. With only minutes to tidy themselves, they laughingly and joyously assisted each other, lastly Lizzy retying Darcy’s cravat, a skill she was now very proficient at.

“There,” she declared, “as perfect as Samuel would do.”

Darcy was beaming, smile broad as he leaned to kiss her ruddy lips. “Thank you, my heart, for everything. I love you.”

She smoothed his rumpled hair, her own face radiant with love and satisfaction. “My pleasure, dearest. Anytime.”

He laughed, reaching around her body to open the windows. The gust of fresh sea air was notable and their timing ideal. The carriage completed a wide arc over the sloping dune, stopping moments later onto a flat expanse beside the road. Lizzy gasped, hand rising to her mouth in sheer awe. Darcy glowed with pleasure at his wife’s expression, opening the door and hopping out before Tillson, the footman accompanying them on this journey, had alit from his perch.

“Come Elizabeth,” he said, offering a hand to his wife, who took it rather absently, her gaze engrossed with the scenery.

They stood on a forty foot cliff of combined sand and rock with clumps of gorse, lichen, kidney vetch, and heather about their feet. The varied colors and textures displayed by the array of vegetation were dazzling enough, but Lizzy would note this later. Her eyes were captured by the sea.

It was a clear afternoon, the evening fog yet at bay, with a sky of vivid cloudless blue. The dark blue-grey water sparkled and reflected the brilliant sunlight as a million flashing candles, endless to the horizon as the water rippled and roiled. Foam crested waves of all sizes crashed, the sound loud upon their ears. Some waves reached the shore, tides pushing and pulling steadily over the white sands. The beach stretched for miles, dotted with clusters of dried seaweed and debris. To their left beyond the gently ascending and descending dunes, the cliff rose steeply with a sheer escarpment of chalk sandstone, massive boulders fallen amongst the naturally rock floor. Waves fed the stone, mosses growing in a thick

blanket and the scurry of tiny crabs and clutching shellfish visible from their roost above.

Seagulls flew in screeching flocks over the water and beach, darting with incredible speed and accuracy to catch the unwary fish. Groups of nightjar and kittiwake rambled over the sands, bobbing and conversing as they too pecked into the rock clefts and sand for dinner. No humans were present although the faintly visible cluster of building off to the right indicated the nearness of Cromer and civilization in the lower valley.

“William, it is everything I imagined multiplied a hundredfold! No painting does the reality justice. I never accounted for the noise! It is like thunder.” She trailed off, unable to articulate.

Darcy watched her with delight. As with sharing the beauty of Pemberley or any of the other sights they have seen together, his joy was boundless in experiencing it with her. She was aglow with happiness and awe, struck as Darcy always was by the impressive majesty of the roaring surf and vast expanse of ocean. Turning her incandescent countenance to him, his knees instantly weakening at her breathless beauty, she leaned toward him and clasped his forearms enthusiastically.

“Can we walk on the sand William, please? I want to feel the water.”

Darcy smiled indulgently. Glancing around he noted that the road they parked beside veered left through the heath and sparse trees, beginning a gradual decline toward Cromer. The cliff elevation decreased until eventually disappearing into the sand at sea level some two miles before the town. Approximately twenty feet away from where they stood he could see a rough trail twisting between the reeds and rocks down to the beach. It appeared safe enough, so he directed Lizzy to the trail head, pausing to examine further. Lizzy, in her excitement, hesitated not a second, treading onto the sand path with surefootedness. Darcy grasped her elbow, pulling her back with a stern glare.

“Elizabeth! Be cautious. I know you are as a gazelle in your grace and confidence, but I would rather not see my wife and child tumbling down a cliff! I will go first and you can hold onto my arm.”

Lizzy pressed her lips together, but did not argue. The path was not steep, in fact was not a true path at all, but more accurately consisted of sandy gaps between the tufts of vegetation. Twice it was necessary to step over masses of flowering gorse, reacquiring the trail downward. Nonetheless, it was an easy descent, Lizzy not the slightest bit winded. Her booted feet sunk into the warm sand with each stride. She laughed, looking at Darcy with sparkling eyes.

“It is rather difficult to walk on and so warm! I can feel the heat through my soles. I was planning on removing my shoes but think not.” She squatted, scooping a handful of the hot dry sand and trickling it through her fingers.

“Closer to the water the sand will be cooler, and firmer. You can remove your shoes then if you wish. I should warn you, the sand will lodge between your toes.”

He was grinning happily, Lizzy leaning onto his chest with a coy simper and fingers at his cravat. “Will you remove your boots, William, so I can see sand between your lovely toes? I might even be impelled to tickle your gritty toes with mine. Would this please you?”

“I suppose I could be induced to perform in such a childish manner as long as we remain alone.” He bent to kiss her as they were utterly alone, even Mr. Anders and Tillson out of view, but Lizzy pivoted and dashed toward the water line, her glittering laugh waving behind her.

Her sprint was not as speedy or graceful as usually accomplished due to the soft sand, Darcy rapidly outdistancing her with longer and stronger legs encased in tough boots. He halted on the hard sand, just beyond the tide’s reach, hands extended to assist her final few steps.

“Very well,” she panted, “it is official. I am a whale too ponderous to move across the sand! Grossly unfair, Mr. Darcy, and it is entirely your fault!”

Darcy chuckled, kissing her forehead and then kneeling to unlace her shoes. “I do believe you have something to do with the state you find yourself in, my love; however if it pleases you I shall assume all blame. Steady yourself on my shoulder and breathe deeply. The salt air will revive you. Other foot.”

Lizzy gingerly placed her naked foot onto the sand, but Darcy was correct that it was cooler near the water, although warm. She wiggled her toes, smiling at the strange sensation. “It feels so different than dirt or river sand. So fine and soft.” Her other foot was now bare, Darcy holding her boots and stockings, and she began to stroll, slowly digging her toes with each step while hiking her dress up to mid-calf. Heading toward the water line, the sand gradually cooling further with moistness apparent, Darcy watched her with rising delight.

He experienced a sudden flash of memory.

Georgiana at four years of age, chubby legs striding with exaggerated steps over the sand at Sidmouth with her tiny face screwed up in perplexity, seriously debating whether she liked this odd sensation or not. Anne Darcy held her daughter’s hand with a sunny smile, laughing her throaty laugh, while Darcy and his father stood several feet

away observing the scene with pleasure.

“She is going to cry,” a solemn sixteen year old Darcy said. “You wait. One of her infamous bellows that will frighten the seagulls clear to France.”

His father laughed, clapping a hand onto his son’s shoulder, already on the same level as his own. “Bet you a shilling she laughs.”

Darcy looked at his father with a grin, “Deal!” They shook on it and not two minutes later Darcy was digging into his pockets for a shiny shilling to hand over to his father while Georgie chortled her babyish delight, tugging on her mother’s hand in an insistent urge to become one with the cresting waves.

The scene on this deserted stretch of Norfolk shore was different in a myriad of ways, but the sight of his wife laughing as the cold foamy water lapped at her ankles was strangely reminiscent. He did not fear her bodily launching into the sea, but her amusement and childlike zeal was not too dissimilar from Georgiana’s. She glanced over her shoulder to her husband, who remained standing and holding her shoes.

“Are you afraid, Mr. Darcy? Fear the cold water may freeze your toes? Or that the tide may suck you in, a big fellow like yourself?”

Darcy shook his head, deigning not to answer. He looked about, spotting a rock five feet away. He sat and removed his boots and stockings, after another thorough search about to ensure they were alone. He joined his wife, already splashing her way toward the rocks, taking her hand as they strolled. He sighed deeply, “This is precisely as I imagined it. You and I strolling along the beach with the waves crashing and birds flying. Not a soul in sight.”

“It will likely be busier where we are staying, so we should enjoy this time.”

“Not necessarily. Mr. Vernor said the Inn is secluded near a private cove. The guests are allotted individual periods to bathe, if desired, or merely gaze into the sea. Of course, we will be visiting other areas more public, but I chose this place for that reason. He also said the dining room overlooks the ocean. We can dine and watch for whales or dolphins or ships passing.” He paused, drawing Lizzy into his arms and leaning for a kiss.

They held each other tightly in silence, contentedly watching the surf and inhaling the fresh, crisp air as the sun lowered in the west.

\* \* \* \* \*

“William.”

He turned at the sound of her voice, scenery of sunset over the water forgotten in a millisecond by the exquisite vision before his eyes. She wore a new gown of aquamarine satin, the skirt bordered with rouleaux of twining lace and roses; a velvet navy-blue spencer with short capped sleeves trimmed with wide, white lace accenting her bosom; gathers of satin falling in gentle folds over her swollen belly. The Kashmir shawl draped her fair shoulders and a choker of blue velvet with a diamond pendant graced her slim neck. She was beautiful, glowing, and vibrant. Darcy was struck forcibly by how profound his love and pride in squiring her as his.

He smiled, extending an arm with hand palm up, "Elizabeth, you are breathtaking. Come, beloved, watch the sunset with me." She joined him on the small balcony, Darcy encircling her waist and kissing her rosy cheek before resuming his study of the ocean.

They had arrived at the resort after a leisurely, periodically halting drive along the coast. The Inn was located a half mile south of Caister-on-Sea, nestled aside a sheltered stretch of beach secluded from the main shoreline by a natural rocky protrusion to the north and manmade wooden pier to the south. The pier was actually part of the resort, arising from an elevated tree lined bluff beyond the formal garden and extending a hundred feet over the waves. The lodge itself was an enormous, sprawling building of rustic wooden beams and irregular stone; three stories tall with wide windows and balconies for each room. The chambers were generous, well apportioned, and situated to grant adequate privacy from the fellow guests. The entire structure sat on a promontory roughly fifteen feet above the shore, surrounded by indigenous trees and bushes allowed to grow as nature intended with minimal purposeful landscaping interfering. The ornately designed formal garden and patio positioned near the pier also skirted the cliff's brink, providing a stunning view of the North Sea from the shade of canvas and leaves over plush chairs and settees.

The Darcys had arrived late in the afternoon with no time to tour the elaborate environs or the opulent public rooms inside the lodge. With a planned sojourn of two weeks, they would have plenty of time to explore the resort's attributes. In fact, neither felt any rush at all, perfectly content to stand together on their ocean facing balcony and observe the brilliant hues of scarlet, orange, and purple.

Lizzy rested her head against Darcy's upper arm with a sigh. "I have never seen such colors. Beautiful. Can we walk on the beach at night?"

"Certainly, although probably not wise in that gown. I would not

wish to see it soiled overly. You are absolutely ravishing, my love,” he finished in a low tone.

Lizzy slipped her arms over his shoulders, peering up into his face. “I love you Fitzwilliam Darcy. Thank you for the compliment and you are welcome to ravish later, however now I am famished.”

Darcy had opted to dine with his wife at a single table secluded near the wall-spanning windows overlooking the bay. The approximately fifty current guests sat in various sized groupings about the massive dining room. A few couples elected to eat at solitary tables, but most desired to sit in larger companies. Therefore, conversation and laughter was rampant. The food was marvelous, service elegant and superb, and atmosphere divine. Lizzy and Darcy gazed at each other over the candlelight, softly talking as they ate, and filled to bursting capacity with unrelenting love. A number of evening entertainments were scheduled and offered nightly for the lodgers, but for this night the Darcys wished to be alone, departing immediately upon finishing their meal and returning to their room. There they would stay, primarily in the comfortable bed, snuggling and loving and sleeping intermittently until well after sunrise.

\* \* \* \*

“Need any assistance with removing your gown, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Stay over there, Mr. Darcy, as I am quite certain sea bathing would be delayed indefinitely if you aided my disrobing.”

Darcy laughed, obeying his wife as he removed and carefully folded his waistcoat from where he sat on the narrow bench. Assist he may not do, but observe the stripping? Absolutely.

They were inside one of the resort’s bathing machines Darcy reserved for an hour of private couples bathing. Naturally, despite his many excursions at coastal towns, this would be his first experience bathing with a woman, his adorable wife, the anticipation higher than any of the numerous times he swam with a troop of men.

He was impressed with the quality of bathing machine the resort offered. In point of fact, he was greatly impressed with all he had seen thus far, the remote and obscure tourist town well equipped and modern. The wide cove was divided into separate sectors for intimate bathing well away from the public areas for beach play. Furthermore, the machine usage was scheduled with segregated periods for married couples and for the individual sexes. Darcy planned to return later in the afternoon when the men bathed, already relishing what would be an extended span of

intense swimming through the surf.

For now, however, he was thrilled to be here with Lizzy, introducing her to the joy of sea bathing. He only hoped he could control himself and allow her to truly enjoy the water. Watching her undress down to her shift and imagining how the thin garment would cling to her body once wet was not conducive to maintaining his restraint, Darcy swallowing and forcefully tearing his eyes away.

“I suppose he is safe and warm, untouchable by the cold water.” Darcy glanced over, Lizzy standing with hands caressing her abdomen.

He smiled, “He is cocooned and protected, beloved, do not fear. The dippers all agreed and you are not the first pregnant woman to bathe. Besides, the water is not all that cold. I think you shall find it refreshing. Are you ready?”

She nodded, eyes grazing over his naked form with equally decadent thoughts arising. “Are you certain we cannot be seen? I would rather no other see you in such a state.”

Darcy laughed, “Fret not, love. I promise you, I would not permit you appearing in your shift if I thought there the slightest chance we would be visible to roving eyes! The canopy shall shield us. Now, sit on the bench and hold on while we move.” She did as he instructed, Darcy pulling the lever to raise the outside flag. This was the signal for the driver to back the wheeled cabin into the water.

The so called ‘bathing machine’ had been around since the early 1700’s, invented by Benjamin Beale. The concept was remarkably simple: a large wagon propelled by two horses with a canvas or wooden shed built on top; the interior generally consisted of shelves or closets to place one’s clothing, a bench for sitting, and supplied with a stack of towels; one door in the front as the entrance, the backside open with steps to enter the water. A driver would direct the horses to back the wagon into the water then, in the case of private bathers, depart a safe distance until the flag was lowered as signal to withdraw the device from the water. Same sex ‘dippers’ were available to attend those persons who could not swim. This particular machine also sported an enormous tent off the back end to allow for added privacy.

Darcy jumped unhesitantly into the water, immediately diving completely under, swimming several clean strokes away, and surfacing with a splash. He turned to his wife with a grin, water running in rivers down his torso while smoothing wet hair off his brow. Lizzy waited on the top step, dangling one foot into the waves and admiring unabashedly. The water was waist high on Darcy, meaning that it would hit Lizzy well above her bulging abdomen. He waded back to her, snaking cold wet



hands under her shift and clutching her inner thighs.

Lizzy gasped, jerking spasmodically. "You devil! Spawn of Satan as your aunt declared!"

Darcy merely laughed, grinning mischievously. "I thought you were brave, Elizabeth Darcy, fearless and adventurous. Was I in error in this assessment?" He climbed the steps, leaning his wet body against hers for a soggy kiss.

She squealed against his lips, wincing, but threw her arms over his shoulders and launched forward. Darcy was unbalanced in his surprise, both of them falling into the water. His strong legs stood fast on the sand, preventing Lizzy from being dunked, but the splashing water doused her adequately. She laughed and wheezed at the same time.

"Not that cold, he says! I beg to differ, sir!"

"Buck up, my lady. Be strong and..." His words halted by a forceful splash aimed precisely into his open mouth. Lizzy giggled and slithered away, walking on tiptoes over the shifting sand.

"Plainly unfair," he finally sputtered.

"Serves you right. Look William, the bottom is so clear once the sand settles." She was staring into the water with rapt intensity, arms skimming over the surface. "I think I can....wait....let me see....Yes!" She bent slightly, reaching into the water and then raising her arm into the air with a shout of glee, a two-inch round rock in her hand. She looked at her smiling husband with pride, "Perfect balance and dexterity. Not bad for an obese whale. Here, a souvenir," and she tossed the small stone to Darcy, who caught it midair.

"What, pray tell, am I supposed to do with it?" He spread his arms widely, "If you have not noticed, I am unclothed. No pockets readily available."

Lizzy grinned, floating back to her husband, eyes raking over his form, "Oh yes, sir, I did notice you are unclothed. Of course, you are a man supremely noticeable whether clothed or not." She slipped her arms around his neck, nuzzling close, the rock discarded hastily as he enveloped her body. "Are you going to teach me how to float and swim, my beloved personal bathing instructor, or are we to continue discussing your nakedness. Either option appeals to me as they both involve your luscious body near mine." She nibbled his lobe, Darcy clutching her tightly with a heady sigh.

"Are you seducing me, Mrs. Darcy?"

"The thought did cross my mind, my lover. You assert we are utterly alone here."

"I cannot in good conscience renege on my vow to teach you to

swim and float, however. All trust and confidence in my fidelity would be forfeit.” His hands glided over her bottom, pulling her firmly against him. “I shudder to imagine what you would then think of me.” He grinned, bending to bestow a thorough kiss lasting long enough to leave them both as breathless as if running a mile dash.

With a quick peck to her nose he flipped her about, Lizzy instinctively thrashing. “Relax, my love! I shall teach you to float. Surely you did this as a child in your pond, but the buoyant salt water makes it easier.”

“Is the instructor expected to frighten the wits out of the student with rushed movements?”

“Only when said student is attempting to divert attention away from the lesson. Such behavior is considered cheating and would earn a sharp rap to the knuckles if we were in a proper classroom. Breathe shallowly Elizabeth, but do breathe. I shall not let you go.”

“Is this the voice of experience, William? The rapped knuckles, that is?”

“Absolutely not. I was a perfect student. Attentive and never in trouble.” His tone was patently false with lips pursed. Lizzy chuckled, earning a tiny pinch to her bottom. “Concentrate, Mrs. Darcy.”

She closed her eyes and relaxed, Darcy’s arms under her back and upper legs. She had floated proficiently in her youth, even self taught a few basic swim strokes, but it had been years since her last rebellious foray to the Longbourn pond. The Pemberley grotto pond was far too shallow and small to attempt swimming and the floating done in Darcy’s embrace never lasted very long before preferable activities interrupted. This was vastly different. The gentle waves lapped around her, causing her body to bob and sway; the salty water was buoyant, the feeling of lightness delightful.

She sighed, a small smile of contentment on her lips, “For the first time in weeks I do not feel weighted down and off center. This is marvelous.”

Silence fell, Darcy enamored. She was radiant in her happiness and, as suspected, the wet clinging shift left nothing to the imagination. His wife’s incredible body with perky breasts and hard nipples, lissome legs, dainty feet and toes, precious swollen abdomen, delicate shoulders and collarbone, and mounded feminine center all lay before his ravenous eyes. His arousal, well on the way since disrobing in the machine, was now complete. He cleared his throat, dragging his thoughts harshly away from the vision of hungrily loving her on the warm sand.

“Is it so burdensome, beloved, carrying our child?”

She opened her eyes, gazing with overpowering love into the depths of his blue orbs. "Not in the least burdensome, dearest. The changes are odd, wearying at times, and I do feel awkward, but it is never a burden. Can I tell you something? I never imagined, since loving you so wholeheartedly, that I could possibly love someone as greatly, until now. He is not here yet, I do not know what he shall look like, or what his personality shall be, but I already love him with all my soul. It is rather strange, but so wonderful. How could I then deem his presence inside me a burden?"

Darcy had told her once that on occasion she said or did something that was so amazing to him that the emotions surging through his soul were nigh on unbearable in their intensity. This was such a time. As inadequate as it was, all he could manage was a brilliant smile, tears misting his eyes and larynx constricted.

Lizzy rolled out of his arms, turning about and clasping onto his forearms. "What next, teacher?" She asked teasingly, pulling herself into his chest with hands sliding down his back to derriere while wrapping her legs about his thighs. "Back stroke? Breast stroke?" Squeezing his rump firmly, she snared his lower lip and sucked, easy to accomplish as his mouth had parted open in avid yearning.

Darcy groaned, regulation and propriety forgotten. He cupped her face, applying fervid pressure to her mouth. Lizzy responded blissfully for a moment, startling him when she abruptly launched backward using his body like a wall. Performing a number of perfectly executed backstrokes, she smoothly traversed the distance to the bathing machine steps. Her laughter floated on the air as he stood rooted to the spot. She settled onto the lower steps, body mostly submerged, observing his surprise with a naughty grin.

"As you can see, Fitzwilliam, I already know the backstroke. Perhaps you can show me the breast stroke?" She unbuttoned the top of her shift as she spoke, peering at him through lowered lashes.

Darcy grinned lasciviously, crossing the short space with a cleanly performed breaststroke, grasping onto the rails and pulling himself up until hovering over, muscles rippling and hairs black. He leaned in, lips brushing her upturned mouth, whispering huskily, "I love you Elizabeth. God, how I love you! Please tell me I can make love to you here in this inappropriate place as I desperately burn for you and cannot return to the hotel in my current state!"

Lizzy reached to fondle him, Darcy moaning loudly, her legs drawing him closer, "I confessed I wished to seduce you, did I not? Love me, Fitzwilliam, please." Nodding curtly, he claimed her mouth,

devouring in his thirst for her. Releasing the rails for a far preferable grip to her breasts and bottom, Darcy united with his wife in one rawly penetrating motion.

On Christmas Eve they had first discovered the joy of making love in the tub, a blissfully rapturous interlude that they had repeated numerous times since. The sublime combined sensations of warm water surrounding their bodies while passion raged internally created a liaison of exquisite proportions. This assignation was both similar and yet superbly variant. Their bodies flamed, heat rising immeasurably until skin flushed; small bumps spreading over flesh fiery from within while chilled from the cold water and balmy air without, the fusion heightening the tactility of every touch and caress.

It was heavenly! For not the first time in their marriage they each wondered how it was possible for passion to soar to a higher pinnacle then yet attained. Darcy could not control himself, moving harshly within her in a frenzied voracity. Fleeting he worried that he may be too rough, never wishing to harm her in any way, but she met his pace equally and propelled him on. The chill water swirled over their flaming flesh, surrounding and surging their most intimate regions as they loved. The racing sensations were inexplicably powerful.

Their culmination, when it finally arrived, swept through them in a torrent, shouts released in unrestrained ecstasy, only later thankfully recalling their isolation.

\* \* \* \*

“Have fun, beloved, but be careful. I do not want to hear of my husband being caught in an undertow or snared in kelp.”

“I shall be cautious, love. See you in a couple hours.” He kissed her cheek and squeezed her hands before striding briskly toward the pier. Lizzy watched his tall, elegant figure until disappeared from view, turning toward the lodge with a sigh. She was not overly worried about him swimming in the open ocean, although the possible dangers are real. Mainly she recognized that she would miss him, but knowing how greatly he adored vigorous athletic pursuits, and swimming being one infrequently partaken, she could not deny him the activity.

The men bathed on the far side of the pier; the pier itself closed down for the afternoon to prevent any peeking, not that there was a woman alive who would admit to such voyeurism. Darcy had told her that most resorts scheduled male swimming in this manner. He said that most men preferred to swim in the nude. Darcy did, although some wore

breeches or bathing outfits which were basically a type of long underwear of light wool. The vision of a company of nude men splashing about the waves was far too humorous to resist imagining, despite her embarrassment.

She sighed again. In truth, she would give anything to see her virile spouse with muscles contracting and tensing as he cut cleaning through the water. Granted the brief view of his strokes while with her that morning and well familiar with his manly physique, the picture was readily conjured and she shivered involuntarily. Stifling a highly unseemly moan, she entered the common room.

Those women left alone while their husbands or fathers bathed milled about conversing and sipping tea. Lizzy was greeted enthusiastically, her naturally gregariousness rising to the fore. In no time at all she had formed numerous casual friendships and received a dozen invitations to dine at group tables. The array of women revealed a diversity of situations. Three young women were newly married like herself, one on her honeymoon and another pregnant with her first child as well. There were several unmarried maidens touring with families. The bulk were older and enjoying vacations with husbands of many years or even decades. A final group consisted of the spinster sisters traveling with a brother, the widow and her companion, and a Lady Eloise Underwood, boldly traveling alone with servants only.

Lizzy had a delightful afternoon; tremendously entertained with titillating discourse, delicious snacks, and several games of whist. She returned to their chambers well after Darcy, who was already bathed and dressing for dinner. Not surprisingly, he had communicated sparingly with his fellow swimmers, learned only four names that he could effortlessly recall, and received no invitations to dine. He shrugged his shoulders, utterly apathetic, but more than willing to join a group table if it pleased his wife.

They dined with Lady Eloise, a witty woman in her mid-thirties; the widowed Mrs. Alcastor and her companion Miss Stein; the family Henner consisting of a husband and wife and two teenaged daughters; Mr. and Mrs. Drake-Murray, the young couple expecting their first child; and Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, a middle aged couples with three children who were safely at home in Kent. Darcy was by far the most taciturn member of the assembly, although Mr. Stewart was nearly as silent, the two men eventually discovering an equal passion for horses, a topic that would carry them through the evening.

The after dinner recreation, aside from the usual games of cards, chess, and backgammon, was a silhouette party. Lizzy had read of the art

form, but never beheld the process. The fad of tracing silhouettes, or shades, began in France in the mid 1700's and was popularized by King George III with 'shade parties' a favored amusement amongst the royal elite. The artist employed for the next three nights at the Caister Seaside Resort was a German who lived in Norwich and traveled up and down the coastal towns plying his talent.

Lizzy was thrilled by the idea of obtaining a tracing of her husband's profile, Darcy enchanted with having one of her, so they both consented to sit for the artist and purchase the portrait. Artists employed differing techniques and materials, but all focused on the profile. The concept was simple: a bright lantern was positioned near the subject's face, casting a shadow onto a white paper screen. The shade was then traced to be later cut by hand onto black parchment or fabric, craftily embellished with slashed cuts for collars or jewels or other details, mounted onto a white background, and then framed.

The evening's diversion was tremendous fun, the German droll and cheerful as well as a gifted artisan. Darcy and Lizzy decided to place their shapes facing each other on the same picture, lightly bronzed and elaborately framed. It was a fine piece of art that would hang in their sitting room as a remembrance of this vacation for the whole of their lives.

It was late when the Darcys crawled into their bed, Lizzy already drifting into slumber when her warm bodied spouse nestled against her back. He drew her close, wrapping limbs about her and kissing a bare shoulder.

"Good night, my heart," she whispered sleepily, twining her fingers between the longer ones lying on her belly, "Sleep well. I love you."

"I love you Elizabeth," he answered with a gigantic yawn, kissing her ear and promptly falling asleep. Thus ended their first full day by the sea; sleeping deeply with cooling breezes and the muted sounds of crashing waves entering the half open window.

## **5 – Magic Lantern**

“Here you are Elizabeth.”

“Thank you dearest.” Lizzy smiled into her husband’s eyes as she reached to take the tall glass of mixed fruit juice from his hand. “What do you have there?”

He placed the small linen wrapped basket he held in his hand, the subject of her query, onto the little table between their chairs.

Responding as he reclaimed his seat, “I thought while I was retrieving beverages for us I would also snare a snack. Completely selfish on my part as I did not wish to trudge up to the inn thirty minutes from now when you suddenly realized you have not eaten in two hours.” He grinned while Lizzy rolled her eyes.

“Walking some hundred feet hardly qualifies as trudging, Mr. Darcy, and my increased appetite is all your doing, as we have established.”

“As you wish, Elizabeth. I brought those pecan scones you like so much, some raspberries, and two bananas.” He picked up his book, stretching long legs onto the lounge with a contented sigh.

It was their third day at the resort and thus far they had traveled no farther than the beach, pier, and pathways through the wood. Darcy had a whole list of local entertainments, most of which they did wish to visit, but the delight of leisurely hours staring at the waves and swimming was currently taking precedence. Both days they had risen later than usual, foregoing any bedroom activities to join the other guests for a lingering breakfast as the nightly mist departed. They had missed the sunrises, one of the items on Darcy’s list, but the play of morning sunlight on the water and thinning fog was an enchanting backdrop while dining.

At some point in the day they utilized the bathing machine for an hour or two. Darcy did teach his wife to swim, the only stroke she was moderately proficient at being the backstroke. Modesty and safety prevented him steering her too far from the machine, even though they were well away from any potential prying eyes. Lizzy enjoyed the lessons and not merely because Darcy was the teacher. The water was colder than she would have preferred, but bracing and revitalizing nonetheless.

Mostly it was the sense of balance and gracefulness she felt in the water which was appealing. Of course, they did manage to waste a great deal of time in horseplay with splashing, diving for rocks, tickling, and dunking. Inevitably the session ended, or in the case of today, began *and* ended by making love.

Now they sat on padded, wooden lounge chairs located on the sand. An umbrella shaded them from the harsh sun. This area of the beach, the southern edge of the private expanse nearest the pier, was well away from the bathing machines situated to the left by the rocks. Numerous chairs and umbrellas were set to accommodate the guests. Several children frolicked in the surf, their squeals of glee mingling with seagull squawks and crashing waves. It was wholly relaxing, peaceful, and refreshing. The days were comfortably warm with the oppressive heat of Derbyshire left far behind; cooling, gentle breezes replete with the tang of salt and fish flowed intermittently.

Lizzy sipped her drink and nibbled on a scone while applying the finishing touches on a gown for their baby. Darcy read, naturally, Montesquieu having been completed so now he was studying the dry textbook on marine wildlife and vegetation with intent interest.

"Look here, love." He spoke into the silence, holding the page up for her inspection, "A drawing of those birds we saw yesterday by the rocks. An Arctic tern. I thought it was in the tern family, but the markings were different. They are indigenous to the Polar Regions, not seen frequently this far south. Listen to this: they migrate year round from the Arctic to the Antarctic, making them one of the farthest traveling bird species known. They seek the summers in both places, rarely in their lifetime experiencing night. How fascinating!"

Lizzy smiled, displaying the appropriate amount of interest before resuming her own task. It was not that she found learning the names and habits of God's creatures unworthy, but her thirst for absorbing all knowledge to the tiniest degree was not as unquenchable as it was for Darcy. She was frankly flabbergasted that he could attend to the thick manual page after page as if riveting literature. What was even more astounding is that she knew he would assimilate and regurgitate eighty percent of what he read fifty years hence, his memory phenomenal.

The Henners wandered by, the thirteen and fifteen year old daughters shyly glancing at Darcy, who was oblivious. "Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy," Mr. Henner greeted with a bow, Mrs. Henner dropping a curtsy and softly greeting. "I pray your afternoon is progressing delightfully?"

"Very much, Mr. Henner. Thank you. Are you leaving the beach?"



Mr. Henner nodded, "The ladies are gathering for a swim. The men folk will be meeting for faro in the game room. Will you be participating, Mr. Darcy?"

Lizzy stifled a laugh as a cough, Darcy ignoring her as he replied, "Thank you, but no. I will be bathing later, however. See you then, Mr. Henner?"

"Absolutely! Enjoy the sea air, Mrs. Darcy." They left, the girls giggling and whispering.

"William, if you wish to play cards I do not mind. You do it so rarely that you should leap at the chance."

"I play rarely because I am hopelessly inept and unlucky, and I do not particularly enjoy the game. I may appeal to your magnanimity for a game or two of billiards this evening, however. Mr. Stewart plays, as does Mr. Noble. Would another short separation disturb you, dearest?"

"Of course not. I will miss you, but I am certain I can find some activity to soothe my broken heart." She reached over and squeezed his hand, Darcy smiling and squeezing in return. He returned to his book, Lizzy staring into the sea. After barely two days she felt as if they had been here a week. As enormously thrilling as their Derbyshire excursion had been, the fast pace had allowed little time for prolonged periods of relaxation. Here they spent inordinate amounts of time doing absolutely nothing, and it was fantastic. Lizzy would hesitate to admit it to her overprotective spouse, but her burgeoning body was gradually beginning to complain at the alterations! Personally she never would have imagined ever reaching a state of mind where lying lazily about was prodigious, but it was happening.

Lost in his text for God knows how long, Darcy was jolted to awareness by a piercing squeal from the water. It was only the children playing, Darcy smiling at their antics as he turning to his wife with a comment, finding her sound asleep. With a frown he realized that the sun had moved past the sheltering umbrella, the left side of her fair face dewy with perspiration from the direct rays. With a mumbled curse at himself, he rose hastily and readjusted the umbrella stand. He touched her cheek gingerly so as not to wake her, sending a silent prayer heavenward for his timing as the skin was unburned.

His eyebrows shot up when he noted the late hour on his pocketwatch, the time for men's bathing ten minutes away. He cautiously adjusted Lizzy's bonnet to further protect her face, studied the sun for a moment and moved the umbrella a bit more, only then satisfied enough to leave her napping. He knelt, gently rubbing over her abdomen and brushing the fingers resting there, leaning for a soft kiss to her head.

Resisting the urge to kiss their child with difficulty, several loitering resort guests already peering at him oddly, he rose and crossed to one of the servants standing at attention by the beach edge.

“My good man,” he began, pressing a five pound note into the stunned servant’s hand, “my wife is sleeping under that umbrella there. I am going bathing. I require you to watch the sun’s movements and ensure she remains shaded. Wake her if this becomes impossible. When she awakens, inform her where I have gone and assist her to our room. Send for me if necessary.”

His fears and concerns were for naught. Lizzy woke refreshed, well shaded with a cooling breeze wafting over her body. She instantly knew where Darcy was, not even needing to check her pocketwatch, the efficient servant merely confirming her supposition. They reconnected to mutual approbation in their bedchamber, both revitalized and dressed for dining. At the lobby, however, Darcy led Lizzy to the right and out the front doors.

“I know we have only been here three days now, but I am almost positive the dining room is to the left,” she offered with a smile.

Darcy chuckled, “If you are not feeling faint from hunger, my love, I thought we could walk the beach at dusk. It is a peaceful time of day with the others engaged indoors and the birds calming for the night. I always love the serenity and beauty of the sea at dusk with the sun setting, casting remarkable shadows and deep colors onto the waves.”

“You should have been born near the sea, William, although I cannot imagine you living anywhere but Pemberley.”

“It is interesting, Elizabeth. In my travels I always gravitate to the seashore with eager enthusiasm, yet I am not fond of ships per se, despite owning four, nor do I care for sea voyages. I have met so many people who do live by the water and have discovered an odd phenomenon: those who live near the endless beauty of the ocean often take it for granted. They no longer notice the dazzling sunrises or sunsets, the surf does not move them, and they rarely walk the beach. I suppose we are all that way to some degree. I know that since sharing my homeland with you I have renewed my ardor for many of the wonders that I did not readily dwell on. It is as if I am seeing it for the first time through your eyes, and I love that you have provided me the opportunity. Therefore, I consider myself fortunate that I only view the sea every year or so, and from different perspectives. Keeps the experience fresh and ever changing.”

He guided her warily down the dimly lit steps to the beach. They strolled in silence over the expanse of shifting sand toward the water line,

the tide notably higher than when Lizzy departed that afternoon. The waning sunlight as it dipped below the western horizon did cast stupendous hues over the clouds and rippling water. With an essentially clear sky marred fragmentally with wispy strings of clouds, the rainbow tones of burnished scarlet, orange, gold, violet, blue, and a myriad unnamable massed together into a vivid display. They stood on the tide's boundary as the eastern horizon faded into deepening shadows; the terminal glimmers of sunlight on undulating waves slowly replaced with twinkles of starlight. A lone sailing vessel of indeterminate type passed gradually into the blackness off the world's rim.

All the while, Darcy and Lizzy stood with arms encircling waists, in silent contemplation of life and nature and the stunning majesty of the Creator.

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Over the following days the Darcys altered their schedule somewhat. They wandered into Caister-on-Sea, deciding to walk the half-mile, well maintained oak lined trail from the resort to the small hamlet. The village itself was wholly unremarkable. Quaint and tidy with a meager number of shops catering to the locals, small fishing boats in abundance, and a people universally rustic and hardy. The only true draws to the town were the church and castle, both of immense significance and interest to Darcy and Lizzy.

The Holy Trinity Church was in appearance like many other churches they had seen, architecture of the 14<sup>th</sup> century standard throughout the country. Of course, that is not to say it was not lovely. Built of grey brick with a tall castellated tower, high arched windows, and a long nave leading to an unusual pipe organ at the chancel. The organ pipes were split into two sets on either side of the aisle and appeared to lean toward each other as if whispering, creating a vague tunnel like sensation entering the chancel. An ornately detailed hatchment with the royal coat of arms patently commemorated George III, yet it also showed cleverly painted over markings for James I from two hundred years prior. The building was very old and deteriorating in subtle places, the modest community likely unable to contribute the monies necessary to sustain the structure. Darcy left a generous donation, feeling particularly charitable after a time of quiet contemplation both inside the sanctuary and strolling with his wife through the ancient cemetery and gardens.

Caister Castle was located near the church, a pleasant walk over the heathland. Sparse clusters of birch trees with a thick underbrush of

gorse scrub and bracken with trailing vines of wild honeysuckle and bluebells adding a pleasing fragrance to overcome the faint but persistent odor of fish. Butterflies fluttered in abundance, unperturbed by the scores of bees attacking the fall blooms. The ruins of the castle sat rather forlornly on an expanse of wild land, the main pathway and road the only areas attended to. The moat had long since been drained and filled in with the debris of time, only the vaguest markings indicating that it had ever existed.

Built in 1432 the glorified manor house was notable for a couple reasons. One, the owner and architect was Sir John Falstaff, or Fastolfe depending on the reference, who was the inspiration for William Shakespeare's character of the same name. Luckily for Sir Falstaff, he was long since deceased before his name was immortalized in three of Shakespeare's plays as the depiction was not a favorable one. Secondly, Henry VI granted only five licenses to crenellate during his entire fifty year reign, a legal necessity from the crown in order to build a defensible structure with battlements, moats, and gunports. Caister Manor, the home of Sir Falstaff, received this honor allowing him to fortify his home with a ninety-foot tower, three foot thick bricks, and separate courtyards.

Lizzy and Darcy were two of a dozen persons wandering via the lush grounds and tumbling stones. The castle was actually well preserved despite the anomalous holes and general decay. The rusted chains to the absent drawbridge dangled beside the main entrance, the inner courtyard building frames were readily discernable, and the tall tower with sturdy spiraling stairway was easily navigable. Lizzy felt perky after so many days of lazing about, but did ascend the stairs in gradual stages with Darcy's hand as a rock on her elbow. The view from on high was well worth the breathlessness.

Another day found them comfortably settled into one of the resort's phaetons as they passed several hours meandering about the immediate countryside with no distinct destination on the agenda. This was a highly irregular occurrence; Darcy being a man extremely detail oriented and organized with little spontaneity to his character! It was Lizzy's idea to set out randomly and Darcy blanched and spluttered at the concept, Lizzy laughing as she propelled him to the cozy carriage stocked with a picnic lunch, local map, and thick rug.

"Anywhere but east, Mr. Darcy," she said with lifted chin and imperiously pointing finger.

Darcy stared at her for a whole ten minutes, Lizzy maintaining her humorously commanding pose, while his mind raced with nearly audible clicks as the meticulous list of activities written in his firm hand

were mentally checked. Finally he nodded, a tiny smile lifting the corners of his lips. "Certainly not east. Very well, Mrs. Darcy, as you wish. Ha!" The last to the horses and with a slap of the reins, they set off.

In truth, if one did not travel due south into Great Yarmouth, a destination for another day, or north where they had already traversed, west was the only remaining direction and this meant touring the Broads. The extensive wetlands unique in all of England, given the name 'Broads' due to the seemingly endless expanses of shallow lakes and connecting rivers, was honestly a sight to behold. Darcy drove the road north of the River Bure heading toward Stokesby. Within two miles they were on the fringes of the marsh, the ground notably soggy, and air humid. Darcy cleared his throat, the usual precursor to an oration, but Lizzy spoke into the silence first.

"The Norfolk Broads," she began, in a strong lecturing tone as if reciting from a textbook, "an area approximately one-hundred-twenty square miles comprised of seven rivers and fifty broads, most navigable. Home to a plethora of diverse wildlife, many believed to only reside here, and the necessary livelihood for the residents from Norwich and all the small burghs in the vicinity as the essential commerce route to Great Yarmouth and beyond. Most believe the vast waterways a natural landscape fashioned by God and time, others contend it at least partially a result of centuries of peat excavation. Whatever the case, currently the marshlands serve as a perfect habitation for farmers and fishermen. With vegetation naturally in abundance, cattle, sheep, and waterfowl flourish. The infinite quantities of hay, sedge, and reed are easily cultivated and sold."

She continued to ramble on as Darcy drove, his grin spreading with each passing word. When she had memorized the book he had brought with him, he had no idea, but his pleasure in her interest and recall was tremendous. He said little as they wheeled along the rutted tracks and across the numerous bridges, allowing his delightful wife to bask in her education and tease with her frequent inflections, gestures, and word usages which were precisely meant to mimic him.

All the while they passed sprawling flatlands thick with reeds, rushes, fen orchid, ragged robin, and meadow thistle; all inundated with moths, butterflies, and dragonflies of truly astounding proportions and colors. Neither Lizzy nor Darcy had ever seen so many flying bugs. At times it was rather frightening, the masses of damselflies and gnats swarming about their heads. Twice they caught glimpses of otters slipping into the murky waters, and Darcy spied a red deer who agilely bounded behind a copse of sallow trees before Lizzy turned the direction

of Darcy's pointing finger. The birds were as abundant as the insects, far too many to adequately identify. Even Darcy relinquished the endeavor, opting to purely take pleasure in the array of colors, shapes, and sounds.

Darcy kept the map on his knees, useful as a blanket shielding Lizzy's rubbing hand, but primarily to prevent him driving them astray. Unlike all their previous journeys where either Lizzy was supremely oriented, as during their frequent treks about Hertfordshire while engaged, or Darcy was knowledgeable, as in London and Derbyshire, here they were both utterly out of their element. The vague sense of unease never left him throughout the day, Darcy not comfortable in unfamiliar terrains. Lizzy had no trepidation whatsoever, giddily admiring the stupendous environs and trusting her husband's formidable competence as well as her own excellent sense of direction.

In the end, they suffered no mishaps. Aside from the reams of wildlife, people were also a constant. The river keels and wherries were interminable, not to mention the intermittent homesteads, all with congenially waving individuals aplenty. At Acle they veered northward to Thurne then turning easterly until reaching Hemesby where they looped south to Caister. The landscape remained stupendous and wildly diverse with wonders so numerous that they gave up even pointing or commenting; simply observing in serene awe.

By mid afternoon they were safely returned to the inn. Darcy escorted his wilting wife to their room, intent on tucking her in for a needed nap. Faint hopes were momentarily raised when she pivoted in his arms at the bedside, one arm slithering over his shoulder while tiny creeping fingertips fiddled with his cravat.

"Care to join me, my love?" She asked with upturned face and presented lips.

Darcy bent, accepting her invitation wholeheartedly, only to have her gift abruptly nullified by a jaw-cracking yawn. He chuckled against her mouth, withdrawing inches and caressing her rosy cheek. "Thank you for the offer, dearest, but I think I shall put you both to bed." He bussed her nose, whirling her about gently, and with a pat on the bottom assisted her into the bed. Sitting next to her warm body, he noticed not for the first time the increased inability to nestle snugly against the front part of her. Not that he in any way was perturbed by this, joyously settling as close as feasible and resting a large hand over their child. He was extremely active at the present, kicking and jabbing his father's hand with great enthusiasm.

"I do not believe he appreciated the pickled herring," Lizzy mumbled, eyes already slipping closed, "He has been pummeling me

since lunch.”

Darcy laughed softly, leaning until his mouth rested over Lizzy’s flattening navel. “Listen carefully, young one. Your father commands you to behave and allow your mother to rest. She promises to never consume pickled herring again. Be a good boy now and sleep.” He continued on, Lizzy smiling at his silliness while the baby apparently disregarded his father’s authority, exercise unabating. Internal calisthenics were not a deterrent to Lizzy’s slumber after all, sleep claiming her within minutes. Darcy gently massaged her belly, sitting in serene contemplation for a bit before rising. After a soft kiss to her forehead and whispered *I love you*, he retrieved his book from the table and left the room.

The main patio was cast in deep shadows this time of day and nearly vacant. The men were bathing, but Darcy opted to enjoy the solitude. The book, *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, sat open on his knees, forgotten for the moment as he watched the waves and a group of children splashing.

“Mr. Darcy. I am surprised to see you here all alone and not bathing with the gentlemen.”

Darcy glanced upward with a start, rising and bowing elegantly. “Lady Underwood. I trust you are well today and enjoying your visit?”

“Tolerably,” she said with a smile, sitting gracefully onto an empty chair across from Darcy, “It can be boring and somewhat lonely to travel unaccompanied, but I refuse to be a burden to my friends. Please sit, Mr. Darcy. No need to stand at attention.” She smiled sweetly, fluttering her fan toward his chair.

Darcy hesitated, uncomfortably glancing about to ensure they were not alone, before resuming his seat. He sat with back ramrod straight, his bottom on the extreme edge, ready to spring up at the first opportunity for escape.

Lady Underwood laughed, “Relax, Mr. Darcy! I shan’t bite, promise. Where is Mrs. Darcy, by the way?”

“She is resting.”

Lady Underwood fanned her face, staring boldly at Darcy with a pensive expression. “Have you been married long Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy stiffened even further, meeting her eyes with studied indifference. “Nearly a year.”

“I must say I was surprised to see a woman so advanced in her confinement traveling. Few men would wish to squire their wives about in such a state. It is impressive and....touching.”

Darcy remained silent, countenance impassive as he returned his gaze to the waves. Lady Underwood continued, “The two of you seem to

have an unusual relationship. At least unusual compared to most I have observed. It intrigues me.”

“Lady Underwood, forgive my rudeness, but I do not wish to discuss my personal relationships with a stranger.”

To his surprise, she laughed. “As you wish, Mr. Darcy. I meant no offense.”

Silence fell. Lady Underwood eventually filled the quiet with casual chatter, Darcy responding in mostly monosyllables. Another fifteen minutes passed, Darcy wound tighter than a coil. Just as he prepared to excuse himself, Lady Underwood rose, lowering her voice seductively and leaning toward him. “Your wife is an adorable creature and I can certainly understand the attraction. Nonetheless, I know how difficult it can be for some men when their wives are in the advanced stages of pregnancy. Traveling unescorted does have its advantages, Mr. Darcy, but it gets lonely. Very lonely. Perhaps we can help each other.”

The expression of disgust with flinty blue eyes leveled at her face caused Lady Underwood to retreat a step. Darcy said nothing, but his answer was clear. Still, she smiled, shrugging slightly. “Merely an offer, Mr. Darcy. Think about it. Have a lovely evening.”

Darcy shuddered, rising quickly once she was gone, heart pounding with the need to touch his wife. He was not overly stunned by Lady Underwood’s proposition, having been the recipient of similar sexual solicitations more times than he could recall, all of which revolted him and were never accepted. As disdainful as he considered the practice, he knew it was common. Nonetheless, he always felt dirty when accosted, but never more than now that he was married.

Elizabeth slept, face relaxed and gloriously beautiful. Darcy removed his jacket, waistcoat, and boots, cautiously nestling against her back. Lizzy sighed, murmured his name, and melted into his embrace without waking. He did not sleep, but held her close and tranquil for the next hour, renewed and cleansed in her presence. Only when she began to stir slightly with the familiar shifting cadence to her respirations indicative of pending wakefulness did he release the top buttons of her gown and slide a hand in to cup one ripe, warm breast. Squeezing tenderly and playing with a pert nipple, he feathered kisses along the nape of her neck. He was not yet aroused, instead merely delighting in the joy of holding her and knowing that eternally she would be his to love and talk with and share his soul.

Lizzy rolled in his arms with a heady sigh, sleepy eyes meeting his. His hand resumed its pleasure at her breast, the other stroking a now exposed shoulder. “I did not anticipate you being here when I awoke,



beloved. It is a most pleasant surprise.”

He smiled brilliantly in response, the dazzling smile only given to Lizzy with all his pearly teeth flashing and faint dimples appearing; the smile that extended into his eyes, blue orbs so crystalline as to nearly be transparent, sparkling, and shining so brightly that she could see a tiny image of her face in the mirror-like surface. Her breath caught at the boundless adoration and cavernous love reflected therein.

“I love you William, with all my soul!”

“I love you, my Elizabeth. You are my soul, my blood and bone, my very life.” He continued to stare at her, fondling her breasts, but making no other moves, content to gaze at her for the present. Lizzy stared in return, hands slowly stroking over his body, as content as he to allow passion to gradually rise on the wings of idolization.

It could have been ten minutes, perhaps an hour, but eventually his shirt was discarded and her buttons were released with lips followed the line of exposed flesh. Darcy tasted her, relishing the mildly salty flavor and musky odor of her skin. Mostly he thrilled at the soft mewls of pleasure passing her lips and the rushing heat flushing her skin wherever he touched. Her breasts literally grew and hardened under his hands and mouth. She tensed and shivered continually, the passage of time only heightening her response to his ministrations. Endlessly she murmured his name, driving him insane with desire and happiness.

Over the swell of their child, peacefully at rest, Darcy devotedly worshipped. He loved her belly, firm in its expansion yet remarkably soft; the outward shape changing as the baby shifted or as she moved. Each time they loved he asked if it was uncomfortable, especially with his large frame on top, but she insisted all was well as of yet. He gloried in this, fervidly excited by the sensation of their child pressed into his abdomen when they made love. If the growing bulk prevented full penetration, it mattered little to him, the emotional rapture in this tangible evidence of their love far superior to the physical. Now, he kissed over the perfectly stretched flesh, licking her navel and making her giggle, kneading gently before traveling lower.

Her legs were wholly unaltered. Strong, supple, toned; skin like finest alabaster or freshly fallen snow. Darcy could never name one part of his wife’s body that he loved the most, all of her exquisite as far as he was concerned. Certainly there were specific areas which reacted to his touch with greater intensity, but as with her touch to his flesh, every inch was erotic and arousing. Still, the fact remained that the highest level of passionate sensitivity was awakened when their intimate, centered erogenous zones were stimulated. Naturally the culmination of their

lovemaking revolved around such places.

Lizzy was lost in a hazy realm of purest passion. Remembering her name would be difficult so crazily roused was she. Beautifully her husband transported her; hands, lips, tongue combined masterfully to provoke. Rhapsody grasped and waved through her head to toe as she screamed his name and arched in blissful surrender. Her muscles trembled, the sensations extending beyond what was humanly endurable as Darcy leisurely kissed, licked, and stroked his way back to her mouth, crushing her in a starved kiss.

His hands never ceased caressing, tenderly and lightly. He only allowed her to minimally calm from her zenith, knowing that it would absolutely be only the beginning of the pleasure he could give her. "Beautiful wife, I so adore you. To love you is truly all I wish to do in life. If only all else could fade and I could endlessly rouse you. The satisfaction I derive from this alone is glorious."

She smiled, smoothing his rumpled hair and fingering over his radiant face. She held the pulsing evidence of his ardor in her palm, skillfully manipulating his spiraling craving. "How fortunate for us both, my heart, that I feel precisely the same. Loving you, watching your face as you attain your ecstasy with me, because of your love for me, is my greatest joy. How tremendously I love you Fitzwilliam!"

Languid stimulation rapidly gave way to frantic need. Voracious yearning led swiftly to scorching delirium. Conscious thought rarely interjected when their mutual thirst rose to such unquenchable levels. Instead, they acted with pure animal lust, blindly moving as emotions guided. They fused as one with Lizzy astride Darcy's hips, both sitting with arms embracing and incessantly fondling. Whispered endearments and promises uttered between pants. Indescribable flames of glory raced between their melded bodies, each feeling their partner's passionate fire as intently as their own.

Each and every time they made love, whether it playfully or hungrily, the sensations both physical and spiritual eclipsed what seemed logically possible. The thought of another never entered either of their minds; not a glimmer of curiosity or shred of wondering. How could it when paradise was achieved in each other's embrace?

Darcy groaned, stridently wheezing, caught in the heavenly crux of wanting the sensations to last indefinitely yet dying to let go and bond utterly with his wife.

"Fitzwilliam! Oh god, please," she cried, the choice taken away from him as they tumbled together over the brink into the dimension of complete unity.

Darcy could not say how he managed so stay sitting upright. He held Lizzy for long minutes as they gasped for air and gradually restored clarity to blissfully fogged minds. Rationality always seemed to reassert itself with tender kisses along shoulders or necks or chests or wherever they found skin nearby. Fingers danced over perspiring flesh, involuntary writhing continued with neither wishing to break the connection hastily. Voices speaking softly, the individual words not nearly as important as the intonation.

Finally they collapsed to the bed, entwined and sated. Darcy did not speak of Lady Underwood. As deplorable as secrets were to him, more heinous would be hurting Lizzy. He honestly did not know how she would react to the idea of women propositioning her husband. Trust was absolute between them so he knew she would never doubt his fidelity, nor would he doubt hers. If the situation were reversed, he would promptly kill the man, or at least maim him for life, ala Orman. As repulsed as Darcy was by Lady Underwood's solicitation, he was capable of shrugging it aside as a flaw to her character and of no import to him. However, due to the forced proximity as guests of the resort, he thought it best to keep Lizzy unaware of Lady Underwood's interest. He wished for nothing to spoil their vacation.

He was thankful that he had alternate plans for dinner. Mr. Vernor had directed his attention to a French restaurant in Great Yarmouth; apparently extremely posh and intimate with spectacular food. They dressed in their finest, Lizzy wearing her Twelfth Night gown. Her fuller bosom was displayed lusciously to an appreciative Darcy and the baby's bulge perceptible, but not large enough yet to tarnish the stunning beauty of how the gown flowed.

Darcy grinned, approaching his bewitching spouse with breathless enchantment. "Elizabeth, I.....well, I truly do not have the words. You are beautiful, captivating, magnifique, la femme lovliest dans l'univers, mon epouse, mon inspiration et survie...." Despite his claim, words fell in a French torrent until trailing away at the crevice between her breasts.

"William, do we not have dinner reservations? I am rather hungry after this afternoon's exertions and I distinctly heard a few rumbles erupting from your perfect midsection over an hour ago. Surely you are starved by now."

"I am famished, beloved, ravenous in fact, but not for food. God, Lizzy, how is it possible to want you so completely again!?"

She laughed, pulling his face away from her décolletage and kissing him soundly. "Come my dashing husband. I am currently

famished for food and I wish to be seen on the arm of the handsomest man to ever appear in Norfolk. Later, my lover, I will show you what it feels like to be wanted so completely.” She sucked gently on his lower lip, the tip of her tongue caressing, only then clasping his arm and propelling him toward the door, ignoring his groan and faltering step.

Dinner was stupendous. The cozy restaurant afforded an amazing view of the River Yare, the atmosphere so unerringly French that Darcy was transported to Paris and tremendously impressed. Lizzy had grown accustomed to French cuisine as prepared by Mrs. Langton, but this was subtly different. Darcy ordered several unique dishes never served at Pemberley, the table laden with far more food than they could possibly consume, even with Darcy’s appetite. He wanted her to taste a bit of everything, getting a wee bit carried away with enthusiasm at the inclusive menu. Additionally, the wine cellar sported wines nearly unattainable even with the improved trade to France. Darcy ordered a rare Bordeaux from Château Haut-Brion dated 1796, eyes sparkling in anticipation.

They departed the quaint bistro, Lizzy assuming they were to return to the Inn and rather partial to the idea as she quite frankly felt bloated and nearly ill from so much rich food. Darcy, however, steered her along the sidewalk toward a destination unknown.

“Surprises Mr. Darcy,” she said with a tilt of her head.

He smiled, glancing sidelong into her face, “You know how I adore surprising you Elizabeth. Next to making love with you it is undoubtedly my favorite pastime.” Lizzy actually blushed, although no one was nearby to overhear.

They strolled slowly, Lizzy grateful she remembered to wear a shawl as the air was nippy. Darcy tucked her as close to his side as propriety allowed and attempted to increase the pace, but Lizzy held him to a stately speed. It was cool, but so crisp and fresh. Lizzy inhaled deeply of the salty breeze, the fragrance of the orchids and heather which grew in abundance mingling to create an oddly pleasant odor.

“It is strange to feel the mild chill here and know that home is probably sweltering.” She paused to pick a sprig of heather, inserting it into his top buttonhole.

“It will begin cooling soon. Autumn is beautiful at Pemberley, beloved. Mr. Clark is a genius. He has the gardens planned so that they bloom in all seasons, but I do believe fall blooms are premiere. A final season to rediscover with you, my heart, then we will be entering our second year together and eagerly awaiting the birth of our first child.”

He halted next to an enormous oak on the edge of a town square, the shops all closed except for a café on the diagonal corner. A handful

of people wandered about, but they were alone where they stood under the faint gaslight. He grasped both her dainty hands in his, gazing into her eyes with his typical piercing intensity.

“Elizabeth, there is something I have wanted to ask you. I have been searching for the perfect moment and this feels right.”

“Is everything alright, William?”

He smiled, stroking along her cheek, “Forgive me love, I did not mean to alarm you. Everything is perfect. No, this is just a topic that has occurred to me from time to time, but especially since Marguerite and Samuel’s wedding. I do not believe I ever told you, but every Darcy male, and many of the females, for generations unknown have been married in the Pemberley Chapel. It is one of those facts that simply are, without consciously holding much weight until the time comes to apply it. When we wed it was logical to marry in Hertfordshire with your sister and Bingley. I was mildly saddened to not say our vows at Pemberley, but it truthfully did not matter as I was so blissfully happy to have you.” He laughed in delight, “We could have wed in a barn and I would have been deliriously ecstatic! Nonetheless, I have realized how deeply I desire to stand before Reverend Bertram, in front of the altar where my parents exchanged their vows, where I have worshipped all my life, where our children will be dedicated and baptized, on my ancestral land, and repeat my undying pledge to you.”

He paused, squeezing her hands firmly, countenance serious but awash with devotion and love. “Elizabeth Darcy, will you marry me, again?”

Lizzy was speechless, lips trembling and eyesight blurry with tears. She nodded and managed to croak a ‘yes.’ Darcy smiled brilliantly, bringing her hands to his lips for a hard kiss.

“Excellent! We can discuss the details later. I do so incredibly love you Elizabeth.” He bent and brushed her forehead, “Perhaps it can be a yearly event! Renewing our vows if for no other reason then to see you in your wedding dress again.”

Lizzy chuckled, taking the proffered handkerchief to wipe her tears. “I doubt sincerely if it would fit me this year.”

He extended his elbow, Lizzy snuggling close as they resumed their walk. “You can wear anything you wish, my love, as long as you promise to love me forever.”

She looked up into his face, shaking her head, “Have no fear, William. That is a promise easy for me to make.”

Darcy shepherded her toward the diagonal corner of the square, the café lively with numerous people sitting and standing, laughing and

singing along with the minstrel band playing jauntily on the terrace. Darcy glanced at his pocketwatch, releasing a low whistle, “We need to step fast, love. I am afraid I miscalculated the time.”

Past the café, down a busy avenue, and two blocks to the right brought them before a brightly lit theatre. The building was clearly very old, probably built in the Elizabethan Era or shortly thereafter as it greatly resembled drawings Lizzy had seen of the famous Shakespearean playhouse, the Rose, in London. The original lath and plaster structure had been reinforced over the centuries with attempts to stylize and flourish the plain building obvious, giving it an amalgamated appearance of divergent architecture. Still, despite the *mélange* design, the theatre was lovely, aided greatly by the modern gaslights, scrolling marquee, and gaudily painted posters blanketing the walls. The posters advertised the theatre’s entertainments, mostly of a musical or comedic variety rather than dramatic plays. Tonight’s show was boldly declared on the marquee and on an enormous folded sign located by the door ---

*Professor Sciarratta’s Magic Lantern Revue Presents “Phantasmagoria!”*

“Ooh! How fantastic, William! I adore magic lantern shows!”

“So you have seen them,” he said, “I was not sure if any had traveled to Hertfordshire.”

“Twice, at the assembly hall as Meryton does not have a proper theatre. The first was a repertoire of fairy tale stories, Aesop’s Fables and Biblical tales primarily. The second was last summer, not too long after I returned from Kent. It was a recreation of military battles from the Napoleonic Wars, complete with ships bursting into flames and cannon fire. Quite dramatic with accompanying sound effects and piano music; most patriotic and emotive. I have heard of *Phantasmagoria* though. Is it truly as frightening as written of?”

Darcy shrugged, handing over the coins to the ticket seller, “I do not know from first hand experience. I have only seen three magic lantern performances, similar to your experiences. When I was eleven my family, including Lord and Lady Matlock with Richard, Annabella, and Jonathan, traveled to Paris. It was my first trip to the Continent. With the Revolution over and Bonaparte in control, it was deemed safe to travel.” He paused to shake his head at that folly. “Anyway, Father bought tickets to see the original *Fantasmagorie* by Etienne Gaspard Robert. The show was all the rage then, the French not having had enough fright in their lives apparently.” The last was spoken with dripping sarcasm, Lizzy also shaking her head.

“Of course, I was young and not fully aware of all the political

intrigues, only wishing to see something reportedly so spectacular. Unfortunately, the day before the show Mother became very ill. It seems foolish now, but none of us considered the simple cause of pregnancy. My parents had given up on having more children so were caught unaware. Father insisted on staying with mother until the physicians could diagnose and treat her illness; I would not leave although Father encouraged me to go, so the Fitzwilliams attended the show. Richard and Jonathan gushed on ad infinitum until I wanted to strangle them. Aunt Madeline found it too scary, Annabella had nightmares and refused to discuss it, poor thing, but Uncle liked it.” He shrugged again.

They were inside the small lobby. Lizzy glanced about, noting the majority of the attendees to be common folk with simple suits and gowns. A minority was of a higher class and dressed in finer attire, and only a handful of those dressed as well as Darcy and Lizzy. She felt terribly self-conscious in her elaborate ball gown, but Darcy glided through the press of people as if at the Royal Theatre in London, heading directly toward the balcony stairs and confidently expecting all to part before him. The strange thing is that they did! A hush preceded their steps, a gap instantly created for Darcy to escort his wife through, and muted whispers of awe rose in their wake. Lizzy wanted to shrink into her skin yet concurrently puffed with pride at her husband’s natural nobility and grace. Darcy was innocently ignorant.

The theatre balcony did not boast individual boxes, but rather was designed with long rows of seats, larger and more comfortable than the seats on the main floor. The low balcony afforded an excellent view of the black draped center stage and two smaller curtained areas to the sides. The room was dimly lit although whether this was normal or as a means of increasing the eerie atmosphere for the performance, Lizzy did not know. The Darcys were ushered to seats in the first row, near the right side. Most of the seats were already filled and the fever of excitement with palpable shivers of fear raced through the assembly.

Lizzy leaned toward her husband and whispered, “Will you hold my hand, William, so I will not be afraid?” She looked up into his face with a smile, but her eyes were mildly anxious. She would sooner be horsewhipped than admit it, but she was a bit frightened.

Darcy chuckled and took her hand, “I will protect you, my dear. No ghosts or specters will be allowed to molest you so long as I am here.” He grinned and Lizzy laughed, slapping him with her folded fan.

Suddenly several of the dim lights were extinguished, throwing the already dusky room into deeper shadows. Numerous gasps were released, folks shuffling to their seats in earnest. A deep, sepulchral voice

erupted into the hushed hall, startling everyone as the disembodied voice intoned without inflection:

“Ladies and gentlemen of the living, find thy seats hastily. The spirits are restless, desiring to arise in a dance macabre. None has the power to detain them. Do not be found wandering the empty aisles! This would be.....unwise. Can thoust control the whimsy of the dead?”

The voice continued in the same vein as the final stragglers took their seats. The remaining lights were doused one by one until total darkness was achieved. As the final lights went out, slowly one by one, music gradually swelled. Music eerily brought forth by a glass armonica and accompanied by whining winds and clapping thunder. The gloomy voice grew fainter as it beseeched the dead to rise and begged for pity on the living until drowned completely by the wailing sounds emanating from the depths of the orchestra pit. Abruptly a deafening boom rent the air succeeded by utter silence.

Lizzy was clutching Darcy’s hand so tightly he winced, attempting to wiggle his fingers enough to restore circulation, but she would not let go. He bent to where he thought her ear was, whispering, “Elizabeth, I cannot feel my fingers.” She started violently and then giggled, planting a kiss in the dark, which landed on the side of his nose, and loosened her crushing grip. He immediately encircled her shoulders and drew her into his side. No fear of inappropriate public behavior being frowned on here as no one could see them and he strongly suspected every one would be tightly clenching each other before the show concluded!

The boom was rapidly followed by the appearance of a hazy red fog at center stage, the curtains apparently having been withdrawn. Out of the smoke a phantom appeared, growing larger and larger as it seemed to float over the gasping audience. The evilly grinning phantom was bathed in the red smoke, giving it the impression of blood, with a dagger in one hand and a severed head in the other. All instantly knew this to be the French Revolutionist Marat. Screeches pierced the void; fans could be heard fluttering wildly. Crazy laughter emanated from Marat’s grin as he disappeared into thin air.

A collective breath was taken, but released in a rush as another apparition emerged. A woman in trailing garments, face beautiful initially, but incrementally morphing into an old crone bent and wrinkled, her elaborate dress falling into rags as her old face decayed before their eyes until only a skeleton in strips of moldy cloth remained. She moved over their heads as she decomposed, skeletal form joining the now visible skeletons positioned all about the stage; or rather what had been the stage, but was now a cemetery replete with crypts and headstones. One



by one the dead rose, walking on spindly legs, speaking from lipless mouths, empty sockets roving over the crowd.

On and on it went; one scene after another in rapid succession allowing no time to collect oneself. The haunting music rose and fell, ghostly voices droned, thunder and lightening crashed, specters and demons of all sizes materialized. Many of the scenes were familiar from literature or history: *The Nightmare* by Fuseli, *The Head of Medusa*, *Macbeth and the Ghost of Banquo*, other French Revolutionaries manning the guillotine, *The Opening of Pandora's Box*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and more. Interspersed were the random bats, goblins, and ghosts, manifesting from all points on the main floor. The figures magically expanded to gargantuan sizes, hovering over the audience so closely that one felt they could touch them, and then shrunk before sinking into the ground as if returning to the underworld.

It was terrifying and fascinating. Fleetinglly one would wonder how the effect was created, but generally the images and emotions engendered were so spectacular and realistic that coherent thought was eradicated. Lizzy, once past the introductory fright and comforted by Darcy's sturdy arm and warmth, calmed to a vague trembling and moderately heightened pulse rate. Screams were frequent, crying could be detected, and undoubtedly swooning occurred. The heat in the room increased from the combined press of bodies and raised body temperatures.

The crescendo was an appearance of all four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The Biblical Riders trampled across the stage and into the crowd, swords and scythe brandishing, the clap of horses hooves echoing, while the original inhumanly bleak voice quoted from Revelations. With final bursting neighs and a resounding crash of cymbals, the Horseman rode through the back wall and precipitous silence fell, the room plunged into cavernous darkness and utter silence for a full ten minutes.

The lights were lit all at once, revealing a tiny figure before the drawn curtains on center stage. The familiar voice again penetrated the quiet, although now it spoke with a bit more warmth and normalcy, "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the Illusionist Extraordinaire, Master of the Magic Lantern and Limelight, Creator of the Macabre, Professor Leonardo Finocchi Sciaratta!"

The tiny man bowed with a flourish, his grandly feathered tricorne doffed and swept theatrically as he blew kisses to the audience. The crowd erupted in applause and cheers, standing for a glorious ovation. Darcy and Lizzy stood as well, clapping enthusiastically. Her

heart still raced and she was yet torn between loving the spectacle or hating it, but there was no doubt it was a stupendously artistic performance. Certainly one she would never forget, her fervent hope being that the ghosts did not resurface in her dreams!

## **6 – Up, Up, and Away**

The room was sunk into deepest shadows. It was that singular hour of the night when the moon and stars were fading, but the morning sun was still well hidden beyond the threshold of the horizon. Darcy snored softly, in his typical comatose state of slumber, blissfully dreaming, and wholly unconscious to his wife's gentle nudging and whispering.

"William, wake up. Dearest, please. William? Fitzwilliam Darcy!" Lizzy knew her husband to be a deep sleeper, but this was ridiculous. She did not wish to startle him, but the easy rousing was not working.

It was their ninth morning at the resort in Caister-on-Sea and Lizzy had determined that today they would not only finally rise early enough to view the sun ascend, but would be settled cozily on the sandy shore when it occurred. Thus she had forced herself to sleep lightly and had risen to the chill of pre-dawn, dressed in the darkness, and was now shivering beside Darcy's warm body. She sighed, gazing at his peaceful, beautiful face and seriously reconsidered the wisdom of her plan. However, the vision of the very body displayed now before greedy eyes encompassing her on a blanket lying in the sand as the sun ascended and heated their skin was extremely appealing.

She lifted her skirts and nestled kneeling against his side. Bending over, she reverted to a form of waking known to prevail each and every time.

"William, my love, I need you to wake up," she spoke clearly while bestowing firm kisses to his face.

Darcy groaned faintly, swiping at his face as if shooing a fly, then abruptly jolted awake and lurched up, nearly bashing heads with Lizzy who fortunately has excellent reflexes. "Elizabeth! What is it? The baby? Are you ill? What....?"

"No, no! I am sorry, dearest. Please forgive me for startling you," she soothed with a giggle, stroking his dazed face and squeezing his hand. "I want to see the sunrise with you."

He stared blankly at her smiling face, illuminated by the single flickering candle on the bedside, very gradually and laboriously assimilating her words. "I have your clothes here, and a blanket, and I am

certain it will be vacant down by the rocks. We can hold each other and watch the dawn.” She paused, Darcy yet befuddled, and leaned in to touch his lips with hers, “It is on your list of things to do, Fitzwilliam. Additionally we can perhaps add another item to the inventory which I am positive has occurred to you but you were too polite to place in writing.”

She accentuated her words with focused caresses, but it was not necessary as he was now fully awake and knew precisely what she meant. He smiled sensuously, staying her fondling hand, but returning her kiss lustily.

“You are becoming quite proficient at these little surprises, my lover.”

“I have learned from a master,” she replied with a quick peck to his nose, “Now, get dressed William! We have a sunrise to beat.” She leapt up before he could halt her for more kisses, grapping the pile of clothing on the foot of the bed and tossed them into his face.

Minutes later they were sneaking quietly down the dimly lit corridors and out the rear double-pane glass garden doors. A handful of servants were about, performing their morning tasks, but they ignored the Darcys as if they were invisible. It was quite dark on the pathway to the beach, but they had traversed it so frequently over the past week that their feet stepped confidently. The shoreline was deserted; debris and seaweed deposited by the high tides dotted the smooth sand offering breakfast to the hundred birds pecking and fluttering about, which also ignored the Darcys.

Morning fog was minimal today, already drifted far out to sea where a thick blanket of clouds obstructed the black horizon. The sky immediately above their heads was crystal clear, the final visible stars extinguishing one by one as the sky began to lighten imperceptibly. Darcy spread the blanket on the firmer sand near the rocks. The waiting bathing machines provided additional cover from the possibility of prying eyes, although it was unlikely that anyone else would be about.

Their timing was perfect. The faintest glimmer of sunlight could be detected radiating above the massive fog bank; nearly indiscernible except for the hint of distinction between the rippling water and stationary cloud. Darcy was dressed in only a shirt and trousers with his large overcoat open and enveloping Lizzy, who nestled against his chest. Body heat emanated from his core, Darcy a true Englishman with internal furnace impervious to the cold. Lizzy wore a wool pelisse over her gown, so between clothing and husband, she was toasty. They sat in silence for the most part, Darcy gently caressing her arms and legs while

Lizzy did the same, both content to enjoy the spectacle with nothing but the gently lapping waves as background music.

Like waiting for water to boil, the sun came up in timeless increments. Eyes burned with the strain of watching, but dared not close or look away in case that was the very moment she finally appeared in all her grandeur. Then it happened! No fanfare or blazing glory, but simply slipping above the clouds with majesty; completing a process performed millions of times in millions of ways in millions of places on the globe. Unconcerned with the mere mortals far below, she dawned; shining brilliantly with shades of gold unmatched on earth. All was illuminated and touched by her heat and beauty; the giver of life that she was, and all creation rejoiced at her coming. The birds flew higher and spoke louder, little crawling insects and sea crabs scurried about, flowers opened to receive the light, and the Darcys watched it all in awe.

Lizzy sighed, speaking barely above a whisper as it seemed somehow appropriate, “Not so dissimilar than all sunrises in the end, as they always move me, but I love how the waves glisten and the light outlines the clouds, showing all the layers. It is breathtaking.”

“It varies so, the sun as it touches the clouds and water. At home the dawns and sunsets are essentially unchanged. Unless a storm approaches or snow blankets the ground, it is rarely differing. Beautiful, naturally, but the same. The ocean is something else. We could catch the rise each day and never see it precisely alike.”

Warmth rapidly accelerated in the halcyon atmosphere surrounding them. Darcy rained tender nibbles along Lizzy’s neck as she released a muted sound of pleasure. “Perhaps you are correct about ocean sunrises, but I shall never tire of the dawn as seen from home. I love how the innumerable greens of the fields and orchards are gradually revealed as the sunlight spreads. It reminds me of spilled liquid gold as it touches the colors, covering all the valley and eventually the gardens and Manor in a brilliant blanket of light. Besides, we have our own rippling waters at Pemberley. The Cascade Falls and lakes with fountains shimmer and sparkle so stunningly.” She sighed deeply, “I guess I am a bit homesick.”

She turned in his arms, leaning backward against bent knee to peer into his smiling face. Immediately he cupped her cheek, stroking softly with a thumb, pulling her tight into his body and surrounding with muscular legs. Brushing her lips lightly, he then spoke, “Elizabeth, my heart swells when you talk of Pemberley with such devotion. I cannot express how pleased I am that you love your new home.”

“The clichéd reply would be for me to say, ‘How could I not love

Pemberley as you are there.’ Of course, this is largely the truth, but it is more than that.”

“In what way?”

“I do not know if I can explain it William. All my life, as much as I loved Longbourn, it never felt completely permanent. I suppose that is because as a female I knew I would some day marry and leave, but also because there was a sense of instability. We knew that if papa died it could, and likely would, be taken away from us. Hardly a day went by that mama did not lament the fact. It was home, but I remember feeling somewhat like the nomadic Arabs or American Indians.” She shrugged and laughed, Darcy chuckling as well.

“I honestly gave it little thought, but I suppose I must have wished for a deeper feeling. Then again, I am fairly pragmatic, so undoubtedly figured experiencing emotions for a house impractical and silly. Whatever the case, when I saw Pemberley, something opened in me.”

“How so?”

She sighed, staring blankly as she attempted to recapture those long ago sensations. “Since reading your letter I had spent all summer replaying all our conversations, or rather the attempts at conversation. You know all this, love, as we have discussed it. Between my preconceived opinions and rudeness, and your awful communication skills, I had little to work with!” Darcy blushed slightly and Lizzy tickled him, both chuckling and unable to deny the truthful accusations.

“Anyway, after months of reflection, and extreme annoyance with myself in that I could not evict you from my mind, I came to the conclusion that I had erred horribly. Not in refusing your proposal, but in allowing my prejudices and independence to ruin the opportunity to get to know you. I cannot say I loved you, but I did recognize the good man you are. Yet never, not once, did I think of your wealth. Until I saw Pemberley.” She reddened and Darcy lifted one brow with a crooked smile.

“Ah, mercenary after all, Miss Bennet?” He kissed her forehead and she playfully slapped his chest.

“Not quite that bad, but I am not completely stupid. We paused on the bridge and there she was. Oh, William, Pemberley is so beautiful! Maybe on some level it was because it was your home, but for a second all I could think was that I could have been Mistress of such a place. For the first time I truly grasped who you were and what ‘10,000 a year’ really meant. I laughed at what I knew every other girl alive would consider my extreme folly. I sat, still giggling, as the carriage resumed the ride up the

drive. However, as quickly as those thoughts had come, they vanished. The closer we got to the house, and then when we did arrive and begin our tour, all I could think of was you. Fitzwilliam Darcy, the man as I had begun to imagine you were behind the arrogant facade. I could see your elegance, grace, warmth, and taste in every corner of every room. Then Mrs. Reynolds began rattling on and on about what a fine Master you are, how all the servants and tenants revere you, what a doting brother you are, how generous and affable.....”

“Mrs. Reynolds blathers too much and exaggerates,” he interrupted with a hoarse grumble.

Lizzy laughed and reached for a kiss, “She loves you and only speaks the truth.”

“Finish your tale, love, but save the flattery.”

She slipped her arms tight about his neck, fingers in his hair, “How can I not flatter a man as perfect as you, Mr. Darcy?”

“I am warning you, Elizabeth!”

She laughed gaily, kissing him again, “Very well, in all seriousness. All my emotions swirled and coalesced, as you know, and I finally accepted the truth of my feelings for you. I do not think I can fully separate my love for you from my love for Pemberley as they are so intertwined. When I thought you were lost to me, again, I was devastated primarily at never being able to hold you and confess my feelings, but also with the reality that I would never see Pemberley again. Your home had surrounded me and entered my soul. I did not recognize just how much until after we were married. You remember how nervous I was as we approached the Manor after our wedding?” He nodded. “It was not merely because I feared being a good Mistress and making you proud; it was equally because I knew instinctively that Pemberley *deserved* an excellent Mistress and I feared myself not up to the task. I had already given her a personality all her own; she was as real as you or me and I did not want to disappoint her. It was then that I realized my love for a house! Over the next weeks it grew and before our first month was complete I understood what it truly meant to be connected to land and heritage.”

He was softly stroking her face, smiling tenderly as they stared into each other’s eyes. Lizzy reached one finger to trace his lips, speaking quietly, “Can I tell you something, dearest, without hurting your feelings?”

“Of course.”

“When we get home, I do not want to go on any other adventures for a very long time. Naturally, it would be unwise,” she said

with a laugh and pat to her belly, “but mainly I want to abide, truly abide, at Pemberley. With you and Georgiana and our son and whatever guests visit, but always with the familiar walls around me and our bed to sleep in. For the first time in my life I truly have a home that is mine, will forever be mine, and I want to savor it.”

“I promise we shall stay put, my love. However, I will remind you of your words when another long winter of snow and endless spring of rains causes you to lose your mind from the forced confinement!”

Lizzy laughed, again rubbing over her belly, “I think I shall have plenty to consume my time, dearest.”

Darcy chuckled, lacing his long fingers through hers on the soft bulge of their child. He leaned for a kiss, pulling her further into his chest while gently reclining their bodies onto the sun-warmed blanket. The cushiony sand gave way under the weight, molding around their forms. Darcy’s enormous coat covered them completely, shielding Lizzy from the whiffs of breeze as bare legs were exposed by a seeking hand.

Lizzy caressed over his chest, leisurely wending her way down his torso to groin, while kissing playfully with little nibbles and suckles as Darcy adored. He was dressed in the same overcoat worn when he walked through the morning mist nearly a year ago, shirt open and face stubbly. Lizzy was always thrilled with his rough clothing, the combination of pounding surf and kindled daybreak enhancing the sensations.

“Hmmm... William, I love you.”

He withdrew from her lips with a faint moan, grasping her fondling hand. “Elizabeth, we should return to our room.”

She opened her eyes in surprise, “I know you well, my lover. Do not tell me you have not dreamt of loving on the beach! I have seen your eyes rest on the sand when we bathe, with that singular expression I know indicates you are musing on making love.”

“Decadent imaginings are not necessarily translated to reality, beloved. We are quite exposed here and I cannot allow my passion for you to overrule my judgment.”

“Your judgment is flawed, love. It is barely six in the morning; no one arises this early, except for the servants, and they have no reason to come here. The bathing machines are not utilized until ten and shield us well. It is not yet fully daylight so our shadows will meld with the rocks, and your large coat will cover us. Since I rather enjoy making love to you clothed like this, it is an additional bonus for me.”

She finished with a smug smirk, grabbing a thick lapel and pulling him roughly to her upturned lips. He relented for several blissful



moments, hands moving toward intimate regions mechanically. With a frantic gasp, elicited by her purposefully stimulating hands, Darcy paused.

“Obviously you have given this serious contemplation, but I still deem it risky. Elizabeth! Desist!”

With a throaty chuckle and devious smile, she whispered, “You cannot return to the Inn in your current condition anyway, Fitzwilliam. Therefore, you may as well search about to ease your mind as to our solitude, and then grant me what I demand. You know I shall prevail in the end anyway.”

He stared at her, lips twitching as he attempted to maintain a stern glare. It was thoroughly impossible to do so when she was so beautiful and desirable with the rays of sunlight dappling her flawless face; lush, pert lips set in a succulent pouting smirk.

“What has happened to the sweet, innocent girl I fell in love with?”

“She married you, my marvelous lover. Alas, she is corrupted for life, naughty and wanton, a tigress by your own admission. Wipe the transparently false disapproval from your face, Mr. Darcy; the sun is rising higher and we are wasting precious time.”

He caved, shaking his head and laughing as he rose. A quick scan and circuit around the machines proved the asserted fact that they were utterly alone. The majority of the beach and resort on the bluff above were yet sunk in shadow, only the few flickering lights visible at lower level windows. Briskly he strode to where Elizabeth waited now sitting up and watching as he approached, coat billowing as he walked his uniquely powerful gait. He knelt by her knees, but before he could embrace her, she encircled his hips in a firm clasp and squeeze to the buttocks.

Darcy grinned, lacing lean fingers through her trailing hair as she attended to hard thighs and round bottom with devoted caresses. Of course, she was correct; he was helpless to resist her allurements and advances. The man of caution and towering regulation was shattered before the onslaught of her love. How she excited him and fulfilled him was infinitely beyond any dream he had ever entertained. As she unclasped his trousers, raising his ardor to celestial levels with mastery unparalleled, he honestly believed the entire resort population could walk by and he would not notice, nor care.

Any heat furnished by the rising sun was miniscule compared to the fire raging internally. With a hoarse growl he jerked from her grasp, panting heavily as he laid her onto the sand. Choosing to lie beside her for the moment, deep breaths necessary to calm and prevent taking her

in a rush. He touched her face and kissed slowly but pervasively, passionately touching her essence. Murmuring rivers of love between lazy kisses, he roused her. Not that it was required, Lizzy already massively inflamed with body writhing and reaching for him.

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered as they loved, nibbling on an earlobe while his hot breathe rushed over her neck in cadence with his tireless motions, “are your daydreams and fantasies being fulfilled?”

He lifted with a groan, arching and slowing until physically able to speak. “Truthfully? Oh god, Elizabeth! Wait!” He gasped, staring at her with glazed eyes. “I...I visualized us totally naked, rolling about on the hot sand in broad daylight. Completely impossible, naturally. This....Lizzy, my wife....every time is a gift with you, beloved.”

Lizzy gazed up at her husband; resplendent with his morning face flushed and hair tousled, half dressed with flowing coat perfectly accentuating his masculinity. He was stupendous, abundantly gratifying every dream she conjured. Pace quickening with both needing more, he continued to attempt answering her question.

“I love you wholly, Elizabeth. Specific places or methods or crazy fantasies are not essential, my love. You are vital to my fulfillment, not the place. I need....only you....Elizabeth....lord! Please, love....I cannot stop.....Lizzy!”

Several nearby birds squawked and flapped away in fright at the shouts emerging from the rocks, but no other life forms were aware of the rapture attained on the sand. The Darcys would be mistaken to assume they were the only couple to ever watch the sunrise and take advantage of the isolation. Luckily they were the only ones to pick this particular day, but the resort staff had more than once needed to discreetly steer a tiptoeing couple in an opposite direction.

Sneaking back into their room without being overly noticed was a bit problematic as more staff members were about. Still, the servants skillfully glanced the opposite direction or busied themselves at some task until the Darcys passed by. Their faces were rosy with embarrassment, but both agreed the outing was worth any humiliation. Once in their room they laughed giddily like children, randomly dropped their sandy coats and the blanket, and commenced kissing and embracing with joyful enthusiasm.

“Elizabeth, I am as foolhardy and nonsensical as a teenager when around you! And as amorous. Lord, what you do to me!” He grasped her bottom and pulled her tight, fingers traveling to the buttons down her back as he assaulted her mouth.

The zealous embrace continued until Darcy laced one broad hand

through the wildly tangled hair on the back of her head, whereupon Lizzy frantically reached to where his fingers were with a gasp.

“My hair clip! It’s gone!”

“Which clip, love?”

“The one with the pink flowers on it. Oh, I love that clip!” She was searching around the floor at their feet, Darcy joining the visual exploration, but it was nowhere in the room. “It is an old one of mine and not that important really, but I have had it for years is all.”

“Shhh, relax dearest. It is surely somewhere between here and the rocks. I will go look for it.”

“I am sorry, William.”

“For what? I have already had one of the best mornings in my life, beloved. I can wait to make love with you again for a few more hours,” he grinned cheekily and kissed her lightly, Lizzy laughing.

“Thank you, my heart. I love you.”

“I know,” he said with an airy wave from the door. The lost clip was discovered on the patio, a servant bending to retrieve it just as Darcy walked through the door. Few words were spoken, Darcy maintaining his dignity and the servant blandly handing it over.

Smiling happily and whistling cheerily, Darcy absently fiddled with the clip as he headed down the second level corridor toward the stairs for the third floor where his adorable wife was awaiting his return, hopefully unclothed on their bed. Lost in visions so delectable, he did not notice the door opening until Lady Underwood was standing five paces away. He halted abruptly, the silly grin erased instantly for the typical Darcy aloofness. In the intervening days since her disgusting proposition, Lady Underwood had made no further overtures. Darcy caught her eyes on him frequently and she would smile in a mildly seductive manner that nearly made him retch, but he was able to avoid her. The worse was observing her false friendship with Elizabeth, who had no idea of her true nature. Darcy prayed that she would depart the Inn, but each evening she was there in the dining room and parlor, flirting and chatting. He strongly suspected that her claws had dug successfully into a couple other gentlemen, noting oblique glances and touches which sickened him as one was a married man as well. Again, Darcy was not naïve, but the activity revolted him nonetheless.

“Mr. Darcy, what a pleasant surprise.” She wore a dressing gown and robe, her hair braided and hanging over one shoulder. She was a beautiful lady, no doubt, but also quite aware of her beauty and equally aware of the effect of her attractiveness on men; an effect she utilized as a spider did its web.

“Lady Underwood,” he replied with a proper bow and eyes diverted, “You are well this morning, I trust?”

“Very well, Mr. Darcy. Improving by the moment, in fact. What brings you to my corridor so early in the morning, or is this a redundant question? You have chosen to accept my offer, I presume?”

Darcy was stunned. Bold propositions he had seen, yes, but this transcended them all. For several seconds he was honestly speechless, staring at her in frank amazement.

“Lady Underwood....”

“Come, Mr. Darcy,” she interrupted, stepping nearer and laying one hand on his arm, “You should not stand about in the hallways. We can discuss this in my chambers.”

He jerked his arm violently away, supreme anger overcoming his surprise. “Lady Underwood, you are horribly mistaken! I am retrieving an item for my wife and merely passing by. Good day!”

He sidestepped to walk around her, but she reached out with a steely grip to his wrist, halting him and moving close. “Mr. Darcy, you would be wise to rethink your refusal. I am accustomed to getting what I want and will find a way to secure my wishes.”

“Unhand me, my Lady. A scene and subsequent scandal would not benefit either of us. Let us drop this unpleasant topic.”

“Now you are mistaken, sir. The topic is a very pleasant one, for both of us. Please do not necessitate me causing trouble for you. I do have some influence, but would rather our relationship be mutually satisfactory, and voluntary.”

Darcy was livid, face dark and rigid with an anger seldom experienced and rarely manifested toward an individual. Despite her bluster, Lady Underwood paled and instinctively released his arm and retreated a step. Darcy stiffened to his full height, towering over the petite Lady as his entire body hardened with unmistakable menace. When he spoke, his voice was glacial, but terrifyingly composed and low.

“Listen very carefully, my Lady. What you are asking will never happen. Furthermore, it is you who are unwise if you believe for one second you can threaten Darcy of Pemberley. I know who you are and know your reputation. I suggest you inquire of these ‘influences’ you state you have. You will discover the extreme error in your judgment regarding me. In the mean time, stay away from me and from my wife, or it is I who will be causing the trouble. Are we clear?”

To her credit, Lady Underwood remained collected under her pallor, but her eyes were frightened and her voice faint. “Very clear, Mr. Darcy.”

Under the circumstances Darcy was thankful to find his wife in her bath. By the time they reunited for breakfast his anger was dimmed to a simmering irritation and well buried. His joy at seeing and touching his beautiful Elizabeth was genuine and purifying to his soul. Lady Underwood was not in the dining room, fortunately; the Darcys breaking their fast and leaving shortly thereafter for a day trip into Great Yarmouth.

Once tucked comfortably into the coach with windows open, Darcy inhaled deeply of the tangy air, twined fingers with Lizzy as she turned a brilliant smile his direction, and felt the final vestiges of his chagrin dissolve. Aside from the sheer elation found in the presence of his beloved wife there was also the anticipated delight in today's outing.

Great Yarmouth, or Yarmouth as the locals referred, was one of the few North Sea located towns famous as a seaside resort. It held this distinction since 1760 when one of England's first seaside bath houses utilizing the chill water of the ocean was constructed here. The narrow strip of flat, sandy dunes situated between the medieval walled Rows east of the River Yare and the pebbly beach bore the unusual name Denes. Unique in all of England, the Denes had for centuries served as a haven for cattle grazing, fishermen to dry their nets, and for the community to relegate other unpleasant tasks, such as criminal hangings, from the citizens safe inside the thick walls. This remained the status quo until wise and greedy city entrepreneurs recognized the financial advantage to cashing in on the seabathing phenomena by expanding on the existing wells and building a Bath House. The mile long expanse of finely churned sandy beach coupled with the wide barrenness of the Denes created the ideal environment. Great Yarmouth's economy subsequently exploded. Herring and mackerel fishing would endure as a primary industry, but tourism boomed. The ancient jetty near the Bath House was rebuilt and reinforced until eventually extending 456 feet out to sea, providing both a stupendous view and exhilarating sense of the open ocean.

It was to this pier that the Darcys headed first. Despite their early rising and vigorous exertions, several days of lying about inspired each of them to wish for a brisk walk and full day of entertainment. Mr. Anders deposited them by the pier with instructions to park near the north gate of Nicholas Church. The streets were busy with the combined traffic of Yarmouth's twenty thousand natives attending to their daily activities and the massive number of visitors. The popularity of Great Yarmouth as a resort had rather surprised Darcy upon his investigation. He had heard of the city, naturally, but was only vaguely aware of the particulars. Quite

obviously, as they crept snail-like through the streets, hundreds of English tourists were abundantly conscious of Yarmouth's charms.

The harbor and pier was clogged with fishing boats of all sizes replete with clamoring fishermen and straining nets of fish. The smell would have been overpowering if not for the constant easterly breeze capturing the wafting odors and transporting them far to sea. Nonetheless, it was unpleasant at times. Lizzy, as well as most of the women meandering about and a good number of the men, kept a perfumed handkerchief close in hand. Happily, the stench waned the further one walked down the jetty. Darcy kept a firm grip to Lizzy's elbow as they walked the damp, uneven wooden dock. It was wide and very well constructed, intended to cater to the tourist desiring the excitement of invigorating ocean winds and pounding surf under one's feet; however, it was also a working dock with hardy men toiling and the risk of impeding ropes and fish innards blocking the path.

They made their way to the extreme end without mishap. It was a beautiful day, cloud-free and warm; the incessant air currents gentle but cooling. The majority of the boats preferred to anchor closer to shore for the ease in offloading their catch, which meant the far ends of the wharf were empty. Other brave folk were standing at the rail, Darcy and Lizzy finding a clear space with a stunning view of the endless waters north and east. They stood nestled close, Lizzy absorbing Darcy's radiating heat, with backs to the shore. The surf roiled and gulls screeched, the sounds just loud enough to drown any noise from the shore and moored ships, rendering a disconnected sensation.

"If the boards beneath our feet undulated it would be exactly how it feels on a ship," Darcy said. "I remember the first time I took a sea voyage, when we went to France, I could not quite decide if I enjoyed it or not."

"Did you get seasick?"

"No, fortunately. Jonathan did, poor thing, as did my uncle, although he would likely deny it if you asked him." Lizzy laughed. "They both retched horribly and kept to their bunks. Thankfully it was only a Channel crossing. No, I always suffer a headache while aboard ship. My stomach has no upheaval, but my head splits." He shrugged, "I do not know why. Laying down makes it worse, which seems odd. I do best if I stay near the bow, feel the spray, and breathe deeply. Anyway, aside from that discomfort, I do love watching the waves and there is nothing as stupendous as glimpsing the occasional whale spout or jumping porpoise. Yet at the same time the sense of helplessness, of knowing there are fathomless depths of water under and all about is disconcerting. Maybe

that is why I get such a headache. I despise being out of control and having my entire fate at the mercy of other people and natural forces.”

He shuddered and Lizzy chuckled, squeezing his arm. “Yes, I can see why this would frustrate you. I daresay I would feel much the same so am thankful for the firm foundation. Richard suffers no ill effects?”

Darcy laughed, “Richard is a born seaman. Honestly. I told him he was a fool to not join the navy, and he did consider the option, but decided the draw of the cavalry outweighed a ship. In the end it makes the most sense since, like me, he was practically born in a saddle. Still, I was a bit surprised as he perpetually extolled the exploits and virtues of Admiral Nelson with stars in his eyes, forcing me to play navy whenever possible. He was always Nelson and I some underling being ordered about to swab the deck or load the cannons.”

Darcy smiled in remembrance. “Even then he possessed the air of command. I wish you could see Richard in this light, Elizabeth. He is so different. You would be amazed.”

“Why did he not join the navy then?”

“By the time he finished at Cambridge, Nelson was dead. Napoleon was raging across Europe and soldiers were needed. It truly did make the most sense for him to be in the cavalry and uncle encouraged it. Richard rose quickly. He earned the rank of Second Lieutenant before he left for Russia in 1812. By the end of that campaign he was elevated to Captain. By 1815, at Waterloo, he was a Junior Major commanding two companies and distinguished himself brilliantly. He earned his Colonel stars at battle’s end.”

“I confess I have not given much consideration to Richard’s career. How remiss of me! I had no idea he was such a hero. You all must be so very proud of him.”

“Assuredly. Although it was horrible during the long months with no communication. Aunt Madeline worried so. She had not embraced Richard joining the military, even though it is a typical career choice for second sons, and Richard would not be deterred. Still, I suppose all mothers are torn between pride in their sons for serving their country and tremendous fear. Each letter would be met with great rejoicing. We did not see Richard for nearly four years, but he returned with injuries minimal and medals abounding. We were blessed, so many families losing loved ones during those long years.”

“Was he much changed when he returned? One hears terrible stories of what battle does to some men.”

“Oddly, no. At least not too much. Richard has ever been gay hearted and humorous. Jolly, I suppose is an apt word. Yet he is

amazingly intelligent and focused. The casual acquaintance does not see that aspect of his personality. We spoke at length and seriously about his experiences at war, and he shared with uncle, but few others will ever hear him talk of it without a ready joke or clearly embellished tale. Georgiana loves to hear him regale his exploits, wholly unaware that none of them bear more than a passing resemblance to the truth.”

They wandered slowly up the pier, past the cluster of inns and boarding houses which surrounded the Bath House, turning north onto the broad esplanade separating the beach from the Denes. The once restricted area outside the medieval town walls was gradually evolving from a wild wasteland to a developed part of the city, but the progress was sporadic and frowned on by many town officials, creating a pattern of intermittent buildings and empty spaces. The walkways leading to the beach underwent similar haphazard planning with proper development recently unfolding. Still, the rough avenues were not a deterrent to the mass of visitors. The beach was packed with blankets and umbrellas as people enjoyed the sun and sand, children by the dozens frolicked in the tide, and long lines of tourists rambled under the tree lined boardwalk.

Lizzy and Darcy joined the strollers, arm in arm and slowly wending their way to the main avenue that would take them into town proper. North on King Street to the town marketplace literally wall to wall with chiefly locals buying and selling, they bypassed the crowds by veering to the left-hand sidewalk. The Church of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of fishermen, with towering gothic spires was seen from a great distance. The enormous gated grounds were blanketed with thick lawn and shaded by innumerable ancient trees. Built in 1119 with the typical cruciform structure, the original edifice has been altered and added onto so many times in so many styles that one can no longer rightfully say the actual architecture. The building is gigantic, providing services for over a thousand parishioners and at one time boasting eighteen separate chapels catering to individual families and guilds. Currently the church is partitioned by three brick walls to allot individual places of worship for the Independents, the Presbyterians, and the Churchmen. This strange configuration was an oddity worth seeing, Lizzy and Darcy spending a pleasant hour investigating before meeting up with Mr. Anders and the carriage.

Lizzy requested walking to the southern end of the promenade, but Darcy insisted on the carriage, refusing to weary her overly. There were those moments when his over-protectiveness irritated Lizzy, this being one of them, but she bit her lip and did not argue. Of course, it would have been a fruitless endeavor anyway, Darcy being a man



intensely stubborn in spite of a general desire to grant his wife whatever she wished. The press of the crowd meant that it undoubtedly took twice as long for the carriage to weave its way to the south Denes; however, the manifest affluence of the Darcy coach with emblazoned crest meant the crowds parted and Mr. Anders easily drove to the front entrance of the temporarily renovated training field at the Militia Barracks.

Today was a special day at Yarmouth. Precisely one month ago today, on August 15 of 1817, the foundation stones were laid in the exact center of the military racetrack for what would two years hence be the first columnar monument in all of England raised to honor Admiral Lord Viscount Horatio Nelson. To celebrate, and to partake in the fever and publicity, a balloonist from Norwich was lifting off for a proposed flight to London.

As far as the monument was concerned, Darcy had a vague recollection of reading a couple short articles about the proposal, but the facts had escaped his memory until a week or so prior to their trip. Even then, it had been an off hand comment by Mr. Keith regarding the laying of the foundation that restored the memory. He had promptly added an inspection of the site to his list.

The balloonist, however, was a total surprise.

“William, did you hear about the balloonist?” They were in their room on the third night of their sojourn in Caister-on-Sea having retired to the bedchamber after a pleasant evening of conversation and cards with the other guests. Darcy sat on the edge of the bed where he had rather impatiently awaited his wife’s emergence from her dressing room, and was currently stroking and kissing the thinly satin veiled bulge of their child. Lizzy stood tolerantly, running fingers through his hair, smiling with pleasure at this necessary part of his day.

He glanced up at her face, “A balloonist? Where?”

“Seven days from now near the site of Nelson’s monument. A hydrogen balloon, so the leaflet says, to launch and fly to London. Can we attend?”

“It would be delightful, beloved. I have never witnessed a balloon take off, have you?” He resumed his attention to an active offspring, pressing his cheek against the insistent kicks readily felt.

“Five years ago we spent the Christmas season at Cheapside with Uncle and Aunt Gardiner when James Sadler took flight from Vauxhall Gardens. It was stupendous. I am surprised that you have not seen the spectacle, William, especially considering how captivated you are with strange inventions.” She lowered onto his lap, leaning for a kiss.

He chuckled lowly, nestling her close and continuing the steady

caresses to her belly. “Merely not in the proper place at the proper time. I remember the event you speak of, but was snowed in at Pemberley. Pity. Perhaps we would have encountered each other in the crowd.”

“Sweet thought, my love, but I was sixteen and would have dismissed you as an old lecherous man even if you had cast a second glance my way, which is highly unlikely.”

“I should be offended, but instead I believe I shall show you old and lecherous!” And with that pronouncement he clasped and carefully tossed his squealing wife onto the bed, proceeding to lavishly prove that lechery was an apt description, but assuredly not old.

The reality is that Lizzy was accurate in her assessed surprise at him having not seen a hot-air or hydrogen gas balloon. It was a tremendous delight to be treated to this rare occurrence, balloon flying still an extraordinary and dangerous undertaking despite being avidly pursued since the Montgolfier brothers first flew in 1783.

The rough ground of the Denes surrounding and including the Militia Barracks and Naval Hospital was gradually transforming into a developed region catering to the tourist. The construction of the track for horse racing built in 1810 aided the city planners significantly in their assay. Now, with the essential funds finally attained to erect the monument and the initial steps in building begun, public awareness beyond Nelson’s birth land of Norfolk was spreading and the prospect of increased revenue was high. If the volume of people presently paying the modest fee and filing in to take seats was any indication, Great Yarmouth was in for a rapid explosion of progress.

Darcy gladly paid the steeper price for premium seats under the canvas awning, shade being an asset worth any cost. The gargantuan balloon could easily be seen from anywhere inside the makeshift stadium, and from a great distance without, but naturally part of the draw was watching the balloonist in action. This could only be observed from inside.

The fabric of the mammoth gas-filled balloon was woven with concentric circles of maroon, yellow, forest green, pink, black, white, and violet – all colors dazzling in the bright sun. Held securely to the ground by dozens of sturdy tethers, individually manned by burly fellows, the willow branch woven basket sat sedately on the dirt. There were so many people milling about the arena that until the exhibition commenced, no one could determine who the balloonist was.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Barking in a powerful voice, a tall man dressed in a stunning suit of purple commanded silence and attention. In the hush that fell, he continued dramatically, raising the audience’s

expectation to a fever pitch, “Welcome one and all to Great Yarmouth and this extravaganza! Today all shall be witness to an aerial feat of magnificent proportions! Trusting to a liberal dose of mastery in the science of gases and atmospheric pressures, the balloonist is nonetheless an adventurer of astounding bravery! Ever at the merciful whims of nature and the Almighty, the courageous balloonist literally risks life and limb with each ascent! Who among you can claim such fortitude? Do you have the nerve? The sheer audacity to tempt fate? Nay, you confess? Well, allow me to introduce one who possesses all these traits and more! Ladies and gentlemen, please a hardy round of applause for Miss Alita van Vivash!”

With wild applause following a brief caesura of stunned awe, the crowd greeted the impressive woman who materialized from the sidelines. Even from their seats high above the floor, Darcy and Lizzy could discern Miss van Vivash was easily six feet in height and probably as brawny as Darcy. As incongruous as it seemed, she wore a scarlet gown garishly adorned with lace and frills, a wide brimmed hat with ribbons and foot-long feathers, and a hem length boa in white ermine. She waved her gloved hands grandly with florid bows in all directions, blowing kisses enthusiastically before entering the balloon’s small basket. The announcer shut the door with a flourish, gallantly grasping Miss van Vivash’s hand for a courtly kiss.

In point of fact, the actual ascension of a balloon is rather undramatic. One by one the tethers are released, the balloonist calculatingly emptying the hanging sand-filled ballasts as the balloon simply rises until well above the earth. So gradually as to be nearly indiscernible, the balloon begins to glide horizontally as air currents are encountered. Necks arch and eyes strain with the effort to catch the infinitesimal alterations of the colossal device; time drags as the ponderous contrivance gracefully and majestically soars until finally a mere dot lost among the wispy clouds.

All the while the people watch, collectively holding their breaths, and waving incessantly at the disappearing pilot. For long moments no one moves, as if under a spell difficult to break. Hypnotized, the audience begins to stand and drift toward the exit. Talking is initially minimal, but progressively erupts in tiny bursts as total strangers share in the awe.

Darcy avidly observed the spectacle with the singular twinkle in his eyes so familiar to Lizzy. She too was captivated by the demonstration, but having seen it once before she did manage to tear her eyes away and note her husband’s expression. Lost in his reverie, apparently unaware that the balloon was far beyond even his keen

eyesight, Lizzy squeezed his arm and leaned to his ear.

"I fear your busy schedule allots no time for you to take up ballooning as a hobby, love."

He turned to her with a sheepish smile, eyes still sparkling nonetheless, "That was truly marvelous, Elizabeth!"

"Let me guess. We must hasten to the nearest library to purchase books on the science of balloons and flight?"

He laughed, "No. We must hasten to the nearest pub or restaurant as I am parched and famished. Later I shall acquire a book on the subject. Only for enlightenment, you understand?"

They did not need to travel far. The entire southern end of the sandy peninsula formed by the River Yare and North Sea was rapidly evolving from a primarily military habitation and ship docking quay into a tourist destination. All along the boardwalk small shops and eateries were practically daily opening. The previously rustic track had been widened and smoothed with trees actively being planted to shade pedestrians. Large fields were leveled for carriage parking; naturally arenaceous beaches were meticulously combed and inspected for bathers and players; hotels were being built; grassy plains and cultured gardens were landscaped; and a modern wharf was being constructed.

In the middle of it all sat the racetrack. Some ten years ago the military men decided they needed a track to race their horses. Over time, what was essentially designated as a cavalry training field and arena for mild amusement among the militia grew into a full fledged betting racecourse. Spectator seating had been built, areas of concessions, and the all important booths for gambling. Twice a week the track was taken over by breeders, owners, jockeys, and thoroughbreds from around the country for a sport that has been synonymous with England since the days of Queen Anne. Although this track and the racers exhibited could not compare to the Royal Ascot or Newmarket, nor were the purses as substantial, wherever there were horses traveling at fast speeds and money to potentially be made, folks would flock.

Since this latter description perfectly encapsulated Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, attending the races while at Yarmouth was an item high on his list. The truth is that of all the entertainments Darcy enjoyed partaking in, billiards being premier, watching the races ran a close second. He was not a gambling man by nature, so any betting was cautious and reserved for those animals he felt extremely confident in. As a long standing member of the Jockey Club, as was his grandfather, as well as being a breeder who understood the animal as if one himself, Darcy was extremely knowledgeable regarding the sport. He could name literally every horse

and jockey of merit throughout the country, was personal friends with the chief owners, and had patronized every racecourse of substance numerous times. Although the revenue Darcy had won through intelligent betting over the years was not copious, it far out measured the amount lost.

As for Lizzy, the world of horseracing was completely foreign. While in London Darcy had taken her to two events held at the Royal Ascot in Berkshire and once at Epsom Downs in Surrey. Naturally this was an essential for Darcy, not only due to his intense love of the sport, but for business reasons as well. Lizzy had approached the adventure with a fair amount of trepidation, frankly imagining being bored senseless and overwhelmed with choking dust and noise, but smiled and expressed delight with the prospect for her husband's sake. Darcy, of course, was not fooled in the least.

To her surprise, she found the sport extremely exciting. First off, both racecourses subverted her vague imaginings by being extraordinary in construction, opulence, comfort, and provisions. The seats afforded the Darcys were plush, shaded, segregated, and offered a fantastic view of the impeccable track. Secondly, and most amazing of all, the racing itself was exhilarating. Lizzy's six months as a Darcy, surrounded by some of the finest horses in the country and married to a man who nearly lived and breathed all thing equestrian, had birthed in her an unrecognized appreciation of the majestic animal. Her enthusiasm and knowledge would likely never come near to Darcy's, but she discovered the entertainment fabulous fun.

Darcy, naturally, was thrilled at her embracing the diversion; so much so that he was only mildly perturbed when she insisted on betting for a particular horse because, "he has a nice name." Lizzy, unbeknownst to her spouse, had done so to tease him, confessing only after Sweet Whistler placed second!

"Look, Elizabeth," he now said, holding the program open and pointing, "Race one has a mare named Lovely Peacock. Sounds like a winner to me!" Lizzy harrumphed and swatted him away, Darcy chuckling.

Ignoring him for the time being, she studied the program carefully. Darcy had taught her the rudiments of calculating odds and the profile aspects of import. Of course he had the advantage by intimately knowing the pedigrees and racing histories of many of the horses. She pursed her lips, glancing at her handsome spouse who was currently avidly observing the prancing animals down below.

"Fitzwilliam," she began, Darcy raising a brow at the formal

address, "I suggest a friendly competition. A challenge, if you will. Are you brave enough to match wits with your wife?"

"I believe I require further illumination, Elizabeth, as your wits frequently supersede mine. What did you have in mind?"

"I have fifty pounds in my reticule. If you will agree to limit your wagering to the same we shall see who chooses the wisest by who wins the most."

Lips twitching, Darcy nodded sagely. "High stakes, Mrs. Darcy, especially considering I had no intention of being so extravagant."

"Is the idea too daunting, Mr. Darcy? Are you afraid?" Her eyes were twinkling, pert nose and chin lifted boldly in challenge. Darcy gazed at her, cursing inwardly at the restrictive rules of propriety which made it impossible for him to kiss her as he yearned to do with an agonizing stab through his gut. Lizzy knew him far too well, aptly reading the message in his eyes despite the controlled mien. Her smile widened as she waited.

"You know I never back away from a dare. Therefore, I accept your challenge, but shall grant no quarter, my dear."

"None shall be asked for, William." She leaned forward and lowered her voice, "I love you, you know. If I do win I will expect you to reward me as I see fit."

Darcy took her hand and kissed her fingers lightly, eyes locked with hers, naturally resonant voice husky, "It seems that I shall win in either case then."

"Mr. Darcy, what a pleasant surprise!"

Both Darcy and Lizzy jolted. Lizzy flushed brightly, but Darcy recovered smoothly, standing with elegant grace to greet the older man smiling pleasantly from the aisle. "Lord Ellis. What brings you from Suffolk?"

"Sea air and horses, naturally. Likely the same as yourself. Mrs. Darcy, I trust you are well?"

Lizzy smiled, "Quite well, my Lord. It is a delight to see you again. Is Lady Ellis accompanying you?"

"Alas, she despises horse racing and has opted to shop." More random chatter ensued, Lord Ellis eventually leaving the Darcys to "continue their amusements" with a wink, Lizzy reddening again.

The afternoon hours elapsed. Darcy and Lizzy kept to their contest with playful seriousness, neither willing to tolerate defeat although it was equally obvious that neither would really suffer if the loser. Surprisingly, Lord Ellis was not the only acquaintance encountered. Probably a fifth of the attendees seated in the stadium section relegated to those of wealth and station were known to Darcy. Several were

military officers introduced through Col. Fitzwilliam, but most were social peers familiar to varying degrees. Between casual conversations, thrilling races, a personally escorted tour of the Nelson monument site, delicious refreshments, the stimulating competition in wagering, and the incomparable joy produced by the presence of the other, Darcy and Lizzy were glowing by the time they settled into the carriage.

Lizzy promptly turned to her husband. "Alright! Time to count the profits and see who the victor is."

## **7 – Just Deserts**

Darcy laughed, but retrieved his money clip as Lizzy opened her reticule. Lizzy had been impishly secretive in her selections, insisting that Darcy stand away as she placed her bets so he “would not cheat.” Darcy, in turn, had feigned confusion and dismay with much frowning and chin scratching. In between the blatantly smug articulations and theatrical heavy sighs, they mutually reveled in taunting each other.

Nonetheless, to Darcy’s extreme pride, Lizzy calculated earnestly and won far more often than she lost. In the end, Darcy prevailed in their cordial competition, but by a mere four pounds.

“Game well played, Elizabeth. I am very proud of you. You chose horses wisely and it paid off.”

“Thank you, William, but you have triumphed fairly. Name your desired reward, sir, and it shall be granted.”

“Hmmm....What a difficult decision this is! What can I possibly desire from you? Let me think a bit.” He kept up the false musing all the way back to the resort, Lizzy sitting serenely beside him staring out the window as if wholly uninterested.

It was nearly six when they arrived. Lizzy, strangely, was not at all fatigued. Darcy had observed her circumspectly all afternoon, ready to instantly depart if necessary. To his increased pleasure she appeared hale with a becoming rosiness to her cheeks and mischievous glimmer in her brown eyes. Naturally Darcy had no problem deciding what his reward would be, the plotting initiated with instructions to have dinner served in their room.

Upon entering their chamber, windows open to admit the fresh evening breezes and everything cleaned perfectly, Lizzy walked to the middle and turned to await her husband. He stood silently by the shut door watching her with a dreamily seductive smile on his lips. For a long while they stood apart, studying each other for the sheer pleasure of feasting hungry eyes. Slowly, with elegant poise, he floated toward her. Lizzy was breathless, already tremendously stirred from nothing but his brilliant azure eyes on her body and piercing her spirit.

He paused inches away, not touching for several seconds, and then reaching leisurely to her hair and began removing clasps and pins.



Each tendril fell into his hands, slipping through caressing fingers. He toyed with curly tresses, pulling them gently as if springs, releasing with infinite care one by one the secured clumps of hair until wildly free over her shoulders. He uttered not a word. Lizzy panted in short spurts, a hazy part of her brain wondering how he can consistently find ways to excite her to unimaginable heights by the simplest tasks. Now he laced long slender fingers through the roots of her hair, massaging firmly over her scalp from nape to crown only then lifting the heavy locks off her neck and combing tenderly until tangles unraveled. A dozen times he repeated the activity with studied meticulousness. Her lustrous hair crackled through his fingers, the varied hues of brown glimmering in the light with lavender rising to assault his nostrils.

Her eyes were closed in delight, hands clutching the edge of his jacket, and mouth parted. Mesmerized, he played lovingly with her chestnut mane as he scrutinized her expressions, groaning and briefly losing all control when the tiny tip of her moist tongue appeared to lick dry lips. He bent and kissed her unrestrained, tongue thrusting deeply, and hoarse moans caught in his throat. Blissful minutes passed, both succumbed to raging sensations. It was a singularly sharp squeeze to his derriere that jerked him to reality.

“Elizabeth!” He gasped, “Wait, please. It is my reward owed, you recall? I have a plan, my precious.” He kissed to her ear, taking the lobe into his mouth for gently suckles. “We have hours and hours, best beloved. Trust me, we shall be satisfied.” He pulled away to meet her glazed eyes.

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, “I want you....”

“You shall have me, lover,” he interrupted, “I can promise you that. All night, languidly and wholly I shall love you. This is my wish. Wait here.” He pecked her nose, smiled, and left for his dressing room.

He returned quickly with a bundle in his hands, blushing faintly. “I brought this. It is my favorite. Will you wear it for me, dearest?”

Lizzy laughed, recognizing what he held. “William, you truly are too cute. Of course I shall wear it.”

When she later returned from her dressing room, her husband was garbed in a figure hugging black chambray robe with borders of sage green satin. He was bent over the cozy table in the corner, now laden with several covered trays, lit candles, two place settings, and a vase of roses. A bottle of champagne sat chilling in a bucket nearby.

“What is for dinner?” Darcy pivoted, eyes grazing his wife head to toe as a grin of purest lust gradually spread over his face.

Approximately a month earlier Lizzy had woken with a pressing

need to visit the water closet. It was nearly dawn, the faintest traces of light filtering through the curtains. The room, however, was yet very dim and there was a slight chill to the air at odds with a Derbyshire morn in mid August. Lizzy, naked as always and blessedly warm snuggled next to the inferno that was her spouse, had been struck by the cool room, and blindly groped for the first garment she could find in the scattered piles of discarded clothing hastily tossed the previous evening. It was Darcy's shirt of finest spun silk with pearl buttons down the front. She drew it on, fastening the middle three buttons absently as she rushed from the room. Minutes later she returned, sleepily rubbing her face, and was brought up short by an audible gasp from the bed. Darcy lay propped on an elbow, eyes wide as he stared at her, an expression intimately familiar to her growing as was the evidence of his desire.

"You are wearing my shirt," he said unnecessarily, voice huskier than she had ever heard it and eyes aflame. "Come here." It was a curt command uttered in a tone that brooked no argument, not that it occurred to Lizzy to do so. What followed was a session of lovemaking closely rivaling, if not transcending, anything prior. The shirt stayed on throughout. Since then he had politely requested of her to wear it twice, amusing Lizzy as she would happily grant him anything especially as they were mindlessly aroused each time for reasons that neither could articulate.

The effect had not waned, Darcy now ogling with fists clenched at his sides. "Elizabeth Darcy, you are surpassingly sensual. Suddenly I am not certain how wise my request as I honestly do wish to proceed leisurely. God how you tempt me!"

She approached, running one hand over the satin border draping his muscular chest. "As you declared, William, we have all night. Much can transpire in that amount of time. Of course, you are the master of the evening as the winner of our wager. I am at your disposal." The last muttered faintly against his lips while her hands moved freely over the quivering flesh of his torso.

Forgotten was dinner and champagne. Forgotten were preconceived notions of lazy loving. In a burst of energy he clasped her bottom with both large hands, lifting bodily, and aided by her wrapping arms and legs about him. Swiftly they were at the bed where Darcy knelt with Lizzy yet entwined. He ran seeking hands roughly over the voluminous silk swathing her lithe frame, even the swell of their child not filling the space. Why seeing her encased in his shirt thrilled him so he could not say precisely. Partially it was the way it fell to the middle of her rounded thighs leaving her long shapely legs completely bared.

Additionally the shoulder width was nearly twice hers so the gaping fabric displayed tantalizing glimpses of her collar and breasts. But primarily the reason was indefinable, Darcy only aware of a visceral surge of primal eroticism in the vision before his rapacious eyes.

It was fortunate that Lizzy unerringly responded to her husband's miraculous touch with alacrity as Darcy was frenzied in his thirst for her, extended foreplay no longer an option. He captured her breasts through the fabric, suckling and squeezing while gently lowering her to the bed, pelvis pressing harshly against her. Practically ripping the robe off his body, Lizzy's hands instantly roving and trailing fire, he joined with her in a heated rush. They loved furiously, gazes acute and ensnared. Another protracted consuming kiss ensued, ending when a harsh growl erupted from Darcy's chest. He rose, arching sinuously as he grasped her hips and thigh, eyes now closed in vaulting ecstasy.

"Lizzy! I need to feel all of you! Oh Lord, I love you so!" Voices faded into unintelligible articulations of glory as they plunged over the edge, blissfully united in their pleasure.

He collapsed into a slump, instinctively avoiding crushing her belly as his upper body fell to the side over her thigh. Gradually he peered up at her shining face, brown eyes slitted as she watched him and lazily played with his hair. "I love how you call me 'Lizzy' in your rapture."

"Would you rather I call you 'Lizzy' all the time?" His voice was yet harsh, naturally resonant tones always deeper in passion. Their son was rolling and kicking as he often did after they made love, Darcy absently chasing the movements with a hand.

"No. 'Elizabeth' is somehow proper coming from you, and I adore how your voice caresses my name every time. You never address me that it is not bathed with adoration and sensuality. You always have, if only I had had the ears to hear it. 'Lizzy' is uttered when you are completely undone, hence why I love it." She stroked over his perfect nose, resting on the dimple in his chin. "I love you William."

He rolled, lying next to her and encasing in strong arms. He did not speak for a bit, caressing tenderly and kissing through her hair. Finally, "I love you Elizabeth. My Lizzy, my wife."

After a time of cuddling and brushing kisses, she unexpectedly giggled, looking up into his eyes, "Well, now that we have that out of the way, perhaps we can proceed with the leisurely unfolding of the evening as you requested for your victory over me. Starting with dinner, as I now have heightened my appetite."

"I shall never consider making love with you as something to get

‘out of the way,’ however food does sound appealing.” He fingered the edge of his shirt where it lay over her thigh, “You will keep this on for me, dearest?”

“What if I become cold?”

“I shall start a fire.”

“If I spill on it?”

“It can be cleaned.”

“It is rather large, William. It may fall right off my shoulder into the plate!”

“You are filling it out better Elizabeth, so I daresay that will not happen.”

“It has a strange effect on your senses, love. Can you control yourself throughout the meal?”

“I shall endeavor to be a good boy, however I seriously doubt you would argue terribly if I fail.”

“Awfully confident you are Sir! Smug and arrogant.”

“Yes I am, and I can tell by your expression that you are neither shocked nor dismayed. Shall I prove my conceit, my lover, or do we leave the bed for nourishment first?” He accented the challenge with a firm caress over one round swelling buttock, fingers probing, and grin wide.

Lizzy squirmed from his grasp, both laughing. Planting a glancing kiss to his lips, she stood, grasping his hands and tugging, “Come love, let me feed you before you faint.”

\* \* \* \*

The remaining five days of their seaside sojourn were passed exclusively at the resort. By mutual agreement they decided that sightseeing, although educational and exhilarating, was not as preferable as simply lying about the beach and assuredly not as divinely stimulating as seabathing. Therefore, they reverted to the pattern established on their first few days: sleeping late and dining late followed by a time in the water; lazy afternoons on the beach; leisurely strolls along the wooded trails or shoreline collecting shells; evenings in various pursuits with the other guests; quiet contemplations of the ever changing sunset; moonlight walks on the sand or pier; and the occasional individual recreations.

The afternoon following their Yarmouth excursion found them again reclining under the umbrella on the sand. Darcy read aloud while Lizzy sewed another baby garment. Caught up in their tasks with the now familiar sounds and smells of the ocean washing through their

subconscious, neither noted the servant approaching until he spoke.

“Pardon me, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy. These just arrived for you and here is today’s *London Times* as you requested.” He held a twine wrapped bundle of parchment and folded newspaper in his hand, handing them to Darcy.

“Letters from home,” he murmured. “Mr. Keith with updates. A letter from Georgie, one from Bingley, your mother, and Mrs. Lathrop.” The latter two taken by Lizzy, who opened Amelia’s first with a mild pang of guilt.

Minutes passed in silent reading, Lizzy breaking the quiet first with a happy shout.

“Amelia delivered a girl!”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Darcy smiled with true feelings of joy, instantly thinking of Stephen while simultaneously imagining his own emotions when the time came. “Did all proceed smoothly? Mrs. Lathrop is well?”

“The baby was born three weeks ago now. They named her Fiona Heather. Amelia says she resembles Stephen, but has her green eyes. Oh, what a wonder!” Lizzy sighed, reading on with a smile.

“The birth....Does she speak of it?”

Lizzy glanced over to see him serious with a hint of anxiety in his pale eyes. She squeezed his hand, smiling tenderly. “She is well, love. The birth was long, she writes, as is expected, but there were no complications. Do not worry so William. Everything will be fine, I promise.”

He pressed his lips tightly together, jaw clenching, but he nodded and returned to his letter. At odd moments as the weeks advanced, Darcy would find his thoughts dwelling on the final birth process and possible emergencies. Lizzy was healthy and very strong, as was their child by all indications, but he knew well from stories and family traumas how horribly wrong it could end. The thought of losing their baby terrified him, but not nearly as much as losing Elizabeth.

A deep sigh from his wife interrupted the threatening stabs of fear. “I miss Amelia. I wish I could see her and the baby. Who knows when we will be able to travel again between winter and infants to care for?”

“We could visit on our way home, if you wish. Leicestershire is not far out of the way and I am certain they would not mind.”

“Could we? Oh, William! That would be so wonderful! You are brilliant and far too good to me.”

He laughed and shook his head, “Thank you dear, but I was only

thinking of myself as Stephen is the best billiard player after Mr. Hughes that I know.” He picked up Mr. Keith’s missive, feigning indifference while Lizzy chuckled.

Mr. Keith’s letter was brief stating that all was well with harvest beginning as usual, sheep being prepared for market, and the horses all responding according to the breeding plans. Georgiana delivered a rambling dissertation of her adventures sans any mention of Lord Gruffudd now that they had left his vicinity of Wales, to Darcy’s mumbled pleasure. His uncle had included a short paragraph stating that they expected to return by the last week of September. Mrs. Bennet gave a typically detailed commentary of the local gossip, some of which actually interested Lizzy, noting in passing that Mr. Bennet and Kitty were well. Charles declared that all was in hand with the plans for relocation, the actual move to take place mid October.

After the letters were read and shared, Darcy turned to the newspaper. Even on vacation he could not eschew keeping abreast of current events and business affairs. This compulsion was not only due to years of habit, but also an obligation related to his station and influence.

“Ah! Look here, love! An entire article on Miss van Vivash landing her balloon on Hampstead Heath. She landed safely, not precisely where she planned to in the vastness of the park, but close enough that the awaiting spectators and reporters could relocate. Excellent!”

That evening they dined with a company of guests. The food was excellent, as always, and the lively conversation enjoyable, especially to Lizzy. Darcy was reserved as was typical, his contributions limited and mostly confined to discussions of politics with a new resident of the Inn, a barrister named Spade, who sat next to him. Lady Underwood was dining as well, but thankfully for Darcy, sat at another table. Nonetheless, he was uncomfortable, her presence and noisy laugh constantly reminding him of an event he wanted to forget.

After dinner scheduled entertainment was a chess tournament for the men, although two brave women insisted on playing, and a fashion exhibit for the ladies. Three modistes from Yarmouth brought living models to show the latest styles from abroad. It was wonderful fun with tea and refreshments offered, animated banter, and many of the accessories available for purchase.

Lady Underwood sat near Lizzy, seemed to take a special interest in her in fact. Lizzy was flattered and sensed nothing amiss, honestly delighting in the older woman’s charm and wit. Despite the gap in their upbringing and age, Lizzy felt relaxed and accepted. The segregated

portion of the night passed swiftly for all. Lizzy anxiously awaited her husband's reappearance, yet content for the time being.

When the gentlemen began filing in as their games ended, Lizzy kept an eye on the door from her seat at the settee where Lady Underwood sat beside her, three other women on a nearby sofa. Darcy entered, eyes immediately scanning the room for his wife, spying her seconds before she glanced up. Lady Underwood was currently speaking, her visage gay as all hung on her every word, one hand lying lightly on Lizzy's forearm. Darcy froze, instant rage masked from all in the room behind his regulated façade. Lizzy glanced up, automatically issuing a dazzling smile that wilted moments afterward at the constrained thunder in his eyes.

He crossed the room with minimal strides, entire body tense, bowing curtly to the assembled ladies and offering a brisk preamble. "Pardon me, ladies. Mrs. Darcy, it is time for us to retire." He held out his hand, Lizzy taking it with open mouth and scarlet cheeks. She murmured vague good nights, sensing Darcy's stress and impatience, further baffled and embarrassed by a brief but harsh glare directed at a faintly smirking Lady Underwood.

They did not speak until in their room; Darcy seething and frantically wondering what he was to say to Lizzy after his precipitous rudeness; Lizzy confused and worried and irritated all at once.

"William, what is the matter.....?"

"Elizabeth," he interrupted, vainly struggling to soften his tone, "Please forgive me for that. It was rude and ungentlemanly I know, but I could not bear to see her talking to you so intimately."

"Who?"

"Lady Underwood." He was avoiding her eyes, suddenly very ashamed as the worst of his temper began to fade. "Promise me you will not speak with her further."

"William, you are making no sense. Lady Underwood is a lovely person, kind and considerate, humorous and lively. She has done nothing untoward...."

He interrupted again with an edgy tone, "Elizabeth, I will not discuss her attributes or character! I am ordering you to have no contact with her."

"Ordering me!?" This time it was Lizzy who interrupted, bristling and seriously vexed. "You have no right to speak to me thusly William!"

"I am your husband, Mrs. Darcy, which gives me the right!" They glared at each other, anger in full sway on both sides.

"Is this how it is to be now? You barking commands without

explanation? This is not like you William. Tell me what is troubling you or I will make no promises of any kind.”

“You have already promised to obey, if you recall.” He flashed, immediately wincing inwardly.

She stared at him for a long while, Darcy sternly meeting her eyes, but clearly deeply disturbed. “You are correct, Mr. Darcy, I did promise. I just never thought it would be lorded over me in such a manner.”

His face fell and he reached for her slack hands, “You must trust me in this Elizabeth. I know what is best.”

His eyes were pleading, but she detected a reserve not seen since long before their engagement. He was keeping a secret, she was sure of it, and the stab of pain to her heart was acute.

“I am going to change for bed,” she finally said, withdrawing her hands, “Excuse me.”

Darcy watched her leave, ripping at his choking cravat with a foul curse. “Blast, Darcy, you are a fool!” he muttered, throwing the unoffending necktie violently at the wall. He strode to her door, pausing at the last moment. *Give her a moment*, he thought, *calm yourself and think!*

He had worried so, not wishing to cause her pain by learning of Lady Underwood’s advances, and yet his horrible actions had caused her far more pain than the simple truth. He threw his body onto the chair, hands running angrily in his hair. Now he had to rectify the situation, find the words to apologize profusely and on bended knee if need be, and then tell her the truth. He groaned, absently unbuttoning and removing coats as his mind whirled.

Why is it that she rendered him in all ways impetuous? It had always been so, from their first unruly tête-à-têtes at Netherfield to the wild abandon found in their bed. She unhinged him, in all ways, his organized mind disheveled constantly by her wit and verve. His passionate nature unleashed and reckless. His love for her so consuming that rational thought flittered away with the supreme desire to please her.

He had asked her to trust him and knew that ultimately she would, without further questions. But he had seen the hurt in her eyes and knew it was borne of his distrust in sharing with her, not in the rude command. He sighed, bending to remove his shoes and stockings.

She returned at that moment, hair braided rather than loose and wearing a plain gown with thick robe belted tight. She did not glance his direction, but walked with lifted chin and stately poise to the bed. Darcy could not help but smile at her fire and not so subtle hints.

“Elizabeth, my love,” he began.



“I am tired William. Good night.” Her voice was firm with only the barest tremor.

He paused, watching her fluff the pillow and draw the blankets. Softly, “Remember how I told you once that women would offer themselves to me? Offers I never accepted, but grew somewhat accustomed to nonetheless?” She did not answer, but had stilled with her back yet to him. He swallowed, “Lady Underwood extended such an invitation to me, twice.” Another pause followed by a deep sigh as he leaned back in the chair. “I should have told you, beloved, been honest, but I did not wish to ruin our vacation. I was in error. Please forgive me?”

Lizzy clutched the sheet, not turning, “How did it occur? What did she say?”

“The particulars are not important...”

“They are to me! What happened?”

Her voice was cold as Darcy had never heard it. He frowned, but answered her. When he finished she stood silently for a handful of minutes, the sheet edge crinkled under a white knuckled fist. His frown deepened and he sat forward, opening his mouth to speak when she abruptly spun about. Her countenance was flushed with a rage he had never witnessed, not even at Kent. Eyes practically shooting sparks, she stormed to where he sat, Darcy involuntarily gripping the chair arms and sinking into the cushions by the force of her ire. She stopped before him, swaying slightly and leaning into his stunned face.

“Do not *ever* keep such secrets from me Fitzwilliam Darcy!”

He nodded, but she was already moving away, striding vigorously toward the door in a manner vaguely familiar.....It was just like him! Having no idea what she was thinking, but truly fearful at the fury evident in every particle of her body, he jumped up and trailed after. The door was opening before he reached her, Darcy lunging forward and slamming it shut with one hand high over her head.

“Elizabeth, where....?”

“Out of my way, William!”

“No, I will not allow you to leave so angry and dressed like this. We must discuss this.”

She pivoted, one hand still on the knob and pulling futilely against his superior strength, meeting his eyes with defiance, “She touched my husband! Pretended to be my friend while laying hands on you! She demanded to....to.....” Lizzy spluttered shrilly, waving her free hand briskly in the general region of his front side, “know you in the Biblical sense!”

Darcy fisted his free hand over the smile threatening to break forth as he coughed on the laugh that erupted. Lizzy's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"If you dare to laugh, William, I will hurt you! This is not at all humorous. If the situation were reversed I know quite well how you would handle it! Pity there is not a sword or pistol about." And she actually visually scanned the room as if expecting and praying a rapier would materialize.

"Elizabeth, forgive me. You are right, this is not humorous. However, you are overreacting just a bit. Nothing occurred, naturally...."

"I know that!" She snapped, rolling her eyes and piercing him with a look of utter contempt. "I trust your fidelity William, if not your reasoning and faith in trusting me!"

"Beloved, I am not so sure my reasoning was flawed, considering your present irrationality."

She opened her mouth for a sharp retort and then clamped it shut as the truth of his softly spoken words penetrated her brain. Her eyes lowered and body relaxed into the solid door, finally releasing her tight grip on the knob. Not trusting her compliance completely, Darcy remained leaning into the door, sizeable frame dwarfing hers.

"How can a woman be so bold and....devious and immoral? Not that I cannot understand her excellent taste." She whispered, glancing up at his face with a faint blush, anger still evident by the fiery glints deep in her eyes.

"That is kind of you Elizabeth, but I do not think women such as her overly particular." He sighed, "I should have trusted you with the truth from the beginning. You are justified to be vexed with me."

"Yes, I am vexed with you!" She flared anew, stalking past him to commence pacing and shooting daggers his direction. "You allowed me to pursue a friendship with her, knowing her character! Do you not see what a fool this makes me? How she must be laughing at the stupid little girl? The pathetic child with the faithful husband who will not share with her?"

"Do you honestly care what she thinks of you?"

"No! Yes! A little. Do you not see William? Either what we have together is special and plainly revealed to all, or it is a lie. I *do* care what *you* think of me! No secrets, remember?"

"Yes," he whispered miserably.

"And why is it that you consider it your right to dash off risking your life to defend your claim and my honor, but I cannot do the same?! Your possessiveness is not a mutually exclusive privilege William. You

belong to me as surely, and I am equally as furious to think of another seducing what is mine! Yet, as offended as I am, what I cannot believe is that you would shield me in this way.”

“Elizabeth, please, I am deeply sorry!”

“I know you are William.” She stopped pacing, suddenly weary and weak. “I also know you meant well, only wishing to spare me pain because of your love for me. I *am* naïve in so many ways and perhaps not fully capable of handling such things. But, I never will learn if you do not trust me! Your job as my husband is not to screen me from life so that I do not mature in wisdom.”

They stood in silence, eyes downcast as they wrestled with thoughts and emotions. Darcy was ashamed, recognizing the truth of all her words although he could not honestly imagine relinquishing the fundamental need to protect her from all pain. Lizzy was mainly tired, yet a vivid vision of ripping Lady Underwood’s hair out lingered.

“Have there been other propositions?” She spoke quietly, staring at the floor.

He looked quickly to her averted face, shaking his head vigorously as he rapidly crossed to her. “No others since long before we were engaged beloved, but it does not matter in any case.” He reached to clasp her shoulders, but was halted when she lifted fierce eyes.

“It matters to me! I need to know if there are other ‘friends’ of mine who have privately desired or even unashamedly attempted to make love to my husband.” Her voice caught on the final words, tears springing to blazing eyes.

Darcy studied her with deep remorse and concern. Her countenance was yet smoldering with resentment, but also quite pale and pinched. She looked so fatigued and drained. His entire fault and with heart constricting he lifted gentle fingertips to a wan cheek, caressing slowly.

“We cannot control what others may muse on, beloved. I, however, can and should control my actions with improved wisdom. I made a horrible mistake in doubting your understanding. Will you please pardon me?”

“You are twice the fool if you honestly fear I would not forgive you any misstep,” she countered with some asperity.

And then with a weak smile she fell onto his chest, Darcy embracing her tenderly yet with steely strength. All night he held her close, dozing lightly as he preferred to gaze on her face in the moonlight noting the ease relaxing her facial muscles and the increasing health filling her cheeks as she slept. In the darkest hours of the night it was Lizzy

who roused and reached for her drowsy husband, pulling his body and lips onto hers. They made love in the shadows, dreamily bonding and stimulating with remaining four senses leading and heightened.

Faintly whispered words of devotion murmured as they climaxed and then drifted into cleansing slumber, limbs entwined, and perspiring skin fused. "I love you William," but she was asleep before he uttered his responding declaration.

It was while Darcy waited patiently for his wife to join him in their chamber to descend for breakfast that Lizzy slipped out a side door on a mission of her own. She had slept well and her heart was whole. She understood Darcy's reasoning for maintaining his silence and she did appreciate the compassion which drove him even if she did not agree with the decision. Hopefully he now recognized the reality that honesty and full disclosure between them was essential, even at the risk of hurting feelings.

Lady Underwood was another matter. Her anger had simmered all night even in her dreaming state. There was no excuse, in Lizzy's eyes, for a woman to act in such a way. There were plenty of unattached men in the world for her to fraternize with, as disgusting and immoral as even that activity was to Lizzy. Yet certainly better than enticing married gentlemen, especially after they made it perfectly clear they were uninterested! Depravity warped into pure evil when one considered her threats to Darcy and counterfeit amiability toward Lizzy. This was not a lonely woman seeking comfort and companionship. This was a wicked narcissist bent on destruction.

Lizzy's knock was answered by a maid who admitted Lizzy and exited to inform Lady Underwood she had a visitor. Lizzy waited, experiencing a strange detachment. All night, even in her sleep, she had imagined what she would say or do, never doubting for one second that she would not confront the so-called lady in some manner. Pistols or swords were out of the question, but she now better comprehended Darcy's need for retribution. With well laid plans intact, she evaded her husband and now waited.

However, calmly conceived ideas dissipated as rapidly as smoke in a stiff breeze the moment Lady Underwood entered the room.

"Mrs. Darcy! What a delightful surprise to see you in my room so early in the morning." She was dressed for breakfast, her hair yet unstyled, the smile on her lips only partially hiding the curiosity and trepidation.

Instantly the fury of last evening poured through Lizzy with vivid pictures of this creature touching her husband invading her mind. She

lashed out with every ounce of the bizarrely extreme strength she possessed in her svelte body and delivered a stunning slap to Lady Underwood's left cheek. The stricken woman staggered and cried out in pain, gasping in shock.

"That was for having the audacity to accost my husband," Lizzy said calmly, following her words with another ringing blow to the same place. "That was for evilly pretending to be my friend."

Lady Underwood whimpered, tears stinging her eyes as she peered at Lizzy with undisguised fright and astonishment.

"You are a disgrace to all that your title symbolizes and an ignominy to womankind. How you can live with yourself is a mystery. You should wither with the shame, but instead you persevere, which leads me to conclude you lack a soul and conscience. I pity you, my lady, I truly do. Yet my pity does not transcend my wrath. If you have even a shred of decency or, at the least, a modicum of wisdom you will avoid my husband and me. I can do no more than strike you. Mr. Darcy of Pemberley can do far worse. You have been warned."

She left the room with chin held high, in truth trembling slightly from residual temper, but primarily exhilarated and satisfied. A flash of movement to her left caused her to glance toward the stairs leading to the ground floor where Darcy was in the process of descending in a rush.

"William?"

He halted and twirled about all in one motion, nearly tumbling down the stairs and grasping the banister to correct his imbalance. His face was suffused with distress, paling substantially as he glanced from Lizzy to the door she had just exited.

"Elizabeth, what..."

Words abruptly ceased when another door opened to reveal Mr. and Mrs. Stewart. Pleasantries were conveyed, Darcy recovering quickly although he kept glancing to Lizzy, who acted as if nothing was amiss. In fact, she was particularly effusive. The second they were out of sight he turned to his wife, running hands over her upper body as if checking for injury. He noted the redness to her right palm before she had the chance to speak, eyes widening with sudden shock as he peered into her mildly embarrassed but triumphant eyes.

"I do not believe Lady Underwood will be as pretty as she usually is for several days. Perhaps that will inhibit her ensnaring any other innocent gentlemen."

"You...hit her?"

"Well, she deserved it!"

"Indubitably." He laughed shortly, taking her elbow and steering

her to the third floor stairwell. "I should scold you most profoundly, but I..." He laughed again, a bit hysterically, leaning his head back against the wall with eyes pleading heavenward, "Lord, why? I honestly did wish for a simple life. Was that too much to ask for?"

"Oh, bother! Simplicity is overrated. Spirit and passion are preferential. Now quit whining and take me to breakfast. I have worked up an appetite." She tiptoed for a quick peck to his cheek, but he stayed her for a sober examination of her eyes.

"Are you certain you are well, Elizabeth? Completely, heart and soul? And our child? I truly was very frightened when you were gone." His voice caught, Lizzy doused with sorrow. She encircled his waist tightly, entire body pressed hard against him with their son protesting and kicking vigorously.

"I beg forgiveness, beloved, but it was something I had to do. I assure you we are perfect, body and soul."

Lady Underwood departed the resort that morning, offering no good-byes. Speculative gossip abounded, but the Darcy name was never mentioned. As for the Darcys, they spoke no further on the subject. Lessons were learned, similar errors would never be made in the future, and thus the book was closed.

The remaining four days were uneventful, comparatively speaking. One day it clouded and drizzled, Lizzy insisting on taking their walk irregardless, to Darcy's initial discomfort. The nuzzling kisses enjoyed under the close confines of the umbrella dispelled most of his unease; the rich aroma of wet loam and pine allayed the residual. The storm worsened in the afternoon causing the surf to roar and upsurge dramatically. They sat cozily in the parlor sipping hot cocoa before the fire and watched the impressive display all afternoon.

A hastily discharged missive to the Lathrops was equally hastily replied to, the positive response arriving the day before the Darcys were to depart. They were both very anxious to be home, but decided a short three day visit to the Lathrop's estate Stonecrest a perfect cap to a perfect vacation.

Their final night was passed on the end of the pier. Dinner was arranged by the resort staff, privately by candlelight as the sun provided a majestic living mural in its decline and the tides supplied the music. The fare was superb, but it would not have mattered as it was the atmosphere and communion that brought the greatest joy to their hearts.

"May I have this dance, Mrs. Darcy?"

Lizzy laughed, taking her husband's proffered hand and assuming a waltz pose. He did this frequently, surprising her at odd moments with

a request to dance as he hummed a tune. Of course, the primary excuse was to hold her tightly, the formal posture of a strict waltz not maintained for very long. Darcy could not sing if his life depended upon it, but he could hum fairly well, or at least enough to set a tempo for the amusement. Over the course of time he had taught her a number of couples dances learned during his travels, most of which were far more intimate and lively than the waltz. Lizzy was only proficient in the typical English country line dances, but was growing exceedingly fond of the duo dances popular in more progressive countries. Along the way they invented their own steps and movements, usually involving motions clearly erotic in nature and thus wholly inappropriate for public viewing, but quite scintillating in the privacy of one's bedchamber.

Here at the far end of a lonely pier they allowed themselves to cross a few boundaries, but did retain a dignified restraint. Darcy was as graceful and debonair as always, body fluid and flawless as he guided his wife and lover over the rough wooden planks. Lizzy experienced a slight awkwardness with bulging belly preventing total ease and refinement, but they enjoyed themselves nonetheless. They ended against the rail in the shadows after a lavolta lift and turn, Lizzy breathless in Darcy's arms with face inches from hers.

"I did not think you would be able to lift me," she teased, seconds before his lips met hers with astounding passion. He cupped long fingers around her neck, thumbs caressing as the kiss varied in intensity, and lasted for endless minutes. On and on they kissed with no sense of hurrying, both abundantly content to focus all senses on shared breath and taste. Lizzy's hands rested lightly on his waist, Darcy never left her slender neck or creamy shoulders. He withdrew for brief moments to caress her face with his eyes, never halting feathering strokes with delicate fingertips, and always returning to her mouth for more.

*I love you* whispered ceaselessly by both, kisses traveling unhastily over jaws to ears, passion bubbling, but overruled by adoration as moonlight shimmered palely.

"I am sure it is unnecessary, but I am compelled to verbalize to you, beloved, how remarkable this entire vacation has been for me." His voice was so low and vibrant, Lizzy shivering at the sensations educed. "Superlatives are jumbling in my mind, competing with each other to adequately convey my joy, but none do it justice." He paused for an interlude of fresh kisses and nibbles, knuckles lightly rubbing up and down her neck. "I love you Elizabeth, with all my heart and soul. My happiness is higher than the heavens. I may live to be one hundred, and pray I do with you by my side, but I will never forget this time with you."

Claiming her sweet mouth yet again, Lizzy now encircling his shoulders with fingers running through his hair, he slowly glided downward brushing over her breasts to the beautiful swell of their child. Tenderly, devotedly he smoothed and kneaded big hands over her abdomen, adoring the feel of taut flesh cocooning their baby. The wonder of it never failed to awe him. Daily she expanded as the product of their love grew stronger; miraculously nourished and harbored by his mother while adored by an eager father. Lizzy was well into the seventh month of her pregnancy; health generally excellent if a bit prone to fatigue and slight imbalance. She was lovelier to him than ever; glowing, robust, and with a peace emanating from her core.

“As anxious as I am to hold our infant I believe I shall miss this.” He spoke softly, palms moving steadily on her stomach.

“As virile and amorous as you are, my love, I suspect the swollen belly will reappear frequently. I visualize Pemberley cluttered with rambunctious little Darcys.”

He smiled, truly delighted at the vision and refusing to dwell on the risks of numerous births. A final walk along the beach by moonlight, Lizzy even convincing Darcy to remove his shoes and feel the cold water lap at bare ankles, was the culmination to their outdoor activities. The crowning touch was discovered when they returned to their room. Per Lizzy’s instructions, servants had fashioned a makeshift picnic tableau on the chamber floor before the open balcony. Privacy was not assured on the balcony itself; other rooms situated without direct visual contact, but open windows too close for complete comfort. A thick blanket was spread with several large pillows, a platter of fruit and pastries, mulled wine in clay mugs, and two candelabras for illumination sat waiting. A low fire burned as the evenings were increasingly cool.

Darcy grinned happily at his smugly beaming wife, wordlessly taking her hand and leading to the blanket. Passionate lovemaking was the ultimate crescendo, but only after prolonged intimate conversation, frolicking, cuddling, feeding each other, and titillating foreplay.



## **8 - Home**

The ancestral home of the Lathrops, Stonecrest Hall, was located roughly five miles northeast of Melton Mowbray. The modest home of grey bricks sat in a shallow dell amongst a dense forest of ancient oaks and was surrounded by a broad expanse of compact grass and clover. There was a natural essence to the property, much as Hasberry possessed, which was relaxing and homey if not as grand as the formality and cultivation of Pemberley. Beyond the house proper were the extensive barns and fields amid the oaks where the cows and bulls roamed. The wealth of the Lathrop family was partially from the cattle market, but primarily from dairy products, the cheeses produced considered some of the best in the country.

The Darcys arrived late in the afternoon, having decided to travel straight through from Caister. Lizzy was tired and her back ached, but the physical discomforts were offset by her excitement. Mr. Lathrop greeted them warmly, informing Lizzy that Amelia was with the baby. With a kind smile of complete understanding he directed a waiting maid to escort Mrs. Darcy to the nursery after the briefest of welcomes. The men chuckled once she was away, Lathrop leading Darcy to the parlor for a much needed brandy.

Amelia was rocking and nursing her daughter when Lizzy was admitted. Kisses of true delight were shared while the baby obliviously fed on, eyes closed and tiny mouth working diligently. One delicate fist lay atop Amelia's breast, minute fingers kneading. Tears welled in Lizzy's eyes at the sight. Several of her friends, both in Hertfordshire and in Derbyshire had children, but she had never witnessed a scene so intimately maternal. Her heart gave a massive lurch, one hand instinctively caressing her belly as she gingerly touched Fiona's downy cheek.

"Oh, Amelia, she is absolutely beautiful! How small she is! Oh...." Her voice caught and she swiped at her tears. Amelia was radiant, as all proud mothers are. Lizzy peered closely at her friend's face. "You look amazing, my dear friend. Are you fully recovered from the ordeal?"

Lizzy sat on a nearby stool, hands massaging her back while

Amelia answered with a laugh. “Nearly. My bum still hurts and I am a wee bit sleep deprived, but it is a joy to not be carrying the extra weight!” Lizzy laughed, nodding as she rubbed aching muscles.

The following hour was spent in sweet companionship, both women sharing tales of motherhood. Amelia, in the forthright manner that she possessed, imparted detailed information of her labor and birth, Lizzy paling frequently but absorbing each point. Amelia commiserated with Lizzy’s current travails, thankful that they were minor. She, too, had been blessed with a relatively easy pregnancy, but a certain number of aches and pains were universal. Fiona finished her meal, falling into the drugged sleep typical of the satisfied newborn. Amelia insisted Lizzy hold the slumbering infant while she freshened up for their guests, Lizzy not requiring too much persuasion.

Lizzy had held a few small babies in her life, but not since becoming a wife and soon to be mother. The rush of emotions, aided surely by rampant maternal chemicals, was overwhelming. For the first time she experienced an intense urgency to hurry through the incubation process so she could gaze upon their son and nestle him to her breast. For several minutes it was as if her spirit soared with an uncontainable need to flee this place for Pemberley, for home, where the focus would all be on final preparations for their child. The hunger to lay eyes on the nursery and all the waiting infant items was nearly painful and a sob caught in her throat.

Then Fiona stretched, releasing a weak gurgle as pink lips pursed and sucked on an imaginary nipple. Her eyes fluttered open briefly, a flash of greenish-blue before closing in renewed sleep. Lizzy smiled, stroking the soft cheek, and bending to smell the fresh fragrance that all newborns emanate. Her baby delivered a grouping of lazy kicks, as if to remind his mother of his viability and equal eagerness to be known. Lizzy chuckled under her breath, rubbing over his prodding limb. “Do not fret, my sweet, I love you best and will wait patiently.”

The women joined the reclining men in the parlor. Amelia held the baby, Darcy’s eyes instantly alighting on the swaddled bundle. Lizzy recalled with a smile that her husband had never actually beheld a very young infant. His careful regulation was slipping rapidly as they approached. The gentlemen rose, Stephen quickly crossing to assist his still sore wife to a comfortable chair. Lizzy squeezed Darcy’s arm, eyes meeting with tender communication before he turned his gaze back to Amelia and the baby.

“Mrs. Lathrop, you appear well. Congratulations on your blessing.”

“Thank you Mr. Darcy. I am quite well, all considered. Now sit down and relax. My arms are frankly aching. Dearest,” she looked to her husband with a wink, “Perhaps you can assist me? Mr. Darcy, could I trouble you to hold the baby while my husband fetches Elizabeth and I some tea? Elizabeth, could you be a dear and plump up this pillow for me?”

With smoothly manipulated orders, Amelia fulfilled Darcy’s wish without him needing to ask, which he likely would never have had the nerve to do. Fairly before he could take a breath he found his arms blissfully encumbered with the blanketed, softly squirming baby. He sat stiffly, afraid to move an inch or even breathe lest he disturb the peaceful bundle or, heaven forbid, drop her. Heart pounding and inhaling shallowly, Darcy studied the diminutive life form in his rigid arms. She was so small! Every feature dainty in the extreme, wisps of pale hair, cheeks so round and pink, and incredibly light. Gradually he relaxed, sinking comfortably into the sofa and cuddling her close to his chest.

It was absolutely amazing. Never had he seen anything so tiny. Still, she seemed too large to actually reside inside another human being and with a sudden flash of insight he completely understood his wife’s aches and complaints as their son intruded on internal organs and placed stress on muscles. Lizzy joined him on the sofa, reaching to gently pull the blanket away from Fiona’s chest to unveil a petite hand.

“Easy, Elizabeth, do not wake her,” Darcy chided in a whisper.

“Her stomach is full, love. A full marching band could troop through and she would sleep on. Here,” she grasped his hand, “touch her cheek. She is so soft.”

Darcy did, holding his breath and trembling slightly.

“Unbelievable. I have never felt anything like it.” He looked up at Stephen, who was grinning broadly where he stood next to Darcy, gazing at his daughter with insurmountable pride and bewitchment. “Lathrop, she is beautiful. An absolute miracle.”

“Soon, my old friend it shall be your turn. Nothing on earth quite compares, I assure you.”

The three days passed in Leicestershire were tranquil. Lizzy and Amelia stayed near the house at all times, short walks about the grounds being the only excursions. Amelia was recuperating rapidly, the mild soreness evaporating as her body restored gradually. She lamented the additional bulk to her already full figured frame, but did so with a giggle and shrug. Lizzy delighted in learning all she could about baby care. The days were highly informative and eased an inordinate amount of the foreboding Lizzy had not even been aware she bore.

Darcy and Lathrop were gone all day, each day, on horseback with rifles in hand as they tromped through the game filled woods in the vicinity. Late afternoons and evenings were spent in the game room at billiards, primarily, but also the occasional chess challenge. Lizzy always rejoiced when her husband was able to truly embrace the various manly pursuits he enjoyed but often did not have the time or company to engage in. As fully as her masculine spouse devoured such activities for all the typical reasons, he also utilized the secluded moments to quiz his friend on infant related topics. Mr. Lathrop was a strict traditionalist so the concept of entering the birth chamber had never crossed his mind; therefore his knowledge of the delivery process from the first few pains to well after Fiona had arrived and all had been cleaned up, was nonexistent. Nevertheless, he was a devoted husband and father who happily shared what facts he knew, Darcy discovering the same easing of hidden anxieties as his wife did.

Inbetween their individual gender related recreations, the foursome reconnected for breakfast and dinner as well as early evenings reposing over drinks and conversation in the parlor. Darcy tactfully, and with transparently pleading eyes, asked to hold Fiona whenever possible. The Lathrops smiled at his sweet enthusiasm and Lizzy positively beamed. By the end of their stay he felt fairly comfortable with the frequently wiggling baby, although the first time she screwed up her little face and released a truly astonishingly loud bellow Darcy blanched whiter than a sheet and clenched her so tightly in alarm that she halted instantly and pierced the big man with a wide-eyed accusatory stare. Amelia laughed, assuring the stricken man that it was merely feeding time as she removed the squalling infant from his shaking arms.

Darcy entered their bed late each night, Lizzy long since asleep, so it was morning before they were able to compare notes. Both felt the pressing urge to return home, but also recognized the providential aspect of this visit. Excitement and enthusiasm coupled with book knowledge was wonderful, but nothing quite compared to first hand experience.

When they said their farewells, the women shedding tears while they hugged, it was a moment of truly mixed emotions. They knew it would likely be months before they saw each other. It was not safe to travel with a young baby in the coming winter months and obviously Lizzy would be going nowhere. Amelia's family was expected over the Christmas holidays, even if they had been willing to brave the elements.

"Come spring, my dear Amelia, we must visit! Either we shall come here or you to Pemberley. The season in London is much too far to wait."

“Pemberley is only a day away, love. We can easily arrange visitations. Mrs. Lathrop, thank you for allowing us to disturb your peace. It has been delightful fun and instructive.” Darcy bowed gallantly, delivering a friendly kiss to her fingers.

Amelia, however, lifted up and kissed him on the cheek. “William, you and Elizabeth are never a disturbance. Thank you for veering this way and for adoring my daughter. You will be a wonderful father.”

Darcy’s cheeks were rosy, and he smiled happily. “Thank you, Amelia.”

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“Mrs. Darcy,” softly whispered in her ear and accompanied by a tiny nibble and smattering of brushing kisses.

Lizzy stretched, arching blissfully into her husband’s body and clasping the warm hand resting on her abdomen. “Rising so early William, something special about today? Hmmm....?” She turned her head to reach his smiling lips for a glancing kiss.

“Well, I had no way to manufacture mist in our bedchamber and I opted to remain nude rather than don clothing and a large overcoat, but it is nearly the exact time of day.” He reigned tiny suckles over the nape of her neck, Lizzy shivering in pleasure, returning slowly to her ear. “I am as bewitched today as I was then, still desire to never be parted from you, and love you with an ardency multiplied a hundredfold. Thank you, my precious Elizabeth, for agreeing to become my wife.”

“Thank you, my precious Fitzwilliam, for asking me to become your wife. I love you more than life. And do not fret over the lack of English mist or clothing. I have a very good memory not to mention the painting to remind me of a significant event in our lives. All things considered I would rather wake with you unclothed next to me in our bed.”

He chuckled against the skin of her mid back where he was bestowing all manner of oral delights while wending his way down her posterior side, one hand quite busy over her anterior.

They were home. Happily ensconced in their familiar surroundings and gradually adapting to the regular pace of Pemberley.

Darcy was quite busy catching up on the endless affairs that only he could properly and legally handle. He relished the work, in truth, missing his wife during the long hours either in his study or on his horse; nevertheless, the Master of Pemberley thrilled in the activity as a

necessary part of life.

Lizzy quietly resumed her duties as Mistress. She had not consciously recognized missing the simply household tasks while on her vacation, but once confronted with the pile of papers Mrs. Reynolds had carefully organized on her desk, she delved in with nearly as much gusto as Darcy. They rediscovered the contentment of working side by side at their sitting room desks or in his study and in the joyful sharing of estate business.

To their surprise, Georgiana had returned home two days prior to their arrival from Leicestershire. She doubly astonished them, especially Darcy, by not flying pell-mell down the stairs and launching like a jack rabbit into his arms. Instead she stood sedately on the top step of the entrance portico, dressed in a very fashionable gown with her hair pinned up in a jewel accented coiffure, smiling radiantly with eyes shining, but in all ways a young woman.

Darcy did not quite know how to feel. One the one hand he was instantly struck by how beautiful she was in her grown-up poise and discipline, and his pride soared immeasurably. On the other hand, his heart was stabbed with an acute ache at the final vestiges of his baby sister apparently erased overnight. Then at the last second as he mounted the final three steps below her, she suddenly bounced on her toes, squealed, and vaulted into his ready embrace.

“Oh William! I missed you so!”

He smiled into her hair, recognizing the pure selfish happiness rushing through him in knowing that there were at least a few traces of the child in the woman he squeezed tightly to his chest. “My sweet Georgie. I missed you more.”

She pulled inches away with a grin, delivering a quick peck to his cheek, “I rather doubt that, brother dear, as you had Elizabeth to assuage your heart.”

“Yes, but there are some places even a beloved wife cannot touch.” He kissed her forehead and then released her with a broad smile.

“Does your sister warrant such a greeting?”

“Oh Elizabeth! Look at you!” The two women embraced, Georgiana unable to tear her eyes from the significantly larger waistline.

Elizabeth laughed, placing both hands on her belly, “Yes, it is quite impressive, is it not? I found myself competing with the whales at the coast!”

Chatter and stories from all parties was rampant long into the evening. Georgiana was far more effusive than her brother or sister as they were frankly exhausted, Lizzy actually falling asleep on Darcy’s

shoulder mid-adventurous tale. It took days, but finally all gaps were filled and Georgiana too fell into the old routines of life at Pemberley.

The newlywed Olivers had also returned prior to the Darcys. Darcy and Lizzy found their personal servants attending to their duties and relatively unchanged except for the occasional dreamy expressions noted when happened upon unawares. Other than asking Samuel two or three general questions about the weather and sights around the Lake District, which his valet answered in short sentences, Darcy made no other inquiries. His curiosity was not adequate to overcome the extreme mortification that would assuredly ensue if he did ask Samuel anything remotely personal. Marguerite was a bit more forthcoming regarding the various activities she and her new husband had partaken in, praising the countryside and accommodations, but gave nary a hint of anything intimate. Most information was gleaned from Mrs. Reynolds who informed her employers that the Olivers were very happy and contentedly established into their apartment. It was further revealed that the previously stoic, excruciatingly bashful Samuel was looser now, both Olivers increasingly approachable and sociable.

With the family thus settled, the last weeks of September glided by with happy serenity felt all around. The weather held clement and sunlit during the day with a slight chilling come sundown. The gradual metamorphosis about the extensive grounds began as autumn colors invaded, leaves burnished with golds and reds. The emergence of the multihued dahlia, purple toad lily, marguerite daisy, calendula, nasturtium, rosemary, and salvias provided a fresh plethora of vibrant color and fragrance to the summer fading blooms. The numerous bushes with variegated foliage accented the already dazzling displays. The gardeners were especially busy preparing the vast gardens for the winter freeze and spring flowering, bulbs arriving by the wagon loads.

Lizzy watched the digging for several days before gathering the nerve to ask Mr. Clark if she could, with assistance, take over care of the private garden to the east of the manor. If he was shocked or dismayed in any way by her request it did not show. Thus it was that Lizzy could be found most days on her knees in the soft turf with two gardeners named Robert and Harry aiding nearby. Naturally the modest garden was already faultless and Lizzy had no desire to radically transform anything. She merely wished to plant a few of her favorite plants and to fulfill a long standing pleasure to work with soil and flora, gardening having always been a pastime she enjoyed.

Between her Mistress duties, gardening, visits to the orphanage, preparations for baby Darcy, regular social engagements with her lady

friends, long walks for physical exercise, and general leisure activities, Lizzy was very busy. Hardly before either she or Darcy knew it, October was ushered in.

It was on an average day the first week of October when the first disruption, of a sort, occurred.

Lizzy sat in the music room attending to the household ledger with mildly swollen feet propped up on an ottoman. Georgiana sat at the pianoforte providing background music. It was a quarter after four in the afternoon and pleasantly warm with a faint breeze blowing through the open patio doors. Darcy was away, had been since very early in the morning, observing the final wool baling and delivery preparations.

Phillips entered upon Lizzy's acknowledgement, bowing formally and announcing that there were two gentlemen in the foyer asking to speak with the Mistress as Mr. Darcy was absent.

"Who are they?" Lizzy asked with raised brows.

"They did not offer their names, Madame."

"How odd," she murmured, rising with a shrug toward Georgiana, who also rose to trail along curiously.

"Madame, can we two lonely travelers intrude upon your hospitality for the fine Irish whiskey reputedly lurking in the liquor cabinet at Pemberley?"

"Whiskey, brandy, port, whatever you wish for kind Sirs, but first give us a kiss!"

Georgiana had already released a cry of delight and dashed to her favored uncle, Lizzy turning to a grinning Col. Fitzwilliam for a kiss.

"Richard! What a wonderful surprise! We were expecting this wayward traveler to breeze in eventually," Lizzy laughingly declared with a gesture toward George Darcy, "but you are an unanticipated albeit fantastic addition."

"He attached himself to me in London," George declared, "and I could not rid myself of him. Pathetic, really, so I dragged him along. Elizabeth, you appear to have swallowed an enormous ball."

"I wish it were that simple as then it would be lightly filled with air and not expanding further. Come, gentlemen, whiskey is secured in the liquor cabinet. Phillips, your penance for being roped into deception by these two mischief makers is to bring us a tray of comestibles for our weary travelers."

She linked arms with Richard, who said, "You look quite well, Elizabeth. How are you faring?"

"Very well, all considered. I have a husband who dotes most profoundly and a sister nearly as devoted, so I am not allowed to



overtax.”

“Where is the doting husband, by the way?”

“At the wool barn. I do not know when he shall return, but he usually arrives in time for dinner.”

George laughed, “William miss a meal? Do not be ridiculous. Whiskey, Colonel?” Asked as he crossed directly toward the liquor cabinet.

“Please. Georgie, I want to hear all about Wales. Your letters were expository and mother enumerated additionally, but I wish to hear more from your own lips. Especially, my dear cousin and ward, about this Lord Gruffudd you so eloquently chronicled.”

Georgiana blushed scarlet. Lizzy chuckled, laying one hand softly on Georgiana’s arm. “Richard, for shame! Do not tease your cousin so. Can a young woman not notice a handsome man and gush to a trusted guardian without being interrogated? Besides, ladies need their little secrets.”

“Very well, I am properly chastised. Forgive me Miss Darcy.” He bowed gallantly her direction, “Skip past Lord Gruffudd to your birthday celebrations. I believe you were in Cardiff at the time?”

Georgiana overcame her embarrassment and launched into a detailed account of the merriment delivered by her aunt and uncle for her eighteenth birthday. Refreshments were brought and the small group exchanged stories for the next hour with much laughter ensuing.

Darcy was greeted to the distinct sound of revelry drifting down the hall as he discarded a dusty coat into the waiting hands of Mr. Taylor. “We have visitors?”

“Yes Sir. Dr. Darcy and Col. Fitzwilliam arrived this afternoon.”

Darcy nodded, striding briskly to the parlor and paused on the threshold to view the scene. Col. Fitzwilliam stood in the middle of the room with arms gesticulating as he related what Darcy quickly ascertained was a tale of foolish new cadets attempting to learn marching maneuvers. Lizzy and Georgiana were laughing hysterically, while a grinning George sat sprawled on his deceased brother’s favored chair with long maroon covered legs crunched into the minimal space.

“I leave for the day and all manner of disorder arises. Pemberley apparently now hosts anyone who wanders by?”

“With such fine whiskey and beautiful, charming women in residence it is only to be expected William,” George retorted with a follow up sip of the amber liquid in his glass.

“I assuredly cannot argue the charming women, or the whiskey for that matter. Richard, it is wonderful to see you. I trust all is well?”

“Tolerably, cousin. I urgently needed to breathe fresh air and escape the adolescents lately come to my regiment. Besides, Dr. Darcy required a companion on the road. To keep him safe, you understand.”

George snorted, Darcy chuckling as he crossed to his wife and sister. “Georgie dearest,” with a quick kiss to her cheek before lifting Lizzy’s fingers to his lips, “Beloved, you are well?”

“Perfect, dear. I have been marvelously entertained. Our guests seem to be bursting with amusing anecdotes.”

“Passes the time, I suppose. Uncle, we have had no news since Devon. What have you been up to? And please tell me Darcy House is yet habitable?”

“No worries, William. The cousins all send their best wishes. We spent a week on the coast then I departed to visit friends in Dorset. I actually was only in London for four days, which is why Darcy House is undamaged. Mrs. Smyth expressed her sadness to see me depart, but I longed for Pemberley. Nothing quite compares to the autumn here.”

“I am discovering the same,” Lizzy said. “William told me the gardens were particularly lovely in the fall and he was not exaggerating.”

“Of course,” Richard interjected, “This is your first autumn here! I had forgotten. Mr. Clark and his staff are remarkable. My parents should allow him to train their gardeners.”

“I arrived at the end of autumn past, but the rains and cold weather set in shortly thereafter so William had little opportunity to acquaint me extensively with the gardens. Except for what I could see from windows, that is.”

“What a shame,” George murmured, “Holed up inside with nothing to do all winter. How trying that must have been.” He glanced slyly at his nephew, who was approaching with whiskey decanter in hand.

“Yes,” Darcy intoned dryly, “It was terribly stressful, but we managed.” He refilled his uncle’s glass without meeting his eyes. “Of course, it was blessedly quiet. Virtually relative free until Christmas.”

“Ah, Christmas at Pemberley.” George dreamily stared into space, ignoring Darcy’s playful slur.

“Will you stay for Christmas, Uncle?” Georgiana asked with a pleading tone.

“We shall see, dear. I am enjoying my leisure. By the way,” he pulled a folded piece of parchment from his pocket, “It is a bit crinkled I fear, but I have a missive from Raul. Have either of you heard from Miss de Bourgh?”

Lizzy shook her head negatively, Darcy responding, “Not for a month. I rather assumed she was otherwise entertained.”

“Apparently quite so. Raja states that all is progressing smoothly. He is working at the hospital in Ashford as well as offering his services throughout the community as required. Lady Catherine is now singing his praises to all who will listen, probably questioning when he will officially propose and increase her prestige in society.”

“Undoubtedly Miss de Bourgh wonders the same,” Lizzy said.

“So he has not secured her hand as of yet? What is he waiting for?” Darcy was honestly surprised.

“Soon, I garner from his letter. He wanted to be established somewhat, earn Lady Catherine’s undying respect and approval, and shower Miss de Bourgh with the full treasure trove of courtship rituals. I gather he has exhausted the arsenal of romantic tomfoolery so with nothing remaining, engagement is imminent.”

“Hopefully he has left a few romantic gestures in reserve. Women appreciate that sort of thing.” Lizzy smiled winsomely at her husband.

“Is this true, Darcy?” Col. Fitzwilliam asked with a raised brow and smirk.

“I have found it to be so, yes. You would do well to remember the information, cousin.” Richard shuddered, taking a quick sip of whiskey.

Lizzy laughed. “We must find a nice lady for you Richard. You are far too wayward. Capricious, poor soul. You need a steady girl to stabilize you.”

“Shackle, you mean,” George spoke in defensive of his friend. “Not all men are destined for domesticity, dear Elizabeth. Some of us prefer being foot loose and fancy free! Although, having a woman about can have its advantages, I suppose. Back massages, home decorating, darning socks, that sort of thing, eh William?”

“Precisely, uncle. That is why I chose marriage,” Darcy answered seriously, eyes twinkling and meeting Lizzy’s.

“The day I darn socks will be the day the sun fails to rise. Back massages are acceptable, however.” She and Darcy shared a brief, knowing smile.

Yet holding his wife’s eyes, Darcy spoke to his uncle and cousin, “Speaking of matrimony, I am thankful that you both are here and do pray you intend to stay for a while. Elizabeth has agreed to marry me, again, in a renewal ceremony at Pemberley Chapel.”

Col. Fitzwilliam smiled delightfully, lifting his glass Lizzy’s direction. George whistled and declared with a grin, “Romantic gesture of the highest order, indeed. Well done William! How marvelous for me

as I missed the official nuptials. When is the date?”

“We have not decided as of yet,” Darcy answered, still gazing at Lizzy. “I was opting for November twenty-eight as a perfect commemoration of the happiest day of my entire life.”

“I, however,” Lizzy interrupted softly, “reminded my husband that I will be as enormous as a house by late November, if not in the actual throes of birth travails. Additionally it somehow seems irreverent to waddle down the church aisle to be wed while clearly nearly to burst with child!”

“I do believe, my dear niece, that it is far too late to hide that fact. Besides, I am sure God is privy to the fact that you two are already legally and spiritually bound, and shall withhold the lightening bolt.”

Lizzy reddened but persevered, “All true, Dr. Darcy. I think we should wait until after the baby is born....”

“And I,” it was Darcy’s turn to interrupt, “refuse to wait that long. I have a burning urge to exchange vows with my wife in the Darcy family chapel. She has accepted my proposal so cannot renege on the agreement.” He spoke with a slight edgy tone and clenched jaw, but wore a smile for Lizzy and eyes indigo with desire.

“Well,” George boomed as he rose with a spine cracking stretch, “I am free all next week. You, Colonel?”

“My docket is empty for a couple weeks,” Richard shrugged. “A wedding is an adequate entertainment, I suppose.”

The truth is Darcy and Lizzy had no serious disagreements regarding the reaffirming of their vows in the Pemberley Chapel. In fact, both would have happily planned and concluded what was essentially desired to be a simple, intimate affair within days of returning home. Lizzy theatrically teased, sending Darcy into near hysterics, by performing the wedding march with exaggerated waddling and thrusting her stomach out as far as possible. However, she honestly had no moral conflict with exchanging vows in a Holy sanctuary with her husband, gravid state or no.

Only two elements gave them pause.

One: Georgiana, upon hearing the news, literally burst forth with schemes and expectations regarding everything from the gown to the flowers to the guest list. Initially both the bride and groom were flummoxed as they saw the cozy, understated affair they envisioned turning into an Event. They managed to rein in the more extravagant ideas Georgiana invented, the white doves being a bit too much even for the romantic Darcy, but her enthusiasm was contagious, especially to the fore-noted hopelessly maudlin groom. Even the generally pragmatic

Lizzy had to admit that a new gown was desirable.

Second: Lizzy and Darcy realized that whether modest or ostentatious, having as many family members as feasible around to witness the celebration was a pleasing prospect.

For these reasons Lizzy did lean toward waiting until after the baby was born, thinking that then her parents and Kitty would be visiting as well as Jane and Bingley settled nearby. Darcy pointed out that they could not count on Dr. Darcy still being in England. The truth is, he intoned with all the logic at his disposal, there would necessarily be several members of the family busy elsewhere no matter when they scheduled it, and he stubbornly persisted in his assertion that the ritual take place as soon as possible. The ultimate point of the ceremony was to please his burning need to wed in the Darcy family church.

This latter fact so moved Lizzy that she could not refuse his heart's desire had she wished it. She was well aware of the fact that the vast majority of women would be fortunate to find a man who longed to wed them once, let alone twice! The intertwined relationship they now shared meant she wholly comprehended how vital being married in the Pemberley Chapel was to his essence. Therefore, although they remained vague to George and Richard, a tentative date for October twelve had been set. They were only waiting on final word from the Bingleys, in hopes that they would arrive by then; for the unknown arrival of Dr. Darcy; and for Lizzy's gown and the ring to be delivered.

By October seven all fell into place.

George was in residence and Col. Fitzwilliam was an added bonus highly pleasing to them both. The elder Fitzwilliams were at Rivallain, as were Jonathan and Priscilla, all delighted with the idea.

A hastily scribbled note delivered on the morning of the seventh from Hasberry announced that the Bingleys had arrived the day before. Lizzy was ecstatic! She desired for them to be present, but had not expected them as their last communiqué had alluded to a mid October relocation. Within minutes of reading the note Lizzy rose, stating the intent to drive to Hasberry immediately. Darcy literally leapt to intercept her midway to the door.

"You are absolutely not driving in your condition!"

"William! That is unfair! I am perfectly capable of handling the curricule. I drove it just three days ago to Lambton!"

"Lambton is less than five miles away and a well traveled road. Hasberry is nearly fifteen and partially desolate. It is not a matter of you being unable to handle the carriage, love, as I know you proficient."

"Then why....." Her voice caught in a sob, Darcy gathering her

into a firm embrace.

“Please, beloved, placate my over protectiveness just this once. I would worry so. Allow me a compromise, I shall send one of the grooms with a letter the moment you pen one and insist he tarry pending a reply.”

In this way they received confirmation of attendance from the Bingleys before the day was over. That same afternoon Madame du Loire delivered Lizzy’s gown for the final fitting and word reached Darcy that the jeweler had finished the ring. All was set in motion for the renewal of their vows.

## **9 – With This Ring I Thee Wed**

October twelfth dawned crisp and cool, but cloudless and brightly sunny. Darcy woke with tingles of excitement racing through his body nearly as intense as on the morning of their official wedding day. Naturally there were a vast number of differences. On November twenty-eight of 1816 he had barely slept a wink; dreams plagued with alternating enchanting visions of his glorious fiancé gliding toward him at the altar with dreadful images of the same glorious fiancé fading away in some horrible manner. His nervousness all throughout the morning had been extreme, at times virtually ill from the tension.

However, the greatest difference was that on this wedding day he woke with the luscious softness of his wife's body curled in his arms, knowing with blissful conviction that he would not be waiting until late in the evening to make love with her. With this delicious thought premier, he lightly kissed Lizzy's shoulder and commenced gossamer caresses over downy flesh.

"I believe we have erred, Mr. Darcy," she whispered sleepily.

"In what respect?" Kisses deepening along her neck.

"It is bad luck to espy the bride prior to the wedding, so I am told."

"I shall keep my eyes closed."

Lizzy giggled, turning abruptly and forcefully flipping him onto his back. With a grace truly astonishing for a woman seven months pregnant, she was astride his thighs and had his arms pinned to the sides before he took a breath. Despite his surprise both eyes were tightly shut, laughter escaping as her lips descended onto his.

Nibbling kisses and teasing suckles ensued for several rapturous minutes, Lizzy murmuring, "It is getting quite difficult to bend over, my lover. Your son insists on occupying all available space including a portion of my lung cavity I believe. Typical Darcy, determined and insatiable."

"I have no idea to what you refer, Mrs. Darcy."

Lizzy lifted slightly, both to inhale deeply and to gaze upon her handsome spouse's face. She smiled at his pretend haughtiness and sealed eyes, thick lashes lying beautifully on stubbly cheeks. With elbows resting

on his solid upper chest, she tenderly stroked over unshaven jaws.

“Open your eyes, Fitzwilliam,” she whispered.

He obeyed, love radiating forth as hands initiated their adoring journey over velvet knees and thighs. Studying, admiration mutual and profound, they observed in silence. Passion rose naturally, neither consciously encouraging the rampant excitement nor able to halt the surging tide had they wanted to.

“I love you.” The hush broken simultaneously by low voices expressing an emotion tangible and critical to survival. Individual hearts no longer independent of the other; beats in synchrony and the impetus for each subsequent stroke. Skin as familiar to probing fingertips as the flesh covering their own body, yet never unscathed by the merest brushing glance.

“I love you.” Who spoke? It did not matter as their spirits were united, thoughts and sensibilities merged into one voice. Audible expressions of love and devotion no longer necessary as their innermost essence breathed the other’s emotions, yet they could not refuse the sheer pleasure in hearing the sentiments vocalized.

“I love you.” Lizzy leaned to capture parted and waiting lips, the kiss serious with intent. Oh, the sweetness! How blissful a kiss with the one you love. Lips tingling, blood rushing, heat escalating, moisture shared, air of life mingling, senses reeling, intimacy integral.

“I love you.” Withdrawing a fraction to inhale and share piercing looks of unparalleled reverence. Lizzy’s lengthy tresses falling as a veil over Darcy’s arm where he caressed one silky arm and neck.

“God, how I love you!” Pulling her as he rose slightly to claim tasty lips yet again, passion raging as bodies moved with increased urgency. The pressing yearning to touch on all surfaces ruling, hands traveling fervently over flaming flesh. Mouths melded with tongues gliding, sighs and moans escaping intermittently, hearts pounding erratically.

“I love you! I love you, I love you....” Trailing declarations between hard kisses all about his flushed face. “William, I love you.” Lizzy sat up, breathing heavily, hands flattened on Darcy’s chest for leverage as she writhed her pelvis into his.

“I....I love you....lord, Lizzy, I love you...” Lost in throaty groans, Darcy’s eyes closing in ecstasy while arching with her. Broad, mildly rough hands sliding over the rounded bulge of their child, enclosing ripe breasts. Oh, the rapture! Heaven touched as they united, bodies surging together, buried deep physically and spiritually.

“Love you.....love you.....love you....love you....” Words



spilling from panting lips with each rhythmic motion, unending avowals in tune with seething action, eternal worship mingled with fierce sexual gratification. Rapid, slow, furious, languid, hard, gentle, extended, abbreviated....pace determined by immediate yearning. Raw passion accelerating to explosive levels, control teetering on the edge of heavenly bliss yet harnessed by mutual need for increasing heights of ardor.

"I love you, always." Whispered professions as eyes locked for the last span of time, reciprocal desire to communicate through glazed glances all the vast love experienced. Hoarse moans and guttural groans unleashed, eyes closed as sensations coalesce and burst forth through every nerve and cell, spines stiffening simultaneously with hands clenching hands. Eternal joy, never ending veneration, and undying adulation expressed in the most elemental manner.

"I love you William!"

"I love you Elizabeth!"

Decipherable words forgotten as spirits soar and bodies melt in gloriously unifying pleasure.

Lizzy remained straddling Darcy's hips, supporting a trembling body by weaved hands on her thighs. She needed to watch her husband. Never was he more beautiful than after they made love. His fair skin flushed, noble brow moist, lush lips ruddy, firm chest heaving, and pulse pounding in his throat. Yet it was not the readily visible signs of his pleasure that moved her the most. Rather it was the glow of utter elation and peace that suffused his countenance, eyes shining with total satiation, and mouth smiling with transcendent happiness and devotion. She did not require a mirror to know that her mien reflected the same as she could feel the gushing emotions through and on her skin.

Eventually he untangled his fingers from hers, tenderly grasping arms, and pulled her onto the bed beside him, instantly enveloping and burying his face between her breasts. "I would die without you Elizabeth," he mumbled, "My heart would quite literally cease to beat. I so love and need you! Words do not exist in the English language to convey how deeply I love you. You are my life and breath, my very soul."

Lizzy smiled, stroking through his thick hair. She had no need to reply, his articulations precisely stating her heart. The heart that belonged wholly to him and survived in him. All too soon they would need to rise and part. As excited as they were about today's scheduled event, absence from the other, no matter how brief, was painful. For now they reveled in their sweet communion, allowing senses to be restored to normalcy at a gradual rate. Softly they caressed, speaking of love and marriage and children and Pemberley until the clock insisted they leave their bed and

begin preparations for their second wedding.

\* \* \* \*

Approximately a mile west from Pemberley Manor, along the avenue which connected to the main road leading to Lambton, nestled a small cluster of buildings amid a shallow valley in the midst of which stood Pemberley Chapel. The accompanying structures primarily consisted of resident dwellings for Pemberley workers in addition to a handful of simple business establishments. The tiny hamlet did not have a proper name, traditionally referred to as Pemberley Village or just The Village. It existed for the sole purpose of providing the most basic necessities for the tenants of Pemberley so as to avoid traveling the additionally miles to Lambton during a busy day and as a central meeting place for socializing. A modest assembly hall was located across from the church and the orphanage was situated on the northern edge of the settlement.

For most of the Sundays during the warm summer and fall, the Darcys walked to the chapel for services. This was a new development insisted on by Lizzy, Darcy still uncomfortable as he deemed it appropriate for the Master and Mistress to arrive in state. Lizzy snorted at this idea, forcing him to grudgingly and angrily concede by plainly strolling right by the carriage on the first fine morning in April and heading down the avenue on foot. Darcy had gaped for several seconds, Georgiana shrugging and following Lizzy without a backward glance, finally gathering his wits and serenely trailing after. In reality he was seriously vexed and an argument had ensued upon returning home. As with many issues during those strange weeks, Lizzy was a bit irrational and would not budge. Much later, when Darcy recalled the incident, he chalked it up to early pregnancy lunacy. He was only partially correct. Once again ensconced at Pemberley after the season in London, Lizzy had reasserted her desire to walk to church. Luckily her emotions were then stabilized and they were able to discuss the prospect rationally. In the end, Darcy concurred that walking was allowable during clement weather although it did retain a measure of oddity for him that time would never fully shake. Nonetheless, strolling with his wife and sister was a delightful pastime, and the residents of Pemberley Village did not seem to view the ignoble arrival of their Master as indecorous.

Today, however, they would not only travel by carriage, but would travel separately. Once parted for their dressing rooms they adhered to the time honored custom of remaining secreted apart until

reconnecting inside the sanctuary.

The Bingleys had arrived the afternoon before. Charles was clearly harried and displeased to vacate Hasberry so soon after moving in, but the general air of frivolity which inevitably surrounded Col. Fitzwilliam and Dr. Darcy bolstered his spirit. They, naturally, were having tremendous fun with poor Darcy, regurgitating every pre-matrimony jest known to man up to and including giving intimate relationship advice about the wedding night; the latter especially ridiculous as neither were married. Before an hour passed Bingley's native gaiety was revived and he readily joined into the amusement. The evening's "bachelor party" was lively, Darcy unobtrusively slipping away sober and long before the other three.

Darcy owned several outfits of a highly formal cut and weave, allowing Samuel to pick one at random. The end result was nearly identical to what he wore for his official wedding day, or at least he thought so. The truth is he had taken no particular note as to his attire on that day either, trusting Samuel to provide the best. Darcy may own an obscene amount of clothing, but he honestly paid little attention to what he wore on a daily basis. Samuel chose a jacket and matching breeches of deepest blue wool, almost black, with a waistcoat of the same color, but accented with an edging trim of burnished auburn.

Darcy fingered the vest with a faint frown, "I do not recall this waistcoat," he mumbled, glancing at Samuel's inscrutable visage, "Have I always possessed it?"

"As you say, Sir," Samuel replied flatly, avoiding his Master's eyes.

Darcy smiled inwardly, suddenly suspecting the color of his wife's gown, but making no further comment. The proffered white silk cravat also sported a faint glistening of interwoven auburn threads.

Col. Fitzwilliam wore his best dress uniform, Bingley in a fine suit of beige wool, and Dr. Darcy for once in full English gentleman's attire. His lanky frame was encased in a tailored suit of bluish-grey with long trousers to match, the complete reserved effect counteracted somewhat by the florid Kashmir scarf of innumerable colors utilized as a necktie.

"Dashing, Uncle," Darcy proclaimed sardonically upon entering the parlor where the men gathered. George grinned, lifting his tea cup in salute.

"How is the groom this morning?" Richard asked, "Feeling well? No last minute jitters? I am sure we could find a way for you to bow out gracefully."

"Hysterical. Have you been rehearsing these witticisms all week?"

“Only for a day or two.”

“I daresay Darcy, I am yet astounded that you of all people are purposely placing yourself on ceremony a second time,” Bingley declared with a shake of his head. “I could never force myself to go through with it again.”

Darcy smiled and clapped his friend on the shoulder. “It is not quite the same Bingley. It would require a far stronger man than me putting a pistol to my head to induce me to stand before all of Meryton society a second time. This is vastly different. Although, enduring these two jokers and their clever barbs for the past week has been torturous.”

“It is becoming ugly in here Colonel. We better get him to the church where the aura of God will halt his tongue. Besides, I am starving so we need to hurry along. Knowing Mrs. Langton, she has a special breakfast planned for after the festivities.”

Lizzy, in contrast, was inundated with female approbation. Jane, Georgiana, Lady Matlock, and even Marguerite were effusive with praise for the dress, hair, jewels, and the entire concept. Lizzy’s dressing room was a veritable hotbed of feminine giggles, perfume, and romanticism with the ladies exchanging sentimental musings of husbands and amour. Emotions were high, the air thick with excitement. Mrs. Reynolds played the part of commander, assuring the men were well away before Mrs. Darcy departed for the church.

Reverend Bertram had nearly collapsed from overwhelming delight when Darcy approached him regarding the renewal ceremony. Like Mr. Darcy, the good Reverend had also suffered an acute case of disappointment at having the marriage of his patron, a man he had known since birth, wed so far away. Naturally he would never have voiced this dismay to Mr. Darcy, but the intense happiness expressed left no doubt how he felt about the matter. Now he stood at the altar of his beloved chapel, wearing his best formal vestments, beaming at Mr. Darcy and the entire assembly. Outwardly he was sedate and composed, but the rosiness to his cheeks and broad grin revealed his enthusiasm.

The small chapel was decorated with a dozen bouquets of fall flowers and two large candelabras. No other adornments were necessary, the interior lovely as is. Aside from the family no other guests had been invited. After much debate, both Darcys wishing for several of their friends to be present, it was unanimously decided that if they invited anyone then all of Derbyshire would feel slighted. Neither wanted their private affair to become a countywide social extravaganza. Those of their closest friends understood. As a compromise, they planned a dinner party for that evening as a way to share the occasion with their intimates

without causing an uproar.

The moment Darcy assumed his proper station to the left of Reverend Bertram, facing the gathering of his dearest relatives smiling at him from the richly polished oak benches, peace infused his soul. All niggling thoughts of the foolishness or inanity of his desire for this ceremony vanished. He gazed upon the beloved persons before him and as if by magic he saw his mother and father sitting in their customary spaces in the front pew. There was his grandfather, unruly grey hair and bushy eyebrows framing gentle eyes of midnight blue. He could feel the presence of all the long generations of Darcys etched into the very beams and floorboards of the sanctuary. Somehow he knew that just as surely as God Himself watched this Holy ritual so did the innumerable ancestors who had been baptized, married, and eulogized in this room.

Peace, contentment, and supreme happiness. None of the nervousness from before plagued him. Everything was different this time, until Elizabeth appeared on the threshold. Instantly Darcy was struck with the identical paralyzing awe and breathless wonder from November past. His heart constricted and the room faded as his eyes peered through a narrow tunnel focused exclusively on his stunning wife. Was she more beautiful then on their wedding day? Nothing would supplant the vision of Elizabeth Bennet in her wispy white wedding gown with golden ribbons braided through her hair.

No, it was the immediate surge of joy and rush of thanksgiving which blazed through his soul that rendered him mute and transfixed. She was everything to him. Suddenly the handful of minutes elapsed for her to glide gracefully down the aisle was an eternity. The need to touch her, smell her perfume, hear her voice, and gaze deeply into her astounding eyes was overpowering, causing his knees to nearly buckle and lungs to burst. Each step she took was an individually painted portrait hung in his mind's gallery alongside the array of Elizabeth portraits already residing.

Her gown was a deep auburn, richly woven of glossy damask with a fine pattern of lacy leaves. The color accented her chocolate eyes and lustrous brunette locks, hence why Darcy so adored her in brownish hues, and the understated embellishments of lace and ribbons suited their mutual taste for minimalism. Another Marguerite creation with highlighting gems displayed her glorious hair to best advantage. There was no hiding the swell of their child and the maidenly blush was gone from her cheeks, Lizzy now a woman of elegance and maturity. This refinement manifest in all aspects of her bearing and mien. Darcy's heart grew further with pride and vaulting love.

Lizzy reached her incredible husband, hands clasped firmly and eagerly as she mounted the dais steps. She only had eyes for him, so regal and handsome with warmth radiating and abiding affection transparent. They stared at each other frankly, no hesitation or tremulousness. The seconds stretched, both lost in adoring gazes, and startling slightly when Reverend Bertram spoke.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together, once again, this Man and this Woman in Holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with His presence and first miracle that He wrought in Cana of Galilee, and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men. Therefore, it is not by any to be embarked on unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

“First, marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name. Secondly, marriage was ordained for a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of abstinence might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body. Thirdly, marriage was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be rededicated.

“Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth have chosen this day to stand a second time before God in His Holy Sanctuary to consecrate their union, to express their undying faithfulness and devotion one to the other, and to receive the blessing. Their commitment to each other and to the institution of marriage as ordained in the Divine Scriptures is a testimony. I shall not ask if any know just cause for these two to not be wed as that time has past. Assuredly the communal dedication they have shown coupled with the desire to suffer through another long winded ritual proves their loyalty and seriousness.”

The Reverend smiled, breaking from his solemn pose, as a soft ripple of chuckling ran through the assembly. Lizzy and Darcy laughed lowly, tearing their gazes from the other’s face to glance with twinkling eyes toward the Reverend.

Clearing his throat and raising his voice, Rev. Bertram resumed,

“Fitzwilliam, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the Holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?”

Darcy’s smile was faint, merely a tiny lift to the corners of his mouth, face awash with serene intensity as he responded in a firm voice, “I will.”

Lizzy inhaled deeply, eyes blinking rapidly to abolish the tears threatening to overflow. Darcy squeezed her hands and so mesmerized was she by the tender emotion saturating his face that she nearly missed the Reverend’s words.

“Elizabeth, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the Holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love him, honor him, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?”

She wanted to shout her promise loudly with a ringing exultation, so enormous her love and desire. Therefore, it was with some surprise that her words caught and she swallowed before able to utter in a husky tone, “I will.”

Darcy smiled broadly, releasing a soft whistle while arching a brow. Lizzy flushed and giggled, pressing his hands firmly.

“At this time Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth shall declare their vows to each other. Per their request they have chosen to restate their promises with a unique melding of the traditional vows as well as personal sentiments.”

Darcy stepped closer to Elizabeth, his hands completely encasing her smaller ones and eyes locked onto her face. Emotions overwhelmed him, but his voice was loud and clear. “I, Fitzwilliam, take thee Elizabeth to my wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth. Elizabeth, you are my heart and soul. I promise to love you for all of eternity trusting that even death shall not part us but for a moment. You have renewed my spirit, brought me purpose, and healed my heart. My gratitude is immeasurable and I vow to spend my life proving my thankfulness.”

He paused, squeezing her hands before removing one to reach into his pocket. Claspng her left hand and gazing intently into her eyes, he said, “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and

with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The narrow band he slipped onto her third finger was almost identical to the one he had placed there nearly a year ago, and nestled perfectly sandwiched with the engagement ring between.

On the night he left Pemberley for a wild ride to London with vague and desperate hopes of salvaging the catastrophe surrounding the Bennet family with Wickham’s evil, he had spontaneously diverted to his mother’s room. On a pure whim he retrieved the small box protecting the engagement ring gifted by his father so many decades prior, thrusting it into a deep pocket, and refusing to heed the silent voice in his head that labeled him a fool. A number of times over the following weeks, even as he carried the box securely on his person at all times, he would figuratively and literally shake his head at his folly.

On the afternoon after meeting and proposing to Elizabeth in that misty moor near Longbourn, he had presented the ring to her with extreme formality. He never could explain why he acted in such a fanciful manner as to take the ring from its resting place, but being able to immediately situate it onto the finger of the woman he loved was a moment he would never forget.

It was constructed of gold and adorned with a one carat star sapphire of vivid blue, centered between two half-carat diamonds. James Darcy had personally designed the ring for his fiancé, searching, so the tale went, all over England for the most exquisite sapphire he could find. Like many family stories, James Darcy embellished the tale for the amusement of his children, yet Darcy did not doubt his father’s devotion to seek the very best for the woman he had loved and waited on for four years. Whatever the truth, the ring was magnificent and Lizzy remained awestruck that something so elegant belonged to her. The wedding band Darcy designed for Lizzy was delicate; a slim band of gold in a braided pattern with three petite diamonds spaced with two small blue sapphires. For the sake of continuity he ordered today’s band fashioned similarly except with three sapphires and two diamonds. Placing it on her finger was not quite as profoundly moving as the first time, or at least he did not feel as lightheaded and dazed with emotion, but his heart skipped a beat and fingers trembled.

Lizzy was momentarily speechless, tears welling and throat tightening. Darcy grasped her hands with a gentle caress, spontaneously lifting to his lips for a soft kiss. Their eyes met, Darcy winking and smiling brightly.

Lizzy returned his smile, lifting her chin and speaking strongly, “I,



Elizabeth, take thee Fitzwilliam to my wedded husband, to have and to hold, 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 plight thee my troth. Fitzwilliam, the life I did not realize was empty became full on the day you married me. You have graced me with your love, your soul, your entire being. I am complete in you, a woman because of you, and a mother as a gift from you. Eternally I shall love you and forevermore I pledge to strive in all ways to foster your happiness."

Emotion threatened to engulf him at her words, vigorous breaths necessary as she completed her earnest vows. The modicum of calm he attained was assaulted seconds later when, with a secretive smile, she dipped into a hidden pocket of her gown, withdrawing a wide band of brushed gold. Turning his left hand upward, she slowly glided the warmed metal over his ring finger while reciting:

"Fitzwilliam Darcy, with this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and all that I possess I share with thee: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." She lifted the ring clad finger to her lips bestowing a tender kiss. "I love you William," she whispered for his ears only.

"Elizabeth!" Darcy's mouth had dropped open in utter shock, shattered emotions strewn beyond the ability to reassemble. Thankfully Reverend Bertram sensed his stupefaction and looming collapse, smoothly assuming control by leading the assembly in a prayer. Darcy and Lizzy harkened to his words peripherally, captured by the other's concentrated stare.

Lizzy was beaming, quite smug at having astonished her husband so completely. Darcy thrilled at the sensation of the solid reminder of her promise heavy on his flesh. Men rarely wore wedding bands; it being a cultural custom not widely adhered to in England. Yet the feel of the metal on his finger was wonderful and he wholly comprehended with stunning clarity why the visible, tangible evidence of matrimony was so vitally important to women. His heart soared and he knew without a doubt that he would proudly display her token of their unending love and fidelity for all of his life.

The Reverend finished the benediction, laying his hands atop Darcy and Lizzy's clasped ones, intoning in a ringing voice, "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder! Forasmuch as Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to the other, and have declared the

same by giving and receiving of rings, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The short conclusion was timely and adequate for Darcy to restore a semblance of coherency to his frayed sensibilities. The urge they felt to kiss each other was painful in intensity, but they resisted, managing to appropriately respond to Reverend Bertram’s forceful declaration, “May I present, to my tremendous honor, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

\* \* \* \*

The day’s activities were jubilant. A delicious breakfast repast was served by Mrs. Langton, surpassing all expectations. Laughter was rampant, congratulations and well wishes abounding. Merriment and frivolity reigned, augmented as additional guests began arriving as the afternoon progressed. Lizzy and Darcy stayed as close together as feasible, deluged with innumerable requests to replay the vows and display their rings. The women universally wiped teary eyes, glancing speculatively at their husbands while the gentlemen feigned ignorance. It is doubtful that Darcy sporting a band would initiate a fashion trend, but more than a few of the younger men of their acquaintance privately thought the gesture romantic. None ventured a negative word and even Dr. Darcy found no cause to tease.

The general air of gaiety was delightful, but eventually Darcy snapped. The need for even a minute of solitude with his wife multiplied to a craving hunger until he finally grasped her elbow, politely excusing themselves from the cluster of females surrounding, and lead her to his study. Leaning against the door, he pulled her into his embrace as close as possible with bulging belly intruding, cupping her face with firm palms. Lizzy fully expected him to kiss her, had closed eyes and pursed lips in anticipation, only to open them moments later when the blissful sensation of his mouth was not felt.

He was staring with smiling, blue-eyed Darcy intensity. “William?”

“Elizabeth Darcy. I love you.”

“And I love you, Fitzwilliam Darcy,” she replied with a chuckle. “Was it all you dreamed of beloved? Is your heart content now that we have married in the Darcy chapel?”

“My heart is content married to you, my love. Today’s ceremony fulfilled a family tradition and provided me the opportunity to again

express my undying faithfulness to you, my precious wife. I am grateful for many things, dearest, but especially that you still love me in spite of my mawkishness.”

“Among your many stellar attributes which heighten my love for you, sir, your mawkishness is listed. I would not wish for you to be any other way!”

“Elizabeth, beautiful, sweet, sensual, clever Elizabeth.” He caressed over her soft neck, lips brushing imperceptibly along her jaw. “I must tell you how incredibly I love my ring. I shall wear it forever, a treasure of you. What made you think of it?”

His lips had traveled to her ear, Lizzy rapidly succumbing to the allure of him. “Hmmm....I wanted to make this occasion exceptional, to surprise you. I do not actually know what made me think of it. I guess it was you planning my ring, an additional token not really necessary as I told you.” She withdrew, lifting his chin to peer into his eyes seriously. “William, you never fail to gift me with something special. You are far better at such things than I, despite your assertions to being uncreative.” She kissed him lightly. “I wanted you to have a tangible remembrance of this day. To express how profoundly moved I am by you and all you do for me. William, I love you so very much!”

She kissed him fiercely, Darcy pulling her closer and responding with yearning. Seconds later she broke the kiss, eyes less than an inch away as she stroked softly over his face. “The ring is symbolic of our love. Strong as metal, precious as gold, brightly shining, and without end. I know you will treasure it beloved, but I want you to understand that if it is uncomfortable in any way you do not need to wear it. I know it is odd. I also know you; on or off your finger you will revere what it represents and cherish it....”

Darcy was shaking his head with increasing vigor, finally halting her words with his mouth on hers. “Stop, Elizabeth! I love the ring and will wear it for all the reasons you stated. Nothing you give me in love could be uncomfortable or odd. In fact, quite the opposite. I never wore the Darcy signet, as you know, because the weight bothered me and I could never adjust to its presence. This,” and he held up his left hand, glittering gold band at home on his slender finger, “feels as if it belongs, as if it has always been there.”

He grasped her hand, lifting for a lingering kiss to each fingertip. Then he grinned, “See how you have altered me, beloved. I am not the faintest bit embarrassed to flaunt my emotional qualities for all to gawk.”

Lizzy laughed. “I delight in this my lover, however I rather like the severe, reserved man I fell in love with. Save the worst of your

saccharine aspects for our intimate moments, otherwise the boys on the play yard may torture you.”

He laughed richly, “I always could prevail over the other boys so I have no fear.”

“Braggart,” she teased.

“Yes, this is true. Darcy of Pemberley, prideful and arrogant. And now I have you by my side to heighten my conceit. Add a perfect son to the mixture and I shall likely be uncontrollable in my vanity. Whatever shall you do with me?”

“Unleash Dr. Darcy to restore your humility through biting sarcasm. First, however, I wish to passionately kiss my handsome husband for several minutes. Contain yourself as best you can, my lover, as we do have guests to attend to.”

“I make no promises,” he mumbled with lips already occupied in pleasanter pursuits than talking.

In the end they did manage to restrain their baser impulses.....barely. The partying would continue late into the night, one meal melding into the next. Most of the guests would end up dwelling at Pemberley for the night, either because they lived a distance away, such as the Drurys and Sitwells, or because the gentlemen were too intoxicated and women too exhausted to travel. Pemberley had not hosted such a lively and large gathering for months, most of their previous dinner parties modest affairs. As typical Lizzy was extroverted, seemingly everywhere at once, and in every way the perfect hostess. Also typically Darcy was reticent, even the group of only friends and family wearing at times. Nonetheless, his happiness was apparent to all, the constant smile and glittering eyes belying his aloof pose. To this crowd of folks who had known Darcy the man for years, he was downright ebullient.

In point of fact, the Darcys enjoyed themselves immensely and if no re-consummation occurred that evening, Lizzy needing to literally be carried up the final flight of stairs and long hallway, (*“One of the drawbacks to a manor Pemberley’s size is how far apart all the rooms are,” she muttered sleepily against her husband’s neck.*), it did not matter overly to Darcy. After all, he had the remainder of his long life to make love to his adorable wife. And this was a mission he accepted gladly and would accomplish frequently with utter joy.

## **10 – A Time Apart**

“Damnation!” Darcy muttered, throwing the letter onto his desk and rising to pace in agitation to the window. He stood for a time staring sightlessly as thoughts whirled. Finally with a heavy sigh he turned and exited the room. Seeking the nearest footman he was informed that his wife, as suspected despite the dreary weather, was in the garden.

It was a week after their renewal ceremony, the guests all returned to their homes except for Dr. Darcy and Col. Fitzwilliam. The two bachelors were currently riding, Darcy assumed, since they had asked him to join their excursion. Unfortunately a recently delivered pile of letters from Mr. Daniels was consuming all his time. Furthermore, the news from London would require an additional sacrifice that threatened to send him into a serious irritation, hence why he sought his lovely bride. Always her presence soothed him, but primarily it was to discuss the business at hand.

He smiled instantly at the sight of her dressed in a thick coat and old boots, wide brimmed bonnet shading her delicate skin, and bulging belly not inhibiting her from kneeling in the dirt and digging vigorously. She wore gloves as she planted the row of bulbs, but the smudges of dirt on her cheeks and neck illustrated her lack of concern for delicacy at the cost of fun. Darcy adored her lack of pretension as one of the hundreds of attributes which set her apart from all other women.

She glanced up at the sound of gravel crunching, lighting up immediately, and sitting back on her heels. “William! What are you doing here?”

“I needed to see your lovely face.”

Lizzy laughed, brushing at the stray wisps of hair tickling her eyes before removing the filthy gloves. “I rather doubt it lovely at the moment, but thank you love. Since you are here I shall request your assistance rising.”

He gladly clasped the hands offered, pulling her up, and leaning for a kiss. She withdrew slightly, halting him with a chuckle, “Kiss me and you will likely get dirt on your face.”

“A little dirt never hurt anyone.”

Several minutes later she was laughing again as she wiped his

soiled nose and brushed over the specks on his jacket. "I did warn you."

"Sit, my beloved. Aside from your delightful kisses, I do need to talk to you." Lizzy noted the tone of seriousness, turning to him the moment they assumed comfortable seats on the padded bench. Darcy clasped her hands, meeting her eyes with a faint, forced smile. "You know I received missives from Mr. Daniels." She nodded. "It is as I feared, dearest. I must travel to Town to attend to business matters. You know I hoped to avoid this, but never actually thought I would succeed. Perhaps in time I will manage to conclude all business issues from the distance of Pemberley, but not yet. For too many years I conducted a large quantity of my affairs from the city." He paused, softly stroking her pale cheeks, "I am rambling to divert the moment when I must face your tears and control my own. Elizabeth, I am so very sorry!"

She swallowed, "Hush William. We knew this was a distinct possibility. You cannot ignore your responsibilities. When..." her voice caught, "when will you leave?"

"Tomorrow, early. The sooner I depart the sooner I will be home. I dare not wait any longer for fear our baby comes early. As it is I am taking a chance and it kills me to imagine that I..." He stopped, voice also catching. He closed his eyes, pulling her dusty forehead to rest on his. "Oh god, Elizabeth! Tell me all will be well, please!"

"All will be well, my love," she whispered. "George is here, Georgiana and Richard too. I am healthy and your stubborn son shows no indication that he wished to vacate his warm cocoon anytime soon. He appears to enjoy pummeling my internal organs. Besides, if his manners are anything remotely akin to his father's he will diligently wait until you return."

She too was rambling, avoiding the painful topic of her loneliness when he is away. She was not too fearful of their child's birth transpiring too soon, although anything is possible, her main heartache merely being the void created with his absence. "How long will you be gone?"

He sighed, standing to pace in agitation with fingers jerking at his sides. "No more than two weeks. Generally I spend a month or so in Town this time of year, but always that has included socializing which I will happily forego. I have given this quite a bit of thought and am certain I can conclude my affairs in a couple weeks. I will likely drive Mr. Daniels's entire firm insane with my surly attitude and rude haste, but it cannot be helped. Additionally I will surely insult someone by rebuffing a dinner invitation. Nonetheless, I refuse to be parted from you for too long. Propriety be damned! I need to be here!" He whirled around, pebbles flying, "Elizabeth, tell me not to go and I will not. Say the word

and I will find a way around this!”

She bit her lip, staring into his troubled face. “I do not need to ask if you have considered all other options, William, as I know you to be methodical in the extreme. If there was another way you would have discovered it.” She rose and crossed to when he stood panting and rigid, placing her palms lightly on his chest. “Later I shall tell you how much I will miss you, but for now I insist you go make the arrangements you need to depart tomorrow. Prepare your thoughts and papers so you can finish the tasks and return to us quickly.”

“Elizabeth, I love you so very much!” He kissed her deeply, withdrawing with effort and breathing slowly to calm. “Very well, I shall make the arrangements. Meet me in our chamber in one hour. I need to be alone with you.” She nodded and he kissed her again, turning and walking briskly away without a backward glance.

It was only when he was assuredly beyond earshot that she collapsed onto the bench in tears. They had spoken several times of the potential for a trip to London. It was absolutely out of the question for Elizabeth to accompany him. In some respects the separation would be easier to handle having already survived their first and recognizing the necessity for such partings as a fact of life. However, the timing with their firstborn so near to arriving added a drama to the severance that was horribly painful, especially to Darcy. Lizzy would be home, safe with family and friends. Darcy, conversely, would be alone with guilt wracking him and, heaven forbid, if anything untoward occurred he would literally never forgive himself.

Lizzy had wisely known that only through action would he prevent succumbing to his distress. A whirlwind of frantic activity ensued, Darcy barking orders immediately upon entering the house. If the servants were momentarily stunned by the discourteous commands and stormy visage of their generally polite and buoyant Master, they quickly ascertained the cause. Nodding sagely and with compassion, they carried out the instructions hastily. Of course the staff was abundantly familiar with their Master coming and going, more than capable to handle all arrangements for a rushed departure.

Nonetheless, it was closer to two hours before he reached their chamber. Lizzy had conquered her tears finally; bathing and changing into Darcy’s silk shirt to await his arrival. Sitting on the sofa before the fire as she attempted to allay her sadness, the delayed appearance of her spouse caused her melancholy to escalate and fresh sobs broke forth. In time the weeping overwhelmed her and in exhaustion she fell asleep.

Darcy entered shortly thereafter, Lizzy’s cheeks dry, but red

rimmed eyes indicative of her grief. The instant lurch of desire at seeing her in his shirt was quickly cooled by the evidence of her tears. Kneeling beside and smoothing the hair off her forehead, he leaned for a soft kiss.

“Beloved?”

She turned sleepily into his ready embrace, murmuring his name as her arms snaked over his shoulders. “Hold me William.”

“Forever, my heart.” Lifting her to their bed he stretched beside, enveloping completely and tenderly caressing with only deepest love ruling. For a long while they held each other. Darcy was content to snuggle close, feel her warmth and softness, delight in the occasional nudges of their healthy child, bury his face and hand into her luxuriant hair, and smell the heady aroma of her perfume. It was Lizzy who moved first, lifting her head from its comfortable rest on his inner shoulder to gaze upon and stroke his beloved face.

Everything slowed down. Time appeared to halt, or at least drag along gradually. Very few words were spoken as Lizzy incrementally undressed her husband. The familiar joy and passion was there with an undercurrent of sorrow tempering the usual rage of heat. As they kissed and caressed with the rising fervor muted, they realized that their prolonged adoration was as much about the yearning to express their mutual devotion and further burn the image of the other onto all five senses, as it was about the desire to make love in some unforgettable manner.

They moved about the bed in all directions, needing to touch each other and view each other from all angles. Darcy removed his shirt, desiring to bare his wife to feasting hands and eyes more than experiencing any heightened ardency elicited by his garment. In truth, nothing augmented his passion more than her natural state. He reached for the ointment, massaging reverently over her expanded belly while she sat astride his thighs and played with the downy hair on his chest.

“Will you do this while I am gone?” He asked softly.

“Yes, although it may remind me of every time you perform the task and the natural outcome.”

She was attempting levity, but her voice broke at the end as the truth of her jest brought her sadness crashing down. Darcy frowned slightly, gazing into her eyes with disquiet.

“Elizabeth,” he began.

“Shhhh...” She pressed her lips to his and shook her head slightly, “Say nothing dearest, just love me.”

“With all my heart and soul.” His kiss was hard and intense, hands working diligently over her abdomen and dipping underneath the



swell to brush over sensitive regions. Lizzy moaned, rocking into his seeking fingers, rapidly losing herself to rising sensations of pleasure. Both were surprisingly interrupted by a particularly strong kick from baby Darcy into his father's palm.

Lizzy giggled, "I think he wants a little attention from his papa."

"Can he not deduce I am otherwise occupied?"

Lizzy laughed louder, "He is a Darcy, my love, demanding and persistent. You may as well give him what he seeks and trust me when I say he will likely not take no for an answer if he is like you."

Darcy grinned, gently pushing Lizzy onto the bed as he positioned his body between her legs, face and hands on the beautiful swell. Currently the ripples of an insistent and active son were playing over the soft skin, Darcy amazed afresh at how evident the baby was from so deeply inside. Lately he had noticed particularly strong pushes of what could only be a tiny foot pressing so firmly that Darcy fleetingly believed he could grasp the extremity between his fingers. He tried, nearly succeeding only to have the limb disappear and moments later reemerge elsewhere on his wife's belly.

"How does he do that? Is he not too compacted to travel about so rapidly?"

"One would think," Lizzy answered with a chuckle, fingers massaging over his scalp. "Yet I can assure you he manages to flip around easily, as I can feel him jabbing me everywhere."

Darcy was silent, mouth pressed against the soft flesh around her naval while his hands kneaded the slick oil tenderly into her supple skin, all thoughts of sexual stimulation forgotten for the time being as he diligently applied to the task at hand. He could feel every movement of his unborn child under his palms with fresh amazement. Suddenly he wondered if perhaps in the very slightest way the awe and transcendent bliss regarding all aspects of this pregnancy had diminished with even the joyous job of rubbing the cream becoming a routine step leading to greater pleasures.

And now he would be leaving, unable to daily talk to his child and perform the duty of caring for her stretching abdomen. Pangs of dismay and guilt for allowing his approach to become anything less than the greatest delight swept through him. He frowned, kissing softly over the rising skin.

"What is it, my love?" She asked softly.

He shook his head, laying his cheek on her flattened naval. "Stay inside, my son," he murmured, "Promise you will wait for me and be good to your mother. I love you little one."

“Do not fret William. All will be well.”

As she spoke he transferred to lay beside her with body partially draped over and one hand yet rubbing the rippling bulge. He stared deeply into her eyes, propped on an elbow and toying with the loose strands of hair about her face. He was so serious, intently studying her face.

“What is it, my love?” She repeated. “Talk to me.”

His answer was slow in coming, mind clearly contemplating his words carefully while Lizzy waited and tenderly caressed over all available skin. Darcy shivered at the sensations educed, finally speaking huskily, “I am afraid, Elizabeth. Afraid to not be here for you, afraid of my loneliness and depression without you, afraid of causing the same negative emotions in you, but primarily I am afraid that I have disappointed you by taking it all for granted. You and our child and the miracle of it all. I am sorry, beloved, if I have been in any way less attentive than I should be.”

Lizzy was staring at him with undisguised wide-eyed shock, truly speechless for several minutes. “Fitzwilliam, surely you are jesting! Merciful heavens, no human on earth could possibly be more attentive than you! I doubt if there is a man alive more involved with his wife’s confinement and unborn baby.” She ceased her purposeful caresses to clasp his face firmly. “Dearest, erase those thoughts. They are not reality, but merely your anguish clouding your judgment. I am in all ways satisfied and treasured and content in you. And our son shall be irretrievably spoiled within days of his birth, which is what I fear!”

She pulled his face to hers, seizing his mouth zealously, and taking charge, showing him precisely what she wanted. Darcy reciprocated joyously, determined to prove his devotion and utterly gratify them both. First, however, he attended to her pleasure. Kissing and touching, murmuring endearments along the way, the focus totally on his wife. The heights of passion attained after timeless adulation to her body shattering in intensity, Lizzy not for the first time thankful their chambers were so isolated.

As always, the rapture of observing his love’s response to his ministrations was astoundingly arousing to Darcy. His need for her inevitably excruciating in power and the control necessary to wait until she calmed enough to tolerate more was oftentimes tenuous, yet he invariably managed. Not today however. Lizzy instantly grasped him, face flushed and breathing labored, drawing him harshly onto her with legs roughly encircling and body arching with clear intent.

Darcy groaned, fighting against her surprising strength to hold his

heavy frame aloft, “Elizabeth, I will crush you!”

“Not today. I need to feel all of you Fitzwilliam, please!”

It was pointless. He had no ability to resist. With a hoarse growl emanating from his chest he grasped her bottom, falling onto her as they merged. Oh the bliss! She clutched him as if life depended, every plane of flesh adhered with the highly erotic sensation of belly and breast pressed under his torso. Increasingly over the past weeks the weight of his body was becoming uncomfortable for her, necessitating a departure from their preferred position of lovemaking. Naturally this distressed him not in the least, the joy of their union always blissful and intense in any position. The frequent experimentation since their marriage, aided to great degree by Darcy’s secret books, provided a wealth of alternatives each delightful in their own way and many perfectly suited for the gravid body. Nonetheless, as they each agreed, nothing quite compared to the feel of her husband’s virile figure pressed onto her and his wife’s lithe frame wrapped around him.

It is perhaps fortunate that their mutual ardency was rampant as Lizzy had no chance to experience the slightest discomfort. The fiery passion rushing through them was powerful, racing swiftly to a crescendo that rocked head to toe.

Inexplicably, Lizzy burst into tears the minute she was able to catch her breath, Darcy cuddling her close to his heaving chest with trembling arms. He soothed her until she quieted, not needing to ask as his eyes were teary as well.

\* \* \* \*

As with their separation in June, they chose to refrain from speaking of it directly. George took the news with a solemn vow to guard Lizzy with his life and never leave her unattended. He was deadly serious and therefore mildly taken aback when Lizzy grunted and rolled her eyes.

“Lord, have mercy!” She said with mock pleading heavenward, “Not another one! I do not require a trailing hound dog, my dear uncle.”

Darcy smiled, George arching a brow at his niece. “Very well, Madame. I will refrain from dogging your heels, but will be in residence, likely the library, if ever you whistle loudly.”

“And you shall come running with tongue lolling and tail wagging?”

“Precisely,” he answered while the other three burst into laughter.

They passed the evening in quiet family communion. Georgiana, George, and Richard were fully cognizant of the anguish shared by Darcy

and Lizzy, even if they did not quite understand it. All through the evening as they laughed and listened to Georgiana play, the three single persons were well aware of the frequent touches and glances meted out between the newlyweds in ever increasing allotments. The air surrounding the two where they sat squeezed into the very end of the sofa was electrically charged. Nothing improper occurred, both restrained in their tender caresses, but the clarity of mutual need and despondency was salient.

Lizzy was quieter than usual and Darcy was monosyllabic. Eventually even the energy of George Darcy could not penetrate the gathering gloom so he rose with exaggerated yawning and stretching, proclaiming fatigue. If anyone thought it odd for exhaustion to suddenly strike them all at eight o'clock it was not pointed out.

Lizzy refused to shed further tears and managed to retain command of her emotions. In actuality, once they were alone, comfortably dressed in robes and slippers and entangled before the fire, their spirits lifted. Both knew without the minutest doubt that they would be miserable beyond description for the next two weeks, yet they both vowed to handle the situation with maturity and strength.

It was mid October and the weather had gradually slid into the chill of pre-winter. The days were generally fair and the rains had yet to attack, but the winds were mounting and the nights were bitter enough to warrant a fire. The lovers reclined on the bearskin rug, snuggled and warm, passion at bay for the present as they discussed estate affairs.

"Mr. Keith will manage the day to day issues which may arise as he always has in my absence." Darcy spoke softly, but with the familiar undertone of authority notable whenever he addressed Pemberley business. "However, it is different now as you are Mistress. You have exceeded both our expectations, my intelligent love, and therefore, if you feel able, can attend to divers matters that normally would await my return."

"Such as?"

He sighed, bestowing a kiss to her forehead before continuing, "Naturally all household issues are already handled by you and if anything needs to be attained above the usual you have the authority to procure it. I trust your judgment, Elizabeth, if there are any unforeseen problems amongst the staff or even the tenants. The senior staff knows you speak for me and will not question your decisions."

She lifted to gaze into his eyes, pleasure and uncertainty warring. "Are you sure this vote of confidence is wise William? I appreciate your faith, but would not wish to make any mistakes."

He smiled and ran his hand through her trailing tresses, "This is exactly why I have no worries. Not only are you intelligent and well versed in Pemberley's necessities, but you are prudent and will not hastily conclude a matter if you deem it beyond your scope."

She nodded, smiling brightly, "Thank you beloved. I will assure all is organized and properly transacted so when you return you shall have nothing to do but love me! Oh, and celebrate your birthday. Ha! You thought to evade, yes?!" Darcy was flushed and squirming, Lizzy tickling his ribs and giggling. "How silly you are, foolish man. Although, please do not be expecting thirty gifts as I am not nearly clever enough to conjure so many brilliant ideas. I would exhaust myself at the endeavor!"

Darcy laughed, but her jest brought something to mind and he halted her probing fingertips. "Desist! I cannot breathe! Unfair that you are not ticklish." He gasped, claspng her hands tightly to his chest. "Seriously, listen to me love. I order you, yes, I order," he glared and arched a brow, lips twitching, "that you not overtax. Your rest is essential. Promise me you will take care?"

"If you promise the same. I know you will be pressuring yourself to conclude your business so you can hurry home. I want you with me, Fitzwilliam, but not to the extent that you grow ill. Take your time, but make sure you are home before the tenth."

"I am never ill, dearest, but I accept your chastisement. Let us both promise to behave and I assure you I will be home well before the tenth. And while we are on the subject, please do not plan an extravaganza for my birthday. I would be perfectly happy to forget it altogether. I simply want to be home and the only present I desire is you, preferably naked on our bed."

"And tied with a big red bow?" She fluttered her eyelashes and pursed her lips, face offered and accepted handily. They made love by the fire, slowly and tenderly rousing the other. The subtle current of sadness was there, but the love they felt was profound and so intensely intrinsic, overruling the presence of dismay.

They fell asleep on the rug, limbs twined with Lizzy engulfed by his larger body. It was the cold creeping over his back which woke Darcy, Lizzy deeply asleep and toasty in his arms. The room lamps were yet burning, casting a glow over her skin that was impossible for him to resist. He studied her, lightly running fingers, and inhaling of her fragrance: a mixture of lavender and sexual gratification and him. Their child slept, the bulge beautifully round and still. At times he missed her flat stomach, especially when making love and overcome with raging passion yet unable to release the concern for her altered shape and

flexibility. But those moments were fleeting and rare. The miracle that was the product of their love lying inside of her body was astoundingly moving to his soul and strangely erotic.

“God, my Lizzy, I so love you,” he whispered, bestowing a tiny kiss to her shoulder, additionally surprised at the sensation of her petite hand warmly stroking over his bare thigh. “I am sorry love. I did not wish to wake you, but it is cold. We need to move to the bed.”

She turned in his arms, sleepy eyes meeting his. “Yes. Our bed, my lover. Kiss me William.” There was no denying the yearning. All through the night they reached for each other, caressing on the edge of sleep, loving with every inch of flesh and every muscle. The last was as the sun crested the tree tops, glow spreading across the fields and through the gaps in the curtain covered wide windows.

Darcy moved within his precious wife, fingers rousing and mouth stirring shivers along her spine. Every curve of her exciting, her heat and softness electrifying, moist depths surrounding and squeezing him thrilling, and articulations of delight enlivening. Wave upon wave of glorious rapture swept through, hearts and spirits soaring as their bodies succumbed to the elation of pure pleasure with shouts of loving joy.

Lizzy was soundly asleep seconds afterwards, a blissful smile on her gorgeous face. Darcy experienced a rush of fierce love and breathless peace. Leaving her was painful, but he knew all would be well as she promised. How could it not be with their souls intermingled? He kissed her several times, the drowsy smile widening, before carefully extraditing his body from hers to prepare for departure.

\* \* \* \*

The carriage ride to London was long, tiring, and uneventful. One thing it was not was boring. Col. Fitzwilliam ingratiated himself to accompany his cousin as he planned to leave in two days anyway. Darcy did not mind in the slightest, adoring Richard and knowing that his cousin’s oftentimes irritating boisterousness would lighten the mood, provide entertainment, and stave off the gloominess sure to come. In this assumption Darcy was spot on.

The first hour or so was passed in silence. Richard surreptitiously observed Darcy’s dreamy face, noted how he fiddled and caressed the ring on his finger, and heard the unconscious faint sighs. In honest curiosity he finally broke the quiet.

“What is it like, Darcy, to love as you do?” The impromptu question pierced the calm, Darcy’s brows shooting up as he glanced to

his cousin, and Richard coloring as he realized his private musings were vocalized.

There followed an awkward pause, Richard flushed and Darcy amused. "Why do you ask?"

"Forgive me, my friend, I meant no offense. It was impertinent of me to ask such a thing so let us just forget the question."

"I am not offended and have every intention of answering your query, cousin. I am merely curious why you ask it. Do you have a particular lady in mind? Or are you seeking enlightenment for the furthering of your education in human interpersonal relationships?" Darcy was grinning broadly.

Richard grunted, "More the latter I suppose, although you know I am not as ragingly consumptive of all matters educational as you are."

"Well that surely is the truth! How you managed to graduate University yet remains a mystery to me."

"Ha, ha." Richard intoned dryly, "Most amusing today Mr. Darcy."

"Watching your discomfiture always increases my humor. You have yet to adequately answer. Why do you ask about love?"

Richard shrugged, gazing out the window, "Primarily idle curiosity. You have been so different since Elizabeth entered your life. I noted a change in your demeanor as far back as Rosings last, although I did not comprehend the cause. The oddity is that I thought you perfectly content before, yet now I observe the two of you together, and even how you fondle your new ring, and the happiness is transparent. Nauseatingly so." He grinned and shrugged again, "So I was curious what it felt like."

Darcy was gazing into his lap, self-consciously removing fingertips from the gold band, with a soft smile on his face. He did not answer hastily, finally speaking lowly, "I do not know if I can sufficiently place it into words. Perhaps that is why the poets wax eloquent with platitudes and analogies as mere common phrases do not suffice. All I know for certain is that almost from the moment I saw her she has filled my senses and my heart. There is joy with Elizabeth in every way and every moment, whether present or no. I feel light and buoyant, yet also grounded and secure. Giddy and frivolous, yet strong and steady. Childish and masculine simultaneously." He chuckled softly, closing his eyes and leaning back against the carriage wall. "Yet you know what the most miraculous part is, Richard? Greater than how she makes me feel is the miracle that she loves me."

He opened his eyes abruptly, staring at his cousin with full Darcy intensity. "Richard, there is no replacement for that. It is a priceless

treasure and I only wish all in the world could experience it.”

“And this ‘feeling’ is worth the misery I note at times such as this, when you are separated?”

Darcy shook his head, “It is not misery in the way you imagine. Yes, I miss her terribly already and my loneliness will be profound, but our love sustains me and I have the constant joy of knowing she waits for me.”

They were solitary with their thoughts for a spell, Darcy resuming the heedless caressing of his ring while Richard dwelled inwardly. Slowly Darcy began to chuckle. “Tell me cousin, does any of this questioning have to do with Admiral Ulster’s daughter?”

Richard’s laugh was rich. “I cannot pretend to feel all gushy and nonsensical, or to completely lose sight of propriety as you do, but she is lovely and my heart flutters a bit. How is that, Mr. Romance?”

Darcy laughed loudly, “It is a start!”

Once in Town, Darcy wasted no time in beginning the arduous process of concluding his business affairs. With the Darcy House staff under strict orders to remain mum regarding his residency, he entered the offices of Mr. Daniels bright and early the day after his arrival. For two days all went according to plan, Darcy quite pleased with the progress made. It was while sitting in the library the second evening after finishing a long devotion imbued letter to his wife, brandy in hand and papers spread before him, that he began coughing. It was only a light tickle felt in the back of his throat, but it persisted no matter how often he attempted to drink or cough the itch away. More irritated than anything, he finally gave up working and went to bed.

Thus far the days and nights had passed rapidly with well controlled sadness. He missed Elizabeth with an ache that was unrelenting, but the constant activity kept the pain at bay. Tonight he sat in the bed that was once comfortable and familiar as only for him, but was now glaringly empty and cold. He tried to read, but the prickle in his throat distracted and he constantly glanced up toward her dressing room positive he saw a shadow. Finally he gave in; dousing the lights and lying down in hopes that sleep would claim him quickly so he could dream of her.

Surprisingly, since he was not actually tired, sleep was attained rapidly, but his dreams were troubled. Elizabeth was nowhere to be found. Instead he floated dazedly through heavy clouds that occluded his respirations, thick cottony tendrils that invaded his nostrils, the air cool and damp. Then he was swimming in a hot spring, deep with the surface sparkling visibly above him yet he could not propel his weighted body to



the promise of oxygen. He woke well before dawn, his sinuses obstructed and throat afire.

“Perfect,” he mumbled scratchily. “Never ill, right Darcy.”

He forced himself to rise and bathe, feeling slightly improved once dressed and outside in the brisk air. However, after an hour closeted in the roomy office with Mr. Andrew Daniels and his eldest son Benjamin, his head felt to explode and the basic exercise of breathing was torturous. He ignored the unpleasant sensations as best he could until mid afternoon when the quill began to waver in his tremulous fist and a fit of coughing gripped him with alarming potency.

Mr. Daniels took charge, boldly facing the potential anger of his client by insisting on calling for Mr. Darcy’s carriage and rescheduling the appointment for when his health was restored. Darcy considered arguing, but quite simply did not have the energy to do so.

It had been some five years since Darcy last suffered from the ravages of a common cold. At that time he had been residing at Pemberley with Georgiana and Mrs. Reynolds fussing over him. It had annoyed him greatly, but he had to admit the constant female companionship and nursing was pleasant not to mention beneficial in speeding his recovery.

Mrs. Smyth was not the least bit maternal and aside from providing hot tea and edibles, had no idea how to care for the infirm. Therefore, Darcy was left to his own devices with only Samuel to make sure he did not wallow in his own sweat and disgusting bodily secretions.

Samuel, proficient with the vast array of masculine essentials, was utterly inept when dealing with an ill Master. The fact that Mr. Darcy had been unwell only twice since Samuel assumed the post as his valet did not furnish him much in the way of medical expertise. Nonetheless, even he could diagnose a frightening increase in infirmity by the third morning after falling sick. Darcy was difficult to rouse, blazing to the touch, coughing in wracking fits, and intermittently shivering and sweating.

The physician was sent for, rapidly assessed the situation, and assumed command. There was no question that the suspected cold was upgraded to influenza status. The prescribed medicines were obtained from the Apothecary and detailed instructions were given to Samuel and Mrs. Smyth. Darcy was liberally dosed with a tea mixture of yarrow, peppermint, ginger, and elder bark for general aches and fever. Further distillations of willow, licorice, and honey were forced down his throat for the cough and chest congestion. Oil of lavender was burned to cleanse the air and promote sleep.

For five days total Darcy drifted in a hazy place of vague

memory. His waking moments were brief and filled with stertorous, productive coughs that left him weak, gasping, and in pain. Muscles that he did not know existed in his body ached unrelentingly. The pervading odor of lavender reminded him excruciatingly of Elizabeth and he knew on some level that time was passing without writing to her or completing the reams of paperwork that would bring him back to her, but then the thought would fade away as uncontrollable trembling assumed command. The energy necessary to rise upon those occasions his body required the relief only found in the water closet was tremendous, leaving him utterly spent. The room undulated and whirled, his head throbbed, and more than once the endeavor ended with his stomach in wild upheavals.

The afternoon of the fifth day he woke abruptly from a vivid but chaotic dream of Elizabeth crying for him. For several moments his heart pounded with the memory, but as the dream faded he recognized the clarity of his thoughts for the first time in days. He was weary as never experienced before, but lucid. The bright sun streaming through the window pierced his sore eyes and his body felt as if he had been pummeled in a boxing ring, but he was cool and the bed was stationary.

"Well, finally back to the land of the living are we?" It was Richard, grinning happily, but pale with an undertone of worry. Darcy opened his mouth to flash a sharp retort of some kind, nothing escaping but a faint squeak. "Eloquent, Mr. Darcy, as always. Here cousin, drink this."

Darcy cringed, fully expecting another foul tasting tea, but it was plain water. Cool and the most delicious tasting beverage ever to pass his lips. Darcy was certain he could have consumed an ocean of the succulent fluid, but Richard forced him to sip gradually.

"God, I am tired!"

"Lazy old man. Lying about for nearly a week and you want to sleep?" Darcy smiled faintly, eyes closing as Richard reclined him onto the pillows.

"What day is it?"

"Tuesday. You have been ill for five days and gave us a bit of a fright. I knew you too blasted stubborn to succumb to a mere fever, but Samuel has been as hysterical as an old woman."

Darcy's eyes had flown open and he was attempting to rise, quite unsuccessfully. "Five days!? I have work to do and must get home. Oh Lord, Elizabeth must be frantic. Richard...?" He fell back into the pillows, panting and coughing.

"Calm yourself, man, or you will have a relapse! Listen to me

William. Do not be stupid and exert yourself unduly. Elizabeth does need you home, but that will not occur in a timely manner if you deteriorate again. I have taken the liberty to write in your stead and inform your beloved wife that you have a minor cold and requested I write for you. I know you hate dissembling, but I judged it proper in this case.”

Darcy was breathing heavily, heart racing painfully, and the room was spinning again. Whether he liked it or not, he could not deny the logic of Richard’s advice. “A letter...I should send....a letter....telling her....”

“Yes, yes, all in good time. Sleep again William. You can dictate a missive to her later. She has written to you several times, which will surely boost your spirits.” He stopped, realizing that Darcy was soundly asleep and snoring.

\* \* \* \*

Lizzy stood on the Pemberley portico for ten minutes allowing George Darcy’s warm hands to rest on her shoulders and resonant voice to soothe, all far too reminiscent of her husband, before she wiped the tears away. Darcy’s carriage was barely out of sight before Lizzy launched into a whirlwind of activity. She had decided with full conscious intent that if she must be alone she would keep busy so she could not dwell on it overly. Her first order of business was to begin planning for Christmas. The fact that it was over two months away meant nothing as she wanted to have all prepared before the baby came. With this at the forefront of her mind, she met with Mrs. Reynolds within an hour of Darcy’s departure.

Thus began her days. As far as Christmas celebrations went, the plans were both easier and more complicated. It was easier in that she knew the tenants quite well now so deciding what to place in their care basket was obvious. It was also easier because the guest list would be far smaller with focus on intimate family and the baby. Obtaining gifts was a bit more problematic as Lizzy could not tramp through the shops of Lambton in her condition, so she needed to decide on what to present to her friends and family and then send a servant to obtain.

There was also the tenant Christmas feast to plan. Last December as Darcy toured her through the manor and first spoke of the holiday tradition for the Pemberley workers, Lizzy had briefly envisioned something grand. In the same way as the Summer Festival, she had wanted to reinstate the old customs with flair. Of course, those early plans had not taken into consideration the arrival of their first child. Not

knowing how the birth might proceed, what her physical condition would be afterwards, nor when it would even occur, Lizzy decided it would be best to keep the event understated. Actually it was her husband who firmly declared that the dinner be a humble affair, allowing no room for argument so Lizzy had no real choice.

Nevertheless, minimal or majestic, she wanted all to be perfect. Plus, it gave her something else to fret about besides missing her husband. Before the week was out the menu was determined, the necessary cleaning of the ballroom and formal dining room was begun, the date was set for a week before Christmas, a group of minstrels from Matlock was reserved, and the list of invitees was written with invitations ordered. A detailed time table was itemized for the following three months so all issues would be handled with or without the Mistress's input.

Inbetween Christmas scheming Lizzy attended to household duties with a vengeance. Mr. Keith consulted her on everything although Lizzy knew he did not have to. She spent large quantities of time at Darcy's desk usually for no real purpose other than for the comfort afforded. The massive desk chair was imprinted with the shape of his derriere and thighs, the desktop strewn with the odd trinkets that he fiddled with while he worked, and littered with random notes written in his strong flowing calligraphy. Darcy was highly organized; each document ever signed filed in a logical manner and the ledgers meticulous, yet strangely the surface of his desk was cluttered. It was all a ready reminder of her husband and for the days he was absent she ignored her own desk in the corner or the one in their sitting room, preferring to sit in his chairs.

Luckily no serious quandaries arose during Darcy's absence. The day to day required purchases of food, household items, provisions for the animals, and such like were routinely procured and paid for, Lizzy only needed to sign the money drafts. Staff wages were disbursed at the end of each week, all earnings tabulated and allocated by Mr. Keith to each person while in Mrs. Darcy's presence; her signature legally necessary on the ledger page. Decisions above and beyond the usual were minimal. An overly abundant and earlier than expected harvest of barley provided an opportunity for Lizzy to receive a crash course in crop management and bartering. With Mr. Keith's patient assistance and the finely detailed notations in Darcy's files, Lizzy transacted a market exchange with a hefty profit and surplus barley storage for Pemberley.

She was quite proud of herself, but primarily she knew that it was the small things such as intact ledgers and legal signatures which would

free up an inordinate amount of Darcy's time when he returned. Extending further, Lizzy completed a number of the tasks Darcy had left unfinished due to his hasty departure. She worked very hard to keep it all in the order that Darcy preferred and thrilled in imagining how pleased he would be to discover how well his wife had taken care of matters.

By the end of the first week Lizzy had a new found respect for all the business her husband handled. After eleven months she grasped most of the vast estate management of Pemberley, but had remained ignorant of the day to day tiny things. In and of themselves they were fairly trivial, but it added up. She recognized on a certain level that her obsession was as much to stave off her loneliness as it was to please her already adoring spouse, but she also tremendously enjoyed the challenges. In another incremental way she grew closer to him, even in his absence, and learned more of the man who was Fitzwilliam Darcy.

George Darcy took his role as protector and companion very seriously. He was never far from her side, forever interrupting her to check how she was or bring a snack, and pouring on the charm as he whisked her off for walks about the grounds. His presence in the manor was simultaneously comforting and disconcerting. Lizzy had grown accustomed to the uncanny similarities George shared with her husband, no longer consciously noting them. Until now. The timbre of his laugh, resonance of voice, piercing blue of tender eyes, and general height and posture, even in his extreme boniness, was virtually indistinguishable from his nephew. It unnerved her, and intermittently escalated her desperation and soothed it.

Georgiana was nearly as persistent, ensuring that Lizzy was never bored or even allowed more than a handful of minutes to herself. Her sweetly steady friendship and deep love for her new sister was genuine. They spent numerous evenings together in the Darcys' sitting room, giggling and sharing girlish stories while reclining in robes and nibbling cakes and sipping tea. It greatly facilitated the transition from busy day to solitary night.

Darcy's hasty exodus had allotted no time for her to prepare little notes or intimate reminders to tuck into his valise, so she wrote lengthy lovelorn letters each night to be posted every two days. Pouring her heart did ease the ache somewhat, as did his reply. Sheer exhaustion and the pressing demands of the baby allowed her to sleep deeply with delightful dreams of him, at least for the first week. His first letter arrived on their fourth day apart. Like her, he had composed it in the evenings over two days and it was far more sentimental and erotic than hers. Lizzy experienced slight trepidation over placing boldly intimate ramblings in

indelible ink to then be carried across England by strangers. Darcy suffered no such inhibition, surprisingly, as the need to express his desires for her transcended the unlikely possibility of the letter falling into unknown hands.

By the end of the week she was beginning to sense some disquiet at a lack of additional correspondence, having written twice more to him, but assumed it was because he was busy. Then the scribbled note penned by Richard arrived saying only that Darcy was ill with a minor cold, offering a patently lame excuse of sneezing too much to hold a quill as to why he was dictating to Richard. Lizzy did not believe a word of it and was frantic.

“George!” She yelled, her uncle appearing within seconds and nearly colliding with Lizzy as he bounded over the threshold.

“What is it?”

“Read this and tell me what you think.”

He did, frowning. “Hmmm. Something does not seem right....”

“Not at all. William is ill, Uncle, I can feel it. I need to go to London. Can you help me with the arrangements?” She was already pulling the servants bell.

“Elizabeth, think. I absolutely will not allow you to travel to London so you can erase that thought from your head right now.”

“But...”

“No, and that is final. William may be sicker than Col. Fitzwilliam claims, but that does not necessarily mean he needs you there...”

“But I am his wife!”

“Precisely....Thank you Watson but we no longer require your services.” The footman bowed and retreated, George crossing to where Elizabeth stood fighting tears. He placed his hands on her shoulders, speaking in soft tones so akin to Darcy that the tears spilled instantly. “Listen, dear. William is very strong and hideously stubborn. I am quite sure he can fight off any malady. We know he is being well cared for between Richard and Samuel. If it were life threatening Richard would be forthcoming, I am certain. William will heal faster knowing you are safe from harm. The journey is too risky and you cannot permit yourself to fall ill.”

She was crying in earnest now and George gathered her into his arms, patting with a whispered *there, there*. For two days she could barely think. Somehow she managed to attend to business as it arose, exercise regularly with extended memory packed walks about the gardens, and host a tea party with Harriet Vernor, Alison Fitzherbert, Marilyn Hughes, Georgiana, and Jane; the last ending up visiting for three days to comfort

her anxious sister. She wrote two more letters, begging for an update and for once not at all embarrassed at blatantly communicating her sorrow and yearning, sending by express messenger.

Finally on the third day after Richard's note, a longer letter arrived, also penned in Richard's blocky script, but clearly the words of her husband. Lizzy began sobbing before the salutation was read.

*My dearest, precious Elizabeth,*

*My beloved, I do pray this overdue correspondence is read by a healthy wife, robust as always and yet encumbered with the blessing that is our child. I, as you have been informed by our dear cousin, have been ill. I fear he mislead you on the full extent of my infirmity. He begs me, my dearest, at this juncture to apologize for his deception as done with only your well-being in mind. This I can assure you is the truth. I do believe I must take full responsibility for the calamity that has befallen me as I so arrogantly jested that I am never ill. Do you recall this boasting, my love? It appears that fate has a sense of humor or perhaps karma is true as the mystics proclaim. However, fret no further as I am speedily mending from the influenza which afflicted me. It was not a pretty sight, my beautiful wife, and I am abundantly thankful you were not here to witness my indignity. Rest assured that I am healing rapidly with, as Richard says, my obstinacy intact. I have no idea to what he refers.*

*Naturally my illness has set me aback on concluding my business. Mr. Daniels has persevered with preparing all matters for me and we are resuming our meetings. Unfortunately they must transpire in my bedchamber sitting room for now and remain stunted as my strength is not yet fully restored. I do still hope to complete affairs and be home for my birthday.*

*Beloved, I cannot relate the whole contents of my heart as my secretary would likely refuse to write the sentiments. I trust that you understand the depths of my love for you and anguish I feel in being separated. Please, Elizabeth, I beg you with all my soul, do not worry! I am recovering and there is no lasting damage. I love you forever, William*

Underneath were supplementary lines in a shaky script that was nonetheless clearly Darcy's:

*My Heart, Forgive the poor penmanship, but I fear my hands are yet weak. I must be brief. I ache for you my precious Lizzy! God how I want to see your face! Know that you are alive in every beat of my heart and the knowledge that you are safe gives me the greatest strength. Soon, very soon, my lover, I will hold you and kiss you and we will make love with all the passion stored. Dream of me as I dream of you. I love you, my Elizabeth. I love you for all eternity. Your Fitzwilliam*

The letter was dictated, shakily written, sealed, and posted the morning following Darcy's fever breaking. By the time Lizzy received it Darcy had proven his powers of regeneration and colossal strength of will by resuming nearly the same hectic agenda as prior to his illness. Richard returned to his regiment with a warning to moderate that he knew Darcy would ignore. In truth he was still weak, the cough abiding, and the need for afternoon rest periods undeniable. At least it gave him a legitimate excuse to decline the few invitations that arrived despite his attempt to maintain secrecy.

Lizzy returned to her self appointed duties with a relieved smile on her face. She would not feel completely secure until she could feel his solidity under her hands and gaze upon his healthy face, but her anxiety was alleviated. While apprehension waned with subsequent letters written in an ever increasingly firm hand, desolation and melancholy flourished unabated. The pain in her heart rose with each passing day, allayed somewhat in rejuvenating sleep and sweet dreams.

As the third week without her husband advanced, Lizzy and Georgiana walked to the orphanage in the Village. They each carried a basket filled with baked treats for the children, dressed warmly against the chill air. October had passed into November, the last of the Pemberley harvests reaped and marketed. The fields now lay tilled and bare. A light drizzle of rain had fallen last evening leaving the ground moist with shallow puddles in places, but today was clear with the clouds lingering over the Peaks.

"If William were here he would predict the rains, whether they are gone for now or to return." Lizzy spoke softly, gazing at the horizon.

Georgiana smiled, squeezing her sister's arm. "Yes, he always knows. It is a gift I do not possess. Of course, if he were here he would likely forbid you to walk, especially if he judges the rains to resume."

Lizzy laughed, "True, although I think I would welcome his overprotective domination if it meant I could hear his voice."

"He shall be home soon Lizzy. He will not miss his birthday. He knows how important it is to you and nothing will keep him away."

"As desperately as I need him, I fear him overtaxing and becoming ill again." She sighed loudly and shook her head, "Enough! He has begged me not to fret, to trust him, and I will. His letter yesterday said all was proceeding expeditiously."

"Did he give any indication of when he would be home?"

"No, unfortunately. I think he is afraid to say much so as to not disappoint. In truth I do not expect him for another week, probably breezing in exhausted on the day before his birthday!"



“Why so long?”

“He had reckoned it would take two weeks at the least to conclude his affairs, and I think he was being generous at that so as not to increase my distress.” She smiled at his ever conscious desire to assuage. “He was ill for five days, if my figuring is correct, then the slow recovery. I can still discern a weakness in his handwriting and weariness in his words. I am sure he is not able to work up to his normal stamina.”

“Well, perhaps you are correct, and I suppose it best he take it slowly. Still, I know he will be here by his birthday! William always keeps his promises.”

The children jumped for joy, delighting in the treats and affection from Mrs. Darcy and Miss Darcy. The joyful, innocent presence of the children never failed to cheer Lizzy, the afternoon hours spent very happily with only fleeting thoughts of her husband intruding. Toward the end of their visit, as the clouds were gradually blowing back toward the valley, Lizzy felt the preliminary twinges of pain.

She held a newer arrival to the orphanage, a girl of two years, as she stood watching groups of children playing hopscotch and jumping rope. One minute everything was roses, Lizzy laughing at the antics and blissfully snuggling the soft body against her breast, when the familiar vague contractions were abruptly displaced by a sharp stab of pain lanced through her abdomen rippling from back to front and down to her groin. It resembled the innocuous false labor pains that Dr. Darcy assured were normal and necessary, but was far more intense. She gasped, bending involuntarily as she rubbed over her belly. It passed as swiftly as it came, Lizzy breathing deeply and almost convincing herself it was not significant when an identical pain struck. She released a squeal, doubling over and nearly dropping the little girl, who was clinging to her neck in fright.

“Mrs. Darcy? Are you well?” It was Miss Seymour, the orphanage director, rushing to Lizzy’s side and rescuing the child from a tumble to the ground.

“No, I think I need to sit. Oh!”

Rapid activity ensued, Georgiana calling immediately for the nearest carriage. In short order Lizzy was home, George carrying to her third floor chamber in an amazingly strong grip for such a thin man. The pains continued at an irregular rhythm and intensity, Lizzy realizing once the initial shock was past that the pains were not horrible, but definitely more severe than normal. It was the stress of what they signified that sent her into trembling sobs.

“Calm yourself Elizabeth. Georgiana dear, hold her hand and

Speak soothingly. Elizabeth, I must be allowed to examine you. Relax, all will be well.”

His final sentence, uttered in Darcy’s gentle tone, was more than she could handle. “George, I cannot....have this baby....now...”

“Well, he may very well have a differing plan, my dear, but we will not know until you settle down. This may be unpleasant and embarrassing, Elizabeth. I am sorry.” He kept a steady stream of placating murmuring as he performed the intimate examination, Lizzy far too distraught to be embarrassed.

“Listen carefully niece. At this point there is no internal indication that your baby wishes to be born.” He laid his broad hands over her abdomen, palpating the intermittent muscle contractions. “The pains are not regular, which is a good thing. Mrs. Reynolds,” he said, turning to the Housekeeper standing nearby, “ask Mrs. Langton to brew a large pot of very strong tea, dregs included, of red raspberry leaf and chaste tree leaf. She has the herbs as I supplied them prophylactically. Elizabeth, focus on me dear.”

Lizzy was crying silently, enormous tears sliding down her cheeks, but she met his sympathetic blue eyes. “Listen, dear, very clearly to me. *If* your baby does decide now is the time for his birth, he is near enough to complete maturity that he will likely be healthy. He feels to be of a sufficient size,” he pressed long firm fingers into her belly on both sides of the swell, palpating the shape hidden inside.

“You can ascertain his size?” Lizzy asked with surprise.

“It is not an exact science, but one develops a sense for these things over time. I am an excellent diagnostician, if I say so myself, and not half bad as an obstetrician!” Lizzy could not prevent a tiny chuckle escaping, George smiling in return. “There, better Elizabeth?” She nodded faintly. “Good. It is vital you remain calm. The tea I ordered may halt the contractions, but primarily you need to rest. My professional opinion is you have been given a fright and a warning. However, this could be a sign that you will not be waiting until December. Only time will reveal. In the meantime I am restricting you to your bed.”

Lizzy was weeping again, Georgiana smoothing the hair from her brow as Mrs. Reynolds reentered the room. “George,” Lizzy whispered between soft sobs, “Please, I cannot do this without William! I need him....”

“Shhhh.... Be still. Say no more, Elizabeth, as I concur. Do not fear; I will send for him.”

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Darcy's summons, conveyed by one of Pemberley's own groomsmen on the fastest horse available after Parsifal, finally reached Darcy after first being delivered to Darcy House and then the offices of Mr. Daniels before discovering the addressee busily working up a vigorous sweat at Angelo's Fencing Academy. It was the only recreation Darcy had engaged in during the entire two weeks plus in London and the only reason he had broke from his self proscribed strict business agenda for this excursion was a raging need for physical exercise.

However, moments prior to the message's delivery he was seriously doubting the wisdom of his actions. The symptoms from his illness were essentially gone with the exception of a nagging cough and persistent muscle fatigue. He stood in the center of the floor facing his current adversary, Lord Miles Holt whom he had prevailed over each time in the past, wheezing and six points behind! *So much for proving your potency and health, Darcy!* He thought with towering sarcasm and chagrin.

The interruption by the Academy's manager was abundantly welcomed by a frankly gasping Mr. Darcy, but followed by instant fresh sweat, this time of the cold variety, with the appearance of a Pemberley groom.

"Forgive me gentlemen for the disruption. Mr. Darcy, this man has a message for you." The groom nervously stepped forward, bowing as he handed the sealed parchment to his Master. Darcy removed his protective glasses with a slightly tremulous hand, murmuring his pardons as he exited the room.

*William,*

*Forgive the abruptness of this letter, nephew. First, Elizabeth is well. However, today she began suffering with true birth pains. Even as I write this note the pains have lessened and the baby shows no overt signs of an imminent arrival, therefore my medical opinion is that you will not be a father quite yet. Nonetheless, Elizabeth needs you. Tarry no longer William. Do not be reckless, but come home. George*

Darcy's heart constricted painfully, lips pressing together in a tight line. Not hesitating for a second, nor allowing the fear to overwhelm him, he jumped into action. The hasty and rude orders barked at Pemberley were courteous compared to the rampage he went on once at Darcy House. The effect was as he demanded though. Within an hour the Darcy carriage was clomping away from Grosvenor Square toward Derbyshire. He refused to halt until well after dark, resting at a cheap carriage inn for six hours, again on the road as dawn broke over

the eastern horizon.

Weary with grey circles under his eyes, rumpled, unshaven, and jittery with anxiety, Darcy caught his first sight of the pinnacles atop Pemberley by early afternoon. Relief washed through him, tears stinging the eyes that automatically lifted to the southeast corner windows. Naturally from this distance he could see nothing of significance, the manor as beautiful and serene as always.

“Hold on beloved. I am home.”

## **11 – November**

The relief to be at Pemberley was palpable, but only partially allayed Darcy's paralyzing anxiety. He sat in the stopped carriage waiting for the coachman to open the door rather than hurdling out as he anticipated doing for the simple reason that he was terrified at what he may find. The cold gust of air hitting his face when the door opened restored him and with a steadying inhale, he disembarked.

Apparently no one had witnessed his unexpected arrival, the footman Georges glancing up in surprise when Darcy walked into the foyer. He snapped to attention briskly, his greeting interrupted brusquely by his Master.

"Where is Mrs. Darcy?" His voice was firm, the fear at the answer well hidden.

"Mrs. Darcy is in your chambers, Sir. Dr. Darcy and Miss Darcy are in the parlor."

"Thank you." He practically threw his overcoat at Georges with the stasis of dread vanishing in the liberation of his fears and cavernous need to embrace his wife. Dignity be damned, he dashed up the grand staircase and turned left with long strides.

"Fitzwilliam!"

He pivoted at the sound of his uncle's voice. "Uncle! Elizabeth is in our chambers, yes?"

"I checked on her not fifteen minutes ago and she is sleeping now, William. Come into the parlor so we can talk."

Darcy stood in stunned alarm, trying to read his uncle's face. "Is she....?"

"She is fine, but she is asleep and she needs her sleep. Allow her to rest undisturbed, nephew, and have a drink with me."

"I am her husband and she needs me!" Darcy flashed angrily, visage stormy.

George stepped closer, face sympathetic but determined. "What Elizabeth needs is a husband who is serene, stabile, and informed. You are currently none of those things." He lay his hand comfortably onto Darcy's forearm, "Come have a drink William, just for the interim, and let your wife sleep."

Darcy glanced toward the far staircase, sighed, running a hand over a grey face as he nodded wearily. "Very well. Just tell me one thing first. Is she.....is the baby....?" His voice broke, but there was no need to say more.

George smiled, placing an arm about Darcy's shoulders and propelling him toward the doorway, "Elizabeth is hugely pregnant and shows no signs of presenting you an heir in the immediate future."

Darcy sagged with relief, simultaneously sighing and coughing and laughing with an edge of hysteria. "Thank God!"

"Yes, indeed. Georgiana, look what the wind blew in."

Georgiana, of course, was dancing with impatience just inside the doorway and leapt at her brother instantly. "Brother! We missed you so very much! Welcome home. Oh, Lizzy will be so happy!"

Darcy clutched his sister tightly to his chest, desperately needing the love and warmth offered freely. George moved to the liquor cabinet, taking his time so the siblings could have their moment.

"Georgie! You have no idea how good it is to be home. How are you, my sweet?"

"I am well. You, however, do not look well at all. It is as Lizzy surmised." She broke the embrace, leading him by the hand to the sofa.

Darcy fell into the cushions with a heavy sigh, pulling Georgiana down beside him and under his arm. "What did my wife surmise?"

"That you would push too hard and not take care of yourself. Be prepared; she will scold you."

Darcy smiled, "I imagine I can tolerate her scolding quite happily. Thank you, uncle." He took the offered whiskey, drinking deeply and ignoring his uncle's sharp gaze. "Are you examining me Dr. Darcy, intending to inform me how terrible I look and rebuke me for not resting?"

"No point in stating the obvious. And I examined you out in the hallway. I was currently trying to decide which tonic would be best for your cough."

"I am certain whatever it is will taste horrible. Tell me about my wife and child." All jesting gone, he duplicated George's stare.

"Four afternoons ago now she began having contractions. They were not severe nor regular which is, if you recall from the text and our discussions, the sign of true labor. Nonetheless, they persisted throughout the evening and were intense enough to warrant medical intervention. Upon examination I ascertained no indication of impending birth and her waters did not rupture. Georgie dear, if this is too graphic perhaps you should depart temporarily."

“Thank you, I believe I will.” She kissed her brother’s cheek and exited, face flushed.

George chuckled, but Darcy leaned forward avidly. “Continue frankly.”

“She has been a wonderful companion and comfort to Elizabeth, William. I have been quite proud of her maturity. Anyway, you understand of what I speak. As I told your wife, I was not overly concerned as the symptoms were tenuous, nonetheless it cannot be taken lightly. I have her on a daily prescription of herbals that have some effect on inhibiting contractions. Additionally, I forced her to stay in bed until today.”

He started laughing, eyes twinkling, “I checked on her this morning and the first words out of her mouth were, ‘How long are you to keep me chained to this bed, Dr. Darcy? Until I atrophy and fuse into the sheets?’ Well, that is always a sign of the patient improving. So I have allowed her to walk about the room, but no further.”

Darcy smiled faintly, but his eyes were troubled. “Are you sure she should be out of bed? I am quite familiar with my wife’s temper and need for activity, but I do not want my child compromised. Nor would Elizabeth either, no matter her frustration.”

“Here are the facts: If your baby is planning on arriving today or next month, there honestly is little we can do to stop it. The herbs and bedrest may aid temporarily, but are no guarantee. The detriments to lying in bed for the next four weeks, especially with a temperament such as Elizabeth’s, would likely outweigh any benefits. Secondly, as I explained to her, the baby is near enough to complete maturity to conceivably be born healthy. He is a Darcy after all!”

His attempt to lighten the mood was disregarded, Darcy shaking his head. “Possibilities are not adequate. I will not gamble on my son’s life. Whatever you deem the proper treatment, it will be done. If I have to tie Elizabeth to the bed I will!”

“Well, that would be a sight to behold. Yet, I see no cause for such drastic measures. The truth is, William, your presence will be the best medicine. Promise me you will not chastise your wife because she does not need your severity but only your love and support. To a great degree her own nature is against her. She does not take leisure well, especially when driving herself to avoid sadness and to please you. Most importantly, she honestly is dependent on you for her serenity. You are a fortunate man, my boy.”

Darcy smiled the first real smile since arriving, caressing and staring at his ring. “Yes, I am. It has been an hour now. Can I please

wake her?" He spoke very softly, as a little boy pleading for permission, glancing to his uncle with beseeching, watery eyes.

"Yes, you may." Darcy jumped up enthusiastically with a broad grin, but George stayed him with a hand. "One last thing William. For reasons we physicians do not completely understand, sexual activity can induce labor. We should give it a few more days to be sure how she will respond to other physical exertions. I am sorry."

Darcy nodded, the grin in place. "No worries. I can control myself for the sake of my wife's health. Right now all I want is to see her face."

"Glad to hear it, however it is not only you who must find control. Women can be persuasive and none, I judge, more so than Mrs. Darcy." He was smirking widely, Darcy actually flushing. Without another word, and to the sound of his uncle's laughter, Darcy left the room.

\* \* \* \*

He opened the bedchamber door gingerly, peeking through the crack. The bed was empty, but he did not require that evidence as Elizabeth was readily seen standing on the balcony. She wore his robe, the same one confiscated while separated from him in June, back to the door with braided hair falling down her back. She stared south, watching vainly for sight of a carriage, hugging the robe tightly against the mild breeze. Darcy approached cautiously, not wishing to startle, utilizing the seconds to drink in every part of her.

To his continued amazement she still did not appear notably pregnant from the rear. Her daintily thin shoulders and narrow waist nearly unaltered with only the faintest hint of widened hips and bulging belly visible. The way she clutched her arms with the dark robe and hanging braid suddenly recalled the memory of how she had looked when he delivered the letter at Hunsford. So vulnerable and sad, hurt and lost. It had knifed his heart then and did so again.

He knocked lightly on the open balcony door, speaking softly, "Elizabeth?"

She turned slowly, eyes widening in a delayed reaction when she realized it was not George Darcy. With a gasp and sob she cried his name, crossing the short distance as if flying weightless, and was into his arms. Pressing with steely hands on his back and face buried into the hard planes of his chest, she dissolved into tears.

Darcy embraced her with steady strength, hands caressing all



about the trembling surfaces of her backside; face embedded into her hair as he bestowed hundreds of kisses to her head. “Elizabeth, beautiful, dearest wife. Hush, love, I am home. I will not leave you. I love you, my heart. Please do not cry.....”

On it went, Lizzy lost to salving tears. Darcy swept her into his arms, carrying to the sofa by the smoldering fire and sitting with her tightly clenched in his lap. Her face was nestled into his neck, fingers running through his hair as her weeping slowly subsided. He gave her the time she needed, hugging and stroking tenderly. Reaching gently to cup her jaw, he leaned back while pulling her head away, thumb caressing over her cheek, and met her eyes.

“Do not cry beloved, please.” He brushed over her lips lightly as the familiar jolt of pleasure rocked through his being. Her lips parted, insistently deepening the kiss. Darcy thought he could die of happiness right then. Embracing his wife, tasting her mouth and tongue, the intimacy of her womanly curves snuggled into his body, her tiny hands kneading and seeking, and the muted sounds of contentment escaping all conspired to overwhelm his senses.

The kiss broke, but their eyes remained closed with faces touching; cheeks fondling cheeks, noses grazing, foreheads in contact, and nuzzling kisses over all features while murmured endearments fell. Lizzy shivered at the blissful sensation of roughly whiskered cheeks and chin scraping the delicate flesh of her face, inhaled deeply of his woody scent, trembled afresh at the vibrantly adoring tones of his voice, and leeches the radiant heat always emanating from the sturdy muscles of his body.

Softly and huskily whispering into his ear between infinitesimal kisses, she said, “Dearest love, forgive me for forcing you away from your business, but I was so afraid. I should feel more ashamed of my selfishness and pathetic reliance, but I do not. I needed you here and now I know precisely why.” She withdrew a few inches to clearly view his beloved face, frowning instantly upon noting the lines of fatigue and marked pallor.

Darcy was attempting to wipe the drying tears with his handkerchief, smile sunny. “I am at fault for ever leaving you, love, and if you are selfish or pathetic then I am as well. We can be a matched pair of hopeless romantics.”

Lizzy was barely listening, swiping at the handkerchief impatiently as she trailed fingertips over his face. “William, you look terrible. Are you still unwell?”

“I have been hearing this frequently lately. Very well, I shall

confess to being tired beyond belief, consumed with worry, still a bit weak from my ordeal, and with a lingering cough. All of this will surely evaporate now that I can sleep in your arms, not to mention being dosed with some horrid concoction of Dr. Darcy's. Perhaps in a day or two I will again be the 'handsomest man of your acquaintance.'"

Lizzy chuckled lightly, still stroking over his face. "You are forever the handsomest man not only of my acquaintance but in the entire world, just a bit worse for wear at this current time. Now you are here for me to nurse you back to health."

"How odd. I was under the impression that I had come dashing home to care for you." He smiled, caressing over her abdomen. "Seriously, Elizabeth, how are you feeling?"

"No pains for the past two days. Well, other than the usual vague ones. He is active and apparently unperturbed by stressing his parents so profoundly." She swallowed, eyes moistening, "I was very frightened William. Not so much by the pains themselves, but because you were not here. No one should see him before you. George says he would be fine if born now, but I do not want to take the chance."

"I concur. We will be cautious and do all he recommends. However, he did make one point we should bear in mind: if our son wishes to come we cannot prevent it. I do not want his introduction to his parents to be anxiety filled. It *will* be a joyous welcoming, Elizabeth, replete with enthusiasm, hope, and love."

"This is why I need you here, my heart, to cheer me up and keep me focused."

Cosseted for the next two hours, they talked and kissed and nuzzled. The baby responded to his father's persuasion by rolling about and kicking. Lizzy, as Dr. Darcy intimated, was not pleased at the restriction in sexual activity, but she did not argue the logic. The yearned boiled under the surface, but as much as they desired each other, the desire for a healthy child was greater.

Lizzy was allowed to join the family for dinner, walking slowly on Darcy's arm. She felt not the least bit delicate or uncomfortable, frankly more concerned by the deepening circles under her husband's eyes, but he insisted she lean on him. It was tempting, but she did not tease him as to what she would do if he collapsed! George presented Darcy with a bottle of thick greenish fluid which he did not ask the contents of, preferring not to know what bizarre extracts he was forced to imbibe. Whatever it was, his throat was instantly numbed, and the nagging tickle that kept him from attaining a deep sleep disappeared. Additionally, either there was some hidden ingredient that sedated or he was simply

wholly depleted because he slept blissfully embracing his wife for twelve hours straight.

\* \* \* \*

November the tenth dawned cold with a drizzling rain. No sun was forthcoming to wake the Darcys at the dawn so, as had already become a habit since his return, they slept late. Lizzy stirred first. As usual it was the call of a full bladder which invaded her restful slumber; care taken to hastily but gently removed herself from Darcy's unconscious grip. He sighed sleepily, garbled something, and rolled to his back.

The few days had passed in calm serenity. None of the four occupants wandered beyond the immediate garden pathways, and hardly even there as the weather was decidedly unpleasant. Lizzy had experienced no further contractions of any notable intensity, devotedly drinking the foul tasting tea four times a day as prescribed. She smothered her natural inclinations and irritation, resting frequently and walking short distances only. In all ways she was the perfectly obedient patient and in all ways minus one it bothered her naught.

Darcy's cough had diminished to a rare event of minor duration and strength. He was correct in judging that restful sleep and tranquility would restore his energy and health. The muscle aches and weakness faded rapidly, and the color returned to his cheeks as the duskiness vanished. His pleasure and frank relief at discovering all Pemberley affairs managed competently and completely in his absence was overwhelming. Mr. Keith only had a list of four items which needed to be discussed with the Master. Mr. Daniels sent a small packet containing the unfinished business, none of which were vital, allowing Darcy the time to attend it at his leisure. Slowly life was settling into the typical winter stasis with nothing of vast import looming, even the birth of their child an event to anticipate with nothing but excitement.

Darcy seemed to handle his uncle's interdiction to forsake making love to his wife with equanimity. If Lizzy noted a churning blaze in his eyes from time to time when he thought she was not looking, she said nothing. Neither denied the contained fire fermenting underneath, but felt it best to avoid the topic. They slept together, it quite simply unthinkable to be apart, but Lizzy wore a gown and Darcy a nightshirt or breeches. The barrier of clothing did not prevent the desire to any great degree, but it was a tangible reminder for fuzzy brains to be restrained. Dr. Darcy observed their poorly concealed passion with some

amusement, but honestly was uncertain the wisdom in withdrawing his ban. Every day that passed allowed the baby to mature; each day possibly the difference between life and death.

The Bingleys had arrived the day before for a short sojourn to honor Darcy's thirtieth birthday. His wish to ignore the day was also ignored, but Lizzy had submitted to his request for a modest celebration. The plan was for nothing more than a private dinner party with a handful of their friends. The gentlemen had tentatively discussed a hunt if the weather permitted.

With the days empty of vital tasks, all members of the household had taken to sleeping late and retiring early. Today, therefore, was no different. Lizzy returned from the water closet fully intending on pressing chilled feet against her spouse's shins as she returned to the land of dreams, halting at the sight greeting her. Darcy lay on his back, covered completely and soundly asleep. What caused her to pause was the clearly defined evidence of the nature of his dreams not impeded even by the weight of blankets and comforter. It was not at all unusual for her potent husband to wake in a degree of, or sometimes complete, arousal. At all times his amorous lustiness was greeted with delight and openness by an adoring, and fortunate, wife. Lately, sadly, she knew that his robust hunger was not being relieved, and this grieved her.

With an epiphany, and self chastisement at her stupidity, it dawned on her that her wonderful lover did not need to suffer while waiting on her health. Smiling lasciviously, she crawled under the blankets and nestled close, mouth starting with moist kisses along his neck and hand reaching pointedly under his nightshirt.

Darcy jerked and moaned, instantly widely awake with thighs clenching and body rippling. "Elizabeth, what.....? Oh god! Wait, beloved, no we cannot...."

"*We* cannot, my lover, but I can. Now lay back, relax, and enjoy." Lizzy knew well the extreme gratification to be found in pleasing her husband. The long time without her did not afford him the greatest regulation, but enough to thoroughly enjoy all the wondrous thrills she bestowed upon his body. Lizzy's checked passion raged, but the satisfaction in observing the man she loved so profoundly attaining his rapture through her manipulation was excessive.

Darcy's shouts and gasping respirations moved her soul. Seconds later he pulled her upward, capturing her whole mouth in a bruising, penetrating kiss. His body shuddered, skin blazing and flushed with pleasure, sturdy arms embracing while hands caressed voraciously. The satiation achieved was immeasurable yet a mere fragment of the total

desire. As if a flood gate had been opened, he pressed her harshly into his torso, mouth seeking the flesh too long veiled from view and touch. Claiming a gown swathed nipple with serious yearning caused Lizzy to release a sustained and loud moan.

It was this clearly expressed vocalization that snapped Darcy to awareness. “Lizzy! Beloved, I forgot myself. Lord what you do to me!” He moved his hands to her face, panting roughly, and pressed his forehead against hers. For a very long while he held her in silence, breath and heartbeat gradually resuming regularity. When he spoke his voice was very deep and gravelly, “I was dreaming of you and I together under the trees. Elizabeth, beautiful wife, I cannot deny how desperately I want to love you. It invades every minute of my day.” He opened his eyes then and gazed at her with indescribable love and yearning. “I know you feel the same for me, and are unsure if that knowledge eases my suffering or enhances it! Thank you my lover for this morning. It was....you are....inexpressible. My Lizzy, my life, you are so selfless and giving! As satisfied as I am right now, my heart aches as I cannot return the gesture.”

She halted his words with a long, teasing kiss. “Fitzwilliam, you are truly too wonderful and a bit of a fool. Do you not always say that pleasuring me brings you great joy? My happiness in pleasing you, my beloved husband, is profound.” She kissed him again, slow and intense. “My darling you give me so much, endlessly extending yourself in hundreds of ways to please me. I am blessed and exhilarated to have this opportunity to focus only on you. I love you so very much William!”

It may not have been exactly how Darcy wished to resolve the physical urge for sensual gratification, but it did help. He faced his birthday with a broad smile and spring in his step that was noticed by all, especially George Darcy who in turn leapt to the wrong conclusion and kept a very close eye on Elizabeth. For her part, Lizzy was in a gay mood. She felt wonderful physically despite the consistent nags of advanced pregnancy, was emotionally joyous at the chance to honor her spouse on his special day, and spiritually thrilled by the peace she noted on his face. She was a bit smug about it all too!

The misty rain ceased by noon, the men folk jumping up instantly to take advantage of the break in weather for their hunt. Darcy, Bingley, and George were met by both the Vernor men, Albert Hughes, and George Fitzherbert on the fringes of Pemberley’s forest. The Sitwells would be arriving in the afternoon for the dinner party. Unfortunately the Drurys would not be able to attend as Chloe’s pregnancy was far advanced and had not been an easy one. Georgiana spent the morning

hours with her tutor, allotting Jane and Lizzy a block of time for sisterly companionship.

“Why did it have to rain?” Lizzy asked. She stood in her parlor staring out the window. “Now the walkways are slick and muddy.” She sighed loudly, turning to join her sister on the settee.

Jane smiled, “I have never known you to be inhibited by the weather. Is Mr. Darcy’s over protectiveness wearing off on you?”

“Not completely, however I must confess that in this instance he is wise. I am ashamed to admit it, but I have discovered a slight unsteadiness at times. All this weight on my poor hip bones, I suppose.” She placed her hands on either side of her belly, smiling ruefully. “It is not worth the risk. Instead I wander up and down the halls where chairs are readily available.” She shrugged.

“Considering the length of Pemberley’s halls it is likely more exercise than if you walked to the rock pond and back.”

“Your tea, Mistress.” Mrs. Reynolds entered with the pot of Dr. Darcy’s prescribed brew, Lizzy wincing. “Drink it all this time, Mrs. Darcy. I will be checking. Mrs. Bingley, this is for you.” She sat the pots down onto the table, bobbing a curtsy, and then departing after a pointed glance to her Mistress.

Jane began laughing the moment the door closed. “The fever of safeguarding appears to be contagious.”

“I am carrying the Darcy heir after all.”

“Pish! It is because she cares for you Lizzy, any fool can see that. By the way, you speak of your weight, but do you remember Angela Harley? Poor dear was enormous. I seriously began to have doubts at the whole concept of matrimony and maternity watching her.” Lizzy was laughing at the recollection. “You, dear sister, are yet svelte in comparison. I do hope I am as fortunate when the time arrives.”

Jane’s voice softened and she glanced away, Lizzy watching her with sudden speculation. “Jane, is there something you wish to reveal to me?”

Jane blushed brightly, staring into her lap. “I should say nothing yet, Lizzy, as we are not certain.” She glanced up at Lizzy with a shy smile, continuing, “Oh Lizzy, I have been bursting to tell you! Charles and I may be expecting!”

Lizzy clasped her hands with joy, “Jane! How marvelous! I cannot believe that Mr. Bingley has managed to maintain his calm!”

“We only days ago began to suspect and cannot be certain. Please Lizzy say nothing, except to Mr. Darcy of course, but no other. I know you are not the superstitious type, but I do so want to present Charles a

child and fear if we speak of it too forcefully it will prove false.”

“Oh Jane, you are so silly! Nonetheless, I understand the necessity in waiting to be sure. I knew it would be lovely having you close. Now our children can grow together as playmates. Oh happy day!”

“Speaking of babies, have you heard from Charlotte?”

“Not for a month or so. In fact I was beginning to worry as I know she was due early this month. Her last letter assured me all was progressing normally. Mama’s recent letter mentions nothing, so there must be no news to report or surely mama would know!”

“Quite uncharitable of you Lizzy, but I agree that it is true. Your tea is getting cold and you have yet to finish it. Tsk, tsk! Mrs. Reynolds may turn you over her knee. Here, have a scone. That may help the flavor.”

\* \* \* \*

“No, place it amid the curls just above her left ear. Excellent! Absolutely stunning. Once again, Marguerite, you have created a flawless masterpiece.”

“Thank you Sir. With hair such as Mrs. Darcy possesses it is an easy task. I was assuming the amber necklace, Madame? Does this meet with your approval?”

Lizzy shrugged, “Perhaps you should ask my personal accessory advisor.”

Both Lizzy and Marguerite looked questioningly to Darcy’s reflection in the vanity mirror. “By all means the amber necklace and earrings.”

Marguerite disappeared into the closet, Lizzy gazing at her husband via the mirror. He stood in the doorway of her dressing room, dressed in a spectacular ensemble of dark gray pantaloons and jacket with waistcoat in silvery threaded purple, observing the final preparations of his wife with a happy smile on his lips. Lizzy wore the auburn gown from their renewal ceremony, her hair truly magnificent with a single clip of diamonds now nestled above her left ear.

Marguerite returned with the jewels, Darcy stepping forward to wordlessly take them from her. “I will finish here Mrs. Oliver. Enjoy your evening with your husband.” Marguerite curtsied with a faint rosiness highlighting her pale cheeks and departed. Moving behind Lizzy, Darcy encircled her slender neck and clasped the necklace in place, fingertips brushing over her skin. He bent to bestow a tiny kiss to the nape of her neck, handing her the earrings and speaking roughly,

“Earrings are beyond my expertise, beloved. Elizabeth, you are breathtaking. One of the best birthday presents in all my life, sans your bookmark, is the vision of you as you are now.”

His hands rested lightly on her shoulders, Lizzy clipping the earrings on. “Thank you my love. However, maybe this year’s present will please you.” She stood and took his hand, leading into the bedchamber. The wrapped gift sat on the sofa, Lizzy encouraging Darcy to sit and handing it to him. “Happy birthday William.”

“I will remind you that I requested no gifts.”

“Surely you did not think I would obey such a ridiculous order? Be thankful I did not invite all of Derbyshire to pay homage. After all, it is a remarkably special day, your healthy birth the beginning of the pathway leading you to me. Now open.”

He slowly untied the bow, pulling the wrapping away from the large, flat box. Lizzy was biting nervously on the corner of her lip, Darcy glancing at her with a soft smile. Inside under layers of tissue paper was a framed portrait. Darcy’s breath caught and mouth fell open as with trembling fingers he removed the picture.

It was Lizzy dressed in one of his favorite gowns: a satin dress of navy blue with silver trim that beautifully accented her fuller bosom, capped sleeves off the shoulders exposing the creamy lusciousness of her flesh and swanlike neck. She wore his mother’s pearl necklace and dainty drop earrings, thick chestnut tresses elaborately coiffed with tiny pearls woven into a strand of curls cascading over her right shoulder and wisps of hair brushing delicately along her temples. The artist had masterfully captured the vibrant sparkle of her eyes, faint twist of bubbling humor on her lush lips, and barely suppressed verve evident in the tilt of her head. The portrait was miniaturized, approximately twelve inches high and eight inches wide, but the realism was so astounding that the image verily leapt off the canvas.

“Elizabeth! It is unbelievable. When did you...? Who...?”

“I confess I deceived you, my love. Many of the afternoons you thought me shopping or visiting Harriet I was sitting for this. I think it good. Do you like it?”

“Good?! It is stunning. You are stunning. I am at a lost for words! Thank you Elizabeth!”

“I thought you could place it on your desk amid the clutter.”

“It may distract me too greatly as the accuracy is remarkable. I will anticipate hearing your voice emerge from the frame. Besides, workmanship such as this deserves a place of honor.”

“It is yours, dearest, to do with as you wish, however I did want it



where you could view it frequently. Think of it as me watching over you.” She reached to tenderly stroke his cheek, Darcy grasping her hand for a kiss to the palm while yet staring raptly at the painting.

“You know I require no tangible remembrances of you, love, but I will treasure this always. Yes, you are correct. I will place it on my desk, even clearing some of the mess to denote an esteemed locale. On the left corner, I think.”

“You could remove that hideous statue of the bull.”

“I like that statue! Oh, you are teasing me.” He laughed, bending to kiss her tenderly and caressing her jaw. “Thank you, my dearest love. It is perfect. You never cease to amaze me. I love you Elizabeth. May I share the painting with our guests?”

“As you wish.”

Lizzy may have ignored his pleading for no gifts, but she did grant his wish for an intimate gathering. Aside from George and Georgiana, no gifts were given. The focus was on fine dining and sedate entertainment. The Sitwells had traveled from their home near Chesterfield, residing with the Hughes. In lieu of attending, the Drurys had sent best wishes for a happy birthday.

All were in awe at Lizzy’s miniature portrait, praising the artistry and sentiment. Darcy momentarily slipped away from his guests to reverently place it in his study, clearing a corner of the enormous desk with a smile as he imagined all the subsequent days spent at his labors with her beautiful face gazing upon him. He touched the gilded frame, chuckling happily as he freshly acknowledged the vast difference between this birthday and the last versus every other in his entire life. His mother and father, when he was young, had showered him with gifts, prepared his favorite dinner and dessert, and a handful of times in his youth held small parties with his closest friends. Then there were the grief filled years after his mother died when celebrations of all sorts had practically ceased. His birthdays then were family affairs only with little in the way of gaiety. As an adult, as he had told Lizzy last year, his birthdays had passed virtually with no recognition except for modest gifts from Mrs. Reynolds, Georgiana, and occasionally Richard.

Only once, when he turned 22, was there a memory attached: Richard and Stephen Lathrop had conspired and surprised him at Whites. The gents there had toasted to his birthday, his health, his prosperity, his future, on and on until the toasts declined to the realm of drinking a shot for his horse, his hair, his teeth, his boots, and so on. All he really remembers after that is waking up the next morning, shockingly actually in his bed at Darcy House, with the headache to beat all headaches. For

the successive years he was blessedly content to forego any revelry.

This birthday was sedate, Lizzy certainly not physically able to tolerate an exaggerated affair and Darcy content to sip brandy while conversing and listening to his sister play and wife sing. All things taken into account, turning thirty was a blissful transition, Darcy glad to put the pain of his twenties behind and embrace the promised joy of his thirties and beyond.

\* \* \* \*

The following weeks were quiet at Pemberley. The weather grew gradually colder with frequent sprinkling rains. The leaves continually fell from the deciduous trees, barren skeletons remaining dotted about the grounds. Little by little the autumn blooms faded and died, the colors about the house transmuting from vibrant to dingy. The excellent Pemberley groundsman under the tutelage of Mr. Clark fabulously maintained the gardens and lawns, keeping all immaculate and as colorful as possible. Lizzy was actually quite amazed at how even the intermittent haziness could not totally subdue the picturesque landscape, nonetheless the gradual tapering toward the monochrome of winter occurred.

Dusk daily fell sooner, extending the evenings. What warmth was attained during the day was rapidly dispensed as the sun set, requiring the servants to light the lamps and draw the drapes earlier. Fires blazed nightly from all the inhabited rooms, allaying the cold that insisted on creeping through the thick stone walls and driving the chill into the hallways. Stored winter wear was pulled out and thoroughly cleaned, new boots and thick slippers purchased as needed. Lighter weight pelisses and shawls were consistently utilized even during the remaining fair days.

There was the occasional day of milder climate when Lizzy and Darcy would take short walks about the grounds, but generally they remained secluded in the manor where it was warm and safe. Darcy's residual cough dissipated completely, leaving him as robust as prior. He resumed his typical activities with long rides on Parsifal leading the agenda, his uncle oftentimes accompanying. Work was minimal and easily finished. He became fanatical about keeping the staff and his wife abreast of his whereabouts. Never did he wander further than the immediate surrounds or into Lambton and that rarely. Even his gallops followed a standard route so he could be swiftly found if necessary.

He observed Elizabeth's every breath, driving her insane at times, but it was a compulsion uncontrollable. For her part, she essentially felt quite well. Her back ached to some degree almost constantly; the mild,

sporadic false labor pains escalated to a frequent phenomenon; her feet swelled slightly, enough to prefer loose shoes for comfort; and she was forever short of breath as the baby seemed to press further and further up into her lung cavity.

Mrs. Hanford moved into her newly renovated apartments on the far side of the nursery. Lizzy discovered the joy of sharing infant related discussions with the kindly woman. The nanny was thrilled by the nursery, having never seen a baby's room decorated so elaborately and delighted in all the delicately knitted and sewn garments and blankets. She humbly gifted Mrs. Darcy with numerous tiny articles that she had created over the past months, Lizzy happily adding them to the piles waiting in the drawers. Lizzy visited the baby's room several times each day for no other purpose than to touch the clothing and items sitting about. Darcy twice looked all over the manor for her, reaching a point verging on hysteria, only to discover her rocking placidly in the chair and stroking her belly.

Dr. Darcy insisted Lizzy drink the tea for three weeks after which he figured the baby could safely be born if he so desired. George never asked outright if he could deliver the baby, simply assuming control of the situation. Neither of the Darcys gave it the slightest thought, frankly never having it cross their minds that he should probably have formally asked their permission or that they should have formally requested his services. Mrs. Henderson, the midwife, was informed of Dr. Darcy's attendance. Darcy and Lizzy fretted that she would feel slighted, not wishing to insult the premier midwife of mid Derbyshire. They did not consider the charm of George Darcy who smoothly flattered by swapping outrageous birth tales and medical expertise. It was agreed between the two that the physician would deliver the Darcys' baby with Mrs. Henderson assisting.

Lizzy was observed closely and regularly questioned on her current state of being. Only once more did Dr. Darcy examine her, about a week after the initial scare. It was only an external exam, his sensitive fingers carefully palpating over her bare abdomen. Darcy watched the procedure avidly. His diagnosis was that the baby was positioned correctly, of a sufficient size but not too large, and would likely soon lower himself into his mother's birth canal. Lizzy especially was thrilled about the latter as breathing was increasingly problematic. As the frightening symptoms of premature labor had not recurred even with Lizzy resuming her usual activities, the physician's opinion was that all was safe.

Darcy presented the world with his typical calm demeanor, not

even his wife fully aware of the rising anxiety as December approached. He read through the textbook entries addressing the birth process so many times that he literally had them memorized. As if magnetized he was drawn to the shelves in the library devoted to animal husbandry and medicine, vainly imagining that the one book with all the answers had miraculously materialized since the last time he looked. The fact that he planned on never leaving his wife's side once labor was initiated was not discussed in so many words, it, like Dr. Darcy's obstetrical service, simply a matter of course.

Roughly a week and a half after his birthday, Darcy and his uncle were mounted on their horses. The day was cool but clear, the soft fluffy white clouds scattered in the azure sky were stationary as the winds were nonexistent. It was an excellent day for racing and the two men had taken advantage of the respite. George, like any Darcy in recent generations, had been placed on a horse before he could walk steadily. Although his professional duties did not allot him the time to ride for pleasure, he managed to adequately maintain his aptitude. Therefore, the two greatly enjoyed these excursions when they could embark on friendly wagering as to who would reach a designated point quickest. It was all in good fun, Darcy the younger inevitably winning, but George's rusty equestrian skills were improving.

Today they crossed the northern bridge spanning the river, bypassed the Village, and headed due east across the moor in a flash of black and brown with coattails flying. The final destination, a clump of trees on a small rise, was reached essentially simultaneously with the good doctor ever so slightly in the lead.

"Ha! I finally beat you!" George declared breathlessly, "Good boy, Aristotle, very good boy." He rubbed his mount's sweaty neck, reaching into a pocket for an apple.

Darcy was grinning, face flushed from the cool air, the picture of health and happiness. Parsifal, on the other hand, appeared decidedly out of sorts, not at all pleased with being displaced by the upstart Aristotle. "Do not fear, old man," Darcy placated, stroking and administering treats, "You are still my favorite."

They dismounted, allowing the horses to wander a bit and graze. George pulled a cigar from his breast pocket, leaning against a tree to puff in contentment. Darcy absently picked up a branch fallen to the ground and peeled at the loose bark, his gaze fixed dazedly on Pemberley nestled across the valley. Silence reigned for a time, both men lost to individual thoughts. It was Darcy who broke the quiet.

"I was reading in the book yesterday," he began, no need to

clarify which book he was referring to as these sorts of introductions were becoming common, “and it was talking about the final stages of the labor process and how irrational the woman becomes. Have you seen this often?”

“It is as I told you months ago William. Labor is intense and very painful. Women often lose sight of rational thought toward the end. It is why having someone dear who can retain that calm is so vital. Are you sure you are up to the task?”

Darcy continued to peel the bark strips, tossing randomly as he thought, finally speaking very slowly. “I want to answer with an unequivocal ‘yes,’ but the truth is I do not know what to expect, either of Elizabeth or myself. I cannot well tolerate seeing her in pain. So, I vacillate between wondering if I will faint dead or dash away in fright, or be strong and the calming influence she needs. Normally I do not doubt my backbone, but it is all so different where my wife is concerned.”

“Of course it is ultimately up to you, William, and none will think less of you if you opt to stay away as most husbands do. However, imagine it this way. You are in the sitting room or library or parlor, wherever, sipping brandy while your beloved wife is screaming and in intense distress. Pemberley is large with thick walls, but probably not thick enough. Even if you cannot hear her, your knowledge of the subject is too inclusive to not know what is transpiring. How would you tolerate that?”

Darcy shook his head, throwing the denuded branch away. “Not well.”

“For what it is worth nephew, I think you will be amazing. Additionally, there is no doubt in my mind that Elizabeth will want you there and will respond to your presence.” He chuckled lowly, “You are becoming quite the trend setter, Mr. Darcy. Marrying for love not once but twice, wearing a wedding ring, sharing one chamber, and now attending your child’s birth. Folks may write books about you!”

“Terrific. My life’s goal.”

George laughed in earnest, inhaling deeply of the cigar and releasing a satisfied sigh, “Ah! Nothing like the taste of fine tobacco. Comes from our former colonies, Virginia grown. Do not worry so, William. Elizabeth is very strong herself and all seems well with her and the baby. One can never be certain, but I do not foresee any major difficulties.”

“Yes, she is very strong.” Darcy spoke softly with a tender smile. “Nonetheless, I am very thankful that no further serious labor pains have reinitiated with her resumption of physical activity.”

“Indeed. Including such activity of which I believe I recommended you two avoid.”

Darcy spun around in shock, eyes wide, “We have not.....that is I have not....! Uncle, I would never do anything that might harm my wife or child. Never! I am not a beast!” His face was stricken, blanched, and jaw slack, but eyes igniting with flickers of anger.

George, for one of the few times in his life, was mortally embarrassed and ashamed. “Fitzwilliam, forgive me! Of course you would never hurt Elizabeth. I should not have assumed anything.”

“Why would you think this of me?”

“I do apologize, son. It is just that.....well, if you must know, you and Elizabeth do not hide your physical attraction for each other very well.” He paused, Darcy too confused and irritated to be discomfited by the intimate topic, but George abashed and reddening. He glanced away, “The poorly repressed desire notable when you returned from Town miraculously disappeared on your birthday and since. I.....well, I concluded wrongly obviously.” His voice trailed away. It was an odd situation for the physician, normally being quite adept at holding blunt, personal conversations with patients. This was his nephew and niece, however.

Darcy flushed slightly, anger fading. “Yes, well,” he cleared his throat roughly, “there are alternatives.” His lips clamped shut, simply unable to continue. In no way could he verbalize the fact that his wonderfully giving wife eschewed her own passion and gratified his physical yearnings. As blissful and relieving as it was to be loved in such manner by the woman he adored more than life, the activity was mixed with emotions of dismay as he could not fulfill her unalleviated passionate desire. He knew her pent up sensual tension was rising and it wounded him to not be able to satisfy her. Besides, nothing compared to making love to her in complete unity and his body ached to bond with her wholly.

He glanced to his uncle. George leaned against the tree trunk, cigar burning forgotten at his side as he stared downward. Assuming a neutral tone, he spoke, “So, your professional opinion is that our child is healthy and could be born safely at any time?”

“Dates of confinement are not an exact science, William,” George spoke in his most authoritative pitch, relieved to be on firm ground. “Based on the information provided as to Elizabeth’s cycles, when you first suspected her pregnancy, and her current condition, the baby could be born anytime between now and early December. In fact, I think I will halt the tea as she hates it so.” He chuckled, finally inhaling

from the butt of his cigar, "Actually, I imagine we would all be thrilled to meet your firstborn as soon as he, or she, is willing to join the family."

Darcy laughed too, "I can confidently proclaim that Elizabeth is ready to *not* be pregnant."

George snuffed the cigar stub under his boot heel, not meeting his nephew's eyes, "At this point I would suggest embracing any activities that may elicit labor. I believe our mounts have rested. Race you back to the manor?" With identical grins they called to their horses.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night Lizzy reclined on the sitting room sofa, propped comfortably on two plump pillows with her aching feet actively being massaged by her adoring husband. She read aloud while Darcy rubbed, squirming intermittently to ease the persistent strain on her lower back.

"Is your back paining you, my love?"

"*Your* son seems determined to kick me in the kidneys!"

Darcy laughed, patting her feet before he removed them off his lap. Falling to his knees aside the sofa, he scooted to her torso, placing his strong hands behind her back. He pressed hard, circular motions with firm fingertips over the lumbar regions next to her spine.

"Relax and close your eyes," but she already had her head thrown back onto the pillow and was vocalizing sounds of satisfaction. He observed her with a happy smile, kneading steadily and leaning into her neck to bestow soft kisses. Nibbling to her earlobe, he murmured lowly, "Dr. Darcy and I had an interesting talk today about babies and delivery."

"Do I have you to thank for stopping the daily tea doses?"

"Partially, although he made that decision himself. His professional opinion, as he shared with you during dinner, is that our son could arrive at any time if he so desired. He even went so far as to suggest we pray for a speedy resolution to your discomfort and gave me ideas as to ways of hastening the initiation."

He withdrew from her neckline, meeting her eyes with a twinkle, one hand traveling from her back to breast with gentle caresses.

"Are you certain you understood?"

"Quite certain." He cupped one breast, holding tenderly as he continued, "Elizabeth, I love you so intensely and want to please you, and me as well I will admit. However, if you do not feel able or interested, all considered, I do understand. My only true desire is to show you my love for you in whatever manner, even if it is embracing you and

nothing else.”

Lizzy smiled, reaching up wordlessly to stroke his perfect face. She feathered over his forehead, brows, eyes, noble nose, to jaw and lips. Lightly grasping his chin with two fingers, she pulled him toward her until his lips were a scant breath away from hers.

“Fitzwilliam,” she breathed, “Love me.”

He released a soft moan when she encompassed his mouth, searching and seeking possessively. How heavenly it is to love one’s spouse whole heartedly, body and soul, without encumbrances. Naturally accommodations were essential due to Lizzy’s greatly expanded abdomen, but only in the final moments of their lovemaking. Before sleep claimed them, warm and blissfully satiated in their mammoth four poster bed, they would love hard and with a joy of surrender. Souls reunited as bodies moved together in harmony; adulation expressed in roving kisses and caresses freely gifted to all surfaces of flesh. Darcy needed to touch and taste all of her, the restrictions of the past weeks having worn on him and created a hunger for her that was nigh on insatiable.

The reality that their child would arrive soon, whether as a result of this session of love or mere time, meant that the beautiful swell created by his presence would soon be gone. Darcy, always enamored by the miracle of it all and fascinated by the feel of her tautly stretched, rippling flesh, devoted an exorbitant amount of time to caressing there. So much so that Lizzy was nearly incoherent with desire, finally bursting with impatient yearning. Grabbing him with a strength still shocking and a grace yet remarkable for a dainty woman in her condition, she forced him onto his back and was astride and merged before he collected his breath to release the groan of pleasure lodged in his throat.

Now he could caress all her gorgeous front side, unreservedly and straightforward! The rapture was intense, neither able to maintain restraint nor wishing to do so for very long. No words were spoken, both too caught in the fever of rushing passion, but the unconscious articulations of delight were numerous and forceful. Only at the end as they shouted each other’s names were the sounds distinguishable as literate.

Bare bodies nestled all night in the way it was meant to be, as far as they were concerned anyway. Their child would not be fazed by the vigorous activity of his parents, opting to stay cocooned and grow a bit more. Lizzy’s increasing girth, fatigue, and irritability was not always conducive to daily or extended periods of lovemaking, but they managed to satisfy their life partner frequently enough over the subsequent days



for neither to feel ignored or ungratified. In many respects the prime joy was in the long cold nights when nude limbs were entwined with dainty bare back pressed into hard, naked, and very hot planes of a manly chest, fingers laced, and breath tickling shoulders as they talked quietly about diverse subjects and then slept deeply.

It was one such night in late November when Darcy roused slightly to note his arms empty. He reached groggily, hands sliding over the faint indentation beside him. The awake portion of his brain fuzzily assumed she had risen to visit the water closet, a frequent incident, and drifted back to sleep. It was some time later, actually a couple hours, before he again rose from the clutches of comatose slumber to again note the vacancy in his arms. An internal clock of some kind recognized that it had been far too long without her to be a mere trip for bladder relief.

Struggling against the tendrils of sleep attempting to ensnare him, Darcy shook his head and crawled across the expanse of cooled sheets to pull the curtains back. Peeking drowsy eyes through the crack, he scanned the room and finally noted Elizabeth sitting on the sofa before the fireplace, logs nothing but smoldering embers.

“Elizabeth?” he whispered, voice husky and barely audible. No answer was forthcoming, in fact she did not move. Alarm bells began to toll in his fogged mind and with a jolt he was wide awake. He sat up further, impervious to the blast of cold hitting his unclothed torso, “Elizabeth,” spoken much stronger.

No reply. Nothing. That was it! In a flash he was out of the bed and to her side, nakedness inconsequential. He knelt before her, hands on her knees, but she seemed unaware of his presence. She sat rigid, hands pressed flat on her thighs, eyes closed as she inhaled and exhaled with a steady rhythm. Her face was calm with a tiny crease between her flawless brows the only apparent indication of some sort of distress.

“Elizabeth! Speak to me!” He nearly screamed it, fingers digging into her knees. Elizabeth shook her head imperceptibly, continuing her deep breathing, and ignoring him. Just as he was about to shake her or run yelling from the room for assistance, she inhaled hugely, releasing the air with a rush.

Then she opened her eyes, staring directly into his troubled gaze a foot away. Her eyes sparkled happily, readily seen in the gloom, with faint hints of anxiety and pain evident. She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair; Darcy paralyzed with a host of emotions all warring for dominance and none prevailing.

“Are you prepared to be a father Fitzwilliam? I do hope so as I

am nearly certain today will be the day.”

## **12 – Bundle of Joy**

Lizzy continued to ruffle through his thick hair, mussing it up even further as she smiled tenderly at the dazed expression on his face. He stared fixedly as the words rushed through his brain. A split second of panic was quickly stifled, Darcy instantly on the alert and fully in control.

He nodded once, bruising grip loosening from her knees. When he spoke, Lizzy was surprised at the command and calm in his tone. “I shall inform Uncle George. Wait here.”

As if she planned on dashing off somewhere! Lizzy laughed, grasping his hand. “Dearest, put on your robe and slippers as you are shivering and turning blue. Then please stoke the fire. It is not yet dawn and by all accounts I will be at this for hours and hours, so there is no reason to wake the good doctor yet. Sit with me here, please? I want this time alone with you before all the craziness ensues.”

He nodded again, face serious, but rose and did as she bid. The robe was a brilliant idea as he realized he was quite cold once the immediate terror passed. In minutes he had a fire blazing and retrieved a blanket to place around them. He nestled next to his wife, drawing her legs over his lap and covering with a second blanket, just as another contraction consumed her. Remembering the breathing exercises George had shown her, she leaned into Darcy’s inner shoulder and submitted to the necessary pain. He hugged her closely, laying a palm onto her belly. His eyebrows shot upward at the extreme rigidity felt. Her very skin was as firm as a board. Never had he imagined it so.

Unconsciously he assumed the pattern of regular respirations Lizzy utilized to maintain her serenity, unaware he was doing so until she exhaled finally as the contraction ebbed. Her belly resumed its usual softness, the baby quiet. He kissed the top of her head, pulling her closer to his body.

“Is the pain so terrible, love?” His voice trembled somewhat, but not as greatly as expected.

“Not as of yet. It is tolerable although I am quite sure it will intensify as time marches on. Pity, otherwise it would be an easy process.” She sighed, leaning her head back to see his face. “Can you

believe we are going to see our son, William? I am so excited!”

He bent to kiss her lips, cupping her face gently. “I love you Elizabeth, so utterly. You have made me the happiest of men. My wife, mother of my child.” He again kissed her briefly and then placed her head against his shoulder. “When did your pains start?”

“I think I dreamt through the first few of them, but woke around two. I lay in your embrace for a time, thinking them just the usual pains, but they seemed stronger, more focused. And they did not stop. After an hour I moved here. I did not want to wake you.”

“You should have,” he scolded lightly.

“To what purpose? Other than keeping me company and warm, there is naught for you to do. I reckoned you needed your sleep so as to be rested for later when I truly need you. Right now....wait.” She gripped the fingers laced through hers on her shoulder, rhythmic breathing initiated as another contraction began.

Therein started an arrangement that would continue until dawn was well passed. They would speak softly of a myriad of topics designed to fill the five to eight minutes between each pain. Darcy held her in his arms, breathing as she did, softly caressing and kissing ceaselessly, murmuring words of encouragement, and never leaving except to add a log now and again. Lizzy dozed on occasion during the pause, supported by her husband’s firm chest, and snuggly warm under the blanket and with fire roaring. If it were not for the unrelenting pains, it would have been a delightful, almost romantic interlude.

The sun rose gradually, faint twinges through the thick winter curtains signifying the start of a new day. “A day we will remember with clarity for the rest of our lives,” Darcy whispered into her hair, Lizzy chuckling.

“I suppose there will be moments I will wish to forget but likely shall not.” She paused, glancing at him with a serious expression, “William, promise me you will keep me awake and focused no matter what I say. I want to see our son the second he is born and remember the wonder of it. Promise?”

“I promise.”

It was nearly seven o’clock, Lizzy steadily contracting every several minutes without fail since sometime after midnight. So far the pains had not increased in power, but occurred methodically. A sensation of pressure on her lower back and deep inside her pelvic region was growing. The baby had made the transition from high underneath her ribcage to low in her groin five days ago, the event a blessedly relieving one for Lizzy. The heaviness on her hips heightened sorely, but the joy

of being able to breathe a full lung of air was heaven. Now that weightiness, the baby's hard head Dr. Darcy declared, was felt all through the muscles of her lower body.

Lizzy sighed as the latest contraction waned, shifting on the pillow behind her aching back. Darcy smoothed the hair from her face, observing closely for any overt signs of distress. Lizzy smiled, eyes closing as she drew his fingers to her lips.

"Perhaps it is time to inform the household of what is transpiring. Jane needs to be sent for and Mrs. Reynolds will be seriously vexed if not involved from the outset."

Darcy frowned, "Do you feel it imminent, love?"

"Unfortunately, no. However, I do want to hear what my physician thinks. And I am thirsty." Darcy rose, settling her as comfortably as possible on the sofa, and crossed to his dressing room where he knew Samuel would be busily preparing his clothing and bath for the day.

"Samuel, please ask the nearest footman to inform Dr. Darcy that Mrs. Darcy is having the baby. It is not emergent, but we request his company once he is dressed. Then can you inform Mrs. Reynolds? I will need her here as soon as possible. Thank you." Samuel left the room with a brisk nod, Darcy standing in the middle for a minute. He took several deep breaths, allowing a wash of tremors to cascade through his veins. He closed his eyes, sending a prayer for strength heavenward. *One second at a time Darcy*, he commanded himself, *be strong for her and do not let her sense your anxiety!* He spared a couple more minutes to visit the water closet and wash his face, the cold water bracing and calming.

Entering the room some ten minutes later, Lizzy reclining as he left her, Darcy was again in charge of his emotions. He immediately noted that she was experiencing another pain, the furrows between her brows present and lips pursed as she concentrated on breathing. He knelt beside the sofa, taking her hand for tender stroking. Laying a palm on her abdomen he waited. Already he had learned that the muscles would relax imperceptibly seconds before the pain itself lessened. It was like a wave: starting high above her naval and traveling downward until the entire bulge was firm as a rock, the tapering occurring in like manner.

"It is logical, if you think on it," he had said at one point. "The muscles are attempting to push him out."

"Shame he does not readily comply," Lizzy responded with asperity, "If I was being shoved so forcefully I would gladly leave the environment of hostility!"

Darcy laughed, "Well, there is more to it than that! Patience, my

love, all will occur in its proper timing.” To which declaration Lizzy gifted him with a snort of disgust and withering glare.

She released the cleansing exhalation, squeezing his hand and smiling weakly. “I am so thirsty.”

“Mrs. Reynolds should be here any.....See, any minute.” He stood to answer the knock at the door, greeting Mrs. Reynolds with a giddy smile. “Mrs. Reynolds, my wife seems determined to present me with our child today. Has Dr. Darcy been sent for? Excellent. First, will you notify Mr. Thurber to send one of the grooms to Hasberry for the Bingleys? I will pen a note to deliver. Secondly, ask the kitchen for a tray and tea, perhaps some juice as well. Let me think....what else?”

“Shall I inform Miss Darcy?”

“If she is awake, yes please. She can keep Mrs. Darcy company as soon as she wishes to. Whatever else you deem sensible; I trust your judgment at this juncture superior to mine. Oh, coffee, please.”

She curtsied and left, passing George Darcy in the sitting room. He approached with casual strides, tea cup in one hand and muffin in the other, dressed in a flowing garment of canary yellow with green edging.

“I was informed that babies are birthing hereabouts? Elizabeth! You are still pregnant!” He stopped abruptly on the threshold, feigning shock.

“Yes uncle, we thought we would wait for you. Now that you have arrived perhaps you can work your magic and speed the process along?”

“Alas, my dear niece, magic does not reside in these hands. Only staggering expertise and superior knowledge. William, you do intend on dressing and shaving? Your baby’s eyesight will suffer if greeted by such a frightful vision.”

“And your brash appearance is benign?” Elizabeth interjected.

“Babies love bright colors. Stimulates the retina.” He had crossed to the fireside chair positioned across from Lizzy, sitting and extending long legs nonchalantly as he bit into the muffin. “So,” he resumed while chewing, “tell me how we are faring, dear.”

Lizzy launched into a briefly detailed synopsis of her contraction history while Darcy stood nearby not sure whether he was calmed or irritated by his uncle’s blasé attitude. Luckily he had no time to figure it out as another pain began, Darcy swiftly kneeling at his wife’s side to assist and comfort. George ate in silence while Darcy stroked Lizzy’s forehead and murmured soft encouragement until the pain passed, leaning for a brushing kiss.

He sat back on his heels, yet holding Lizzy’s hand, and turned to

his placidly masticating uncle. "What is the plan Dr. Darcy? What is your professional opinion?"

"Elizabeth, I fear you are yet in the early stages of labor. I could examine you, but it is not necessary. Trust me when I tell you that you will know when the labor is causing changes and nearing completion. The truth is, as we have spoken previously, the birth course will be set by the baby and internal forces. However, there are some actions that may affect the outcome."

He sat up briskly, suddenly alert and businesslike. "Here is the plan. William, you will freshen up and dress, then go have a full breakfast..."

"You were serious about that?"

"Absolutely. Well, not about the baby's eyesight part, but you do need to take a few minutes for yourself."

"I am not leaving my wife!"

"Dearest, I think your uncle is right about this. No, listen, my love. I will need you more later, and you need to be fresh and energized. Food is essential for you, my heart, as you get grumpy when hungry." She smiled tenderly, caressing the hand clasped in hers, "And only I am allowed to become grumpy today."

"I will not leave her, William, and Mrs. Reynolds should return momentarily. We will call you if needed, but trust me in that nothing will change in the following hour, sorry Elizabeth."

"Write to Jane and Charles, beloved, and take care of yourself. I will be fine." She halted as another pain enveloped her. Darcy assumed his role as comforter.

George rose to answer the knock on the sitting room door, revealing a tray encumbered Mrs. Reynolds trailed by three equally laden maids. "Well, well!" He declared with a broad grin and snatched a blackberry tart, biting hugely. "Mmmmm.....Oh my, this is heavenly." He sighed, eyes closed in ecstasy, "Mrs. Langton is a gift from God."

"I believe these were for Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, Dr. Darcy," Mrs. Reynolds said with a smile, "but by all means, help yourself."

"Thank you, Madame. Actually, the father-to-be is ordered to break his fast with his sister, and none of these delicious edibles are appropriate for Mrs. Darcy. She is restricted to liquids and perhaps fruits, if she can tolerate. Anything heavy will induce nausea." He turned to one of the maids, "Miss, we will require a steady influx of hot, sweet tea and juices." He continued his orders for the kitchen then enlightened the Housekeeper on the current status of her Mistress.

Meanwhile, Lizzy's latest contraction ebbed with her husband by

her side. He gazed intently at her face, smoothing over her brow as they simultaneously released the final breath. Lizzy chuckled lowly, “I appreciate the empathetic reactions, my love, but you do not need to breathe with me each time. I fear you may pass out!”

He shook his head, serious and troubled, “It is unconscious, for the most part, but I find it helps.” He traced fingertips over her features, pausing on her lips, “Elizabeth, I am so proud of you already. You are so brave and in control whereas I am near to collapsing in a heap. I abhor seeing you in pain, even for the cause of bringing our child into the world. I feel helpless.”

She pulled his head onto her breast, caressing through his hair and kissing his wrinkled forehead. “You are my rock, Fitzwilliam. I could not manage this without you. In fact, this morning, when my pains began, it was all I could do to not wake you! I love you and need you by my side. I was so selfishly happy when you woke up.”

“Which is why I cannot leave you now,” he stated firmly.

“Yet you will, beloved, because I will insist. Shhhh...” She pressed two fingers onto his parted lips, Darcy having lifted from her chest with a ready protest. “You will do this for me, to ease my mind. Write to Jane, bathe, eat, allow Georgiana to calm you, and return to me renewed. Then you can help me walk a bit. I am feeling cramped and edgy. Please.....”

Another pause for a contraction, Lizzy squirming and losing her focus slightly as this one seemed stronger than all the others. Darcy clenched her hand, frowning as he placated until the pain passed.

“My! That one hurt a bit more. Help me up, dear, I am very thirsty and need to stretch.” Darcy did as she requested, lending both arms to aid her waddling gait to the sitting room.

“Mrs. Darcy, I brought cold juice as well as hot tea. There is food if you feel able, although Dr. Darcy suggests consuming cautiously to stave off nausea.” Mrs. Reynolds prattled on as she fluffed several pillows on the chaise, Darcy assisting his wife to sit comfortably while George poured a tall glass of juice.

Lizzy drank the entire glass in practically one swallow. Mrs. Reynolds busied herself preparing a cup of tea and small plate of sliced fruit, Darcy suddenly acutely aware of his attire. The Housekeeper had certainly seen her Master in casual garb on numerous occasions, but the addition of another body into the room made him keenly aware of the number of people that would be shuffling through before the day was over. The idea of wearing full formal dress was unappealing, but staying clothed in merely a robe was untenable. On top of that revelation was the



hollow emptiness in his stomach starkly awoken by the array of food on the table. All at once the thought of coffee was an immeasurable craving.

He glanced back at Lizzy, who was observing him with a tiny smile. "Go eat, dearest, but kiss me first."

He bent obediently and complied, softly and with reverence, brushing knuckles over her cheeks as he tasted the apples on her lips and tongue. "I love you, Mrs. Darcy, with all my soul. I will return quickly."

The respite was beneficial for both of them. Darcy wrote the note for the Bingleys, sending a groom to Hasberry posthaste. His plan was to then wash quickly, but Samuel had a bath drawn and the sight was far too inviting to resist. He bathed thoroughly unable to avoid closing his eyes for a spell and allowing the soothing water to ease his tension. Not for long however; the desire for coffee and food almost as strong as the desire to return to his wife. Samuel, wisely and surprisingly, had chosen his Master's most comfortable clothes: breeches of soft wool, thin hose and house shoes, light weight linen shirt, thin waistcoat, and summer jacket. All were quite inappropriate for this time of year yet somehow even the inexperienced valet knew his Master would be sweating before the day was over. A cravat was not offered nor would have been worn.

Resisting the urge to check on Lizzy one last time before descending, Darcy entered the dining room just as Georgiana was dishing up her breakfast. She glanced up with a smile, then eyes widened at the sight of her brother rather than her uncle as suspected.

"William! What are you doing here? It is not Sunday. And where is Elizabeth?"

"At the moment she is being attended by your Uncle George. She is going to have our baby today Georgie!" All pretense at placid indifference vanished, Georgiana nearly dropping her plate in surprise. Darcy was grinning broadly, all the pent up anxiety momentarily displaced by giddy happiness at his pending fatherhood.

"Oh William, truly? How marvelous! Is Elizabeth well?"

"So far, yes. It is early yet and I need to eat quickly to return to her side. This coffee smells divine! You know, my wife and our uncle forced me from the room. I was ill pleased at the notion, but now that I am here I comprehend the veracity. I am starving."

They sat together at one lonely end of the vast table, Darcy attacking his food with relish after a mouth scorching gulp of coffee.

"Be cautious Fitzwilliam or you will choke yourself!" Georgiana scolded with a laugh.

"You sound just like mother. I think she despaired of ever

teaching me proper table manners.”

“Well, if your son grows as rapidly as you did I can imagine Lizzy suffering the identical despair. Father said you grew an inch each day.”

“Not quite accurate, but close. Pass the salt shaker please. I must hurry however as I do not wish to miss anything of import.”

“What is the typical scenario?” Darcy glanced at his sister sharply. “Yes, I know I avoided all birth related conversations, but now I regret it. My sister is enduring a life altering travail and I do not know what is to occur. Quite remiss of me.” She spoke the last with a tone of guilt, looking down at her plate.

Darcy patted her hand, swallowing before he responded. “Do not fret so, my sweet. Elizabeth would not wish it. All you need know is that the pains will increase exponentially as the baby nears his arrival. I have been versed on the procedure a dozen times and have seen more animals birthed than I can recollect, yet I am still unsure of precisely what to expect. You can visit with her if you wish. I know she would appreciate it, but understand that she will be interrupting conversation for frequent pains.”

“How frequent?” She asked, face pale and eyes round in awe.

“They are occurring every five minutes or so now, but will grow closer.”

“Oh my! How exhausting that must be. Are you sure she would care to see me?”

“Of course! Jane will be here soon so you should spend some time with her before.”

“How long will it all take?”

“No way to be sure. Uncle says first births can take up to a day and a half.” Georgiana gasped, hand instinctively moving to cover her mouth. “Exactly. Let us pray to God that is not the case here. I honestly do not think I could tolerate seeing my wife in pain for that long.”

“You can tolerate anything William.” Georgiana stated decisively, “You are the strongest man alive.”

Darcy laughed loudly, tears springing to his eyes in mirth. “Your faith touches me dear sister. Now I have a double challenge to live up to!”

Georgiana waited outside the Darcys’ sitting room while her brother entered to see how his wife fared. Lizzy stood by the window, a bit hunched over and leaning into the wall with one hand tightly gripping the curtain. George sat nearby, watching her closely as he rattled on about a camel race across the desert, Lizzy clearly not listening attentively. Darcy crossed swiftly, encircling her waist as the contraction

eased, Lizzy gratefully falling against the sturdy warmth of his chest.

He kissed her brow murmuring unnecessarily, "I am back, beloved. Georgie is outside if you feel up to visiting."

"Yes, that would be lovely. Help me sit first. I have stood long enough. How was your breakfast? Did you eat enough?"

"I am perfect dearest, just missing you. Uncle, any changes?"

"The contractions are steady. I have ordered Marguerite to prepare a bath as the warm water is relaxing to stressed muscles and often helps speed things along. If nothing else it is good for the psyche to be clean and refreshed, eh William?"

"Very well uncle, you were right and I was wrong. Happy now?"

"Blissfully!" He grinned, rising and stretching with joints cracking. He left for a moment to speak with Georgiana, Darcy arranging Lizzy carefully on the chaise with a blanket over her legs.

"Did you eat something as well, my love? You need to keep up your strength."

"A few bites of fruit in addition to the juice and two cups of raspberry tea. My doctor insisted, although now I feel a wee bit bloated. He definitely is correct about eating anything else. The very thought makes me ill. I do wish our son would hurry along. Perhaps his hesitancy to show himself is a sign that he possesses your reserved nature."

Darcy chuckled, kissing her lightly on the lips. "As long as he possesses some of your spunk and humor I shall be content. Have I told you lately how very much I adore you, Mrs. Darcy?"

"I never tire of hearing it, Mr. Darcy."

"Lizzy?" It was Georgiana speaking nervously from the doorway.

"Georgie dear! Come sit with me." Lizzy held out her hand, Darcy rising to drag a chair near the chaise then resuming his perch on the edge by Lizzy's hips. "Thank you for visiting me. You shall finally be an aunt today, is that not wonderful?"

Lizzy's fair disposition remained throughout the morning. The pains were unrelenting at nearly perfect five minute intervals, allowing just enough time to rest and catch her breath and converse lightly. Occasional contractions were stronger leaving Lizzy winded and with a hint of what was yet to come. Each time such a pain occurred she was torn between fear at the inevitability of what birthing her child would fully entail and hopeful excitement that finally the prodromal labor was at an end. The necessary but lengthy build up as her womb gradually prepared to evict the baby was wearing, Lizzy's natural disposition not inclined for patience.

A prolonged soak in a hot tub with wonderful husband soaping

and kneading aching back muscles was heavenly. Lizzy did feel revitalized and although the contractions persevered, the soothing water and massaging aided overall aches and pains.

George hovered nearby throughout, reading and eating the steady flow of victuals provided by the anxious kitchen staff. Mrs. Henderson was notified and arrived to assist Mrs. Hanford in preparing the nursery and Lizzy's heretofore unused chambers for the birth. Stacks of blankets and towels were brought in; the fire was laid and kept raging with several linens positioned alongside to readily wrap around a newborn babe; water was boiled by the pot full with buckets within reach for a hasty carry to the top floor; rags were freshly ripped for cleaning and binding; Dr. Darcy's instruments were carefully arranged on a small linen draped table and covered while they waited; medications and herbal teas were mixed to be consumed as deemed necessary by the medical professionals; and the bed was warmed and protected from the mess to come.

Dr. Darcy's first extensive exam transpired after Lizzy's bath. Darcy guided her to the smaller bed in the newly decorated bedchamber, settling her comfortably on the cozily warmed sheets, and nestling beside with her hands tightly clasped in his. His jacket had been discarded in Lizzy's bathing area, shirt sleeves rolled up past the elbows, and scattered damp patches drying rapidly in the heated atmosphere. The knowledge he possessed and experience gleaned from animal births lent a fair idea of what the internal exam of his wife involved; the mixture of anticipation at what the findings may be and embarrassment with the thought of observing such an intimate procedure warred for mastery in his gut, leaving him tense and light headed.

It was a few minutes before noon, Lizzy having now been in steady labor for roughly eleven hours. Both were eager for the results even though she was clearly not in the final throes of labor. George was at his most professional, all jesting aside as he calmly spoke in his soothingly resonant voice, masterfully easing the tension in both patient and father-to-be. The exam was gentle and speedy.

"Good news. You are about half way opened, my dear, and your womb is responding to the contractions as it should."

"How much longer, Uncle?" Darcy asked.

"It is still impossible to guess with any certainty. First babies can be quite stubborn."

"Is he tolerating the stress well? I have not felt him move in a dreadfully long time."

George smiled, running one hand over her abdomen. "Babies do not move during the labor process, my dear, so do not fret. All seems to

be well, as far as I can determine.” None of them voiced the obvious fact that there is absolutely no method of establishing what was transpiring internally. “Here is my suggestion. I can attempt to rupture your water sac, Elizabeth, but I would rather nature rule. Walking often helps. William, Pemberley’s halls afford the perfect setting for your wife to receive some exercise as long as she can bear it. Niece, do not overextend and allow William to be your support, but stroll as vigorously as you can manage.”

Mrs. Reynolds approached as Darcy led his wife out into the hallway, announcing that the Bingleys had arrived. Jane joined the slowly lumbering duo as they ended their first circuit of the square third floor corridor. They stood at the southwest corner, breath in synchrony as the latest contraction built, Lizzy releasing soft moans of pain into Darcy’s shoulder. His mien was composed, but very pale with flickers of anguish in his light blue eyes notable even to Jane who could not yet adequately read her inscrutable brother-in-law’s face. He saw her over Elizabeth’s head, gesturing with one finger.

Jane drew near, laying her hand lightly on Lizzy’s arm. “Jane! I am so glad you have arrived. I was beginning to worry.”

“A portion of the road was rutted horribly from the recent rains requiring us to drive slowly. I feared I would be too late. How are you faring Lizzy?”

They resumed their casual stroll as Lizzy, with interjections from Darcy, filled Jane in on the day’s events. By the completion of the third journey Lizzy was weary, Darcy insisting she return to the room, but Lizzy stubbornly refused, compromising by resting on a corridor settee located near the stairs. She leaned into Jane’s side, Darcy kneeling before her knees as another strong contraction overwhelmed.

“Where is Bingley?” Darcy asked Jane softly.

“I left him in the parlor with Georgiana. I met Dr. Darcy on the stairs heading that direction.”

“William, you should welcome our other guest, give yourself a respite.”

“I will not leave you, Elizabeth. That was our arrangement! I do not want you walking without me.”

“I will sit here with Jane, I promise. Drink a brandy if you wish, have a quick lunch, and return invigorated.” She placed her fingers against his lips to halt his retort. Jane quietly murmured the intention of retrieving a pillow and left them alone. “I want to have a moment with my sister, dearest, can you understand? Discover if she is with child. You have not left my side for hours and must need bodily relief if nothing

else.”

“Now that you mention it I cannot deny the truth of the latter, however I am not in the mood for extensive socializing!”

Lizzy smiled, stroking over his precious face, “Nor do I want you far from me for long. A half hour, no more. Kiss me William.” He did, happily, but with lingering nervousness, even his lips cool and dry.

“Yell for me, love, if you need,” he whispered against her mouth. “I will be listening.”

She and Jane sat in silence as a pain completed its cycle, cleansing breath and shuddering muscles signifying the end. Lizzy sighed, leaning her head back onto the wall. “Is it so horrible Lizzy?”

“It is not particularly enjoyable! I so want to hold my baby Jane. It is all I can think of and that somehow helps to persevere through the pain. Mostly I am just tired. I have been awake since midnight and the pain erodes my strength. I do not know what I would do without William. Enough of me though. Tell me your news.”

“We are certain now, Lizzy. I am with child!”

“Oh Jane! I am so happy for you! How are you feeling?”

Jane laughed, “Until I arrived here I was lamenting the increasing nausea and fatigue, but now those complaints seem dreadfully trivial! In truth it is not too bad, yet. Let us pray it stays so. Charles is thrilled, naturally. I wrote to mama and papa yesterday. Caroline and the Hursts are arriving next week. We will announce our blessing officially then.”

“Are they staying for long?”

“Probably through the holidays. Do not make that face Lizzy!”

“Forgive me Jane, but I must confess I am happy it is you and not me! Although I suppose we shall host them a time or two. Caroline Bingley irritates me and the Hursts are boring. Sorry, but you know it to be true. Perhaps I can plead lingering post childbirth fatigue. Certainly I do not want a host of people handling our fragile infant and William will absolutely forbid it. We have not discussed it, but what are your plans for Christmas? Papa and.....wait.”

Resuming the thought a couple minutes later, Lizzy said, “Papa wrote and said they plan to arrive a week before Christmas. I think he wanted to be very sure *not* to be here during the birth, five previous times more than sufficient! I can only be grateful at that insight as I vastly prefer my husband by my side then mama shrieking through Pemberley’s halls.” They both laughed, Lizzy shaking her head at the momentary vision of her mother attempting to ‘help’ during her labor.

“Will Mary be accompanying them? I know she is currently at home pending her wedding in February.”

“I am unsure. William and I extended an invitation to her and Mr. Daniels, although I believe the poor man will sooner tread over hot coals then reside as a guest here. Heavens my back aches! I swear he is pinching every nerve in my lower spine.” She arched, hands rubbing the spasms to her lower back, squirming as another contraction struck. “Oooh! This one is.....harder and....”

“Breathe Lizzy. Squeeze my hand and breathe.” Jane grasped her sister’s hand, gradual control attained and held for a minute as she concentrated on steady respirations, only to be lost abruptly as a gush of warm fluid flooded from between her legs.

Lizzy jerked in surprise, a sharp pain radiating from low in her abdomen. She gasped and released a small squeal, hands instinctively clutching her belly as she shouted, “William!”

Barely a heartbeat later Darcy was bounding crazily up the stairs, Dr. Darcy on his heels, both men instantly assessing the situation without pausing a step. Lizzy was lifted into her husband’s arms, long purposeful strides carrying her to the bedchamber. His mien was grim: eyes tight with fear, jaw clenched, and lips pressed harshly together. Lizzy was panting and whimpering slightly at the pain gripping her belly, arms cinched over Darcy’s shoulders.

George sprinted ahead, gesturing sharply at Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Hanford, who had jumped up at Lizzy’s shout. “The birth sac has ruptured,” he declared smartly. “A warm towel, Mrs. Henderson. Mrs. Hanford, ask Marguerite for a clean gown for Mrs. Darcy. William, lay her on the bed. Elizabeth dear, try to relax and breathe. The pains will intensify now; it is normal to do so. Thank you Mrs. Henderson.” He took the towel and gently wiped her legs as he slowly lifted the saturated gown, continuing his calmly vocalized explanations. “Rest on your husband, Elizabeth, close your eyes and breathe as he is. This is to be expected and a positive development. It means your baby is nearing his arrival. Very good, dear. It is ebbing, yes? Excellent.”

He pressed one hand onto her softening abdomen, the other unhurriedly toweling up her inner thighs while casually nudging her legs apart. “Allow me to ascertain what changes have occurred, if any. There’s a good girl, lean on William and take your ease.” He scrutinized and palpated carefully, assuring nothing had exuded other than clear water.

The pain had disappeared, leaving Lizzy trembling from the surprise. Now that it was over she felt rather foolish for losing control and yelling. She could readily sense Darcy’s tension in the rigid muscles of his chest and arms as they surrounded her, and the raspy respirations echoing in her ear. Additionally she could feel the cooling wetness soaked

into his vest and shirt from where he had held her. She peered up into his strained face, Darcy's eyes riveted on his uncle, reaching fingers to a pinched cheek.

"William," she whispered, Darcy's gaze softening somewhat as he met her eyes, "Forgive me for frightening you. I should not have shouted."

"Do not say that!" he snapped, "I want you to call when you need me! If you did not I would be seriously vexed." He kissed the top of her head rather perfunctorily, attention again centered on his uncle as he asked tautly, "Is all well, Uncle?"

"You have opened a bit more Elizabeth and the baby is lower. The contractions will come quicker now and be stronger. You will need to stay in bed, but can move about however you wish, lying to the right side often the most comfortable. William, erase your frown before it permanently creases your face and assist your wife into a dry gown." George rose, crossing to the midwife and nanny for a quiet conference.

"Here Lizzy, lift up and we will remove this wet gown," Jane spoke softly, voice as serene as always cutting through Darcy's coursing panic. He inhaled deeply, eyes closing briefly for a silent prayer before aiding Jane in dressing his wife. In seconds they had Lizzy settled comfortably propped on several pillows and Darcy's torso, Jane departing to speak with Mrs. Reynolds regarding a fresh juice order.

"Beloved, you should change into dry clothing," Lizzy murmured. Another pain, far more intense than anything previous, had faded. She trembled slightly, faint and incredibly tired as she melted into Darcy's stalwart embrace, fingers laced with his and lying on the top of her swollen abdomen.

"It is insignificant. I will not leave you again so do not ask." His grip tightened and he pressed his cheek into her hair. "I love you, my dearest wife. Are you certain you are comfortable?"

"As much as is possible," she laughed faintly, closing her eyes in an attempt to doze even if only for a second. *Comfortable* in any definition of the word became impossible as the subsequent hours unfolded. The contractions lengthened in both duration and intensity coupled with an increased frequency which meant less time for her to recovery inbetween. Those precious minutes were hastily consumed with ragged breathing and searing back pain. Somewhere in the midst she was incessantly plied with sips of water and cubes of sugar to keep up her strength.

Through it all Jane maintained her post to Lizzy's right side. Her placid strength, tranquil tone of speech, and gentle persuasion calmed Lizzy greatly. Since childhood Jane had been the steadying, rational voice



amid Lizzy's oftentimes chaotic, impetuous nature. So it was now as Jane stroked her hand and forehead, murmuring pacifying sentences, relating memories of peaceful moments and places from their youth all designed to distract and soothe. It was successful to varying degrees as the afternoon waned into early evening.

Darcy kept his vigil to his wife's left side. Where Jane was the temperate tranquilizer, Darcy was the stabilizing stone. At times it was purely physical: his sturdy physique and capable hands essential for support and penetrating kneading to aching or cramping muscles. Other times it was his manly voice with resonant tones as he spoke of his love and pride, his soft lips brushing over her temples and knuckles, his fiercely kind eyes as he gazed with bottomless wells of adoration and encouragement. He seemed to instinctively know what she required at any given moment. If it was tenderness, then his voice and touch softened, stroking soothingly. If it was focus, then his voice deepened into the familiar ring of the Master of Pemberley, commanding her to concentrate and breathe.

"I cannot do it! Please make it stop!" Lizzy gripped his hand during one such incident, the spasms burning through the middle of her body in a fury. Her eyes were tightly shut, sweat beading on her brow, and head tossing to and fro while she whimpered.

Darcy grasped her cheeks in hands of iron, face inches from hers, voice low and resolute, "Elizabeth, look at me! You *can* do this and you *will*! Now, focus on me beloved and breathe. Inhale deep, that is it, now exhale, good, and again. No! Open your eyes! Focus on me! It will pass love, breathe again, one more gone dearest, all the nearer to seeing our son. Excellent! I am so proud of you Elizabeth." And the litany would continue with kisses and caresses until the next pain.

None in the room sensed the internal struggle Darcy endured. A juvenile but persistent part of his soul wanted to scream in frustration; to rage against the impotence of a situation where the generally authoritative man of power was at the mercy of forces beyond his control. A small but very loud voice inside his head yelled at him to run, far away to some distant corner of the mansion where he could curl up into a fetal ball and hide from witnessing the agony suffered by the woman he loved more than life. Yet with typical, well honed Darcy steel and discipline he squelched those inner urges, recognizing them as childish and demeaning. Primarily he understood that despite his dismay at watching Elizabeth in her travail, there was in truth nowhere on earth he would rather be. As awful as it was at times, he knew he was providing a necessary service to his wife and partaking in a miracle. Always central in

his mind's eye was the image of their baby, conceived in tremendous love, who would make his, or her, appearance to the world in due course. The thought of missing that advent was intolerable.

Dr. Darcy and Mrs. Henderson sat across the room, silent for the most part as they observed the unrelenting process transpiring on the bed. On occasion George would rise to assess Lizzy's progress, declaring with satisfaction that all was proceeding as expected. His dry humor, usually rather biting and sarcastic, was gentle with the perfect blend of wittiness and sensitive timing to ease the building strain. Mrs. Reynolds and Mrs. Hanford sat near the fire keeping it blazing and rotating the waiting towels and linens. The Housekeeper quietly communicated with Marguerite and Samuel who loitered outside the room awaiting instructions for hot water or other supplies, and relayed information to Miss Darcy and Mr. Bingley. In fact, the entire household collectively sat on tenterhooks, no real work being accomplished as they awaited the news that all was well with their Mistress.

As dusk fell over the landscape, lamps lit and fires built, Lizzy successfully made the transition into the final stages of the birth process. Like all women down through the long ages since Eve, Lizzy instinctively sensed the subtle alteration in the contractions accompanied by an intense pressure felt low in her pelvis. Primarily it was an indescribable, uncontrollable urge to forcefully expel the cause of all her agony. It overwhelmed her reason, breathing no longer a viable option as the burning to her groin intensified torrentially; the heaviness demanding she hold her breath and bear down.

This she did, surprising her two companions who attempted in vain for her to concentrate, but spurring her two childbirth professionals to jump up and lunge toward the bed. Darcy recoiled in shock when George sat efficiently on the end of the bed, spreading Lizzy's legs as he lifted the sheet. A quick probe confirmed what he suspected and after a nod to Mrs. Henderson, who turned to Mrs. Reynolds for instructions, he looked to Darcy with a beaming smile.

"Elizabeth is completely open now. Henceforth begins the real work, all else thus far leading up to this." His fingers were between her legs, carefully palpating as she began to relax into Darcy's waiting embrace. "Elizabeth, look at me. Very good dear. Now listen carefully. Your baby is very low and ready to be born. You are as open as you can get, making room for his body. Still, as I have discussed with William and he has shared with you, this can take time. The infant still has some distance to travel and you must use the remaining pains to bring him forth. Do you understand so far?"

They both nodded, Darcy wiping his wife's brow and neck with a wet cloth while Lizzy panted. Dr. Darcy resumed, "The contractions will space out a bit, but when they occur you must hold your breath and bear down, hard, with each one. It will hurt, Elizabeth, but you must persevere. Breathe when necessary, but keep pushing toward your derriere until the pain halts."

"How long uncle?" Darcy asked in a hoarse voice.

"Let us wait and see how the next few contractions proceed."

A flurry of activity fell over the room. Fresh buckets of water were brought, George washing his hands and soaking several rags. Additional lamps were lit for illumination.

The Darcys noted none of it. Lizzy reclined on her husband's warm chest, cocking her head to better see his luminous visage. She smiled, raising a hand to stroke his cheek, and Darcy almost fainted with a surge of breathless joy. Never had she been more beautiful than at that moment. Her hair disheveled and loose from its braid, face flushed and slightly puffy, lips dry; yet she exuded a radiant happiness that transcended the particulars.

"I love you Elizabeth," he whispered, cupping her face, "Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this miracle."

She laughed, eyes twinkling and for the first time in hours responding with the friskiness of his Lizzy apparent, "Well, Mr. Darcy, considering you were an integral part of the inception of the miracle it is only apropos you are present at its consummation! I would not be in this predicament if not for you and could not survive it without you. Now, do your job and hand me that glass of water." She pursed her lips, blowing a kiss as she patted his smiling mouth with her fingertips, Darcy chuckling in a liberating release of nervousness as he reached for the indicated liquid.

The difficult task of laboring in tandem with forceful muscular spasms intent on expelling a somewhat pliable but bulky body through a physically much smaller space commenced. Neither Darcy wasted the effort at this juncture to marvel at the awesomeness of the operation. Instead, Lizzy embraced with enthusiasm the ability to be proactive for a change. The pain was intense, but at least she was *doing something* rather than lying inert at its mercy. Darcy quite simply could not think beyond the fact that he would lay eyes on his child in a matter of minutes. His heart's existence would no longer suffer from the torture, and together with hands clasped they would behold their baby.

He was giddy with excitement.

Lizzy was serious and centered, not really needing the ceaselessly

spoken encouragement now gushing from every mouth in the room, but appreciating it nonetheless. A half hour of concentrated effort passed, Lizzy exhausted and aching in every muscle, but strangely exhilarated and energized. Dr. Darcy kept to his seat, one hand on her abdomen under the draping sheet and the other stretching the flesh surrounding the birth canal. Mrs. Henderson stood by Lizzy bent left knee, supporting and watching. Jane, per the midwife's teaching, did the same to the right leg. The sheet occluded full view, of which Darcy was thankful, and maintained modesty as much as is feasible in such a situation.

"Elizabeth, William, I can see the crown of your baby's head. There is lots of dark hair, not surprisingly. You are doing an excellent job, my dear. He is very low and it should not take much longer." However, three marvelously executed pushes later and the baby had not budged. Dr. Darcy, face impassive, deepened his probing. Lizzy squirmed, feeling his fingers uncomfortably seeking. "Forgive me dear, but I need to palpate the baby's head....Ah! Now I see the cause. Typical Darcy, always attempting to be unique and ostentatious."

Lizzy snorted, although she had no idea what he meant as far as her baby was concerned, while Darcy scowled. "Perhaps some Darcys I could mention," he said haughtily, "I, however, prefer to be inconspicuous and ordinary." Lizzy and Jane both laughed aloud, even Mrs. Reynolds hiding a snicker, to Darcy's confusion.

"You, my love, are the epitome of all that is *not* ordinary and at your height and with your presence are far from inconspicuous! We can discuss that later though. What do you mean about the baby, uncle?"

Dr. Darcy was smiling at his blushing nephew, addressing the question seriously. "Your child is wishing to be born looking up at the ceiling when he should be facing the floor. What this means is, I need to attempt turning him or the final stage will take longer."

"Do you want the forceps, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Henderson.

"Absolutely not!" Both George and Darcy echoed firmly.

"Forceps will not touch my son's head unless it is a matter of life or death!" Darcy barked with eyes blazed, Mrs. Henderson retreating a step.

"Do not worry William. I can manipulate him with my fingers or, if he is stubborn, deliver him as he wishes. It may be uncomfortable Elizabeth, I am sorry."

She nodded, unable to speak as another contraction struck. The next several contractions were the hardest, Lizzy's discomfort increasing as the infant hesitantly responded to the physician's persistent direction. Mrs. Henderson was mesmerized, having never witnessed such a procedure, Dr. Darcy explaining the technique in quiet undertones as he

worked.

Lizzy strained with the effort, releasing loud grunts and intermittent yells of pain. Darcy held his breath as she did, Jane also unconsciously mimicking the behavior. The room was quiet except for Lizzy's vocalizations and the sonorous urgings of Darcy. He held her enveloped in his arms with her back pressed to his chest, steady hands supporting her arms as she pulled on her thighs with each forceful squeeze.

"Stupendous Elizabeth!" The poised physician commentating, "Keep your legs open, give him room. The baby has turned and is coming! A towel Mrs. Hanford, quickly! Harder Elizabeth, do not stop now even if the contraction wanes. Push him out! Lots of hair, oh yes. Ears, nose, mouth...now breathe for a moment dear, good girl, let me wipe the face, clear the mucus.....Alright, now again Elizabeth! Let's get those broad Darcy shoulders out....the widest part of all....and, Yes! Here we are.....Ha! A boy! Most definitely a boy!"

George's laugh was lost in the general mayhem bursting forth. Elizabeth collapsed onto her husband, tears of relief and joy springing to weary eyes. Darcy was laughing and crying, eyes glued to the draped knees of his wife while bestowing kisses to her head and hugging so tightly that if she was any more coherent she may have complained. Jane clapped with joy, Mrs. Henderson reached for the thick string to tie about the umbilical cord, Mrs. Reynolds proclaimed the time as 7:59 p.m. and literally bounced with delight, and Mrs. Hanford wept silently as she observed the initial movements of the newborn.

All of it was abruptly pierced by the lusty cry of a healthy set of newborn lungs, loudly protesting the overall treatment being inflicted upon him. George lifted the squalling babe glistening with birth fluid and streaks of blood, still partially blue and attached to his mother with forehead wrinkled in consternation and flailing limbs, for his first inspection by adoring and already hopelessly in love parents.

"Young Master Darcy, meet your mama and papa!" George declared with pride, holding the wailing and utterly irritated and uninterested infant aloft for another few seconds before placing him onto the waiting warm blankets held by Mrs. Hanford and tying the cord. He spoke aloud while attending to the crying infant, "He is perfect. All ten fingers and toes, color pinking nicely, male anatomy as it should be, head a bit pointed but not too bad, ears well formed, mouth intact...oh, good suck already, typical Darcy instantly demanding nourishment. Here Mrs. Hanford, take him."

Darcy buried his face into Lizzy's hair, body shaking as he

sobbed and caressed her arms, hoarsely crooning, “Elizabeth, I love you so! He is beautiful, you are beautiful. Thank you, beloved, thank you, thank you. ....I love you. We have a son. A son! Our son. ....so amazing, you are amazing....”

Lizzy clutched his wrists, turning to capture his mouth for a desperately needed kiss. Their eyes met, radiant and overflowing with love. She smiled, kissed him again and then leaned onto his shoulder, “Beloved, go be with him. I want one of us to be near him giving comfort and it must be you. Please?”

He hesitated, glancing longingly toward the nanny then back to his wife. “I will stay with my sister Mr. Darcy. Go to your son.”

“Jane, after the events of today do you think you may be willing to address me by my Christian name?” Darcy grinned, Jane blushing and lowering her gaze.

Lizzy laughed softly, “Please dearest, go to Alexander. Kiss him for me.”

“Of course. I love you Elizabeth.” He cupped her face, delivering another lingering kiss before moving away, relinquishing her to Jane’s ministering presence.

Lizzy squeezed his hand, gazing upward as he stood, “I love you William.” He smiled broadly, whole face beaming, and with a brush of knuckles across her cheek he left.

Mrs. Hanford and Mrs. Reynolds knelt by the low table situated before the fire on which lay the wiggling babe. His wails continued, currently augmented by the indignity of a bath. Darcy knelt, teary eyes avidly scrutinizing his son.

“Congratulations Mr. Darcy. He is beautiful.”

“Thank you Mrs. Reynolds. May I touch him?”

“Certainly!” The nanny said with a laugh, “He is yours, after all.”

Darcy beamed, hand reaching gingerly to stroke one finger over the baby’s breastbone. Darcy caught his breath, freshly amazed at the velvet softness, personally never imagining any skin could be softer than his wife’s. Laying his entire palm over the sturdy chest of his son, broad hand covering the whole breast and most of the abdomen with fingertips tickling under his chin. The frantic thrashing eased under the firm pressure, Darcy bending to bestow a kiss to the baby’s damp forehead.

“Sweet Alexander, my son. This is your father speaking. That was from your mother, who loves you so very much. This,” and he kissed the downy cheek, “is from me. I also love you, my precious.” He continued the gentle crooning, the baby having calmed at the loving caresses and sound of the familiar voice. Darcy lifted inches to discover a pair of wide,

cerulean blue eyes staring at him with studied intensity, tiny creases between the brows.

Darcy experienced an electrifying jolt rush through his body and his mouth fell open. Alexander, as if by purposeful intent, encountered his father's little finger and wrapped one chubby fist tightly around. Darcy stifled a sob, blinking furiously as the baby remained locked onto his face.

"He knows you, Sir," Mrs. Reynolds said. "Keep talking to him."

He did, voice rough with choking emotion. Alexander's gaze wandered frequently, but inevitably returned to his father's shining visage and brilliant grin. The women worked diligently, cleaning thoroughly over all skin folds and body parts, scrubbing the mass of curly brown hair until lying in silken waves. Inbetween the sing song droning, Darcy closely examined his son.

Alexander possessed his father's blue eyes but they were larger and rounder than his, like Elizabeth's, and set under a smoothly flat forehead rather than his mildly prominent one. The nose was not exactly buttoned as Elizabeth's, but not broad and long as his; time would tell how it evolved. The thick eyebrows were totally Darcy's down to the frowning wrinkles and left arch. He did not have his father's chin cleft, but the overall shape was masculine with a sharp jawline. His fingers were long and hands wide, the feet matching in size. In fact his entire body was long and lean with sturdily defined muscles encased by unblemished ruddy skin. Not a single mark marred his flesh, only the mildly misshapen head preventing him from being flawless.

Darcy grasped one large foot, smiling as he murmured, "No wonder I could almost grip your feet, my darling." He kissed the sole, nibbling briefly on the tiny toes, Alexander flinching and attempting to withdraw. "Ah, ticklish are we?"

Alexander's answer to that inquiry was to release a forceful stream of urine, Darcy jerking backward and narrowly avoiding a blast to the face!

"What the...?!" The women laughed loudly, Lizzy asking what was happening. "Our son tried to urinate on me! Well, at least we know that organ functions correctly." The room erupted in laughter.

"He is clean now, Mr. Darcy. We need to measure him and then dress him, protecting his nether regions before more accidents occur. I am sure his mother wants to see him soon." Mrs. Hanford placed the baby onto the nearby scale, Alexander emitting fresh howls. "My, he is vocal. He weighs....settle down little one....seven pounds and ten ounces!"

Darcy's grin was nearly swallowing his face, turning to peer at his resplendent wife now in a clean gown and propped on fresh pillows while Jane brushed and replaited her hair. Their eyes held, volumes of unspoken emotion and sentiment passing between. "Twenty-two inches! Good heavens!" Mrs. Reynolds declared, "I believe he will be tall like his father."

"No wonder he pressed so resolutely under my ribs. No space. Hurry, dearest, I want to hold him."

In a few minutes he was diapered, dressed in a fine white fleece gown with blue ribbons edging, and wrapped in a warm blanket sewn by Lizzy. Darcy carried him to Elizabeth, her arms extended in anticipation. Slowly the occupants filed from the chamber, Jane kissing her sister one last time on the temple and glancing shyly to Darcy.

"Congratulations William," she whispered.

Darcy beamed, "Thank you Jane."

Last was George. The proud great-uncle taking a moment to inspect the sleeping bundle of joy embraced against his weary mother's breast with jubilant and rather smug father encircling them both. "Well done you two, well done. He is lovely. Perfectly delivered, if I say so myself! William, ensure your wife rests. No staring at the baby all night in lieu of sleep. I will check on you later, dear." He brushed the infant's cheek with a fingertip, leaning for a tender kiss to Lizzy's brow. "Congratulations, niece. You were amazing. You too William," and with a clap to his nephew's shoulder he departed, leaving the Darcys finally alone with their child.

Silence fell. The crackling of the fire, ticking of the longcase clock, muffled murmurs of voices from without mingling with the familiar creaks from within the mansion's walls, faint whispers of a November wind beyond the curtained windows, and the harmonious heartbeats and contented respirations of the three Darcys the only noises. For a very long time Darcy and Lizzy stared, plainly stared, at the slumbering face of their son. He moved occasionally, emitting soft mews, pursing full pink lips, delicate eyelids fluttering, miniature fingers grasping and releasing a parent's finger.

Lizzy sniffled, wiping at a falling tear and sighing deeply. "Are you in pain dearest?" Darcy asked, reaching to stroke her chin as she shook her head.

"No. Well, yes, a bit achy and very tired, but the tears are of joy. Look at him William! Is he not the most beautiful baby you have ever seen?"

Darcy chuckled, chest vibrating, "As you know I have limited



exposure this is an unfair question. Nonetheless, I cannot fathom any other being handsomer. He has your hair, beloved, and your eyes.”

“You said his eyes were blue?”

“Yes, but shaped like yours. And he inherited your nose, thankfully.”

“It does not look like my nose, and besides, I adore your nose!”

She turned her head for a peck to said proboscis positioned by her cheek.

“It is easy to find for kisses in the dark.”

“Indeed, it is. He is beginning to stir. We have woken him I fear.”

“Perhaps I should nurse him. Open your eyes, my precious. Let me see your papa’s eyes.” Lizzy caressed his face, loosening the blanket partially to touch his arms and chest. Alexander stretched, head arching instinctively toward her bosom. Darcy ran a fingertip over the tiny lips, Alexander instantly opening wide and searching. His eyes fluttered, blinking even in the half light of the room.

“Shall I call for Mrs. Hanford?”

“Not as yet. I want this time with only you and our baby. Maybe I can manage it without assistance. Nursing does not seem that complicated an employment. Patience, my love, your mama is a novice.”

Lizzy unbuttoned her gown, Darcy aiding in pulling the fabric away, as Alexander rapidly transitioned from deep sleep to ravenous hunger. His cry was demanding and penetrating. They laughed as they fumbled with the process, fortunate in that the newborn knew precisely what to do, only requiring the nipple to come within proximity of his gaping mouth. Lizzy gasped and jerked at the strong suck, fresh tears springing to her eyes as emotions consumed her. No longer able to control herself, she wept.

“Are you alright Elizabeth? Does it hurt?”

She shook her head vigorously, relaxing further into his warm body. “No, no. It is...blissful! I just...love him so much! And you...William, my heart, I am so deliriously happy!” He held her firmly, rocking gently as she cried, Alexander oblivious to it all as he nursed.

Gradually she quieted, meeting Darcy’s adoring gaze. He bent, kissing her lightly. “I love you forever, Elizabeth.”

“And I you, Fitzwilliam. By the way, I know it yet a couple hours early but.... Happy anniversary my darling. Do you like your gift?”

“I daresay I love both the gift and the packaging it came in. Happy anniversary, Mrs. Darcy.”

\* \* \* \*

Many hours later, well after midnight and nearing the dawn of November 28, 1817, another date of import, Lizzy woke. The unfamiliar room was dim, Lizzy momentarily befuddled by the strange and empty bed as well as the cramping leg muscles, burning arms, and throbbing bottom. The happenings of the twenty-seventh rushed through her consciousness, Lizzy smiling brightly at the surge of exultation, and then suddenly panicking as the vacancy in her arms stabbed her heart.

Her eyes flew open and she painfully attempted to rise, halting and relaxing with a gratified sigh at the vision greeting her.

Darcy lay asleep on the narrow, short sofa before the smoldering fire. His vest had been discarded and feet were bare, a blanket haphazardly covering partially. One long leg had fallen off the sofa onto the floor, the other draped over the arm and dangling from the knee on. His beautiful face was turned toward the bed, lips parted, and he breathed in a deep rhythm. Lying on his ample chest was Alexander. The baby was swaddled, one arm loose and hanging over his father's side, pink face visible. Darcy held his son securely, even in sleep, one large hand resting on his rear and the other wholly encompassing his head.

Lizzy lay awake for a long while watching father and son in peaceful slumber. It was a picture more moving than anything created by the greatest artist. The new mother studied the scene in the finest detail, reverently hanging it in her mind's gallery to be remembered for all of her life.

## **13 – Alexander**

Alexander William George Bennet Darcy, Heir to Pemberley, Master Alex as he would be commonly known to the staff as he grew, was hungry and it was quite feasible that the entire household knew it! The future Master of Pemberley's character was yet unknown, his personality to undergo years of molding and development, but one trait that was instantly recognizable was his demanding persistence. And his temper.

"Merciful heavens, my sweet, you ate barely two hours ago! I apologize most profoundly for being a bit fumbling at the procedure and for yet providing little in the way of actual milk. Bear with me."

"I cannot fathom where he comes by such a temper. Astounding, actually."

"Most humorous, Mr. Darcy. Make yourself useful and prop that pillow under my elbow. *Your* son is heavy on my tired arms. There you are darling, that's my bright boy. Ouch! Goodness, I certainly know where he gets that talent from!"

"Be thankful as the ability to suck well induces the milk to produce rapidly, or at least that is what the book states."

It was mid morning following his birth, the young master just over twelve hours of age. Despite Lizzy's playful teasing he actually had slept for nearly five hours nestled snuggly belly to chest with head tucked under his immeasurably proud father's chin and warm hand, lulled by the strong beat of a blissful heart beneath his ear. Darcy had awoken first, cramped, with no sensation to his left limb from the knee down, and a spreading wet warmth over his abdomen.

Both Darcy men had changed their clothing; elder Darcy with relief and baby Darcy with extreme indignation. Only the loving presence of his mother, and most especially her breast, had calmed him. He had eaten well, promptly falling asleep in Lizzy's arms, and woken two hours later apparently famished. In the meantime Darcy had called for coffee and tea, George had peeked in to assure all was well with the new mother, and the lovers had lost themselves in gazing at their son's face.

They were still lost. Darcy reclined with his wife on the bed, fingertips gently brushing over the wisps of brown curls while the infant

nursed. Lizzy wore a smile unique to all mothers everywhere since time began, dreamily memorizing each movement and cell, while allowing the sensations to course through her blood. Some were mildly unpleasant such as the cramps elicited by his sucking, but most were joyous such as the wash of intense love and happiness.

She rested her head onto Darcy's inner shoulder, sighing contentedly, but wearily. "I think I could sleep for a week. After I eat the entire kitchen, that is."

Darcy kissed her brow, hugging close as fingers played through her hair while yet caressing the baby's fine locks, "As soon as Alexander is satisfied I will call for a tray and help you to freshen up. Marguerite is drawing a bath."

The first days of parenthood were tremendous. Lizzy recuperated rapidly. Too rapidly as far as Darcy was concerned, his fears at her overextending falling on deaf ears. What she could not quite communicate to him was how marvelous she felt. Yes, her feminine regions were sore and swollen, her muscles were stiff and achy for a couple days, and it took her about a week to regain her natural vigor and no longer be stricken by fatigue, but these were minor irritations compared to the joy suffusing her soul. Additionally, the simple delight at suddenly weighing about twelve pounds lighter was stupendous! That first morning she was up and walking about the room before Darcy returned from shaving and dressing, causing him to scowl and grasp her elbows as if she were an invalid, ordering her back to bed.

Lizzy laughed, pivoting in his arms and tiptoeing to kiss the creases between his brows. "If I lie in that bed a moment more I shall scream. Sore muscles need to be exercised, as you well know." She rubbed the slowly fading wrinkles with a happy grin, Darcy gradually matching her expression, as she continued musingly, "Alexander has your eyebrows, nearly your whole face in point of fact. Shall be an advantage for me now that I finally know how to read the moods and thoughts so dramatically detailed in your eyes and perfect brow." She encircled his neck with smarting arms, intent on indulging in a time of pleasurable kisses. Darcy blissfully submitted, hands flattening on her back as he tentatively drew her close to his body, thrilling at the ability to do so.

Of course, nothing further could be accomplished so soon after giving birth even if Alexander had not decided to interrupt. It was a frequent pattern during those initial days. By the end of the third day Lizzy's milk would be fully producing, allowing for longer reprieves between nursing, but for those first days he was never well satisfied and thus never far from her breast. Naturally she minded not at all, generally

holding him as he slept rather than placing him into his cradle.

In fact, he never made it to his cradle until he was four days old! On those rare occasions when he was not held by an adoring parent or transfixed relative, he lay at hand on the bed. Neither mother nor father wished him out of sight, even the dozen steps to the nursery. Mrs. Hanford was constantly in residence educating Lizzy and Darcy on the basic principles of diapering and dressing and bathing. Her knowledge was of a practical, experiential nature. Often it was the simple things that books did not teach which she readily knew and imparted with confidence that eased the Darcys. For example, Alexander's first several bowel eliminations were decidedly odd and frightening, the new parents greatly relieved when the nanny assured them it was normal. For her part, the negligible time spent thus far at Pemberley had not fully prepared her for the intense interest both Darcys shared for all things regarding their son. Nothing escaped their notice, especially Mr. Darcy, whose eagle-eyed penetrating gaze frankly unnerved her initially, but speedily grew ordinary and was balanced by the tender devotion evident. All the rumors circulating since the Master's marriage were witnessed first hand by the nanny and her happiness with her new path in life was immense.

Whenever Alexander chose to stir, even if more asleep than awake, a loitering parent was there. That first day Darcy lay with him on the bed while Lizzy bathed, enjoying a brief span of contented wakefulness. Father and son studied each other, Darcy again examining each feature and marveling at how tender yet sturdy the helpless infant was. He recalled a vague memory of his mother telling him not to fear holding Georgiana as, "She will not break, Fitzwilliam. Babies are tougher than most give them credit." He could better perceive this in Alexander than he could as a young boy with Georgie. His legs kicked forcefully against Darcy's palms, the very bones firm inside robust muscles. He gripped Darcy's fingers or hair when it came within reach with tight fists that actually caused pain! His movements were random and uncontrolled, but strong, even lifting his head for short spells and arching his spine to the point of nearly flipping over! Of course, his stamina was transient, the hours old infant sleeping more than anything. However, that was a delight as well. Darcy's tender crooning, arising from some internally paternal instinct he did not know he possessed, pacified Alexander, eyes drooping and limbs relaxing as his father whispered nonsense and devotion in a melodic voice.

The Darcys' one year anniversary was spent focusing on their baby rather than wholly on each other as they had tentatively planned, but neither minded in the least. Darcy had not arranged any wild

celebration, knowing that Lizzy's condition, assuming she was still pregnant, would preclude anything extreme. Instead he had ordered the staff to prepare a dinner setting in the conservatory. That was now out of the question. Even if Lizzy had felt physically capable of dressing and walking the long distance to the orangery, the thought of leaving Alexander or taking him on any excursions abroad was inconceivable. So, with a rapid shift in thinking, vases of flowers were displayed about their temporary bedchamber and a table was set for dining.

It was a quiet affair, the perfect cap to a busy day. Lizzy had napped intermittently between nursing a demanding infant with a healthy appetite and visits with the family, but was still fatigued from her ordeal. They ate heartily of the stupendous cuisine created by Mrs. Langton for the anniversary, exchanged gifts that would be treasured, and blissfully returned to the comfort of the bed for cuddling and further staring at Alexander. Many anniversaries would be celebrated down the long years graced to them by the Almighty, some quite extraordinary for various reasons, but how could any trip to a foreign land or massive gala transcend the joy of their firstborn?

"My life has altered so dramatically this past year," Darcy mused. "It is surreal and I could almost be convinced I am dreaming it all if not for the tangible touch of you and our perfect son." He leaned to bestow a kiss to Alexander's chubby fist tightly clenched around his index finger. The baby lay asleep on the bed between his mother and father; their bodies nestled as close as possible without smothering the contented infant. Lizzy's nose brushed the fine tresses as she inhaled his innocent fragrance and planted endless soft kisses. Darcy played with her lengthy hair spilling over the pillows, knuckles frequently caressing over her face.

Lizzy smiled through her weariness. Her body ached in unmentionable places and she was utterly exhausted; nevertheless, her happiness rushed through every fiber of her spirit as a surging wave. She spoke in a bare whisper, voice hoarse from the strain of birth and fatigue, "I do know what you mean. If anyone had told me fourteen months ago that I would be joyously married to the most amazing man in the world and with a child at my breast...well, I am certain I would have laughed! Now look at us William. Together a year and blessed with a priceless gift. What was it you said once? 'A part of you and me, created by God through our union.'" She shook her head, "I still cannot believe you are mine, and now we have a baby! It *is* surreal."

Alexander released a soft drowsy sigh, arching his head toward Darcy with petite lips sucking on an imaginary nipple. Thick lashes lay on rosy silky cheeks, his skin fair as was both his parents. The contrast of

milky skin and chestnut hair was striking and so beautiful. Naturally his parents thought him lovely beyond any child alive, but the truth is Alexander was adorable. It was indisputable that he favored his father, but there was much of his mother about his features: the curly hair, diminutive nose, rounder eyes, and bent pinkie toe. His feet overall were long and broad like his father's, but the toe was a Bennet trait. Darcy was thrilled about the little digit, already delighting in ticklish nibbles; Lizzy was less than enthused, having always been embarrassed by what she considered a flaw, but her husband adored her feet (as well as everything else, truth be known).

Darcy smiled at the joy elicited by the mere presence of their infant, leaned to kiss his forehead and inhaling deeply of his clean scent. "I smell the soap, but there is something indefinable about him. It is his very skin, his essence. He is so unbelievably sweet! I never imagined it possible to love someone so newly acquainted and largely unknown to this degree. He is a miracle Elizabeth and I cannot thank you enough." He met her glittering eyes, leaning to now kiss her equally as tender. "I love you, my wife, beyond measure."

"And I you, beloved. My heart is filled to overflowing. My soul is dancing a lively jig even if my body is too weary to respond!"

She yawned widely, Darcy chuckling faintly. "Close your eyes and sleep, dearest. Uncle says it vital you rest while Alexander does."

"Fitzwilliam, will you stay here with us? Please?"

"Of course!" He was genuinely surprised at the question and the tone of pleading it was asked in. "My place is with you, no matter the bedchamber. I would not leave even if you begged me to do so. When you feel ready we will return to our favored bed, but until then you are stuck with me in this smaller one."

Lizzy smiled drowsily, eyes falling shut and voice a bare murmur, "Thank you. Should we move him to the cradle? I do not wish to, but I fear squishing him."

"He will come to no harm. I do not want him so far either. Sleep Elizabeth," he whispered, drawing the blanket further over his wife and dreaming babe, stroking over her warm skin as she promptly succumbed to her fatigue. They slept all three together, Darcy awake long after his wife and child, watching over them as they rested with emotions unnamable alive inside of him.

\* \* \* \*

Charles and Jane departed three days later, but only because

Darcy declared with obvious remorse that the innocuous appearing clouds gathering over the distant Peaks portended a snowstorm. Jane peered at her brother-in-law with clear doubt at his assertion, but Bingley immediately began making plans to leave. Long association with his friend's uncanny ability to predict the Derbyshire weather, a talent he assumed was genetic, gave him no cause to pause.

The sisters said their adieus in the bedchamber while Darcy, for the first time since the birth, descended the stairs to spend the final hours with Charles in the billiard room. Jane held a sleeping Alexander, while Lizzy stretched a bit by pacing about the room.

"Jane, I cannot thank you enough for being here with me. I do hope I can return the favor when your time comes."

"Absolutely! I will need you there most assuredly. However, it is I who should be thanking you, Lizzy. Now I know most clearly what to expect and can attend to my thoughts for the following months and bolster my mental strength."

Lizzy laughed, "Knowing you I doubt you will raise your voice even once, as I did, nor release a peep. Even worse, you shall probably have a four-hour travail and I shall never speak to you again!"

"If I am so fortunate I think I could deal with never having you speak to me again," Jane teased in her quiet voice, Lizzy laughing so loudly that Alexander started in his aunt's arms. She soothed him, resuming, "When do you plan to leave these rooms for the rest of the house? Your pacing is a plain indication of your restlessness."

"Tomorrow. I intend to show Alexander the immediate rooms at the least, even if I have to barrel through William's body to do so! I cannot say I am ready to tackle too much, but these rooms are stifling me." She sighed, sitting onto the edge of the sofa next to Jane, fingers automatically traveling over Alexander's satiny cheek. "I redecorated these rooms and they are lovely, but I already miss our bedchamber. It just.....does not feel right somehow." She smiled and shook her head, glancing to Jane with a faint blush, "I know I am being silly."

"No you are not, but be patient Lizzy. I do not think you can fully trust your emotions so soon after birth. You will know in your heart when it feels proper to move. William is here with you so it truly cannot matter all that much."

"Thank you Jane. Of course you are correct, and William says the same. I will miss you so very much! You and Charles must hurry back for a longer visit around Christmas, even if that means bringing the Hursts and Miss Bingley!"

The storm did strike late that evening, dropping four inches of



powdery snow; nonetheless, it did not overly hinder the message that an heir to the Pemberley estate and fortune had been born. The news speedily disseminated throughout Derbyshire, the horrid weather not preventing gossip. The official announcements were not yet printed before congratulations were arriving to the manor, servants sent trudging through the snow and chill winds to deliver penned parchments by the dozens. It would be over a week before Darcy visited his Club in Lambton to discover that it was Albert Hughes's father, Wentworth Hughes, who won the wager on nearly all counts. One hundred twenty-three pounds for guessing birth date, closest time, and sex! The gents toasted the new father, plying him with cigars and humorous words of parenting advice.

Back at Pemberley, as the weeks moved toward Christmas, life fell into the typical routines for this time of the year. Nevertheless, covering it all, threading through it all, and as a foundation of it all was Alexander. He was the star, the sweet center of attention, the innocent being that had every last soul wrapped around his tiny fingers. Lizzy did begin walking with him the day after the Bingleys left, Darcy at her elbow as they slowly traversed the endless corridors of the third floor. They took turns carrying him, pointing to various portraits or wall hangings, some of which were actually colorful enough to capture his brief consideration. Mostly he slept nestled onto a shoulder, the exercise being essentially for Lizzy's benefit.

Even the sporadically encountered footman or maid could not resist a spontaneous smile and warm gaze to touch the young Master's face. Lizzy was delighted to proudly show him to anyone, Darcy also overcoming a natural devotion to protocol by introducing him with a broad grin.

Georgiana and George joined the excursions from time to time. The dear doctor adored his grand-nephew, easily ensnaring the infant's serious gaze what with the garish outfits he wore, a voice exactly like his nephew's, and a natural storyteller's dramatic flair for enunciation. George found a captive audience to his wild tales, Alexander mesmerized by the theatric facial expressions and mimicking noises. "Aunt Giana," as she would become to the array of nephews and nieces to eventually join the Darcy family seized every moment possible to bond with her first nephew. Her clear devotion to him and sweet disposition would prevail, forging a deep love that would last down through the decades.

\* \* \* \*

"Is he asleep?" Darcy asked Lizzy from the doorway as he entered the nursery.

"Yes. Mrs. Hanford, you will ring me if he wakens?"

"Of course Mrs. Darcy."

"Do not fret, my dear. He has eaten well and should allot you at least three hours to dine. You need a full meal for a change." Darcy soothed his wife with a tender caress to the small of her back, bending simultaneously to bestow a light kiss to Alexander's forehead. The baby, hours away from being four days old, lay soundly asleep in his cradle. His tiny mouth was parted in sleep, as Darcy's always was, miniature fists curled to either side of his head and round bottom lifted into the air as he snuggled into the cushioned mattress.

"Are you sure he will be warm enough? Perhaps we should add another blanket."

Darcy touched his cheek, "He feels warm and Mrs. Hanford will ensure the fire stays lit. Come, love, all will be well, I promise." Lizzy reluctantly allowed her husband to lead her away, not realizing that the separation was no easier for him. Darcy shared a last glance with Mrs. Hanford, the understanding nanny nodding and smiling with reassurance.

Darcy had lovingly, but firmly, informed Lizzy that tonight they would dine with George and Georgiana. As difficult as it was to leave their son, Darcy was craving a full course, freshly served meal. Furthermore, he knew that for Elizabeth to regain her strength it was essential her diet improve beyond quick trays served in their chambers. Aside from the nutritional aspects of the decision he judged that dressing in more than a nightgown, primping her hair, and wearing a few jewels would mentally aid in her total recovery.

Lizzy had tearily argued, Darcy embracing her and nearly relenting, but finally she had agreed. Now, Darcy could only stare at his wife and the vision she presented. Marguerite had coiffed her hair in a basic, unadorned chignon with the strand of sapphires about her slender neck the only jewels. She wore one of the gowns designed for her by Madame Millicent in London for when she was early in her pregnancy and already a mere four days since delivering she was slim enough to wear it, the creamy tops of her lactating breasts beautifully displayed.

He halted her in the bedchamber, Lizzy glancing up into his face with surprise and sudden hope. "Are we staying after all?"

Darcy smiled, cupping her face with his palms and shaking his head, "No, beloved. I intend to guarantee you eat until bursting, drink a glass of wine, laugh with your family, and unwind. First, however, I must tell you how absolutely stunning you are. God, Elizabeth! You take my

breath away!" He encircled her neck, bending for a teasing and earnest kiss. "Hmm... Delicious. Come, Mrs. Darcy, the clock is ticking knowing the appetite of our son."

Lizzy was greeted with enthusiasm by George and Georgiana. Darcy, bless his amazing heart, had placed a goose down filled cushion on the chair to his right, guiding his wife and lovingly assisting her to sit, a chore that was yet painfully accomplished. A large part of her heart and soul remained upstairs, but the warm welcome and dazzling brilliance of the appointed dining room calmed her. With the serving of the first course, a delicious roasted red pepper soup, Lizzy wholly relaxed into the joy of fine dining with dear loved ones.

"I received a letter from Raja today," George began as the entrée was served, all looking to him with rapt attention.

"Did he finally propose?" Georgiana burst out, flushing instantly at her rude interruption, and glancing at her brother in expectation of his rebuke. None was forthcoming, however, as he was as interested in the answer as she was.

George continued with a chuckle, "Apparently so. Down on one knee with a bouquet of flowers to which was tied an engagement ring obtained from Spain, a family heirloom, he writes. Reciting poetry, no doubt, knowing Raul, although he does not say such. Anyway, Miss de Bourgh had to think on it for a few days..."

"She did not!" It was Georgiana again, but this time they all laughed as George shook his head.

"No, dear niece, she did not. He does not specify, but I can read between the lines. I rather imagine instantly leaping into arms or fainting dead away more the order of events."

"Anne is more the blushing and nodding sedate type, but there could have been some leaping involved," Darcy said dryly.

"Speaking from experience, nephew?" George winked at Lizzy.

"No leaping although there nearly was fainting, from me." He squeezed his wife's hand. "Does Dr. Penaflor give any other specifics? Dates, perhaps?"

"Lady Catherine's reaction?" Lizzy interjected with an evil twinkle.

"I expect Lady Catherine has passed the recent months figuring how to incorporate royal Spanish elements into the de Bourgh family crest. Raja is ever the diplomat, not to mention a future son-in-law, so I cannot glean anything untoward. He has well established himself in the community as a worthy physician, already asked to be on the hospital board. I shall allow myself to take some credit in that as I *did* train him,

passing on my superior expertise. Kent is blessed.” He paused for a smug grin and bite of braised chicken.

“Anyway,” he continued, “Raja says they are tentatively planning a February wedding. He and Anne desired an intimate Christmas ceremony, but Lady Catherine insists on her daughter and heir having an elaborate affair with probably all of England invited. I added the caveat there, but would wager the truth of it.”

“Why does everyone insist on February weddings?” Lizzy moaned. “I do not think it wise to take Alexander anywhere during the winter.”

Darcy brought her knuckles to his lips, speaking softly, “Do not fret, my love. We will attend if possible, bringing Alexander if he seems hale enough, or we will not. In the end our son’s health is of the greatest importance. Anne and Mary will understand this.” Lizzy nodded, smiling bravely.

“Well,” Georgiana broke the silence, “I think it very romantic. So much love in the air. I cannot be happier for both Anne and Mary. Maybe we can even find someone for you, Uncle. Miss Bingley is yet unclaimed.”

George literally spit his wine, Lizzy bursting into loud guffaws, and Darcy attempting to glare at his sister, but unable as he hid a smile into his napkin.

“Oh Lord forgive me, but bachelorhood has never conjured more appeal then at that vision! Shame, Georgie, shame.”

“Do not be so hasty, Uncle. Miss Bingley will be visiting over the holidays so you can reconsider the notion at your leisure.”

“Enough,” Darcy said with a sharp laugh, “joking at another’s expense is unattractive and uncharitable, no matter how humorous. Remember this, Georgiana.”

“Yes, brother.”

Lizzy patted her hand. “Speaking of hospitals and superior expertise, what of the hospital in Matlock, George? Other events transpired and I never heard the outcome of your interview.”

“It was intriguing. The facility is fairly modern for a rural establishment. The board approved of my credentials, naturally, and personally I was a smash.” He grinned then shrugged, “I was offered a position, but have not decided for certain.”

“You know you are welcome to stay at Pemberley as long as you wish, whatever your decision.”

“Thank you William.”

“Alexander would miss you and I rather appreciate having a

physician in residence.” Darcy smiled at his uncle, “Additionally, the community could use a doctor of your talent, but do not let the praise swell your ego any further!”

“That would be impossible, I fear. In all seriousness, I confess I have enjoyed my time home more than I imagined I would. It is a difficult decision.”

His grave tone touched all of them. For months now they had all privately wondered what his plans were. Darcy had conveyed to Lizzy on numerous occasions how frankly shocked he was by his uncle’s lingering presence. “All his visits in the past,” he told her one night, “have been no longer than a month and he was restless the entire time. He would be lax and nonchalant, but usually with a coiled energy that is not currently as evident. I am not quite sure what to make of it.” Any attempts to engage George in open discussions of his desires were met with evasiveness and jesting, Darcy finally relinquishing the effort.

In truth, Darcy greatly prayed his uncle would stay forever. Not only had he yearned for him to deliver their baby, but the camaraderie of the older man had unearthed long buried memories and vacancies. His father had been mentally and emotionally absent from the time of his mother’s death at seventeen, physically departed at twenty-two. Empty years without the sort of companionship and friendship only found with a beloved father; the type of relationship Darcy knew he and his father would have evolved into if events had unfolded differently. As much as he cared for his Uncle Malcolm, there was a formality attached and, of course, Lord Matlock had two sons.

With George it was entirely different. Their personalities were very similar, and George was so incredibly like James Darcy that at times Darcy blinked and mentally shook his head at the sensations evoked. It was spooky. Yet deeply fulfilling. “You should tell him how you feel,” Lizzy had gently encouraged just one week ago, “Perhaps he needs to know how intensely you love him. He has been alone for so long, wandering without a family or home. Maybe he needs to know he is wanted and special.”

What she said was likely true, yet how does one say such a thing to another man? Darcy was at a loss.

“Oh, Uncle! You must stay through Christmas at the very least!” Georgiana pleaded, breaking through Darcy’s musings.

“That I can promise, my dear. I refuse to sail in the winter.” He shuddered. “I am a very poor sailor and the Channel crossing is hideous in the best of weather. No, I fear you are stuck with me until spring!”

Georgiana clapped in glee, Lizzy stating, “That is excellent news!

We Darcys are all quite selfish, Uncle, so garner no qualms. We desire your presence for as many months or years as you wish to grace us.”

\* \* \* \*

The first week passed blissfully. Alexander settled into a fairly regular routine, eating every three to four hours on the button all through the day, filling his belly to satiation finally enough to sleep for roughly five to six hours through the night. His parents had no comparison, but felt that he was overall a temperate baby. He assuredly *had* a temper, primarily displayed when he was hungry and when the, in his opinion, time consuming silliness of diaper changing took precedence over his empty stomach. However, the very second the exposed nipple came within range of his seeking mouth, serenity and happiness as well as blessed silence descended. Once sated, generally handed to a waiting father for burping, Alexander was bonelessly lax.

“He is rather reminiscent of an inebriated person, limbs useless with eyes rolled backward and mouth widely open,” Darcy stated with a warm chuckle. “Drunk on milk, my precious?” He held his son on his shoulder, garments well protected with a cloth after lessons learned previously much to Samuel’s dismay, gently patting his back. The spellbound father swayed slowly, wisely not wishing to churn a stomach full of milk, wiping the corners of the infant’s mouth where remnants of his meal pooled. Alexander released a satisfied burp and slept on. “There’s a good boy. Such a strong lad you are, yes. So sweet you are, my little love, papa’s little man.”

His tender murmurings continued. Lizzy observed with a smile from the rocking chair while reclapping her dress and adjusting her bosoms for comfort. Now that her milk production was fully established, Lizzy discovered the painful reality of a heavy breast, quite obviously not an issue ever encountered in her life! During her pregnancy the increased ampleness of her bosom, although extreme compared to her pre-gravid state, was far from the generous volume gifted to seemingly the majority of women. The normal application of gathers and inset stays to her gowns was more than adequate to support her altered physique. This was not the case now. Lizzy was frankly shocked at the affect of lactation on the size of her breasts, easily double her pregnant mass. The strain placed on her thin shoulder and chest muscles was considerable.

Luckily Mrs. Hanford had some experience in this matter. The nanny was not an overly large woman, and although beefier than Lizzy it was clear that there were similarities in bust to frame ratios. Sweetly and

tactfully, she had approached her mistress with suggestions prior to Alexander's birth. An appeal to Madame du Loire had yielded an abundance of specifically designed gowns and corsets for a nursing woman. The undergarments were fairly comfortable, prettily detailed, constructed of silky fabrics, and aided in restoring tone to her abdomen, but primarily it was the relief in having a support for her weighty breasts that was appreciated.

Darcy had extended no specific comments regarding his wife's lushly endowed bust line, but his eyes betrayed his thoughts. Obviously making love to her was out of the question for the time being, Darcy far too content overall to lament the necessary waiting, but his sleepy straying hands which inevitably ended up cupping a breast proved the train of his private musings. Watching Alexander nurse was as much an elation for the delight in observing the natural activity of a healthy son, but also for the titillation of staring at her creamy bosom with imaginings running amok for when she was capable of resuming marital relations.

Darcy kissed the baby's head, sitting in the chair beside Lizzy and turning a radiant face to his equally radiant wife. "I do not think we shall hear a peep out of him for a while. He feels a bit heavier, have you noticed?"

"His cheeks are chubbier," she said, brushing over the mentioned body part with a fingertip. "Considering how much he eats I am not surprised. I can feel the difference in my breasts when he finishes so I know he is adequately fed." She laid her head onto Darcy's shoulder, sighing. "He is so beautiful. I never tire of gazing upon him. Did you read papa's letter?"

"Yes. It will be a delight to have him at Pemberley. Georgiana was thrilled at the news of Miss Kitty and Miss Mary visiting. Additionally, I must also remember to thank Miss Mary for being a typically strong willed Bennet and prevailing upon Mr. Daniels to join them."

"And mama?" She asked with a twinkle.

"Please dearest, do not tease me so. I am sorry I cannot claim affection for your mother, but I am reservedly pleased to have her as a guest. I am even preparing myself to magnanimously accept the inevitably ebullient commentary regarding Pemberley's well appointed rooms and expensive furnishings!" Lizzy laughed, Darcy continuing with a mischievous gleam, "In all likelihood it is you, my heart, who will reap the greatest joy from your mother's enthusiasm with a plethora of maternal advice and assistance."

Lizzy playfully slapped his knee, "Beast! Watch your tongue, Mr.

Darcy, or I shall inform her that you are hopelessly inept and require comprehensive instruction in basic parenting skills!”

Darcy winced. “Very well, Madame, you win. While we are on the subject of your family, I have a thought that I wish for your opinion on. I had the notion of sending the coach to Hertfordshire for your family’s transportation. With five now traveling and the weather unpredictable, I thought it may be more comfortable, not to mention safer. However, I was unsure what vehicles Mr. Bennet possessed, having only seen the landau, and I would never wish to offend by extending the offer. What do you think?”

Lizzy thought carefully, answering with deliberation, “Papa owns nothing remotely as grand as the coach to be sure. In truth, he would probably be mildly offended if the offer came from you. If, on the other hand, it is *my* idea and I express my concern for mama’s nerves while traveling to the far colder regions of Derbyshire, I think he would be placated. Anything to divert a paroxysm of nerves during a day long carriage ride will be welcomed, I can assure you! He may be slightly embarrassed, but his thankfulness will outweigh.” She smiled at her spouse, beckoning him forward for a tender kiss. “You are the soul of kindness, William. Thank you.”

Darcy blushed faintly, “It is a simple thing, Elizabeth. To change the topic, I received a note from the printer. The announcements should be ready in a day or two. I have compiled a list of friends and family to notify and Mr. Keith will send them once they arrive. The list is on the bed stand for you to peruse for accuracy. The post was extensive today. I received a missive from Richard as well stating he will be spending Christmas with his parents, all of them arriving next week from London.” He smiled happily, glancing a kiss to her temple, “It is rapidly transpiring into a full house of guests after all.”

Lizzy frowned, “As delightful as it is to have family about I do not want Alexander exposed to an endless parade of people handling him.”

“I emphatically agree, beloved. We will be cautious. They can gaze upon his adorable face as he lays here in his cradle or wait until he wakes. By the way, I spoke with Reverend Bertram this afternoon and scheduled the christening for the Sunday following Christmas. Nearly all the family will be here so it is perfect, do you agree?”

“Absolutely.” She peered up at his face with a grin, “That gives you one month to rethink naming him ‘William’ rather than ‘Fitzwilliam.’”

“I do not need to contemplate the subject any further. There are



enough ‘Fitzwilliams’ in this family. Annabella named her son Fitzwilliam and Anne can do the same if she wishes. That should appease tradition.”

“What about appeasing Lady Catherine? She will be devastated.”

“Perhaps it is time she learned to deal with disappointment, and do not pretend you are overly concerned for Lady Catherine’s sensibilities, Mrs. Darcy! We have discussed it with serious reflection and I am satisfied with the names chosen. They are strong names all and pay tribute to those dearest to us as well as fulfilling tradition.” He competently transferred the limp baby from shoulder to nestle in the crook of his arm, Lizzy tucking the blanket over naked feet after a kiss to tiny toes.

Darcy resumed, “Mrs. Reynolds requested a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss a few Christmas issues. Nothing too intense as I have expressed our wish to proceed as last year. The groundsmen are already amassing piles of holly and mistletoe, and although I do not know this for cert, I imagine the maids are fabricating new kissing balls to ensnare the unmarried footmen. With so much scheming I wonder how any of them complete any real work over the holiday season.”

“If my memory serves, the servants were not the only Pemberley inhabitants to profit from strategically located mistletoe. In fact, I clearly recollect you reaping the benefits, Sir.” Darcy grinned in happy remembrance, meeting his wife’s eyes with a lusty twinkle. “New topic....I talked to Georgiana regarding delivering the care packages this year. She stammered a bit, but was agreeable. Perhaps Mary and Kitty can accompany her for moral support! By the way, love, your shy sister asked me to request a favor of you.”

Darcy glanced over with raised brow, “She was too timid to speak with me personally?”

“Listen and you will understand. The invitation for the Cole’s Masque arrived three days ago, as you are aware. Naturally we cannot attend, or at least I cannot.”

“We could attend for part of the evening, beloved. Dance a waltz or two, have dinner. I am sure we could arrange an alternative method of feeding Alexander.”

Lizzy smiled and chuckled, “Listen to you, Mr. Darcy! Suddenly so desirous of dancing and socializing! Who is this man I am now married to?”

“The same selfish one from years past, who wishes to squire the most beautiful woman in all England on his arm, spreading envy amongst the unfortunate, and increasing his arrogance. However, we already know

my faults. You were speaking of Georgiana.”

“Simply put, Georgiana expressed an interest in attending this year. While on tour with the Matlocks she danced at a handful of social engagements and enjoyed herself immensely; however, she knows how strict you are about the rules of officially ‘coming out’ and feared your censure.”

Darcy was frowning, lips pursed in thought. “I did not know of her dancing while in Wales. Did she fear sharing this with me?”

“Only in the sense that she did not desire to disappoint you or incur your anxiety over her well being. She knows how worried you were over Lord Gruffudd and abhors causing you any pain. She yet harbors guilt over the Ramsgate affair, to the degree of hurting you and earning your disrespect.”

Darcy sighed deeply, speaking roughly, “I never blamed her for any of that and made my thoughts perfectly clear.”

“She knows this, dearest, but her love for you is so great as to yearn only to please you. Surely you understand how tremendously high her esteem for you? You are all she has had in her latter years to admire and emulate.”

“Until you.” His countenance softened, “Thank you Elizabeth for being a friend and sister to Georgie. What do you deem wise regarding her attending the Masque?”

“Well, assuming she can be properly chaperoned by either the Matlocks or Richard, and since it is a local affair, I do not think it untoward for her to attend. The invitation did include her name, after all. Of course, I do not claim to be fully versed in all the finer nuances of high society, but if Lord and Lady Matlock allowed her to dance at balls while touring, it should not be an issue here in Derbyshire.”

“I suppose I agree. An engagement or two over the winter will in no way effect her formal admission to society at Almack’s in the spring. Perhaps Miss Mary, Mr. Daniels, and Miss Kitty can attend as well. I can request Sir Cole include them on the guest list.”

Lizzy laughed, “Unless her personality has drastically changed with the advent of love and impending matrimony, Mary hates balls and would likely cringe at the idea. Kitty, of course, is another matter entirely. Should I inform Georgie of your agreement or will you?”

“I will talk to her. I judge it the appropriate time for us to have an earnest brother-sister chat. If you do not object to my absence for an afternoon, I think I will escort her to lunch and shopping in Matlock. It has been a while since we spent quality hours together and I am sure she has merchandise requirements, for Christmas if nothing personal.”

“That is a brilliant plan, my love! You should invite her for tomorrow since the roads have cleared and we have a spell of moderate weather. I can meet with Mrs. Reynolds. It is past time for Alexander and I to move beyond the third floor, is that not right my darling?” She brought his miniature feet to her mouth for delectable nibbles, the deeply sleeping infant not even flinching. “Want to see the billiard room where you will be spending so much of your time, sweetheart? How about your papa’s study? He sleeps like you William, in a comatose state.”

“It is the satisfied sleep of one who is utterly loved, and well sated, although for variant reasons.” He kissed the top of her head. “Should we lay him down for now and join the others in the music room? Georgiana has a new song she wishes to perform for you.”

“Yes, I suppose. Oh! It is just so hard to leave him!”

“Mrs. Hanford says he will have more awake hours as he grows, but for now sleep is crucial for his health. I do not imagine he would sleep as deeply being passed around and with the pianoforte pounding in the background.”

Darcy rose, laying Alexander cautiously into the cradle to avoid waking, but the contented infant merely stretched, emitting a smattering of baby gurgles before resuming his pose of tranquil slumber. The blanket was smoothed and another added, both parents transfixed for another few minutes before Mrs. Hanford was notified and they departed.

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Gradually Lizzy returned to her duties as her energy was restored, but always with Alexander either accompanying her or Mrs. Hanford aware of her location. Since she primarily worked from her desk in Darcy’s study or their sitting room, she was easy to find. The Indian silks gifted by Dr. Darcy were perfectly utilized as slings to hold Alexander against his mother’s chest while he slept, enabling Lizzy to carry him easily and have her hands free. She looked ridiculous, and would never appear in public so adorned, but for meandering about the manor it was ideal.

Mrs. Reynolds had all the Christmas plans in hand, Lizzy only required to assist minimally and proffer input. They discussed the care packages for the tenant families, the staff and tenant feast, any additional gifts Lizzy wanted purchased, the menu, and a few other incidentals. There truly was very little for her to address, Lizzy abundantly thankful as she vastly preferred devoting all attention to her precious baby.

Physically she rejuvenated rapidly. The occasionally intense cramps, a result so George informed her, of her womb returning to a pre-pregnant condition lessened daily and were gone by the end of the second week. She did nap most every day with Alexander snuggled against her breast after nursing primarily because it was so wonderfully joyous to do so. Her weariness was essentially gone within days to be replaced by the vigor of youth. The tenderness to her bottom persisted for quite a while, as did the scant discharge from her feminine area, but that too receded. She adjusted to some of the changes in her body: the large and cumbersome breasts that leaked milk frequently, and the wider hips that required several chemises to be altered. More problematic, from an egotistical standpoint, was the extra flesh over her abdomen.

Eventually this would disappear, Lizzy as svelte as always, but since this was a future development, she lamented this alteration to her physique. Logically she knew that her expectations were presumptuous and apprehensions irrational. Her emotions were perhaps minutely a result of personal vanity, but primarily were for her husband. This too she rationally knew to be absurd as Darcy had proven time and again that his love and desire for her was not dependent on her shape. Nonetheless, her unease and embarrassment continued, Lizzy thankful that for now her moderately pendulous belly was hidden from view under a corset and gown.

“Enter,” Darcy declared in response to the knock on his study door. The minor quantity of business that arose during the winter months had accumulated in a pile on his desk over the past week and a half, Darcy finally taking the precious time away from his wife and son to execute his duty as the Master of Pemberley. As important as the tedious issues were he nevertheless was thrilled to see said wife and son cross the threshold.

“Forgive me, William, for disturbing you, but I have the final batch of announcements to post.”

“I shall forgive you, beloved, if you kiss me and then hand me our son. Come to your father, my precious boy. There’s my big strong lad. What are you and your beautiful mother up to? Hmmm...?”

Alexander was awake, bright blue eyes studying his father with an infantile hint of amusement. Darcy held him balanced on both broad hands, neck well supported as he made silly faces and conversed with the innate baby talk tonality that all parents seemed to possess. The baby squirmed and erratically swung his extremities, lips puckered, and stare riveted on his adoring father.

“Who loves you best? Your mama and papa do, yes, that’s who!

Give your father a kiss, milk lips. Ouch! Must you grab my hair each time?"

"Perhaps he is subtly enlightening you to the fact that you need your hair trimmed."

"Is your papa a shaggy hound, wee one? Or is your grip just so strong you cannot prevent grasping anything in your reach? I think it the latter, yes I do, my sturdy little man, I do." Darcy buried his mouth and nose into Alexander's stubby neck, tickling and blowing as the amused newborn wiggled and burbled, nearly giggling.

Lizzy sat and watched her silly spouse play the child with Alexander, heart swelling with fresh rivers of joy. The infant's moments of wakefulness were minimal and seized upon wholeheartedly. Despite her familiarity with Darcy's humor and private frivolity, it still surprised her to observe how nonsensical he was with their firstborn. He would likely be mortified if a servant entered the room, or even many of their family and friends, but the delightful displays of merriment sprung from an inner fount of happiness that he could not contain. To say that marriage and now fatherhood had drastically affected the personality of the stoic Mr. Darcy would be a monumental understatement.

"I received a letter from Charlotte," she interrupted his jollities, Darcy lifting to meet her eyes with a wince as Alexander had a grip on his hair.

"You are smiling so it must be pleasant news." He untangled the tiny fingers from his locks, transferring Alexander into his arms for sedate stroking.

"She has safely delivered, over a month ago now."

"Why the delay in writing? All went well I trust?"

Lizzy nodded, "Mr. Collins, if you believe it, is the father of twins! Two girls! Charlotte writes that the birth was long, two babies being utterly unsuspected." Lizzy shook her head, eyes mildly glazed. "I cannot fathom having to birth two. Poor Charlotte. Be that as it may, she says the recovery was swift. The eldest daughter weighed over seven pounds and was perfectly healthy. The second was barely five pounds and rather sickly, hence the delay in notifying friends. Apparently she was slow to grow and they all worried, but eventually she caught on to nursing and is improving. They feel she is out of danger. Listen to this: Lady Catherine insisted on employing a wet nurse to augment the increased demands of two babies! Paid for it herself! Your aunt can surprise me yet."

Darcy smiled with some surprise evident on his visage as well.

"That is marvelous news. I do hope they encounter no further distress."

He gazed lovingly upon his son, embraced so closely to his beating heart, speaking in a coarse whisper, "Nothing could be worse than losing a child, unless it is losing a beloved wife. Neither event would I wish upon my worst enemy." Drawing Alexander's face near, Darcy bestowed numerous soft kisses, the babe calming until the tip of Darcy's nose brushed over pink lips. Instantly he opened wide, rooting for a meal. When that was not immediately forthcoming a loud bellow was emitted, the once placid face screwed in consternation.

"Apparently he is tired of me. Nourishment takes precedence over play or adoration, so it seems." He carried the upset babe to Lizzy, already drawing the shawl across her chest while releasing buttons. The process of positioning and latching was now accomplished rapidly, Alexander's cries stifled instantly as his mouth became active in pleasanter pursuits.

Darcy encircled his wife's shoulders, securing the shawl for privacy although no one would enter his study unannounced. He kissed Lizzy's temple, caressing Alexander's leg while he nursed. Never tiring of these moments of felicity, Darcy happily eschewed the work on his desk. Stacks of parchment, receipts, and invoices would regenerate no matter how diligently he applied himself; however, these precious interludes were a one time experience to be savored. Yes, Alexander would eat again in a few hours and so on, but each day he matured in subtle ways, vague evolutions that meant he would never be quite the same. They may be blessed with a dozen children, each precious, but all unique in their personalities and actions. Darcy and Lizzy wanted to wholly absorb each minute with Alexander to be treasured in their memories and hearts for all eternity.

Darcy sighed, resting his head against Lizzy's, "I rather envy Mr. Collins, shocking as that is to confess. I would not be averse to spoiling two babies. Perhaps we can arrange something for the next pregnancy." He grinned.

Lizzy chuckled, "Very sweet, beloved, but personally I prefer one baby at a time. And let us allow my bum to heal before we start planning further pregnancies. Unless, that is, we can figure a way for you to incubate one of them!"

Darcy laughed, "I am quite certain every woman on down through the endless ages has prayed for that miracle! Alas, the Almighty had a different plan. Very well then, one at a time is adequate, especially if they are all as adorable as our Alexander." He clasped one foot, toes automatically curling around the tip of Darcy's thumb where it pressed lightly the length of the sole. Alexander shoved against the pressure,

causing his father to smile at his strength. The occupied infant opened one eye, shifted slightly, and momentarily lost his grip on the nipple. After a frantic search the nipple was found, Alexander casting a baleful glance at Darcy before attending to the serious business of eating.

"You of all people should know better than to disturb a Darcy while dining," Lizzy teased.

"Point well taken. Forgive me, my son." He bent to softly kiss the baby's downy cheek, planted a second kiss onto the beautiful flesh of his wife's breast followed by several others winding up her chest until reaching her lips.

The kiss was long, gentle, soothing, and loving rather than passionate. Darcy withdrew mere inches to gaze into Lizzy's sparkling eyes, hand and fingers stroking over her jaw and cheek. "I love you Elizabeth, unbelievably so. You are beautiful and extraordinarily desirable to me. I know we cannot make love yet, but I do hope you understand my yearning for you is unabated. I will wait as patiently as you need, but when we can be together again, I will love you hard with all my soul pouring into yours. Nothing, not time or even Alexander can usurp your place in my life. You are my heartbeat and breath, my beloved, precious wife."

They kissed again. Tenderness transmuting to urgency; passion growing as the kiss deepened; waves of desire swept through them both leaving them breathless. Lizzy moaned, hands gripping Alexander tightly, the infant oblivious as he ate. Darcy pulled away, his arousal well advanced, meeting Lizzy's glazed eyes with his own.

"Fitzwilliam," she whispered, as she always did when overcome by desire.

Darcy smiled beatifically, "Soon, my lover, soon. Anticipation is sweet, and believe me, my expectations are high so therefore it will be sweet indeed. I can promise you this, my soul." He kissed her again, temperately as passion was cooled, lingering teasingly over her lips before traveling along her jaw to then bury his face with a contented sigh into the delicate angle where slender neck meets dainty shoulder.

## **14 – Relative Invasion**

“Pardon me, Sir, but the Darcy coach has been noted on the bridge.”

“Thank you, Mr. Taylor.” Darcy snapped the ledger closed as he rose from the desk. “Please send word to Mrs. Darcy and Miss Darcy in the nursery. Dr. Darcy is yet in the library?”

“I believe so, Sir.” Darcy nodded, both men departing for their respective errands.

The carriage had departed for Longbourn five days ago with Mr. Anders and the footman Rothchilde bearing a letter written by Lizzy. Worded carefully and with her natural humor, and not mentioning Darcy’s name, the letter addressed to her father was unlikely to offend. Nonetheless, Darcy was mildly trepidatious. The respect and warmth felt for his father-in-law was genuine and Darcy had no wish to form a breach in their relationship. Lizzy assured him that even in the improbable event that Mr. Bennet was affronted one look at the adorable face of his grandson would effectively erase the emotion.

Christmas was just over a week and a half away. The house was decorated more lavishly than last year; the maids, footmen, groundsmen, and even the senior staff apparently wholly liberated by the joyous atmosphere that had now totally inundated Pemberley over the past year. Twelve short months all that was required to expunge the years of sadness. With the freedom allotted they had quite probably denuded the entire forest of holly, mistletoe, pine boughs, and any other greenery remotely Christmassy, draping every balcony, window sill, banister, fireplace mantle, and alcove. Darcy’s jest about mistletoe ornaments proved accurate with balls at every corridor junction and dangling from each ceiling light and threshold. All the heirloom decorations were in place, as well as a sprinkling of others that had been unearthed while rummaging through the attic for baby furnishings. There were three times as many candles strewn about the manor and grounds with several dozen torches placed throughout the gardens.

One corner of the parlor was cleared and draped with yards of gold and silver edged red velvet onto which was arranged a plethora of brightly wrapped and ribboned presents. Pine branches decorated with



tiny candles further adorning the area. The entire parlor furnishings were shuffled to provide more room, supplementary sofas and chairs obtained from other chambers to supply abundant seating for the large gathering. Both dining rooms were sumptuously festooned and the ballroom was polished until gleaming painfully with additional greenery beautifying. Instruments were tuned, fireplaces were scrubbed and chimneys swept, vases of fresh flowers were abundant, lamps were filled, windows were cleaned, patios and walkways were freed of all debris, and scented potpourris were everywhere.

All guest chamber designations were carefully considered. Mr. Daniels was assigned the room between Dr. Darcy and Col. Fitzwilliam, Miss Mary to be on the opposite end of the corridor next to Georgiana and Miss Kitty's rooms. The likelihood of improper romantic activity from either Mary or Mr. Daniels was highly dubious knowing their characters, but Darcy considered it his responsibility as Master to ensure propriety for the sake of his new sister. The Bennets were assigned the grandest couple quarters on the second floor, those inhabited by the Bingleys when visiting. It was felt best to reassign the Bingleys to the third floor rather than expect the older couple to walk so far. The other visiting guests would be ascribed their usual rooms.

Lizzy, with Darcy's blessing, had enclosed an impromptu invitation with the birth announcement sent to the Gardiners. With so many already visiting, and the Christening scheduled for after Christmas, it was logical and desirable to have her aunt and uncle grace with their presence as well. She instructed them to simply come if they so wished and were able, not to worry about responding as they were always welcome, therefore it was yet unknown whether they would visit.

Lizzy and Darcy had effectively stayed out of the Christmas planning for the most part, allowing the staff to go wild. They were not disappointed. While the servants unleashed their creativity, Lizzy and Mrs. Reynolds organized the menus and entertainments. As for the culinary aspects of the holidays, the huntsmen, including Darcy a time or two, had avidly provided the main staples for the dietary fare. Desserts of all varieties from basic pies and cakes to elegant pastries and meringues were created. Mrs. Langton and her superb staff could be trusted to whip up an array of tasty dishes and treats to augment the main courses.

The game room was set with extra card tables, a second dart board, Hazard dice, and a domino set of ivory acquired while in Great Yarmouth to augment the chess, backgammon, cribbage, and draughts tables already in place. In anticipation that the freeze and snows would escalate, ten pairs of skates were bought and the existing ones sharpened,

the curling stones and brooms were brought from storage, hockey sticks and pucks unpacked, and sleds were inspected for safety.

Darcy's prized shovillaborde, a table version of the popular deck game shuffleboard, was polished and placed prominently to the right of the two billiard tables in the Billiard Room. Two years prior Darcy had discovered the table in an auction house, thrilled beyond belief and paying an outrageous sum for the one hundred year old relic fashioned after the boards favored by King Henry VIII. Lizzy enjoyed the game, Darcy teaching her the rules and withholding the worst of his competitive inclinations as she learned.

An enormous, wooden floored room beside the conservatory was dedicated to various indoor sports. The room had evolved over the years from what was originally designed as a smaller ballroom into a second game room. It did not have an actual name, usually referred to as The Court due to the enormous netted court for tennis and the area by one wall for rackets. The floor was polished, with new balls and racquets purchased. Also procured were battledores and shuttlecocks for the game of the same name raging through London, and new shuffleboard sticks and disks. The sunny chamber lined with wide windows without curtains and a ceiling partially of glass additionally boasted a skittles (or ninepin) alley, a miniature putting green with five holes, a quoits pin, and hopscotch squares.

All these superb features available to adequately entertain, not to mention the rugged and sculptured landscape, voluminous library, and diverse company meant that Christmas at Pemberley promised to be a raging success. The emotions flowing through Darcy and Lizzy regarding the quiet season originally envisioned turning into a major happening varied, but one emotion absolutely shared was the priority in protecting Alexander. Darcy refused to allow his still recovering wife and fragile child to overextend, the very thought of them becoming ill sending frigid chills deep into the marrow of his bones. With typical Darcy dominance and severity he bluntly reminded Lizzy that he would be in charge and would expect her to obey his orders in all matters. Lizzy flared in irritation briefly, but then laughed, Darcy frowning and preparing to puff intimidatingly, only to deflate and calm when she assured him she agreed and would bow to his will.

So here they now were, nearly three weeks after Alexander's arrival, the quiet family of four as ready as they would ever be for the onslaught. Winter had set in with a vengeance, no further reprieves since Darcy and Georgiana's afternoon in Matlock over a week ago. A short rainstorm had evolved into a furious snowstorm lasting nearly two days.

Snow now blanketed the ground and vegetation, the entire surrounds bathed in glistening crystals with few exceptions. The larger lakes and ponds enriched with fountains provided breaks in the monotony of white, the handful of winter blooms and evergreen trees lending color, and shoveled drives and pathways providing clarity and contour. The vivid blue of the sky was frequently obscured by clouds, most darkly grey and threatening. The usual hectic movements of wildlife and humans noted throughout the river valley and bordering forests during fairer weather was essentially gone. Naturally there were still chores to be done by bundled groundsmen, horses to exercise by jacketed wranglers, and the few brave winter fowl and deer and tiny rodents searching for food to disturb the placid winter scenery.

It was exceedingly cold, Lizzy fretting constantly over Alexander, but the baby grew stronger and his little body seemed to generate heat as did his father's. Nonetheless, Lizzy kept him close to her chest as much as possible and dressed in two or three layers of clothing. Every fireplace located in the frequently inhabited areas of the mansion blazed from sunrise to well after sunset, dispelling the bulk of the cold and keeping the residents comfortable.

December was rapidly passing as the days ticked toward Christmas and then the turning of the calendar to the year of our Lord, 1818.

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Longbourn, located roughly one hundred fifty miles to the south and nestled in the valleys of Hertfordshire, was also experiencing a cold spell although no snow had yet fallen and it was warmer than the northern counties. Whatever the facts, weather or otherwise, none of the inhabitants of the modest manor took any note. All energies were either focused on preparations for the trip to Pemberley or avoiding said preparations.

Mrs. Bennet had been in a barely controlled dither since her trip to Darcy House in London, further incited by the gushing descriptions of Pemberley by Kitty when she returned in August. Despite her incessant declarations of "10,000 a year," the woman of humble means had had no true concept of the life her second daughter married into. The subdued opulence of Darcy House had overwhelmed her and based on the picture painted by Kitty's allegations, Pemberley was vastly superior.

Between Mary's wedding planning and the Christmas vacation arrangements, Mr. Bennet found himself retreating to the solitude of his

study more and more to evade the frenzy. He merely wanted to see his favored daughter and new grandson, enjoy the pleasure of his son-in-law's company, and lose himself in the library. Inconsequentialities such as fashionable clothing and haircuts were of no interest. Transportation to Derbyshire had not actually occurred to him as an issue, his plan simply to utilize the landau. If five persons would be a bit snug, all better to maintain warmth! The arrival of the Darcy carriage two days before their scheduled departure, and the letter from Lizzy explaining its purpose were of no real importance to the practical gentleman. He instantly recognized the advantage and was pleased not only for the reasons delineated by his darling daughter, but for the comfort afforded his old bones. It never crossed his mind to be offended. Besides, his wife's theatrics would have effectively smothered any sensations of insult had they come to mind.

Mrs. Bennet glanced at the formally garbed Rothchilde standing on the doorstep with elegant, crested coach behind on the drive and nearly fainted! "Mr. Bennet!" she shrieked, "Mr. Bennet! Come quickly!" With fan fluttering wildly and hand clutching the doorknob for stability, the flustered woman was quickly flanked by both daughters rushing from back rooms to see what the fuss was all about.

The footman stood serenely, stateliness reigning as he waited. It was apparent that the flushed woman before him was in no condition to read the letter he held in his hand as she had yet to actually acknowledge his presence. Mary called to her father in a calmer voice, correctly assuming that he would not respond to Mrs. Bennet's shriek. Eventually the missive would be read, the servants appropriately housed until they left, horses watered and fed, and final packing done. All the while, and for the bulk of the two day trip to Pemberley, Mrs. Bennet breathlessly intoned the virtues of Mr. Darcy, or more specifically, his wealth.

"Such a fine, fine carriage it is! What a marvelous gentleman he is to be sure! Married our Lizzy when surely no one else would likely have her, always far too independent and sharp tongued for her own good. Truly a wondrous gentleman, so generous and kind, is he not Mr. Daniels?"

Mr. Daniels's agreeing reply, the hundredth or so such offered since departing Longbourn, was lost in the continuing rambles of his future mother-in-law. Mary's gentle smile and soft eyes met his, giving the flummoxed young man the inner strength necessary to deal with the situation. His weekly visitations to Mary since her departure from London had gifted the opportunity to become acquainted with his soon to be family. As Darcy before him, Mr. Daniels was frankly baffled at

how the demure, proper young woman that was his fiancé had arisen from such a family. Mr. Bennet was quieter than his wife, but with a clever wit and penetrating gaze not possessed by his middle daughter. In all ways Mary was an enigma in the Bennet clan, far more than Lizzy ever had been.

Joshua Daniels counted himself a very fortunate man indeed, the antics of the Bennets notwithstanding. His betrothed was a steady young lady, prim, stoic, and fairly humorless; but intelligent, kind, and warm. Since these were character traits identical to Mr. Daniels, the two were well matched. Both approached their union with logic and sensibleness, emotion only a dim part of the decision initially. That there was a physical attraction was obvious to them both, but to say it was a raging passion would be erroneous. Their innocence and balanced natures did not lend well to consideration of such things. However, as the long weeks of their engagement unfolded, both began to sense the stirrings of something stronger; emotions that simmered far under the skin as they gradually took tender liberties with chaste kisses and hand touching. This excursion to Pemberley, as painful as it was for the decorous solicitor to reside as a guest in a client's home, would be an eye opener. The extended period of time the couple would spend together, often inadvertently alone as people came and went about the enormous manor, as well as blatant if constrained demonstrations of affection between their hosts, would enlighten them to the greater riches possibly uncovered in a passionate marriage. Without giving too much away, it is safe to conclude that Mary and Joshua would have a fulfilling marriage in all ways.

This, of course, was future. For now, they all persevered for the ride. It rained and snowed intermittently as they traveled, but the sturdily built coach with thick walls, window shades, rugs, and compartments for heated bricks all contributed for a fairly comfortable journey. By the afternoon of the second day, as they rumbled through Matlock, the clouds broke and sleety rains ceased. The sun peaked through the gaps, offering no warmth of any significance, but casting eye-blinding tendrils of illumination over the glittering snow blanketing the fields.

It was Kitty who recognized the hamlet of Lambton, familiar from afternoon shopping trips with Georgiana. "Oh! This is Lambton, Papa. It means we are very close! Just a few miles and across the river is Pemberley!"

Lizzy had instructed Mr. Anders to approach from the north rather than the slightly shorter southern avenue veering from Beeley. She would never forget her initial view of Pemberley as seen from the bridge

crossing the River Derwent; the mansion sitting proudly amid the gardens and fountains, ringed to the rear by vast forests, the main façade a breathtaking vision of Darcy heritage and prestige. The coachman slowed on the bridge, allowing the occupants to gaze lingeringly as well as permitting word of their arrival to reach Mr. Darcy from the unseen sentry he knew was waiting. By the time the carriage drove under the massive stone and vine swathed archway and halted before the portico, the Bennets and Mr. Daniels were silent with awe.

Darcy stood under the entry, commanding and formal; Dr. Darcy to his left wearing a broad, welcoming grin. Georgiana, hair regally arranged and dressed in a lovely gown of pale blue velvet, exited the open doors as Rothchilde assisted Mary from the carriage. Darcy bent for a quick question, nodding at her reply, and then turned to descend the steps with the two in his wake.

“Miss Bennet,” he bowed, greeting his sister-in-law formally, “Welcome to Pemberley. My sister has been on pins all week awaiting your arrival. However, before I relinquish you to her, I must congratulate you on your engagement and additionally thank you for convincing Mr. Daniels to celebrate Christmas with us.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy, on both counts. We are delighted to be here.”

Mary turned to a bouncing Georgiana, the two instantly enfolded in a deep embrace. Kitty was next to disembark, joining the two enthusiastic young women and ignoring Darcy altogether. He smiled slightly in understanding, turning to greet a spellbound Mrs. Bennet.

“Mrs. Bennet, welcome to Pemberley. Your daughter and grandson will be down shortly and greet you all from the warmth of the interior. I pray the road was easy?”

Mrs. Bennet appeared to pull her eyes away from the house with difficulty, finally focusing on Darcy. “Pardon? Oh, yes! The road was easy, thanks to your thoughtfulness in sending your extravagant carriage! So much more comfortable than the landau would have been, I daresay, and so very fine.”

“I am pleased to hear it, Madame. However, I cannot take credit for the decision. Save your expressions of gratitude for your daughter. Mr. Bennet, Sir, welcome to Pemberley.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. It is wonderful to be here. Dr. Darcy, I trust you are well?”

“Never better! Mrs. Bennet, how utterly delightful it is to see you again.” He bowed with a roguish flair, snatching a limp hand for a brushing kiss, and then offering his arm, “If I may be so bold? I am quite

certain there is a lovely young lady lurking in the foyer with an incredibly cute baby in her arms. I had the honor of delivering this infant you know, first to lay eyes on his beauty, as it were. Of course the real work was accomplished by your daughter, William having some input here and there.....”

His voice trailed off as he led the bemused woman into the painted foyer. Darcy looked at Mr. Bennet, smiling faintly at the silently laughing older gentleman. “Ah, Mr. Daniels! Welcome to Pemberley. Please, gentlemen, let us retire to the parlor where it is warm and refreshments are waiting. I should warn you, Mr. Daniels,” he said with a chuckle as the three entered the house, “it is likely you shall discover attention from your lovely fiancé slowly forthcoming for a day or two until female conversation is exhausted. Word of wisdom from an experienced husband given free of charge!” Mr. Bennet laughed aloud, Mr. Daniels blushing.

Lizzy stood at the top of the grand staircase, dressed in a gorgeous gown of brown chenille, a huge smile lighting her entire being, and Alexander nestled in her arms. The proud smile Darcy could in no way prevent lit his face. The two sisters, escorted by Georgiana, were mounting the stairs toward Lizzy. Mrs. Bennet, on the arm of Dr. Darcy, was captivated in open mouthed scrutiny of the brilliantly frescoed ceiling and lavish carvings abundant in the enormous two story entryway, momentarily forgetting both daughter and grandson.

Wife and son disappeared in a mass of flowing skirts and reaching arms, the chatter and exclamations of marvel rising to the rafters. Lizzy’s merry laughter lifted above the fray until Mrs. Bennet caught sight of her daughter among the general splendor and her shrill outcry drowned all.

“Oh, Lizzy! How adorable he is! Let me hold my grandson! Hello sweet baby, I am your grandmamma. Well done Lizzy, birthing a male as I recommended. The heir to Pemberley to please Mr. Darcy. And such a healthy boy he is, yes indeed. Someday all this will be yours, you lucky little dear.”

Lizzy cringed, glancing into Darcy’s pained visage at the bottom of the stairs. “Papa,” she spoke firmly to her father, cutting through her mother’s proclamations, “Come meet your grandson.”

Mr. Bennet had anticipated this moment with moderate enthusiasm, remembering the pleasure in his girls during their childhood. As was the case with most men, the dashed hope for a son had often overshadowed his joy and a normal tendency to relinquish all baby matters to the women had conspired to prevent his bonding overly with

his daughters until they were well into their toddler years. Thus, as happy as he was for Lizzy and her husband, he had not expected to be unduly moved by a tiny person with presumably no personality or ability to interact.

What a shock it was to the elderly gentleman when his eyes locked with Alexander! The seventeen day old infant was awake and alert, eyes intently studying the faces before him with the serious expression complete with miniature brow furrows that his parents had come to recognize as Alexander absorbing the world around him. Mr. Bennet was jolted to the core as he captured the attention of the babe lying sedately in his grandmother's embrace. Grandfather and grandson connected gazes, both men still for the span of several heartbeats, and then Alexander stretched out one wobbly hand as he wiggled and released the newborn version of a giggle.

Mr. Bennet was in love, utterly and completely head over heels. His eyes misted and he gruffly cleared his throat while extending the tip of an index finger to stroke the soft fist. "Handsome chap, Lizzy. Quite attentive and serious, like his father, yet with a hint of humor like you. Fine addition to the family, I do say."

Lizzy was beaming, pride in her son immeasurable and now increased by the obvious affect he had on her relatives. She laid her hand onto her father's arm, drawing his gaze to her, and lifting to kiss his cheek. "Come inside the parlor, papa, and relax with a brandy, then you can hold him."

Gradually the group moved toward the parlor, Darcy and Mr. Daniels bringing up the rear. Darcy had observed the unfolding drama with widely divergent emotions. Like his wife, the pride in their son was infinite. He truly considered Alexander the most perfect baby in the entire world and was therefore not the least bit surprised at the instantaneous affection. The negative was the epiphany foolishly not deliberated prior that he would quite probably have to physically evict his child from someone's arms if he wished to hold him! It was not a pleasant idea and the scowl that threatened to overtake his countenance was fought with all the power at his disposal. Plainly put, Darcy was ragingly jealous! An unattractive emotion to be sure, but there it was.

He entered the parlor last, Lizzy already placing Alexander into her father's arms. Mrs. Bennet had moved away without a backward glance apparently and was strolling about the room examining with a keen, covetous eye. George was positioned near the three younger ladies, charming unabashedly. Mr. Daniels stood apart by the window in an uncomfortable pose familiar to the anti-social Darcy. He approached the



poor man with a smile.

"Mr. Daniels, what is your preference? Brandy or whiskey, or perhaps wine?"

"Do not trouble yourself, Sir."

"It is no trouble at all," Darcy assured him, motioning to a footman. "I shall have a brandy, as will Mr. Bennet I am certain, a whiskey for Dr. Darcy, and Mr. Daniels...?"

"Whiskey then, with thanks," he said in a small voice, face flushing.

"Excellent! Tell me, Mr. Daniels, how fare your father and brother?" Steering the conversation to general subjects, drinks easing the tension, Mr. Daniels began to calm. Darcy attended to the dialogue while keeping an eye on Mr. Bennet, who was grinning widely as he held Alexander and talked quietly with his daughter. Lizzy glanced to her husband, radiant in her happiness, and blew him a tiny kiss.

Darcy winked, the feelings of jealousy waning gradually in the warmth of Elizabeth's face, musings abruptly interrupted by Mrs. Bennet, who he had not noted was nearby.

"Mr. Darcy, Pemberley is magnificent! Surely it must be the finest house in all of Derbyshire? I cannot imagine anything to supplant it. How very proud you must be! And to think my little Lizzy is Mistress of all this. I would not have thought her capable!"

"I can assure you, Madame, that your daughter is eminently capable of handling anything. She is fearless, wise, and extraordinarily accomplished. Far and away the best Mistress Pemberley has been blessed with in decades."

"How kind of you to say so, Mr. Darcy. It has been difficult having my daughters so far from me. Knowing she is performing her duties as a wife, and now as a mother, eases my mind. I daresay I fretted most profoundly that she would be unable, as I so disappointingly was, to provide you an heir. How pleased you must be to have a son!"

"I am pleased to have a healthy child and that my wife survived her ordeal. The sex was inconsequential, Mrs. Bennet."

"You are far too compassionate, Sir! Yet surely you wished for a male child? A man of your station and means *always* desires a male, everyone knows this, but I see that your politeness requires you to pretend otherwise. How very fortunate my Lizzy is!"

"Actually I initially prayed for a daughter, Mrs. Bennet, and would have been equally as delighted to welcome such. As for being fortunate, I think I have been the more greatly blessed in that quarter."

Any further rebuttals were halted by a loud infant squeal from the

sofa, Darcy's attention captured by his son. Lizzy was laughing at the surprised expression on her father's face.

"Am I squeezing him too tightly, Lizzy?"

"No papa. Alexander is quite demanding when he requires nourishment. A trait inherited from his father, I do believe." She glanced to Darcy with a grin, her husband crossing to the sofa.

"I would not be too hasty in that assessment, Lizzy, as I recall a young girl who inhaled her food the sooner to return to the play yard or a favored novel."

"Be that as it may, let me take my little wiggler from you before he displays the full lung capacity at his disposal. Come my darling, save your grandpapa's ears and let me feed you."

"Lizzy, can you not have the nanny take him?" Mrs. Bennet asked. "I was hoping for a tour of the house!"

"I am afraid it shall have to wait, mama, until Alexander is satisfied. Once he is asleep I will be happy to show you and papa around."

Mrs. Bennet was staring at her daughter in shock, "Surely you do not...? That is, is there not a wet-nurse for the baby?"

"No mama. I prefer to care for our son's sustenance myself. Excuse me papa," she kissed her father's cheek, rising with a fussy Alexander sucking on her little finger.

George breezed in airily, "Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Bennet, I would be delighted to escort you both, and the young ladies and Mr. Daniels, on a tour of the manor. If I may be so arrogant, I am quite sure that I am acquainted with the house to a degree surpassing its most superb Mistress. After all, I did grow up here and even know the attic corners and hidden passageways!"

"Oh, how exciting!" Kitty exclaimed, "Will you show us the secret passages, Dr. Darcy?"

"Alas, my dear Miss Kitty, my decrepit bones would probably break if attempted to squeeze into narrow confines. Georgiana can don an old dress at a later date and lead you on an adventure."

"Uncle!" Georgiana cried, face rosy, "I have no knowledge of such places!"

"Of course not, my dear, of course not." He winked at Darcy, lending an arm to Mrs. Bennet and Miss Kitty with voice booming in narration as the group filed out. "There is a rather remarkable portrait of my brothers and me, dashing gents all, in the gallery...."

Darcy and Lizzy were left alone with their momentarily placated baby. "William, I am sorry for mama's words. Are you alright?"

Darcy smiled, bending to kiss her lips gently. "It is of no moment, my dearest. Shall I accompany you to the nursery?"

"Thank you, but no. Join our guests, offering your unique perspective on the wonders of Pemberley. Somewhere in the middle you can divert my father in the library and enjoy a time of well deserved solitude. I love you, Mr. Darcy."

"I love you, Mrs. Darcy. And you too, my precious little love." He bent to kiss Alexander's cheek, again kissing his wife. Then with a roll of his eyes heavenward, tug on his jacket, and theatric sigh, he exited to follow the echoing rumble of George and giggles of amused women.

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Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived two days later, galloping in amid a swirl of snowflakes. Another snowstorm, this one fairly mild, had struck that morning making for an uncomfortable ride from his parent's estate, but the battle hardened soldier was impervious to the weather.

"Richard! Welcome, cousin. You are just in time for luncheon." Darcy approached with a warm smile.

"Hello, Darcy. Good to see you, although yours is not the Darcy face I most wanted to greet first. Thank you Mr. Taylor." He handed the last layer of jackets to the pile of over-clothing held by the Butler, turning with a grin to clap his cousin on the back shoulder.

"We can readily divert to the nursery, as I assume this is your reference. Be warned, however, Alexander is asleep so formal introductions must need wait. Come, and while we walk you can tell me when your parents will be visiting."

"We arrived at Rivallain last evening. Mother was more than prepared to arise with the sun and travel on, but father wanted to settle for a day or two. I rather believe, as in most matters, that mother's will shall prevail and expect they will rattle into the courtyard tomorrow morning at the latest! She is very anxious to meet your son and visit with Elizabeth, having brought the subject to the fore of all conversation at the breakfast table no less than a dozen times. I decided I needed to ride on if I wanted to see him myself, the women liable to monopolize all his waking moments discussing the joys of childbirth and motherhood!"

"You have no idea how accurate your jest, my friend. I have barely laid eyes on him since Elizabeth's family arrived and he is mine! Quite annoying actually, so I am forced to rise with the late night feedings just to steal precious time alone."

Darcy was speaking lightly, but Richard, who knew him so very

well, detected the undertone of irritation. In an attempt to soothe the easily somber Darcy, he said, "Surely you cannot be missing *too* much, after all babies, so I am to understand, lay there as lumps and sleep all the time!"

Darcy bristled, the idea of *his* son a 'lump' not appreciated, but one look at his cousin's face brought laughter to the surface. "Very well, Colonel, we shall see. I have it on good authority that he is the most adorable child in the universe and thus far all who lay eyes on him have fallen hopelessly in love. Be cautious, my friend, as your heart will be wrest away!"

They reached the nursery, Darcy entering cautiously although the well oiled door was unlikely to squeak. Mrs. Hanford glanced up from the dresser where she was folding a pile of clothes, smiling at her Master and nodding toward the cradle.

"Mrs. Hanford, this is my cousin Col. Fitzwilliam. Richard, our wonderful nanny Mrs. Hanford."

"Madame," Richard bowed gallantly, turning into the room to follow Darcy who had crossed swiftly to the cradle. Alexander lay curled on his right side, covered tightly with pink hands folded beside his parted lips as if in sleepy supplication to the Almighty. Auburn curls lay heavy over his now perfectly round head, longer wisps brushing his brows; skin porcelain with ruddy cheeks marred only by a faint pinpoint rash across his chin. Both the nanny and excellent in-house doctor assured the Darcys that these scattered rashes were normal as his delicate flesh adjusted to the outside world of fabrics and soaps. Despite the trivial imperfections, Alexander was beautiful, his father's assertions only a slim exaggeration as everyone in the manor was adoring.

A softly smiling, prideful father competently bent with seeking hands to lift his son, Richard grabbing at his wrist. "Darcy, wait! Do not wake him!"

"He just finished eating and I know how to lift him without disturbing. Sit in the chair and you can hold him."

Richard blanched, arms instinctively clasping behind his back as he shook his head emphatically. "I do not think that a wise plan at all! I have never held a newborn and if I drop him I am quite certain you will be perturbed!"

"Heavens, Richard. The mighty man of His Majesty's Armed Forces who handles sword and musket in battle is afraid of a tiny baby?"

"Precisely. If I fail with any of those things it is my own health and life that is forfeit."

"Sit and quit complaining. Besides, you have held Annabella's

children, so stop pretending. Alexander is sturdy and I trust you completely.”

Col. Fitzwilliams sit as bid, face yet pale. “Very well, but if something happens I will tell Elizabeth it was your fault.”

Darcy had lifted Alexander adeptly, the slumbering babe merely stretching slightly before nestling into the familiar warm shape of his father’s embrace. As always, Darcy’s heart swelled with a love indescribable and unique. Instantly he was mesmerized by the breathing reality of his child, the living presence clutched close to his body overwhelming his senses, his very soul elevated by the tiny personality created with the woman he loved so profoundly.

Col. Fitzwilliam observed his cousin, freshly amazed even after the transitions of the past year by how altered the serious, perpetually melancholic mien that he had assumed was an integral trait. Now it was entirely erased, Darcy even in his intensity displayed a tenderness and joy that was transparent. Richard privately challenged anyone who knew Darcy well to not be moved by the positive mutation of his character. Even when he spoke his voice was deeper, imbued with a timbre of emotion similar to, but subtly different to his tone when speaking of Elizabeth.

“Here he is Richard. My son. Alexander William George Bennet Darcy. Did I not speak the truth in that he is amazing and adorable? Beautiful like his mother.” Darcy secured him into Richard’s arms, sitting onto the chair beside and caressing one fingertip over the baby’s cheek.

“Yes, he is a highly attractive lad. He definitely has Elizabeth’s hair and nose, but he looks like you Darcy. What about his eyes?”

“Blue, but shaped as his mother’s. He actually seems to be a fair mixture of us both, although I am sure his features will evolve as he matures.”

“Do not tell my sister I said this or I shall torture you, but he is far lovelier than any of her four children. Sadly, they inherited their father’s physical characteristics.”

Darcy smothered a laugh. “Shame, Richard. Lord Montgomery is a distinguished gentleman.”

“Ha! He is grouchy, old, and sports an enormous nose! Makes yours look positively petite.”

“Thanks,” Darcy interrupted dryly.

“You are welcome, and thank you for not countering with an acerbic remark about my own nasal assets as you surely could have. By the way, Annabella and the children accompanied us from London and are at Rivallain. Lord Montgomery may show up if his preferred pursuits

bore him, but we are not holding our breath.”

“Poor Annabella.”

Richard shrugged faintly, “In truth, I believed she was relieved. Ah, you know my sister, Darcy. Money and place in society were always more important to her than affection. She has that as Lady Montgomery and is content.”

“I suppose. It will be delightful to see her again and I think I can now find it in me to endure her children.”

Richard chuckled, glancing to his cousin with a sly smile, “Oh, I would not count on that! They are spoiled rotten and unruly. Your best bet is to hint they stay at Rivallain with their governess.”

Darcy snorted, “Were we different as youths, cousin? How many governesses labeled you incorrigible and me mischievous? I still have lash marks on my backside, I am sure.”

“Let it be a lesson for you, father Darcy. ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child,’ as the Good Book says, or ‘train a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it.’”

Darcy shuddered, stroking his precious, innocent son’s cheek. “Perhaps, although I cannot imagine taking a switch or belt to Alexander. I guess Elizabeth and I will need to be prepared. I know I shall not tolerate a disobedient child.”

Lizzy discovered the two men a half hour later still fawning over the oblivious infant. She smiled at the tableau; like her husband never tiring of noting how everyone fell immediately in love with their child. Neither perceived her presence in the doorway until she cleared her throat. Darcy rose with a beaming grin, crossing to kiss her on the lips.

“Richard arrived, my dearest, as you can see and I could not resist introducing him to Alexander.”

“So I gathered. We waited in the dining room wondering if you had gotten lost in your own house, Mr. Darcy. Mr. Taylor enlightened us to Col. Fitzwilliam’s arrival and I reckoned you had come here.”

“I am so sorry, love! We completely lost track of the hour. Forgive me?”

“Naturally. However, you, Col. Fitzwilliam will be punished severely for your rudeness in not greeting Pemberley’s Mistress unless you pay penance by singing the praises of our incredible son!”

“Thankfully, Madame, I can accomplish this with ease. Honestly Elizabeth, he is lovely. Of course, he has been sleeping the entire time and I have not been gifted to the vocal prowess I am certain he possesses.”

Lizzy laughed, “Even his cries are rays of sunshine, Colonel. I

think he has inherited his father's resonant tones as his yells are not shrill, and only occur with appropriate incentive."

"He is demanding and with a wild temper, which could easily come from either of us," Darcy interjected.

"A melding most probably, which could mean it double in intensity. Woe to you both on that count. Remember the switch, Darcy."

"Very funny, Richard. Now, gentlemen, if I may be so bold as to insist we let the baby sleep in peace and eat lunch before it grows colder, and before he wakens to persistently request my presence. I have to schedule these things carefully."

\* \* \* \*

The remaining days until Christmas counted down slowly with the residents and guests of Pemberley contented in their seclusion behind sturdy stone walls and snow blanketed lawns.

The weather was unpredictable. The sky was continually cloudy to one degree or another, but the snows fell randomly with little warning, even to the bizarrely astute Darcy. It was freezing cold, warming ever so slightly during the days when the sun was allowed to shine through. The small pond froze over, the last of the stubbornly clinging leaves fell, walkways slicked over with crunching ice, and evergreen trees and hedges transformed into wintry monuments. Rhododendrons, hellebore, jasmine, camellia, and cyclamen, as well as potted iris and daffodils sheltered on the terrace, fought to shine through the frosty quilt with varying degrees of colorful success.

Lizzy watched the changes to the surrounds from the thick windows of the manor, happy for one of the first times in her life to forego outdoor activities. Twice she bundled up with barely the tip of her nose visible and strolled along the balcony and private garden with her mother and sisters; however, she honestly did not wish to be far from Alexander. Her only excursions beyond the manor would be to visit the orphanage bringing gifts to the children and for church on Christmas day. Their guests, on the other hand, delighted in the array of entertainments Pemberley had to offer both inside and out, boredom not an issue of concern.

Georgiana shed the past year's maturity in the presence of Kitty, the two giggling and adolescent in their pursuits. Not surprisingly it was Col. Fitzwilliam who could generally be found in their company as equal parts adult escort and fellow juvenile enthusiast. They played hockey, skated, practiced dancing for the Masque, threw snowballs, and erected

two enormous, and well accessorized, snowman and snow-woman on the south lawn. Mary and Mr. Daniels tended to remain together most of the time in quieter activities such as table games and conversation, although they did join the revelry surrounding the snow-couple's creation.

Dr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet renewed their acquaintance, the older gentlemen spending the bulk of their time in the library although the chess set was put through its paces with neither man claiming victory more than the other. Darcy joined them frequently, as did Mr. Daniels and Col. Fitzwilliam when the ladies were engaged in female companionship. Every possible diversion offered was enjoyed by someone at sometime, even Mr. Bennet cajoled into a tennis tournament at one point with the feminine cheering squad vocalizing their encouragement from the narrow spectator seats. It was George Darcy, of the long limber extremities and quick reflexes that prevailed over them all. Naturally he thoroughly delighted in the adulation from the rousing onlookers.

Mrs. Bennet flittered about, finding amusement wherever possible. She spent the majority of her time with Lizzy in the nursery or her parlor with Alexander nearby. She did extend a vast amount of parenting advice, some of it filed in mental wastebaskets for disposal, but a quantity of it actually worthy. Mrs. Bennet may have her faults, but she has raised five daughters with minimal assistance. She and Mrs. Hanford got on surprisingly well, their upbringing and station in life not all that divergent. Lizzy and Darcy were thrilled and a smidge dumbfounded to discover that the flighty, nervous woman actually possessed a rudimentary wisdom. Furthermore, also to their shameful astonishment, she adored her first grandson.

Pemberley is a very large house, nonetheless, ten people roaming the corridors and haunting the public chambers is rather evident! Adding to the clamor was the arrival of Lord and Lady Matlock with Lady Annabella Montgomery the day after Col. Fitzwilliam, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner the following day. At times it was tremendously overwhelming, but the Darcys took it in stride as best they could. Alexander was shown to even more faces, few of which interested him beyond a few seconds, his gaze always drifting back to his mother or father.

Lizzy had been introduced to Richard's younger sister in London. Her husband's estate was in Hampshire, none of the family visiting with her very often except for during the season in London. Lizzy found her dull and haughty, resembling her eldest brother Jonathan in personality (Annabella was great friends with Priscilla and instrumental in her introduction to the Matlock heir) and none of the other Fitzwilliams.



Annabella's reaction to her cousin's son and heir was vague and after a brief pinch to a chubby cheek she murmured, "How sweet," before moving away. Lord Matlock smiled and declared him "handsome and strapping." Lady Matlock was composed and dignified as usual, but once Alexander was in her arms it required a seriously vexed wail of extreme hunger to induce her to relinquish him.

In truth, although neither Lizzy nor Darcy would dream of verbalizing it, they were relieved when the three returned to Rivallain after a one day visit. They agreed to dine on Christmas day after the children had opened their presents. The Gardiner's surprise arrival mere hours after the departure of the Fitzwilliams filled the brief respite, but were a welcome advent. Mrs. Bennet had not seen her brother and sister-in-law since their short sojourn in London during the spring, and having a woman her own age in residence was a joy. Further presentations of the newborn were performed, Alexander far more tolerant than was his father, who was frankly becoming quite cross.

Despite their fears, Lizzy and Darcy admitted that Alexander was healthy, patient with all the handling, unperturbed, regular in his sleeping and eating patterns, and a certifiable smash with every last soul who laid eyes on him. He grew before their very eyes, daily becoming increasingly alert with a rapidly blossoming personality uniquely his own. They were cautious, never allowing him to be taken far from the nursery or disturbed while napping. After his meals he was held and rocked by his doting mother in solitude for long periods of time, Lizzy refusing to be influenced by family or official Mistress of Pemberley duties.

Unfortunately Darcy was not so blessed. He was pulled in a dozen directions. Once dressed and separated from wife and son for the day he rarely saw them again except in passing until late at night. As Master and Host it was a responsibility keenly felt to ensure all guests were adequately entertained, nourished, comfortable, and content. As husband and father it was his duty to guarantee his immediate family not overwhelmed or unduly disturbed. Add to that the occasional Pemberley estate related issue and he was busy from sunup to well after sundown. Lizzy fell asleep early, still recuperating and exhausted from the demands on her body. Darcy arrived later, snuggling close to her warmth in their temporary bed and bestowing gentle kisses. He made a point to rise with the predawn feeding, assuming the burping and rocking regime so Lizzy could return to sleep. It was the only time he managed to be alone with his son since the arrival of the Bennets and after a week he was ready to burst.

Thankfully a day of fair weather dawned and a breakfast decision

was made to travel to Matlock for last minute Christmas shopping. Everyone went except for Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner who opted to grasp onto the silence for placid perusal of the library shelves yet unexamined. Darcy begged liberation from the expedition, claiming business when the truth is he wanted to be alone with his wife and baby. The instant glitter to Lizzy's eyes as she snapped her gaze to his face clearly spoke of her own need and hope that he was dissembling regarding business. Darcy smiled, blue eyes softening in a familiar way that Lizzy understood.

After waving farewell to the laughing occupants of three carriages, Darcy verily sprinted up the stairs. Lizzy sat on the bed with Alexander at her breast, raising adoring eyes and one hand to her spouse, who hastily discarded jacket and boots before joining her with a heady sigh.

He buried his face into her neck, kissing as he murmured, "I can only assume the good Lord has taken pity on me this day as I absolutely would have exploded. I cannot survive another day without your kisses and touch, and our son's soft body against my heart. I love you so tremendously my Lizzy."

"Has it been so awful for you, beloved, having my family about?"

He lifted to look into her eyes. "It is not your family, my heart, it is anyone that takes me from you and Alexander. Honestly, I am having a delightful time with our guests. Did you know Miss Kitty is an excellent shuffleboard player?" Lizzy shook her head with a raised brow. "Well, she is. I spent roughly ten minutes showing her the basic moves and explaining the rules, and she nearly beat me the first game! Twice I have turned a corner to discover Miss Mary and Mr. Daniels indulging in the mistletoe custom. I think they both nearly suffered apoplexy and I have never laughed so hard, after I departed the scene that is. Your father and I have shared many a game and brandy, and even your mother has surprised me. No, dearest, I merely need to be alone with you and intend to do so all day today."

"I think this a wonderful plan. I do believe I can bear to be cooped up with you all day." She smiled brightly, reaching to palm his jaw and draw his mouth to hers for a lingering kiss lasting until Alexander decided he was replete.

"Come to your father, sweet boy. Behave as I do not have a cloth handy. Samuel likes you well enough, but not if you soil another garment. That's my good little man, what a strong burp you have! Yes you do, my precious. Give your papa a kiss. Hmmmm....delicious milk, so sweet. No wonder you like it so much. Perhaps soon your father can taste your

mother's milk..."

"William!" Lizzy laughed nervously and sharply slapped his knee. "Do not corrupt his innocent ears."

"He has no idea what I am saying, but I do apologize and will attempt to refrain from verbalizing my desires in his presence. Look he is falling asleep already, not at all perturbed or shocked. I could even express how urgently I wish to make love to you and he would not flinch....see?"

"Please, William, stop. You are embarrassing me."

Darcy peered closely at his wife's rosy cheeks, frowning faintly. "Forgive me, love. I was only jesting, well not entirely you understand, but I did not mean to make you uncomfortable."

Lizzy shook her head slightly, dropping to rest on Darcy's shoulder, her face hidden from view. Silence fell, Darcy snuggling Alexander while his mind raced. That Darcy desired his wife was a given and he had assumed she felt the same way, both patiently waiting until her body was restored. Now he was not so certain how she felt and the doubt rocked him. Naturally they had avoided undue intimate contact; Darcy out of respect for her health and Lizzy, he thought, out of respect for his unremitting amorousness. Despite his yearning, he was truthfully quite content to wait, not even wishing for her to love him as she had during the period of his uncle's restriction. He wanted to wait for her, dreamt of it incessantly, imagining how blissful it would be when they finally renewed their intimate marital relationship. Did she not dream of the same? Or was it merely speaking of it in front of the baby?

"I will lay him down," he said softly, kissing the top of her head. "Stay here, beloved."

When he returned Lizzy was lying partially propped on several pillows, smiling warmly, and opening her arms to him. Instantly he experienced a rush of relief, nestling close and drawing her against his strongly beating heart.

She squeezed him tightly, voice choking and tremulous, "I am sorry, dearest, if I distressed you. I guess I am still a bit out of sorts. So many changes these past weeks with adjustments to my body so suddenly and profoundly. And then all the visitors. I am so happy to have them all here, but it is tiring." She paused, resuming with a soft sob, "Mostly I want to be with you, truly and completely be with you, and I cannot. I am sorry."

"Elizabeth, hush. You do not need to explain as I already understand. Just kiss me and tell me you love me." He cupped her dear face, pulling her upward so they could drink the other in.

“I love you Fitzwilliam, with all my soul.”

He smiled, whispering just before claiming her mouth thoroughly in a kiss that would leave them both breathless and desperately wanting more, “That is all I ever need to know. I love you, Mrs. Darcy.”

\* \* \* \*

Lizzy spent the next three days in the frustration of believing she would never manage to corner George alone. When it happened it was quite by accident. She entered the conservatory to pick flowers for Darcy’s dressing room and discovered the usually sociable man stretched on a lounge chair, alone, under a ripening orange tree with a book in his hands.

Biting her lip, suddenly shy after seeking his undivided attention, she hesitated before slowly approaching.

“Dr. Darcy.”

Brows rising instantly, “Yes, Mrs. Darcy?”

Lizzy cleared her throat, glancing away from his unsettling and penetrating eyes, “I wished for your advice....medical advice, that is, on a matter of.....some delicacy....and....well, a personal question, if you take my meaning?” She was flushed nearly scarlet, eyes downcast.

“Have a seat Elizabeth. I honestly have no idea to what you refer, but I rather think after the events of the past weeks we should be beyond such embarrassments. Speak as plainly as you can, child, and I will do what I can to help. Are you experiencing some residual pain or other discomfort?”

She shook her head vigorously, glancing up briefly. “No, in fact quite the opposite. I feel fine...in all ways. None of the symptoms Mrs. Henderson instructed me to watch for. I feel good as new, I suppose I could say.”

“I see.” He studied her face, beginning to suspect the train of her thoughts. “So, I am to understand the cramping is all gone? Good. And no further drainage or tenderness from...very good. I detect no lingering fatigue, other than what is normal with a baby, and your overall appearance is consistent with a state of health and vigor. Do you agree?”

She nodded, hoping he would put the pieces together and spare her further humiliation, but he remained silent. “It is just....you know we rely a great deal on the book for information, and well...” Another glance to his inscrutable face after which she bolted up and began pacing, continuing in a rush. “The book recommends waiting for.....for....relations,” swallow, “for six weeks or so, but also states

‘until the woman’s body is fully healed.’”

She stopped abruptly, spinning around to face him with hands on her hips, voice strong. “Well, which is it!? I feel healed, but it is not six weeks, so....this is my question.” The gush of vim evaporated, voice falling into a whisper.

George’s lips twitched, but he managed to avoid laughing, holding out his hand instead. “Relax Elizabeth. Sit down and I will give the advice I give all my maternity patients, although it is doubtful most of them listen to me. The truth is we do not know what is happening internally after birth. Physicians can only guess what course a couple should take as far as marital relations. There is no accurate answer that is the same for all as each birth is varied and the effects equally so. However, the standard recommendation is to let your heart and body guide you. When you feel capable and desirous of such activity both physically and emotionally, then that is your answer. I can tell you this with absolute certainty: many resume within a couple weeks and I have never known there to be a problem unless an issue already existed which was aggravated by the action. Does this answer your query adequately?”

Lizzy could only nod.

\* \* \* \*

Christmas Eve day dawned with a brightly shining sun valiantly struggling to bestow her heat onto the frozen lands, but sadly thwarted by the persistent banks of gray clouds dotting the azure sky. It never did rain or snow, but the immobile clouds obscured and cast shadows all day. The mild weather would provide an excellent cap to what was universally agreed to be a fabulously successful week.

The tenant’s feast and ball was a triumph. From a raised dais in the formal dining hall the Darcys had welcomed their guests, Mr. Darcy giving a short speech of gratitude and well wishes for a merry holiday and prosperous coming year. Alexander, awake and awed by the glittering chandeliers, was presented formally to the families whose diligent work made his life possible, many of whom would some day call him Master. The applause was deafening, huzzahs rising to the eaves with Lizzy barely managing a dignified retreat before the startled babe burst into wails!

Calming the upset infant was accomplished easily enough, but the revelry from the first floor chambers would continue late into the night. Another tradition successfully reestablished by the new Mistress of Pemberley and savored by all.

The care packages were delivered by Miss Darcy, Miss Kitty, and

Miss Mary. Kitty came along for the ride, offering cheery chatter inbetween the scattered cottages. Georgiana kept the detailed list tight in her hand, fretting over making a mistake or stuttering over the practiced speeches. Mary was the steadying influence, this sort of task not at all unusual for her as charity work through the Meryton Church was a duty she delighted in and had for many years. Everyone understood why Mrs. Darcy could not appear in person this year and since they had already met the infant heir at the feast, no one felt slighted. In fact, the precious baby was the main topic of conversation, Georgiana often not able to complete her rehearsed greeting before being interrupted with inquires regarding, “adorable Master Alexander.”

A letter from the Bingleys informed of the arrival of Miss Bingley and the Hursts. Greetings were conveyed to the Bennets, the decision being to wait until Christmas day to visit. Jane was not feeling too well, although she hastened to add it only within the expected range of symptoms, and both she and Charles desired to spend their first Christmas at Hasberry. This was comprehended by all and as no one was exactly thrilled by the concept of extended time with Caroline and her snobbish sister and boorish brother-in-law, tears were definitely not shed.

So, with all Christmas tasks consummated, presents bought and waiting to be released from their flamboyant wrappings, entertainments organized, and fine cuisine actively being fabricated, the guests were free to delight in their leisure. Outdoor festivities were rampant in the fair weather, the majority of Pemberley’s dwellers beyond the walls for the bulk of the day.

Elizabeth and Darcy joined the older members for a stroll along the south terrace. Lizzy tightly clutched her husband’s arm, not due to any unsteadiness, but out of a pure desire to keep him close. Her conversation with George yesterday morning had lightened her mood considerably, notable to all including Darcy who had no idea the cause of her sudden excessive ebullience although it was he who would reap the greatest benefit!

“Mr. Darcy, do you imagine the fine trout will be biting this year as they did last?”

Darcy glanced to Mr. Gardiner with a smile. “I am quite certain they will. I am personally not that fond of trout so they are left greatly unmolested for the majority of the year. Help yourself, Mr. Gardiner.”

“Lizzy loves trout,” Mrs. Bennet declared, “She fished when young always insisting on dining on her private catch. Do you remember Edward?”

“Yes, I do. I taught her the rudimentary skills, although I seem to

recall her having a penchant for falling into the lake rather than taking fish out of it.”

Lizzy laughed gaily with cheeks flushing prettily, but Darcy was peering at her with a faint scowl. “You never told me you liked trout. Why have you not had Cook prepare it for dinner?”

She shrugged, beaming up into her husband’s face, “It is not a favorite dish, William, and I know you dislike it. I guess a treat now and then would be nice, however.”

“Mrs. Langton *will* prepare more than one entrée if you order it so, dearest.”

“And the aroma of fresh trout will not send you screaming from the table as mutton surely would?” Her eyes twinkled as she teased, Darcy smiling wider and reaching to caress the hand resting on his arm.

“It is a large room, love. I can always sit at the opposite end.”

Mr. Bennet observed the unconsciously affectionate interplay with an inner fount of peace, never tiring of seeing his children’s happiness. *How maudlin I am in my old age*, he thought with a silent chuckle.

Mrs. Bennet was more oblivious to the romance, offering, “Well, it is fortunate Mr. Darcy, that Lizzy does not like mutton either! At least in that you will be spared any distress.”

They had reached the eastern end of the lengthy terrace; pausing to absorb the sparkling landscape of white with glistening fountain and waterfall, the Greek Temple rising in a glory of marbled stone on the hill. The jolly squeals of skaters was audible floating from the distant small pond hidden from view by snow topped trees and hedges.

“How about it Thomas?” Mr. Gardiner turned to his brother-in-law, “In for a spell of fishing? I tell you, the trout practically jump onto the hooks. It is divine.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled, “As long as you promise to maintain some awareness of the time. I have no desire to turn into an icicle.”

“Dr. Darcy? Care to try your luck yet again?”

“Do you suppose there is any way to build a fire near the edge of the pond?” The shivering man, bundled in two wool coats, turned to his nephew with a pleading expression.

Darcy laughed, shaking his head negatively, “Sorry. Mr. Clark would strangle you if you marred his landscaping or damaged the dormant lawns. Afraid you just need to be tough.”

“We can share a flask of brandy while we fish. That should help.”

George shuddered, sighing in resignation, “Thank you, Mr. Bennet, but I think I shall bring my own flask, just to be on the safe side.”

“You men enjoy yourselves. I for one am beginning to freeze already. Lizzy, Rose, care for a few hands of cards? You can bring Alexander for us to gush over and take turns holding.”

Lizzy smiled at her aunt, eyes glowing happily. “Sounds wonderful. William, do you yet intend to go for a ride with Col. Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy nodded, “As soon as he is done cavorting as a juvenile.”

“I seem to remember a certain mature gentleman engaging in a fair amount of juvenile cavorting at the pond last year at this time, or so I was told,” Mrs. Gardiner remarked with a grin to Mr. Darcy, who flushed slightly and coughed.

“Well, yes, but it was all the doings of my devious wife who claimed to be a novice skater in dire need of assistance and rescue.”

“Lizzy a novice?” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “Why she has been on skates since she was three, although the winters are not as harsh as here and the skating opportunities less. Shame, Lizzy, deceiving your husband! What must you think of her, Mr. Darcy?”

“I assure you, Madame, I have only the highest regard for your daughter. Her ruse was only in jest and thinly veiled. I knew she could skate all along, plying my own arts of deception. It was a friendly game with a pleasurable outcome.” He smirked at his blushing bride, knowing full well she was recalling their interlude in her bathtub afterwards.

The afternoon waned into evening. The gentlemen, including Mr. Daniels and George, were invigorated by their brisk jaunt on horseback. Varied entertainments prevailed both before the excellent Christmas Eve dinner and after. Georgiana and Mary delighted with several duets on the pianoforte, Kitty lifting her voice a time or two, as did Lizzy and Violet Gardiner. The guests differed from the prior year, but the revelry was in the same vein. Alexander joined the group for a time, alternating between wakefulness and slumber, but in good humor throughout and horribly spoilt by all.

It was early yet when Lizzy cornered her husband, literally, where he stood for a moment’s solitary contemplation by a far window. She laid one hand gently on his arm, Darcy turning with a ready smile.

“Penny for your thoughts, Mr. Darcy.”

“My thoughts are all of you and our family, my heart, and therefore priceless treasures.”

“So romantic you are my darling. Impressive.”

Unconsciously he reached to stroke her cheek with a fingertip, “Must be the brandy and excessive body heat pervading the room causing my mind to become all foggy and nonsensical.”



“Whatever the stimulus, do not cease as I am deeply affected by the sentiments.” She ran one hand lightly down the lapels of his jacket, holding his tenderly piercing gaze. “It is time for Alexander’s last meal. May I ask a favor? Can you form a polite reason to excuse yourself early and join us? I crave your undivided company and cuddling before the fire on our second Christmas Eve together.”

He smiled, that singular smile that lit his entire being and was only for her, touching even his vocal cords as evidenced by the huskiness in his voice. “Nothing could be simpler, beloved. I will be right behind you.”

And he was. Lizzy never knew the excuse he gave, although she would have been surprised to learn it was nothing more than the truth. Darcy plainly declared that he wished to spend the evening alone with his wife and son, bowing gracefully if abruptly and hastily exited the room mere minutes after. He entered the nursery as Lizzy was finishing the exhilarating task of nursing their son, having washed and divested of all clothing but his shirt and breeches. He happily assumed the chore of final burping and rocking to sleep while Lizzy retreated to her dressing room.

When Lizzy returned it was to the vision of her dream from so very long ago. That prescient image had been brought to life innumerable times already, Darcy living for the blissful opportunities to embrace Alexander while rocking and whispering silly phrases of love or singing in his off-key resonant tones. Even as Alexander grew it always struck Lizzy forcibly how small he was nestled against his father’s broad chest with long fingered, wide hands supporting.

“Is he asleep?” She whispered.

Darcy nodded, kissing the top of Alexander’s curly head. “Out for the duration I believe. Yet I do have a difficult time parting from him, even knowing he is likely more comfortable on his cushiony mattress.”

“I rather doubt he prefers the cradle to his papa’s warmth, but tonight I want you for myself.” Darcy looked at her with a raised brow and lilt to his full lips. “Yes, my selfishness unmasked. Put him down, love, and I will tell Mrs. Hanford we are retiring.”

That accomplished, Lizzy laced her fingers between Darcy’s, bending for a final kiss to the baby’s forehead before steering him out the door. To his surprise she bypassed their temporary bedchamber, leading unerringly through the sitting room to the Master suite. Darcy had barely stepped foot in this room for nearly a month almost forgetting how cozy and spacious it was, not to mention how much larger the bed. He crossed the threshold, Lizzy’s hand warm in his, and halted thunderstruck.

A fire blazed, casting glows of red and amber across the bearskin rug and pillows before the hearth. A scattering of candles and oil lamps were lit, but the room was muted in soft rays of gold, warm and incredibly inviting. A bottle of champagne sat by the turned down bed, fluted glasses alongside a tray of fruits and sweets.

Lizzy had moved a couple paces away, still clutching his hand, watching the dawning enlightenment spread over his features as his glittering blue eyes swept the scene and returned to her face. She smiled at the expression of mingled childish enthusiasm and raging ardor radiating from every pore; his grin both breathtakingly seductive and frivolously exuberant. He truly was speechless.

She stepped closer, eyes shining as passion rose, raising the free hand to feather fingertips over his chest. "Merry Christmas Fitzwilliam."

## **15 – The Second Noel**

The fire crackled. Amber glows from flames and oil lamps cast about the corners of the vast bedchamber, bathing the already cozy room with heightened warmth. Faint flickers of starlight shone through the spaces where curtains were not completely drawn. The aroma of winter berries, smoking wood, and freshly washed linens wafted through the air. Yet none of these sensory stimulants were consciously noted by the two occupants.

For a span of several harsh breathes they merely stared at each other, ignorant of everything beyond their acutely alive bodies. Darcy pressed Lizzy's hand flat against his rapidly rising chest, her palm instantly burning as skin transmitting flares of heat through the linen of his shirt. Lizzy ached for his touch, yearning apparent in each cell of her body, yet she held still waiting for him to move. His eyes penetrated her soul, searing through her mind and body as he studied her intently as only he could.

The moments stretched, Darcy finally bending in increments agonizing in their sluggishness until inches from her upturned lips. His blue eyes were openly gazing into her brown depths; voice a bare hoarse whisper with breath brushing her sensitized mouth when he spoke.

“Are you absolutely certain, Elizabeth? Positive you are fully healed and ready for me? No reservations whatsoever? I must know because I do not think myself capable of stopping once we start. My desire for you, my hunger, burns as a consuming fire. God, how I need you, my Lizzy!”

She was already nodding affirmative as he teased the tip of his tongue over her lips. Involuntarily a faint moaning sigh escaped her throat, Darcy shuddering as he fought for control. The urge to sweep her into his arms, carry her to their bed, and love her thirstily nearly overwhelmed him. Instead he moved away from her deliciously devastating mouth, planting tender kisses down the sloping expanse of her neck.

Still gripping one hand by his side and tightly adhering the other over his wildly palpating heart, he kissed and huskily resumed his inquiry, “No lingering pain? No discomfort? I could not bear it if I hurt you, best

beloved, even while bringing you great pleasure. We need not rush, my lover, as I will wait as long as you require....”

Lizzy halted his words by the straightforward method of clamping her mouth over his in a forceful kiss, lips parting demandingly and tongue seeking. Darcy groaned, releasing her hands to encircle her body, harshly drawing her soft curves onto the hard planes of his entire torso. A frenzy of caressing and stroking ensued, hands as eager for the other as were mouths. Some small section of his brain screamed to take it slowly, but Darcy was beyond reason. Even via the thick layers of his old robe that she now wore belted securely he could feel the mass of her breasts, the warmth of her flesh irradiating through the fabric; her scent intoxicating and taste enthralling, lush figure yielding to his probing hands.

“Oh, sweet Lord, I love you Elizabeth!” His voice was painful in covetous lust, fingers frantically fumbling with the knot at her waist while firmly compressing her upper body against his chest and simultaneously inching toward the bed.

“William, wait!” Lizzy grasped his hands, breathing so heavily she saw stars before her eyes. Darcy’s face gradually came into focus having halted at her cry although the effort was clearly a torture for him. “I just....need you to know that....I am not....that is, my shape is not exactly....what it was, yet. I may never be... as thin again, and there are a few....marks, just faint ones, but nonetheless they are visible and....I just thought you should be warned.”

Darcy was staring at her in genuine shock and surging amusement. The combination worked to cool the craziness of his passion, a lazy smile spreading over his face while calmly resuming the robe sash untying, peeling it unhurriedly and airily off her delicate shoulders, fingertips brushing. “My beautiful, sensuous, absurdly silly, adored wife. I shall not waste words of praise in an attempt to convince you how absolutely stunning you are, how desirable, how perfect, how intoxicating, how adulated. Instead I shall show you.”

The robe fell to the ground. Lizzy stood before her besotted spouse in his silk shirt unbuttoned to below her abundant breasts; creamy skin glowing and chest rising thrillingly with each breath. Darcy’s smoldering indigo eyes raked possessively head to toe then back to her face, grin purely lascivious as he huskily said, “Yes, indeed, I will show you.”

And then he did sweep her into his arms, carrying the remaining steps to their favorite bed. Laying her gently down, he kissed teasingly, running one hand the length of her body with fire trailing, and

murmuring *you shall have no doubt whatsoever how I feel about you and what you do to me* before pulling away. Stripping his shirt off and tossing it randomly he then opened the top drawer to retrieve the nearly empty jar of massaging cream forgotten since the last application the day before Alexander's birth.

Lizzy giggled, "What are you doing with that? I think the stretching is done for the time being."

"Ah, but the effects of the ointment are not exhausted. Besides, a woman who has been through such travails and who works so hard deserves a lengthy massage from her appreciative husband, do you not agree?"

Lizzy nodded, smiling and sighing as happiness freshly washed over her. Her handsome husband settled onto his knees at the end of the bed, rubbing a glob of aromatic balm between his palms before grasping her feet. She giggled and wiggled slightly at the initial ticklish sensation, Darcy grinning and applying strong fingers to the task. He took his time, the visual enticements of his luscious wife more than a little bit arousing, but the need to allay her insecurity calmed his lust...somewhat. Besides, the pleasure derived from smoothing over her skin was heady, experience having proven that a checked passion once released was rapture heightened beyond comprehension.

Transferring gradually to silky legs and knees, the oil soaking as he massaged firmly into each muscle. Lizzy watched him closely, mouth parted, and panting as ardor rose rapidly from the combined stimulus of his amazing touch and flexing muscles encased by fair, masculine flesh. She pressed wiggling toes up his inner thigh to groin, Darcy playfully pushing her foot away.

"Behave, Mrs. Darcy, or the massage will not extend beyond your thighs."

"What a tragedy that would be."

"Perhaps not a tragedy, but assuredly not as pleasurable."

Her mumbled disagreement about the levels of pleasure was lost in a gasping moan as he pressed lips to her lower abdomen, hands stroking over her hips. The sensations raged, Lizzy completely forgetting to be embarrassed over the thin, silvery marks low on her belly or the residual mound of flesh by her navel. Darcy, as he had told her so long ago, adored all of her, especially these remnants of their child's first dwelling place. She was beautiful, her sacrifice in bringing their son safely to the world was beautiful, and her giving soul was beautiful.

After a thoroughly enticing time Darcy lifted, one by one unbuttoning the shirt to expose all of her. "So gorgeous," he whispered,

eyes plainly revealing devotion and candor. "Elizabeth, I love you."

She held out her arms, reaching, but he shook his head slightly, smiling as he scooped a second dose of ointment. "I have only traveled half way up your body, my lover. Some of my favorite parts yet require my meticulous attention."

"Fitzwilliam, I may well die if you do not kiss me!"

He did not respond other than to smile wider and resume his labors. Straddling her hips he navigated every inch. Waist, around to buttocks and back, up her sides to arms which were freed from the shirt, across trembling shoulders, and finally to her breasts. Darcy had dreamt of this moment nearly as often as he had dreamt of making love to her. Always he loved her bosom, delighted in the softness, this utterly feminine aspect of her physique by far his favored and most arousing.

Now, after a month of observing Alexander nursing at a vastly increased fullness, the mingled faint jealousy and suppressed passion bubbled forth as an uncontainable yearning. Still, he played teasingly, employing all the usual tricks of fingers and tongue validated time and again to arouse them both profoundly. The added euphoria attained when he eventually gave in to the fantasy of suckling and devouring the sweet taste of her milk was shockingly greater than he had anticipated. It was ambrosial! He could not have verbalized the emotions elicited, but they were intense; so extreme that coupled with her throaty groans of delight, arching body, and grasping hands, Darcy lost all regulation.

Not ceasing the inciting activity for a second he tore at his breeches, Lizzy writhing and deliriously aiding the procedure. It might have been almost humorous if viewed from without, but not to them with sensations crashing chaotically as hunger arose.

Simultaneous exclamations of inexpressible bliss burst forth as they merged. Darcy only then releasing her breast to claim her mouth, entire body bearing hers down into the mattress as he clutched her tenaciously. He could feel all of her! No bulge, as precious as it was, inhibiting. Warm, sticky fluid leaked from her breasts onto his chest thrilling him immeasurably, agile limbs clasping and pulling, bellies caressing as they swayed in harmonious rhythm.

Nirvana. Heaven. Ecstasy. Love.

As he had promised, they loved hard. But not fast. Passion pent up and held for weeks now lingered and built further. They did not speak as words were redundant. There was no pain, no discomfort, and no residual insecurities. Only devotion and adoration. A desire to please the other as well as themselves reigned and was achieved in a manner both familiar and unique. The life altering events of the past month and

awareness of the cherished infant sleeping two rooms away added a dimension to their lovemaking that was indescribable. Any doubts either may have harbored deep in their subconscious that parenthood would negatively effect their intimate rapport was shattered.

Darcy had told her once that their lovemaking would grow more powerful as their relationship matured. At the time he had believed it to be true, wished it to be true, but had no actual proof that the declaration was anything more than a hopeful dream. Now he completely acknowledged the reality of his avowal, as did Lizzy. They soared, rocketed, exploded. But it was not merely the physical pleasure, but the emotional and spiritual rapture that was memorable and breathtaking.

Darcy shouted, shuddering, and collapsing onto his wife in divine gratification; Lizzy shivering uncontrollably, but clinging so inflexibly that he could not have moved had he wished to or been capable! It was a considerable period of time before she relaxed her crushing grip, Darcy lifting ponderously to brush tousled hair off her brow and kiss tenderly.

He sighed deeply, laying his forehead onto hers, voice a grating rumble, "Have I told you lately how utterly amazing you are? It honestly staggers my mind the bliss I experience when loving you Elizabeth. I cannot believe it possible for a body to feel such sensations and not splinter into a thousand pieces."

Lizzy chuckled, kissing his nose, her voice nearly as rough as his, "I understand completely, my love. I too am rocked to my very core and in awe. I love you Fitzwilliam, forever."

Their eyes met briefly, closing again as they kissed. Long minutes of tranquil fondling and kissing, satiated utterly with only the remaining wish to touch and prolong the intimacy. Lizzy ran a palm down his mid chest, pulling her lips away with a tiny squeal.

"Oh! I have leaked all over us! William, I am so sorry!"

He chuckled hoarsely, grasping her hand and licking the moist tips of her fingers. "I am not complaining."

"But I have made a mess."

He halted her with a kiss, hand reaching to one wet breast and squeezing gently. "Do not apologize, beloved, please. I confess to rather liking your milk. We Darcy men have that in common as well." And with a roguish grin he captured the nipple and teased.

She gasped and cried his name, lacing fingers through his hair, pulling firmly into her chest and arching. She shuddered and Darcy let go in surprise. His eyes were frankly amazed at her reaction, Lizzy panting heavily and equally as amazed.

"You should not have stopped! Oh, God William, you make me

feel so wonderful!" She drew him down for a consuming kiss, Darcy instinctively extending skillful fingers to restimulate and please his wife. Returning to her breast he applied simultaneous pressures until she tensed and shivered with cries of delight.

Rolling to his back he embraced her trembling body, a smile of sheer exhilaration lighting his visage. She sagged against his chest, breathing assuming the pace familiar as leading to satisfied slumber. Lifting to retrieve the folded blankets he nestled her snugly and kissed her forehead. Champagne and treats were forgotten in lieu of blissful cuddling.

"Sleep well precious wife. I will wake you when Mrs. Hanford rings."

The Darcys were not roused on this Christmas Day well after the dawn by a light knock on the door. Rather it was a good two hours before the dawn to the sound of a ringing bell hanging by the bedside. Darcy was in a customary soporose sleep augmented tremendously by sexual gratification. Lizzy, on the other hand, was already beginning to rise through the deepest stages of sleep due to the increasingly painful pressure in her breasts. Therefore when the unfamiliar tone of a chiming bell invaded her consciousness she was instantly fully awake and alert.

She untangled her limbs from Darcy's with alacrity, out of the bed and retrieving her fallen robe before a breath taken. The abrupt movement and sudden blast of chill air over his uncovered skin, Lizzy forgetting to re-tuck the blankets in her haste, are what roused Darcy.

"Elizabeth? What...?"

"Alexander is awake. Go back to sleep, dearest."

"Bring him here," he mumbled, rising laboriously to stoke the fire as Lizzy dashed from the room. Angry howls greeted her from the middle of the sitting room, their son's lungs in no way fragile! Mrs. Hanford was completing the annoying task, in Alexander's opinion, of changing his diaper, the infant only calming when his crooning mother picked him up.

"Come sweetheart, be patient. Let's go see your father. Not too far away, little love. No, no, do not cry!" But it was to no avail, Alexander's stomach especially empty after the nighttime stretch of sleep. If Darcy had managed to drift into a doze it was shattered at the entry of his wife and hollering son. He merely chuckled though, withdrawing the blankets so Lizzy could nestle against his warmth, lying on her side and finally quieting the distressed babe at her breast.

Darcy leaned on an elbow, encircling his family with the other arm and stroking Alexander's back. "Yes, quite the temper, my lad, but it



is good to know your appetite a healthy one.” He kissed Lizzy’s neck, settling in the soft bend to observe the baby nursing.

“I love how he kneads against your breast while he sucks. Rather like a kitten.” The smile could be heard in his voice, Darcy rubbing one finger over the tiny rhythmically opening and closing hand atop the breast he suckled on. The baby’s eyes were closed in deep concentration, by all appearances unaware and unconcerned with the people around him. Of course, this is not true; Alexander merely innocently confident and content in the love of his parents. “Merry Christmas, my little kitten. And to you as well, beloved wife.”

The words were accented with a warm caress down her side, over hips to abdomen, pulling closer against his pelvis. Another kiss to her neck and happy sigh before settling to watch their son. It was a wonderfully lazy way to begin their second Christmas together. Darcy had returned to sleep by the time Alexander finished. Mother and son drifted away within the heat of Darcy’s embrace, the comfortable bed a haven on a wintry day. Lizzy woke over two hours later feeling cramped between two immobile bodies of raging internal temperatures. Alexander’s brow was actually sweaty! She cautiously vacated the bed, carrying the baby to his cradle and then freshening up before returning to her husband.

Darcy lay much as she had left him, having only shifted slightly, and still soundly asleep. It was very unusual for him to sleep so late, the sun well over the hazy horizon and casting bright beams of light around the gaps in the curtains. Lizzy smiled as she paused to observe him.

*Did our activities last night wear you out, my lover?* She thought with a sensuous grin. *Well, I do hope your energy is restored!*

And with that libidinous thought she shed her robe and crawled under the covers. He gathered her instinctively, but was not fully awake until her lips had completed their leisurely travels from the hollow of his throat to his navel. Darcy woke a very happy and satisfied man. The vision of his wife, the touch of his wife, the love of his wife....combined to nearly be more than one man, even as virile and lusty as Darcy, could handle.

Yet he handled it well!

“Merry Christmas Fitzwilliam,” the only words she uttered as she straddled his hips, unifying beautifully and proceeding to show *him* how he thrilled her, how she adored him, how perfect he was, and how profound her love.

\* \* \* \*

The relatively fair weather from the prior day lasted, allowing for ease in travel both to the quaint chapel in the Village and for their evening's guests. Traditions prevailed in both breakfast foods as well as Christmas activities, meaning that in many ways this Christmas was indistinguishable from last year and all the ones that would follow. Mrs. Langton and her staff had prepared a stupendous breakfast heartily enjoyed by everyone in the elaborately festooned dining room. Everyone wore their finest garments, Mr. Bennet decked out and dashing in the new style suit purchased for his trip to visit Lizzy in London the previous spring. Marguerite and Samuel's consorting was now an expected arrangement, Lizzy and Darcy therefore dressing in nearly identical shades of blue with silver threads and trim.

Reverend Bertram preached a flawlessly constructed if anticipated sermon on the birth of Christ. Lizzy had learned over the past year that the children of the parish performed at least three times a year: at Easter, for All Saint's Day, and during Christmas. It varied from celebration to celebration, either with a play or singing or, in the case of Easter, a puppet show. This year the youngsters gathered in the chancel dressed in choir robes, accompanied by the organist as they lifted their childish voices in a number of seasonal hymns. The finale was the older children singing "The Twelve Days of Christmas" while the tiniest held up corresponding signs with painted pictures of the vocalized gifts. Naturally there were mishaps, especially as the singers inevitably sped up the rhythm as the lengthy song progressed, but the resulting mistakes added to the fun. Once again the worshippers exited the chapel with laughter and smiles.

As tremendously delightful as it was, Lizzy had a hard time relaxing and was anxious to return to the manor. She worried that Alexander may need her although it was unlikely as he had eaten well and it was less than two hours since departing. To her faint dismay the pleasant weather meant that folks lingered in the modest courtyard, all desirous to congratulate their Master and Mistress on their son. Darcy, unlike years past, was reveling in the praise. His smile was barely contained behind the usual mask of reserved supremacy, lending him an approachable air perceived by all and, to Lizzy's veiled chagrin, acted upon by every last one of them! Yet despite her worries they made it safely back to Pemberley before the baby woke.

Opening of the presents necessarily had to wait until Alexander was fed. Then it would take the greater bulk of the afternoon to complete due to the massive quantity of gifts and frequent interruptions. Lord and

Lady Matlock arrived shortly after noon with enough wrapped packages to fill the space created by those already opened. Then, approximately an hour and a half later it was the Bingley carriages.

The cacophony of voices and laughter was overwhelming at times. The ample parlor was literally standing room only even with additional settees and chairs hastily provided. Any attempt at order was ludicrous. Lord Matlock trapped Mr. Bennet, Mr. Gardiner, and Dr. Darcy, the older gentlemen retreating to a far corner for relatively sedate conversation. Mr. Hurst made a beeline to the liquor cabinet and rarely wandered more than a few feet from it throughout the entire afternoon. Caroline and Louisa Hurst sat apart, gazing down their noses at the rowdy Bennets and Gardiners, feeling superior and unaware that Lady Annabella Montgomery was wrinkling her nose at them.

Lizzy had handed the baby to Darcy when Mr. Taylor announced the arrival of the Bingleys, Darcy now happily encumbered in a chair away from the fray. Alexander was awake, his chubby body erupting with newborn chuckles at the silly faces created by his papa and tickles delivered. Darcy held the strong infant under the arms with supportive hands, Alexander wiggling and making stepping motions on his father's thighs and shakily reaching long fingers toward the adoring familiar face.

"My goodness he has grown!" It was Charles talking, eyes wide in astonishment.

"Welcome to Pemberley Bingley," Darcy spoke with a laugh, "I would rise and bow properly, but I am otherwise engaged. Pull up a chair and say hello to my son."

This he did, Col. Fitzwilliam standing beside Darcy with a broad grin. Alexander's gaze moved from face to face, intently studying. "He looks so like you, Darcy. It is uncanny! Even your penetrating gaze. Rather disconcerting actually, to have an infant piercing me with your blue eyes."

Darcy smiled with pride. "I will consider that a compliment, Bingley. He is intelligent and it shows. Is that not the way of it my precious, wise little boy?" The picture of infantile acumen abruptly lost in hoarse giggles as Darcy attacked his son's soft neck with nibbling kisses, fistfuls of hair seized painfully.

"Ouch! Help please!" Darcy pleaded from the depths of Alexander's neck. Richard laughingly untangled the amazingly tough fingers from Darcy's locks.

"You need a haircut, cousin."

"So I have been informed." He nestled Alexander against his chest, soft head tucked under his chin, and rocked gently. Alexander

instinctively found two fingers to suck on as he relaxed contentedly into the warmth of his father's body. "How was Christmas at Hasberry, Bingley?"

"Delightful. Jane decorated everything so beautifully and Cook prepared an amazing breakfast feast. We attended church in Buxton and we, that is Jane and I, thought it perfect."

Richard hid his smile, Darcy glancing toward Bingley's sisters who sat rigid on the sofa. Caroline looked up, briefly meeting Darcy's eyes and raking over the tiny body secured by his broad hands before glancing away with disinterest. "I gather Miss Bingley and the Hursts were not as enthused?"

"Well, you know how it is. Nothing compares to London or, surprisingly, Essex."

"Essex?" Richard asked in surprise. "What does Essex have to offer?"

"Hanged if I know. She spent several weeks there with a society friend of hers, Miss Beatrice Dandridge, and now suddenly its Essex this and Essex that. She slips it in somewhere every other sentence. Frankly it is driving me mad."

"Essex has its charms, especially the coastal areas. Remember Mr. Hardin, Richard? He has a lovely estate near Southend-on-Sea. I spent a few weeks there one summer while at Cambridge."

"Perhaps so Darcy, but Miss Dandridge lives near Chelmsford. It is not that far from Hertford, and we all know how enthusiastic she was about the country surrounding Netherfield." The sarcasm was evident in Charles's voice. He shook his head, "It makes no sense whatsoever."

"Who can understand a woman, eh Darcy?" Richard said with a nudge to his cousin's booted foot, "Unfathomable creatures all, but we love them nonetheless. Here's to the fairer sex!" He lifted his glass toward Bingley and Darcy, who both laughed, Darcy shaking his head.

"Pathetic. I do pity the woman who ensnares you, dear cousin. Now, if you both will excuse me a moment, I think my son needs to be put to bed." Darcy rose, Alexander a limp weight although he continued to suck sleepily on his first two fingers. Lizzy was approaching Caroline and Louisa as Darcy drew near.

"Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, forgive me for not properly greeting sooner. It has been rather chaotic. Welcome to Pemberley and merry Christmas. Mr. Darcy and I are delighted to have you celebrate with us." She turned to her husband with a smile, laying one hand lightly on his arm.

"Welcome Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst. How long has it been, Mrs.

Hurst? At least two years?”

“Approximately Mr. Darcy. Many things have altered. I do not believe I have ever seen Pemberley so elaborately adorned. It is lovely.”

Darcy smiled and bowed slightly, Alexander clutched securely against the broad expanse of his chest. “Thank you. Many things have changed here at Pemberley, Mrs. Hurst, aside from the decorations.”

“So it seems. Congratulations on the birth of your son. He appears to be a healthy infant.”

“Quite healthy, and asleep and heavy.” He turned to his wife, “Elizabeth, I will put him to bed. Pardon me ladies, I will return momentarily.” And with another short bow he left.

Lizzy watched him depart with a happy smile, unconsciously releasing a sigh before turning her attention to her guests.

“Mr. Darcy certainly is an attentive father,” Caroline said. “Who would have thought him the type? Playing foolishly in plain sight of all and now attending to the task of carrying to the nursery! Do you not have a nanny for such things, Mrs. Darcy?”

“We do, but as I recall stating many months ago within your hearing, Miss Bingley, we intend to provide for our child’s needs as much as possible. It is a joy to do so, a joy we both treasure.” She chose to not comment on the fact that Mr. Darcy is *precisely* the ‘type’ to cater ridiculously to his loved ones, a fact Miss Bingley should be aware of given his long standing devotion to Mr. Bingley.

“Indeed. You look well, Mrs. Darcy,” Caroline said, “Fully recovered from your ordeal, I daresay?”

“As good as new, Miss Bingley! How was your sojourn in Essex? Jane said you spent over a month there at the Dandridge estate. I recall meeting Miss Dandridge at the soiree at Lord Calvin’s. Sweet young lady. I was not aware she was a close friend of yours. I have a cousin who lives near Braintree and know how beautiful the countryside is thereabouts. Not particularly exotic or glamorous, but certainly refreshing and good for a horseback ride if nothing else!”

Caroline smiled, “Indeed. Thankfully I do adore riding so was not too terribly bored. There were enough diversions to entertain.” She finished softly with a faint flush spreading over her cheeks. Lizzy cocked her head in puzzlement, her musings interrupted by an exclamation from Kitty.

“Can we finish opening presents now please? Papa, this is from Mary and me.”

The revealing commenced. Lizzy sat beside a mildly paler Jane, squeezing her hand. The gentlemen assumed the roles of couriers,

delivering labeled packages to the ladies. Every attempt was made to open neatly one at a time, but enthusiasm occasionally overcame caution with ribbons and colorful paper flying, piles gathering by their feet. Darcy rejoined a group in a state of moderate, lively chaos. Laughter was rampant with frequent jumping up to hug someone across the room, gifts being passed about for inspection, and exclamations of awe.

Darcy stood beside his wife, hand warm on her shoulder. She glanced upward, eyes sparkling as she clasped his fingers, lifting for a kiss to his knuckles. He smiled, brushing across her cheek before turning to Richard, “Col. Fitzwilliam, the gold wrapped box to your right is addressed to Mrs. Darcy. Yes, that one. Bring it here please.”

“For you, my lady,” Richard bowed gallantly, placing the flat box onto her lap.

“Thank you Richard. William, I thought we were done. You already gifted me three new gowns, the sardonyx cameo brooch of a mother and child that I absolutely adore, the leather bound edition of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, two new pairs of gloves, handkerchiefs, and what else....oh yes, the wooden table with drawers to sit beside my chair!”

“Trifles, my dear. The latter essentially because I was weary of seeing your sewing scattered all over the ground.” He grinned and squeezed her shoulder. “This, in addition to the larger box in yonder corner,” he pointed to a now visible package previously buried under the mound of presents, “is your main gifts from me, your adoring husband.”

“William, really...”

“You may as well just open it Lizzy,” Jane interjected, smiling at her brother-in-law, “It is purchased and wrapped. I doubt if there is any chance it will be returned.”

“Absolutely none. Thank you Mrs. Bingley for your support. My wife has yet to comprehend the realities of being spoiled by her husband. I pray you do not torment Charles with useless arguments and quibbling.”

“I fear she does,” Charles said with a laugh. “However, I do believe we should be thankful Darcy. After all it was the modesty, virtue, and economy of spirit which partially drew us to the Bennet sisters, along with other stellar attributes I hasten to add.”

“Lord have mercy! We will be here until next Christmas at this rate! Open it Elizabeth before these two begin reciting poetry and destroy all our appetites!” George declared, Mr. Bennet laughing and nodding in agreement.

Jane blushed, Lizzy laughing as she began untying the ribbons.

“Honestly Lizzy, and you too Jane, be thankful you have husbands able to present such treasures! How fortunate you both are!”

“Thank you for the reminder, mama.” Lizzy said with sarcasm.

Of course Lizzy was quite familiar with her husband’s need to shower her with gifts. It was a habit borne of his deep love for all those dearest to him; an expression established long before she entered his life. The logical conclusion was to simply accept it, but her nature would not allow her to ever be mercenary or greedy and therefore it was mildly uncomfortable. She glanced upon his seriously glowing visage, much like a child with a secret, and could only say a silent prayer of thankfulness.

The box contained a book bound with fine calf leather dyed a deep blue with gold leaf etching along the spine. The pages inside were blank, the intent of which was unmistakably indicated by the gold emblazoned *Alexander William George Bennet Darcy* scrolled across the front cover.

Before Lizzy could find her voice Darcy was kneeling with hands caressing over the exquisite binding. “It is a memory book, dearest. I saw something similar in Derby, in the infant store. I had this made by a bookbinding establishment in London that has restored numerous antique volumes I have purchased over the years. You can write your thoughts, facts as he grows, ink prints of his feet, memories of first words, when he walks, and anything else that comes to mind. Is it not a fabulous idea?”

“Darcy, this is marvelous!” It was Charles, face suffused with enthusiasm. “Where did you get it?” The new father and father-to-be launched into a discussion, Jane and Lizzy exchanging amused glances.

“William, thank you so very much! It is a marvelous concept, keeping an itemized log, so to speak, of his transitions and growth. Will you write in it as well?”

“If you wish. My mother kept a similar journal for me and Georgie. I ran across them in the attic, having not thought on it for years.” His voice grew quiet, eyes far away for a spell as he stroked the embossed name of their son. “Such memories are priceless.” He cleared his throat gruffly with a slight shrug, voice firmer as he resumed, “The other gift accompanies.” He rose, crossing to retrieve the large package and place it at her feet. “The last, I promise. Merry Christmas my love.”

Inside was a trunk of cedar, approximately three feet cubed with short legs, sturdily if plainly constructed with no embellishment other than ‘Alexander’ carved in rough block letters across the lid. The sweet aroma of cedar pervaded the air, every eye lifting from individual unwrapping to observe the scene.

“Mother kept particular artifacts in a series of boxes, some that I discovered damaged. I did not want that to happen to Alexander’s favorite toy, first shoes, blanket, or anything else we deem worthy of keeping. So I built this...”

“You built it?” Caroline interrupted in astonishment, Darcy glancing to her face with a smile.

“I am quite skillful with my hands, Miss Bingley. Unfortunately I do not have the talent for whittling or engraving as did my grandfather, so it is unadorned, but it will withstand the test of time and any pounding by a rowdy son! I thought it would fit nicely below the window in the nursery.”

“Absolutely! It is fantastic.” Lizzy raised one hand to lightly brush his cheek. “Thank you William, again.”

“I do hope you kept the pattern, William, so you can create more. I think you will need an entire collection in due course.” George declared with a wink, Lizzy blushing but Darcy meeting his eyes boldly.

“Not a problem, Uncle. I have a very good memory.”

“I pray you are an adequate instructor as well, Darcy, as I want you to teach me how to construct a cedar box for our child. I have never worked with wood so it shall be a challenge for you.” Charles looked at his friend with a grin.

“Really Charles! Carpentry? Is not sheep farming and walnut harvesting enough manual labor for you? It is so, so....common!” Caroline was truly aghast.

Darcy’s mumbled and sarcastic *thank you* was lost behind Bingley’s reply, “Honestly Caroline! It is not as if I pick the nuts myself or shovel manure. I manage an estate, and none of this has any bearing on desiring to construct a memory box for my firstborn.”

“Attaboy Mr. Bingley!” George declared with a stunning clap to the younger man’s shoulder, “Artistic creativity is food for the brain! Keeps the nerve’s firing, eh Mr. Bennet?”

“I cannot claim any particular skills with my hands, Dr. Darcy, but I do agree with the philosophy. Although I have assisted in the mending of the fence a time or two, and did apply saw and hammer to create a finely wrought birdhouse and feeder which yet graces the east garden.”

“Oh, I remember that!” Mary spoke up with a rare burst of enthusiasm. “I was but seven or so, papa, and I recall you let each of us hammer a bit and Lizzy sawed. Jane, you carved the perches, is that not so?”

Jane was blushing, Charles gazing at her with pride. “It was a



small thing really. I merely smoothed several branches. We all worked on it together. Even Lydia, who was barely four or five, was placed in charge of handing each nail.”

Lizzy and Kitty were smiling in memory. Caroline sniffed, “Well, I suppose such an endeavor could be amusing, in certain circumstances. Seems a trifle rustic to me. Artistry is one thing, but pounding wood strikes me as a menial chore destined for the working man.”

Darcy was stiff with indignation; hand tight on Lizzy’s shoulder. She caressed his white knuckles tenderly, opening her mouth to flash a retort, but was halted by her mother’s voice, “Of course, Miss Bingley, you have a point! I am certain the venture will not be a frequent activity for either Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley. Men of their fine stature and finances have no need to lower themselves to such base levels, naturally. Do not fret!”

“I am of the opinion that talent of all kind, whether it musical or architectural or scientific or any of a million other realms are all gifts inspired of God and therefore to be acknowledged and pursued extensively, otherwise it is an insult to the Giver. As the Declaration penned by the founders of the Americas states, ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator.’ No tasks are too menial or unnecessary, Miss Bingley.”

All in the room were staring at Mary, who had delivered this quietly voiced speech, with stunned amazement. The attitudes may vary as to the veracity of her words, but all were momentarily speechless. Not surprisingly it was Dr. Darcy who shattered the silence first with a raised cup of tea and ringing endorsement, “Here, here, Miss Bennet! Well said indeed. I’ll drink to that!”

The mood thus lightened, Lizzy turned to Richard, “Colonel, now that my husband has finally exhausted the gift giving it would be an appropriate time to retrieve the package you assured me was in your safekeeping. If you please?”

Richard bowed formally. “As you wish, Mrs. Darcy. Pardon me a moment.” And with a brisk clap of his military boot heels, he pivoted and exited the room.

“Secrets, Mrs. Darcy?” Darcy asked with a raised brow.

“It is Christmas, my dear.”

“While we are waiting Lizzy, this is from all of us Bennets. We pooled our resources.” Kitty placed a smallish, but very heavy gift on her lap, stooping to kiss her cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

The bright wrapping hid a roughly cigar box sized highly glossed, cherry wood musical box! The glass panel in the ornately carved lid

displayed the copper cylinder and shiny mechanical devices required to turn the cylinder and elicit the sounds. Lizzy gasped, hand instantly over her heart in awe and delighted expressions of thanks pouring forth. It was a stunning piece of workmanship, instantly drawing the attention of most in the room, especially the invention-fascinated Darcy.

“Incredible! Where did you acquire one so large and sporting a cylinder rather than disk, Mr. Bennet?” He was already lightly touching the internal springs and motor.

“One of the advantages to having a brother in trade,” he answered with a smile and nod toward Mr. Gardiner.

“I have an associate who deals with various Swiss manufacturers of timepieces. He occasionally acquires musical boxes as well. These are very new, Mr. Darcy, created by Recordon and Jundon. This one plays a compilation of Mozart’s sonatas.”

“I have two musical snuff boxes purchased in Paris and London, one of which I gave to Elizabeth to listen while at her desk. I dismantled a third in an attempt to figure how it worked, failing miserably as I was unable to completely fathom the mechanics or reassemble properly.” His voice dropped to a tone of inner musing as he intently investigated the visible parts, Lizzy playfully batting his hands away with a laugh.

“Get your own musical box to dissect, Mr. Darcy! This one is mine.”

He straightened with a faint blush. “Of course, dearest. I was merely looking.”

Several snickers erupted, Col. Fitzwilliams returning to a room of polite twitters and flushed cousin. “What have you done now, Darcy?”

Darcy, however, had no response forthcoming. Rather his gaze was riveted to the wooden case Richard held in both arms. It was well over five feet in length yet only a foot wide, which would have strongly hinted to Darcy what it contained even if it was not branded with the label *Knopf Bros. of Shenandoah Valley, Virginia*. His mouth literally fell open and immobility gripped all four extremities.

“How did you...?” He stopped, speechless.

Lizzy was grinning broadly; face rosy with delight as she jumped up to stand beside her paralyzed spouse. Placing one hand tenderly on his arm, she explained, “I know you have coveted one for your collection, love. Richard was able to acquire an original dated 1786. I have yet to see it myself, not that I would know what I was inspecting, so I pray it meets your expectations. Open it!”

Richard laid the case onto the table, stepping back as Darcy approached with reverence. “This is unbelievable. I cannot thank you

both enough.”

“I should have thought of it myself and claimed all the glory,” Richard said. “After all, years of immersing yourself in the journals of William Bartram and Jonathan Carver, as well as other American frontiersmen, and the undoubtedly embellished tales of Daniel Boone, should have enlightened me.”

Darcy had opened the case, nearly the entire room’s occupants now clustered about to watch, revealing a pristine condition rifle. But not just any rifle. A uniquely American invention of the 18<sup>th</sup> century frontiersman: a long rifle. This one sported a stock of beautifully grained wood, lacquered and decorated with silver and brass inlays fancily scrolled, the stamped and dated emblem of its makers, and a barrel easily four feet in length. Every surface, both wooden and metal, gleamed. It was exquisite. Collectively the men in the room, even Mr. Hurst who had left his vigil by the liquor cabinet, whistled in appreciative awe. The women, unschooled in the artistry of firearms, nonetheless could readily grasp the fine quality and sheer beauty of the displayed specimen.

Darcy grasped the weapon, lifting with steady and competent hands, as Richard continued his narrative. “This one reputedly has a range of nearly 400 yards in the hands of an experienced marksman. You should be able to achieve that, cousin, with practice.”

“Four hundred yards!” Mr. Bennet gasped. “I would love to see that!”

Col. Fitzwilliam turned to the skeptical Mr. Bennet, “A General I know has a long rifle and has reached 470 yards. Of course he is our regiment’s finest marksman, actually trained as a sharpshooter, but Darcy here is quite an excellent shot. An English Baker rifle can nearly attain that distance, but not as reliably. Nor are they as imposing in appearance or as beautifully designed. I daresay these American rifles are the most elaborate I have ever seen, as painful as that is to admit.”

Darcy’s eyes were glittering as he sighted down the barrel, stock end nestled flawlessly against his shoulder, “I do not know about 400 yards, but I certainly will attempt it! The balance is excellent, weight perfect, and you are correct Richard, no English or German firearm compares. Damned Americans!”

“Do you like it then?” Lizzy asked teasingly. “I am sure Richard could get my money back.”

He lowered the weapon to his side, encircled his surprised wife’s waist, and drew her in for a firm kiss. “I love it *almost* as much as I love you! You keep your paws off my rifle and I shall leave your musical box unmolested. Agreed?” Lizzy nodded, several eruptions of laughter

ensuing around the massed observers.

An hour later all the gifts were finally unwrapped and organized in individual piles. The strewn papers and ribbons were discarded, and the satisfied Pemberley inhabitants relaxed as they awaited the call to dinner. Select items were inspected and shared with others while the men loitered in a knot around the corner table where the rifle case now sat. The rifle itself was passed from hand to hand, all delighting in the temporary joy of imagining firing the stupendous weapon at unsuspecting game. Darcy was already arranging a target session for the morrow, graciously offering to allow each man the opportunity to test his skill.

Lizzy played hostess, engaging and gregarious so that even Lady Montgomery was drawn into frequent conversation and stilted laughter. Jane sat next to Lizzy admiring the locket lying on a pillowy cushion of velvet.

“This truly is exquisite Miss Darcy. You must whisper in Mr. Darcy’s ear to casually mention to my husband where it was purchased. I would dearly love one myself.”

Georgiana smiled, “I shall tell Mr. Bingley myself! It would make a perfect Christmas gift next year or perhaps your birthday. The jeweler in Matlock, Mr. Ingalls, is quite excellent and reasonably priced compared to most found in Town. He has quite an extensive selection of lockets, in fact. I thought Lizzy would like this one,” she finished shyly.

“And you are absolutely correct, Georgie. I adore it! In fact, if it is not a bother, can you clasp it on for me? Fortunately I did not take the time this morning to don a necklace. A fortuitous oversight on my part.”

The locket in question, a gift from Georgiana to her new sister, was of silver. In size only a half inch diameter with a raised and exceptionally detailed picture on the lid of a sleeping infant in profile with tiny hands folded by his cheek, Georgiana had presented it with the humble suggestion of placing a lock of Alexander’s hair inside. Lizzy was still choked up and Darcy quite smug in that he knew of the gift before her, although hastening to clarify that it was entirely Georgiana’s idea and chosen without any input from him.

Not a soul was left wanting or dissatisfied. Lizzy’s second Christmas as Pemberley’s Mistress was an unparalleled success. Dinner was marvelous, a dozen courses served over nearly two hours as humor and conversation raged. The Master and Mistress sat at opposite ends of the long, elegantly festooned table sharing frequent warm gazes. The weather held fair if bitterly cold, permitting after dinner walks in the waning light. Early evening entertainment lapsed in the music room with

a splendid array of instruments played and vocal ranges lifted to the delight of all. Alexander joined the group for a spell, awake and happily passed from embrace to embrace until eventually falling asleep in his grandfather's arms.

It was well after dark, music and singing issuing forth gaily, when Mr. Taylor circumspectly approached his Master and leaned for a whispered conference. Darcy's face instantly tightened, lips a thin line as he nodded brusquely and rose, leaving the room without a word.

"How extraordinary!" Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, "I thought Mr. Darcy's rudeness was extinguished with marital felicity."

"Mother, please," Lizzy said, "Remember that my husband manages a vast estate which occasionally requires problem solving of a serious nature. Papa, do you mind holding Alexander for a bit longer? Good. Excuse me please." And with a nod toward the group in general, she followed her husband.

As suspected, he had removed to his study with Mr. Taylor and Mr. Keith standing before the desk where he sat scribbling on a piece of parchment, another lying by his left hand. "Mr. Keith, I should be no more than a few days. These envelopes here," he tapped a stack with the end of his pen, "are ready to post. These papers here are signed." He tapped another pile, "Issue payment draughts as necessary, address, and post. I will be staying at the Georgian as usual."

"Very good, Sir." Mr. Keith replied.

"Mr. Taylor, alert Samuel to pack a small travel bag for me then inform the stables to prepare Parsifal. I will depart within the hour."

"Depart! Where?" Darcy glanced up in surprise, not aware Lizzy had entered the room.

"Derby," he answered shortly, eyes returning to the parchment.

"William, it is already dark outside...."

"I am well aware of the time, Mrs. Darcy!" He snapped, eyes troubled and blazing as he glanced at her briefly. "Thank you Mr. Taylor, Mr. Keith. Follow my orders. You are dismissed."

"Yes sir." And with a bow both men left.

Lizzy stood in silence; embarrassed, angry, and worried. Darcy seemed to be ignoring her. She bit her lip, slowly stepping toward the desk. "William, what has happened?"

He sighed and melted at her tender tone, falling into his chair and running one hand through his hair. He closed his eyes and gesticulated to the left hand paper, "There was a fire today at my mill in Derby. Much has been destroyed, two men badly wounded, and three dead. Thankfully it was Christmas as most were home with their families," he finished

flatly.

Lizzy's breath caught, eyes glazing with tears. "Oh, love! I am so very sorry!" She crossed quickly, placing a hand onto his shoulder. The gesture woke Darcy from his stasis, standing up briskly, and stepping past Lizzy impatiently.

"Thank you. I am afraid I must attend to the aftermath personally. I am sorry, Elizabeth, but there is no choice."

"I understand, dearest, I truly do and would think less of you if you did not go. However, must you leave tonight? Traveling in the dark is not safe and I would worry so. Nothing can be accomplished until tomorrow in any case."

"I have traveled in the dark many times before. I can be there in a few hours, attain information, and be on site at first light. Time is precious in situations such as these, Elizabeth."

"William, please be reasonable...."

"There is nothing to discuss! It is my decision and I am in no mood to argue the matter."

"At best you would arrive by eleven, far too late to do anything of consequence. I am merely asking you to stay safe with us tonight and leave at first light tomorrow. What difference can a few hours make? The damage has already been done, dearest."

"I cannot stay here, laughing and amusing myself when people in my employ are suffering! It is unconscionable!"

"What is unconscionable is the possibility of injury while galloping full bore, as you would, on a dark and muddy road for two hours! What is unconscionable is that you would not rationally consider your safekeeping and the anxiety of your family!"

"I am an excellent rider, Madame, as you know. Nothing will happen to me."

"You can assure this, Sir? You have the gift of foresight? How delightful it is to know this! Or is it that you are immortal and I was unaware? Whatever the case, thank you for explaining. By all means then, ride on! I shall return to our guests with a cheery heart knowing that I have no fear of surviving without you and raising our son fatherless!"

And with that ringing impeachment she stormed from the room, slamming the door behind. Darcy stood rooted to the floor, furious, but also stricken by her horrifying allegation. Lizzy, meanwhile, was pulled up short five steps past the still reverberating door when she realized she did not know where to go. Lost in confusion with rage and terror warring, she did not readily note her father lurking in the hall several paces away.

"Lizzy?"

She started, glancing upward and instantly losing control at the sight of her concerned father and sleeping baby. With a choking sob she spun about and dashed down the corridor to her parlor. Naturally Mr. Bennet followed, lying Alexander down onto a settee and walking to where Lizzy leaned against the window sill weeping. He stood silently, concerned, but not one who easily dealt with women's hysterics despite, or probably because of, long years in a household with six women. Reverting to the simple comfort of patting her shoulder and uttering a sympathetic *there, there*, he waited.

Eventually Lizzy calmed enough to relate the dilemma between sobs and gasps. Mr. Bennet offered no answers or advice, being of the mind that marital difficulties were of a very intimate nature beyond parental purview. He only had one statement, convincingly presented.

"As painful as Mr. Darcy's decision, Lizzy, it will be compounded if you do not talk to him prior to his departure. The affection you two have for each other is too great to easily endure days apart under misspoken words and emotional estrangement."

In time they left the parlor, Alexander beginning to stir in Lizzy's arms, just as Darcy neared the music room. The lovers' eyes met in the dim expanse between; Lizzy's swollen, red, and filled with pain and Darcy's dull and inscrutable. He bowed slightly, turning without a word into the music room. Lizzy and Mr. Bennet trailed, Darcy already addressing the assembly when they entered and halted by the doorway.

"Forgive my abrupt exodus a while ago. I regret I have received ill news from Derby necessitating an early retirement as I must depart at first light tomorrow. Please, enjoy yourselves fully. All that Pemberley has to offer is at your immediate disposal. Your most excellent Hostess will ensure your comfort. Good night." Another bow, this one formally proffered, followed by a stiff pivot and long stridden exit, not glancing at Lizzy or her father.

Alexander, to Lizzy's relief, chose that moment to release a loud yell, providing a logical excuse to leave. She nursed him alone, Darcy not joining her as he had nearly every night since Alexander's birth. When she later entered their bedchamber, dressed in a gauzy gown of blue, he stood by the far window gazing outward at the visible stars and pale moonlight.

Lizzy had had plenty of time to think. She knew he was likely still angry and riddled with grief and misplaced guilt over the mill disaster, yet she could not deny her own overwhelming relief at his decision to stay. How to approach him and what to say she was less sure of. Correct she may have been, but there was no sense of victory in the idea. Only one

thing was certain: she loved him far too much to part on negative terms. Her father was accurate on that count.

Darcy did not hear her steps on the thick carpet, lost in reverie and contemplation of the stars. She said nothing, merely standing behind his left shoulder and absorbing his beloved profile until the drifting scent of lavender reached his nostrils. He turned; countenance composed as he leaned into the wall and stared at her mutely.

The moment stretched, Lizzy finally reaching one hand and laying it on his chest. "Thank you for staying." She spoke in a bare whisper, breathing deeply before continuing in the face of his silence. "I know you are angry with me, perhaps rightfully so, but I am not sorry for anything I said if it induced you to stay. I too feel grief for the families afflicted, William, but I am not ashamed to confess my selfishness. I cannot bear the thought of anything happening to you. We need you more than them, it is as simple as that," she finished firmly.

She lifted her chin bravely, holding his indecipherable gaze. It had been over a year since she had last been the recipient of the unreadable Darcy stare and she did not like it. Her blood ran cold, tremors beginning that she ignored in the wish to present an unyielding front. It was extremely difficult, the urgent desire to wrap her arms around him unbearably painful to resist. The effort was killing her and just as she was about to throw all restraint away in the crushing need to love him, he acted.

When Darcy moved it actually startled her. He cupped her face with sturdy hands, bending until inches away, voice hoarse as emotion abruptly surged over his features. "I absolutely hate it when you are right and I am wrong, Mrs. Darcy. Please try not to make a habit out of the tendency." His mouth curled faintly in a soft smile, eyes tender as they engaged hers.

And then he kissed her hard, absolving sobs caught in both throats as bodies melted together. It continued for a very long time, spirits meshing as breath and moisture was shared. Lizzy was literally crushed against every plane of his body, but she did not care. When they pulled apart it was out of necessity for deep respirations, neither letting go. Darcy drew her head under his chin, stalwart embrace holding her as physically close as possible. She rubbed her cheek against the mildly rough hairs on his chest, warmth flooding even in the midst of the cool window embrasure, as tears welled in her eyes.

"I love you so very much Fitzwilliam! I am so, so sorry!"

He released an enormous sigh. "So am I."

Taking her by the hand, he led to the bearskin rug; fur burnished



amber in the firelight with pillows piled to one side as always. Wordlessly he removed his robe, bare skin ruddily reflecting the flames, reaching dexterous fingers to untie each ribbon of her robe and discarding it unhastily. The sadness in his eyes tore at her soul. Always naked before her as he was to no one else, she had often seen the pain of grief both past and present in his eyes. It ripped her heart, but she understood now that it was who he was. Tomorrow, in Derby, he would be the man of strength and serene control; everyone looking to him for the answers that he would invariably give without hesitation. Tonight, in the privacy of their bedchamber with his soulmate, he could relax. Sorrow could wash through him and he would turn to her for comfort, Lizzy giving it without hesitation.

He ran heated palms down her arms, goose pimples rising in the wake of his touch, clasping each hand and pulling her onto the rug. He sat propped on the mass of cushions, Lizzy in his arms with back nestled to his chest. He said nothing, staring into the flickering flames with cheek pressed against her temple. She could feel the rigid length of his arousal on her lower back, but he made no move other than to tenderly caress slightly calloused fingertips over shoulders and arms. When he did speak his tone was low and anguished.

“Is it wrong to be so content when people I am responsible for are suffering?”

“There are always people suffering, beloved, everywhere and at all times. Do not all individuals, even in the midst of travails, deserve happiness as it comes to them?”

Silence. Then, “Do you think less of me if I confess there are times I want to run from it all, forget about being ‘Master of Pemberley’ and just live simply somewhere with you and Alexander? No responsibilities except to love you eternally and play with our children as a child myself?”

She turned in his arms, pushing unruly locks away from troubled eyes and feathering over each feature. “How could I think less of you for being human?”

They made love then. Slowly, long into the night, comfort and peace attained in the rapturous expression of bonding and love.

Lizzy woke as the first rays of dim sunlight peeked through the curtains. Darcy, fully clothed in traveling attire, entered their chambers with a squalling son in his arms. He smiled sunnily at his wife as she sat up in the bed, breasts full and ready.

“He has no interest in silly faces or words of devotion. Your breasts take precedence each time, not that I cannot relate to the

sentiment.”

He sat beside as Alexander ravenously attacked the nipple, Lizzy wincing slightly. Infant placated, she peered into her husband’s face, reaching the free hand to cup his jaw. Eyes inundated with love met and held. He kissed her palm, smiling with only a hint of lingering pain evident.

“I will miss you, Mrs. Darcy.”

“I know. And I you. Be careful, my heart, and return to us quickly. I love you.”

“I know,” he grinned. “Thank you, my Lizzy, for being my comfort. You are my life and I will return quickly.” He kissed her temple then bent to nibble Alexander’s toes and bestow tiny kisses to chubby feet and hands. Returning to Lizzy’s mouth, they kissed lingeringly. With a final brush over her lips with his thumb and repeated *I love you*, he rose.

She watched him walk to the door, back straight with figure flawlessly masculine and controlled. He turned and after a blown kiss and airy wave, was gone.

## **16 – The Master of Pemberley**

Darcy was four miles south of Pemberley, clopping along at a swift gallop when the echoing thud of horses hooves not his own penetrated his awareness. Glancing over his shoulder he grunted once and lightly pulled on the reins, Parsifal slowing to a sedate walk. Logically he should have been surprised. He had given no details as to why he was departing so early in the morning, had not asked for company, and assuredly *did not* need a bodyguard, yet found he was not the slightest bit surprised. Annoyed, yes, but not surprised.

The other horse pulled alongside, Darcy slowing to a halt and gracing its sunnily smiling rider with a decidedly unfriendly scowl. He leaned forward and growled, “Why are you here? I did not ask for company.”

“Can a fellow not take a morning ride in the bracing air? Are you the boss of the road, Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I am. This is my land and I did not give you permission to be here.”

The intruder looked around at the endless plains of frosted pasture, smoke emitting chimneys rising from the numerous brick cottages nestled inbetween the empty fields. All was silent in the misty dawn gloom, only the faint scattered barks of dogs and lowing of cows needing to be milked a subtle reminder of life beyond the two horsemen. He shrugged unperturbed, “Very well, I will give you that, but as a sworn defender of the Crown I think I outrank you even here, and can therefore travel wherever I see fit.”

“Hogwash. And you are not even in uniform. Seriously Richard, did Elizabeth send you to watch over me?”

“Unruffle your proud tail feathers cousin. I came of my own volition. Your wife is under the impression you can tread water and calm raging seas, therefore unlikely to request me to play protector.”

“I can assure you that my wife is fully aware of every flaw I possess and reminds me of them frequently, but that is beside the point. I have no humor today, am quite foul as a matter of fact, and frankly in no mood for your acerbic wit and lame jokes.”

Richard nodded, face suddenly devoid of any trace of jocularity.

“I gathered as much. Ride on then and enlighten me as to the problem. I am at your disposal in any way you see fit.”

Darcy stared at his serious cousin for a moment more, grunted again, but argued no further. Instead he tightened his leather-clad grip on the reins and with a short command to Parsifal they set off at a brisk canter while Darcy imparted the facts as he knew them.

The ride was uneventful and thankfully free of rain or snow although the wind was biting. The roads were frozen solid with scattered slick patches of ice and a fair amount of slushy mud oftentimes covering their mounts to the fetlocks. Few words were spoken after the brief discourse on the mill fire, the fast pace and stiff breeze not conducive to conversation if Darcy had been in the mood. Despite the pleasant evening spent with his wife, the idyllic hours spent loving each other so deliriously, her ceaseless empathy which calmed his turbulent soul, and the brief interlude of family felicity that morning, Darcy was still deeply disturbed. His years as Master of an enormous estate had been relatively disaster free. Only nine deaths had occurred as a result of accidents and three men who were maimed to the point of requiring retirement from their duties. It was not a bad record compared to most men in his position. He knew this, was proud of the fact, and strove to find ways to ensure safety among his tenants and employees, but the simply reality is that many of the jobs necessary to keep the Pemberley estate functioning were of a dangerous nature. The number of injuries and near misses was substantially higher, and Darcy looked upon each incidence as a personal affront and failing.

Darcy was a rational man by nature. *Rationally* he knew the blaze at the mill, however it had occurred, was completely beyond his control. *Rationally* he knew that it was in no way his blunder. *Rationally* he knew that these events were called accidents for a reason. *Rationally* he knew that no one would place blame on him. *Rationally* he knew that he and his partners would financially survive the disaster and deal with the trauma as they were each wise businessmen and astute managers.

However, Darcy was also a man who cared deeply. Logic would triumph over emotion, but the emotion would not merely disappear. He would fight it every step of the way, with every breath, and not a single person he encountered would have the vaguest clue as to his struggle. Such was the disposition of the man who after roughly two hours of hard riding with Col. Fitzwilliam keeping pace, drew into the wide gravelly area before the main entrance of the mill in Derby.

It was not yet eight-thirty in the morning, the sun well risen in the eastern sky and casting a strong light if little warmth. The cotton mill co-

owned by Darcy was located on the western bank of the River Derwent, near the northern borders of the town proper. Several mills of various types had for centuries utilized the power of the briskly flowing river to process the wool and flax that was abundantly grown on the fertile fields of Derbyshire, as well as imported silk and cotton. Derby, like many other towns situated fortuitously on rapid rivers throughout England, had evolved in the past fifty years from a sleepy essentially fishing and farming village to a center of industry. As inventions designed to speed up the laborious and costly processes of rendering textiles useful had emerged, an industrial revolution had waved across the county. Derby had significantly benefited and prospered as a result, as had forward thinking men such as Darcy. Uncounted persons of modest means had grown rich through wise investments while men of wealth had grown even wealthier. Darcy invested financially in Derby's Silk Mill, the oldest such factory in all of England, as well as one of the three wool mills located nearby. However, the cotton mill was the only one he was an actual owner of and therefore actively involved in the management policies.

From a distance away the four storied red brick building's jutting towers and visible eaves appeared undamaged. This did not particularly surprise Darcy as he figured the bulk of the damage would be internal. The note had been written hastily by the surviving foreman, giving no specific details other than the loss of life and that the blaze was quenched. Nonetheless, it takes a massive amount of heat to mar brick. As the two rode closer, passing beyond the towering trees and entering the avenue before the main entrance of the imposing structure, he was surprised to note it apparently untouched with no ready sign of fire except for a vague haze of smoke emanating from the rearward aspect of the building. Surprised, and severely dismayed because he could then guess with fair certainty where the damage lay.

Darcy and Col. Fitzwilliam were greeted by a group of several men knotted by the front entrance to the mill. Two of the gentlemen were his partners, Mr. Kinnison and Mr. Schultz, while the others were a mixture of workers, foremen, and undoubtedly city officials sent to investigate the incident. In unison they turned to observe the new arrivals, the murmur of voices hushed momentarily.

"Ah! Darcy!" Mr. Kinnison boomed, "We figured you would be here soon. I wish I could say it was good to see you, but..." He spread his hands and shrugged.

Darcy dismounted, Richard doing the same, but hanging back while his cousin shook hands brusquely with his partners.

“Kinnison. Shultz.” He nodded to the stocky German who had stepped forward. “I came as quickly as I could manage. It was quite late when I received the message. How did you make it here so speedily Kinnison?”

Mr. Kinnison shrugged again, “I was in Spondon for Christmas. My wife’s family dwells there. Shultz and I had lunch three days ago so he knew I was in the area; otherwise the messenger would probably still be riding from Claycross. We just arrived here, having spent the past hour with the injured men.”

Kinnison was the youngest of the three men, only four and twenty. It was actually his father who had partnered with Darcy and Mr. Shultz eight years ago to buy the decrepit old mill. Darcy was especially proud of the acquisition as it was the first independent venture he had entered into after assuming the mantle of Master of Pemberley. His father had been incurious regarding modern machinery and industry. He was not interested in dealing with the processing of their scoured wool, instead selling it outright for others to deal with. The profit was considerable, but Darcy felt certain that it could be increased. While at Cambridge Darcy enrolled in an industrial engineering class where the technology of machinery was taught in incredible detail as well as delving into the socio-economic impact. Always a man fascinated by technology and gadgets, Darcy was also an evolving wise businessman. He immediately saw the advantage to embracing the wave of manufacturing sweeping through his grand nation.

Twice he had discussed the prospect with his father. The first was when he was twenty-one and home for the summer.

Not in his wildest dreams did he imagine at the time that in just over a year he would be Master of Pemberley. His father was in excellent health by all appearances, the ravages of his unrelenting grief yet visible in the haggard lines around his eyes and hollowed cheeks, but otherwise James Darcy was robust. Father and son had developed an easy relationship; one that was of mutual respect and affection if a trifle distant due to James’s tendency toward moroseness and Darcy’s reticence. Their times together were invariable centered on discussing Pemberley affairs rather than personal issues, although as Darcy matured he found the gap in their ages dwindling. In later years, on those rare occasions when he allowed himself to reminisce and muse on *could-have-beens*, he firmly believed that in time he and his father would have become great friends. But at twenty-one those tragic events were future and unthinkable. Rather, both Darcy men imagined and openly planned for a future similar to what James had developed with his father: co-

management of Pemberley. Only in this instance James desired to relinquish the horse breeding and training aspects to his vastly competent son while he continued to manage the farming and livestock ventures. It was an arrangement that appealed to both of them. Darcy's obsession for all matters horse related was legendary, the only other niggle in his brain that of modern inventions. Hence approaching his father about milling cotton.

James sat at the desk that Darcy would inherit, smiling in true pleasure as he watched his tall son pace before him with caged energy, talking vociferously, and gesturing wildly. Pride swelled as he listened.

"It is truly a marvel, father. Just think! We could double, no probably triple our income by entering into the cotton trade and milling it. Of course, depending on the initial layout it may take a few years to recoup, but eventually. And what is to stop us from delving further and milling our own wool as well? The process is a bit more expensive, but you see the figures?" He stopped abruptly, tapping one long index finger on the parchment page lying on the desktop.

James opened his mouth to speak, but Darcy resumed pacing and speaking, "I confess I need to do a bit more research to be absolutely sure, but I am fairly confident we could handle it. In fact, I spoke with Mr. Castledon of London Textile just last month. His company owns several mills of all varieties and he gave me excellent advice. My thought had been to build our own mill here, starting from scratch. He suggested looking into buying an existing mill, preferably one a bit rundown or mismanaged that could be attained at a lowered price. I took the liberty of asking Mr. Daniels to nose around a bit, drop a few hints very discreet like. He says there are a couple possibilities near Stavely on the Rother, or Buxton on the Wye, and in Derby. Any location would do nicely. Perhaps I could have him send you the specifications, father, and you could look into it?"

"Perhaps..."

"Of course with steam engines," Darcy interrupted, hardly aware his father had spoken, "we do not have to look along rivers. They make the need for a water source unnecessary! Although it is still wise, I am convinced, for shipping and safety reasons. We could, possibly, build one from the ground up near Pemberley, or expand the existing facilities where we sheer and scour our wool. Although I do believe that might still be more expensive than obtaining an already existing structure designed for the task. I need to obtain further figures on that, but you can see that we have numerous options."

"I do not think I would want a loud manufacturing monstrosity

so near the manor, son.”

“Yes, yes, you are correct father! That would not be wise, I agree.” He paused momentarily, fingers fidgeting by his sides as he stared into space sightlessly. James observed him silently, the turning wheels of his son’s brain practically visible to the naked eye. “With a steam engine we could fully prepare the cotton. Clean it, card it, comb it, everything. Then spin it and weave it as well. Maybe in time expand further and develop rooms for dyeing and finishing the cloth. Yes, Derby would be best as the population is higher and it is on the main thoroughfare to London and beyond. Think of all the people we could employ! Profits and community benefit!”

James was laughing and shaking his head slowly. “Hold on a minute, my boy! You know I appreciate your enthusiasm, but are you not supposed to be carousing with your friends, engaging in endless fox hunts and billiard tournaments, and other frivolous pursuits of youth? You are on vacation and have one more year of leisurely studies at University, not that you ever leisurely study, but you get the idea. Enjoy yourself for a change and we can deal with this in a year.”

“I do not carouse, father, but trust me, I partake in plenty of extracurricular activities. Did I tell you I won the fencing tournament for my House? Plaque on the wall next to grandfather’s!”

James laughed at Darcy’s sudden youthful boasting. “Yes, you told me lad. I am quite proud of you and delighted to know your nose is not always pressed between the pages of a book. So do me a favor: Relax, gather information if you wish, but complete your education and enjoy life for a while before you immerse yourself in work.”

“But....”

“No buts, William! You know I personally have no interest in the endeavor. That is not to say I disagree with your research and concept, so do not frown at me! I merely insist it wait for now. Take your time, enjoy the summer, and finish your education. Next summer we can discuss it at length and I will trust you to pursue to your heart’s content.”

So Darcy had grudgingly agreed, not really having much choice in the matter. A year later he was home and barely unpacked ere broaching the topic with his father yet again. He had not relented in his desire; had only increased his enthusiasm with further study and discussion with professors, businessmen, and even the average working man during his haunts at the mills near Cambridge. James was agreeable if not newly inspired, basically permitting his son to look seriously into the matter at the mills to be found locally, and promising to allow him to proceed once the particulars were known. It was a short conversation, Darcy wasting



no time in riding to Alfreton where a potential mill had been unearthed by Mr. Wickham. It ended up not being the best candidate, but before Darcy could pursue other options his father had suffered a massive heart attack and a week later died.

It was over six months before Darcy could begin to even think about starting an entirely new project. Yet despite the overwhelming chaos, tremendous grief, and burdens suddenly thrust upon his shoulders, the tiny flame of desire had kept burning deep inside. Nonetheless, it was a total coincidence that brought the cotton mill in Derby to his attention. Mr. Kinnison the elder was good friends with Mr. Henry Vernor and rather casually mentioned to him that the old mill was for sale and he was contemplating buying. Mr. Vernor knew of Darcy's interest via his son, Gerald. One thing led to another, as the old saying goes, and within a month Darcy, Kinnison, and Mr. Shultz, an associate of Kinnison's, formed a partnership and bought the dilapidated mill. DKS Midlands, Inc. was born.

Mr. Shultz was a German immigrant of some fifty years, a self-made man who had begun his employment history as a youth working at literally every job in a cotton mill in Yorkshire before rising to the rank of foreman. Thrifty by nature, he saved and eventually invested in the very mill he had worked in since the tender age of nine. A few more years went by, a total of ten mills invested in at the pinnacle of his career, and Mr. Shultz was counted among the comfortably rich. He liquefied it all, moved to Derby, and started over where no one would know he had once been a lowly mill drudge. Darcy would know none of this history until five years into their partnership, trusting to the man's obvious knowledge of the business and to Mr. Kinnison's recommendation and personal reputation.

The project was a raging success. The partnership allowed for the financial resources to purchase a number of machines that Darcy had not imagined in his early figuring. In the end revenue was made in two years time. It was a small profit for the first three years and the money was completely reinvested into buying additional machinery and improvements, all of which substantially benefited the company. For two years now the proceeds were significant. The elder Mr. Kinnison had died not quite two years prior, his son proving to be as excellent a businessman and trustworthy partner as had his father. All three men were abundantly content with the project.

The milling process utilized by DKS Midlands was typical of all cotton mills of that day. Raw cotton fibers were imported in vast quantities, primarily via British East India Trading vessels that acquired

the product from India and other Far East nations, as well as the former American colonies. Certain areas of England, Yorkshire and Manchester for instance, became synonymous with the cotton trade. Other towns followed suit to varying degrees, cashing in, literally, on the wealth to be found. English inventors by the dozens devoted their lives to improving the machinery necessary to enhance the process. American inventor Eli Whitney's cotton gin was one of the prime revolutionary devices ever invented. Literally every worker of cotton in England owned a cotton gin by the early 1800's, speeding the initial process unbelievably. Raw, baled cotton was transported to the large and complete mill in Derby, just one of hundreds throughout the country.

The massive four story building was laid out in general fashion with each floor devoted to the sequential procedures necessary to take the raw product and render it into useable cloth. Everything from opening the five hundred pound bales of crude cotton to begin the ginning and cleaning process, through the finer tasks of separating the fibers, spinning the slivered threads into yarns, weaving the yarns into cloth, and finishing the fabric with various chemicals from bleaching to dyeing. All of this was accomplished through complicated and innovative machinery operated by human hands. It was a lengthy practice requiring hundreds of employees even in the relatively modest mill of Darcy and his partners, men who were educated and very proud of their establishment.

Now they were dealing with their first momentous tragedy. Thus far the mishaps had been nominal; a few minor injuries and broken down machines all that had upset the flow. This positive record was highly irregular in the danger fraught machinations of a mill and all the persons involved recognized their good fortune. Mr. Shultz lived in Derby and personally handled the difficulties as they arose, Darcy and Kinnison rarely needing to get involved with the day to day functioning. Rather they dealt with the business side of affairs. Mr. Kinnison managed the storage warehouses, distribution, and transport to local markets and London. Darcy arranged the exchange with markets beyond London and abroad as well as the political issues, dealing extensively with the East India Company and to a lesser degree his own ships. These contacts contributed to their rapid success. It was a perfect partnership requiring frequent reports, but minimal face to face interaction.

This incident, of course, was vastly different.

"Darcy." Mr. Shultz shook his hand, jerking his head toward the smoldering mill, "We were just discussing the details of what occurred. Kinnison and I were here until late last night, but it was not safe to

inspect and far too disordered. And we were busily dealing with the injuries and fatalities, and assuring the fire was out.” He shrugged, pausing briefly before continuing. “We lost the foreman Hendle and two workers, Spreckle and Trillis. Good workers.”

Darcy nodded solemnly. His personal knowledge of most of the personnel was non-existent. However, this did not mean he did not care. “Any family? Widows?”

“The men chosen for the Christmas holiday were unmarried per protocol. Hendle was the foreman who drew lots this year and he has....had a family. It will be dealt with according to our policy, Darcy.” Shultz answered wearily, but matter-of-factly. “She works in the weaving room and knows her position will be held for two weeks with compensation for Hendle until she decides what to do. They have four children, two who work as spinners, so I do not know what to expect.”

Kinnison spoke up then, “The two men injured are Haggard and Merran. They suffered minor burns and smoke inhalation. The surgeon says they will be fine.”

They began walking toward the large front doors, Richard joining the other men to follow behind while Shultz resumed his narrative. “We were not able to speak with either man until an hour ago, so it was unclear what had occurred. The other watchmen were not at the scene until after the fire was well ablaze, making their rounds and checking equipment as expected, so they were little help. One fellow, Stevenson, let it slip that alcohol was present.” He paused for an angry glower. Shultz was a staunch Methodist and abstainer from all alcoholic beverages, even to the point of actively participating in a thus far unpopular temperance society in Derby.

Kinnison spared a sideways grin with Darcy, who nodded and smiled faintly. Darcy was not a heavy drinker by any means, a few youthful overindulgences having taught him severe lessons in moderation; but he did not fully ascribe to the near satanic, sinful qualities attributed to alcohol by some. Nonetheless, having been witness to the tragic results of drunkenness in terms of domestic violence and financial ruin, especially amongst the lower classes although on occasion in his own peer group, he did sympathize with the temperance movement. Frankly, as a man of superior self-control Darcy had miniscule patience for men who chronically over imbibed, considering it a hideous character flaw.

As a company policy, alcohol of any kind was prohibited on the mill grounds. Its possession was means for immediate dismissal. The very idea that employees would jeopardize their livelihood and lives for a

drink filled him with a simmering rage. "Do we know the finer details?"

Kinnison spoke up, Shultz still glowering and muttering under his breath. "It took a bit of time. A few threats, intimidation, and cajoling, but they finally gave us enough."

They were inside now, the aroma of smoke and burnt cotton heavy in the air in spite of the widely open windows. Unconsciously each man retrieved a handkerchief to place over their noses. They walked down the seemingly endless rows of liquid filled vats and gigantic tables where the bleaching, scouring, dyeing, and other finishing procedures were carried out. Darcy was relieved to note that they were heading away from the separated rooms where the two steam engines were located, those machines being by far the most expensive not to mention necessary for all other operations to take place. Up a curved stairway to the second floor where they traversed long aisles between the weaving looms. Now standing idle with the threads in various stages of completion, the powerful machines were undamaged. They mounted the sooty stairs leading to the third floor spinning room while Kinnison continued, voice muffled behind cloth.

"Not too original, Darcy. A bit of holiday cheer, as it were, to accompany a lively faro game. They holed up by the stacks of rovings where it is warmer. It was early afternoon, but yesterday was cloudy so apparently they brought in extra oil lamps; the better to see the cards, you understand?" He finished with heavy sarcasm and a shake of his head. "Plain stupidity!"

"The lamps are to be kept mounted and well away from the cotton, they all know that." Shultz mumbled, faint German accent notable as it always was when distressed or angry.

"Apparently Hendle happened upon their entertainment, demanded they clear out, but the four were well into their cups and a fight ensued. Somehow a lamp was overturned," he paused to rub his eyes, continuing in a thick voice, "Hendle ran to the water pumps they tell me, but it gets confused from there on out. The others joined the scene and got the fire out eventually, but not before Hendle and the others had died. What a waste!"

They had halted before a bank of spinning mules, blackened with ash and soot, but otherwise intact. Beyond was a scorched, smoking, wet mess of destroyed machinery and piles of burned fiber bundles extending thirty feet to the southern brick wall. Jagged, blackened gaps were visible in the floor and the ceiling above, the fire having obviously risen to encompass the fourth level. The ceiling was essentially gone with thick cross beams in varying degrees of charred thickness the only support for

the ruined carding machines above. The massive contraptions were scorched and twisted with melted metal pieces jutting, the entire row of mangled devices perched precariously.

Shultz gestured above, "The spinners and rovings acted as wicks, funneling the flames to the fourth floor. It looks like the damage is worse up there. Thanks to you, Darcy, we had those water pumps installed otherwise the fire would have raged unchecked."

"Our first order of business is to remove those carders before they break the beams and plummet through to the bottom floors and cause more damage." Darcy said with a curt signal to several of the loitering men, who nodded and hastened to organize a group of workers for the task. "Any idea how much cleaned cotton was sitting here?"

Shultz scratched at his chin and sighed, "Well, the stacks line the walls here, piled to just below the windows. Freshly prepared bundles are replenished via the far lifts as quickly as they are set to the spinners. Looks like those on the extreme edges may be salvageable."

While he spoke he indicated the area of destruction before them, Darcy's mind performing rapid calculations as he considered the quantities. The walls between floors rose roughly fifteen feet with wide windows all around. The southern wall spanned at least fifty feet, the middle bulk of which was a black, faintly smoldering, and soggy mess.

Shultz was continuing, "Some of these spinners may be repairable. I have three new mules in the warehouse and dozens of spare parts from others that have worn out. Guess we should head upstairs. At least this end of the top floor is just machinery. The raw bales are at the northern end where they are hoisted up."

The group made their way to the stairs, Shultz audibly relating the warehouse inventory as they walked. The inspection was thorough, Darcy ultimately calling for parchment and quill to take detailed notes. Eventually Richard left per Darcy's request to secure rooms for them at the Georgian and to dispatch a note to Pemberley assuring of their safe arrival. It was a long day with Darcy and Kinnison spending the bulk of it in Shultz's office on the ground level, bent over the desk and long table with jackets removed and shirt sleeves rolled up as they poured over invoices and inventory lists. Pages of parchment were written in Darcy's firm hand itemizing the damage.

Most of the men were put to work on the cleaning and removing. Others were returned to the unscathed portions of the factory where the women waited; the steam engines powered up as the sequence of milling cotton from its rawly ginned state to completed weave resumed. Cotton needed to be processed and orders filled, no one wanting to waste any

more time or revenue than necessary. The workers required their salaries and the partners certainly could not afford to lose more than they already had. Mr. Shultz directed the employees in all their tasks with the steady competence borne from decades leading men.

It was well after sundown when Darcy finally eased his aching, exhausted body into a hot tub. With a groan of relief he sank into the steaming water, eyes closing in liberation. For the first time since leaving home he allowed his thoughts to stray toward wife and son. With a smile he gradually relaxed each muscle as he sent his love and yearning flying northward, praying that Elizabeth would somehow sense his heart. It was a joy to finally relinquish the tight hold on his emotions, to dwell on the perfection in his life that was Elizabeth and Alexander. With clarity he conjured the image of his family lounging in the parlor, son complacently being passed from devoted relative to relative with serious countenance breaking into sunny smiles at each face encountered. Darcy could hear the adult laughter and infant giggles as he was tickled and nuzzled, always the beloved center of attention.

As an abrupt epiphany it dawned on him that he would miss his baby's one month birthday! His eyes flew open and chest constricted in true sorrow. The ironic part is that he and Elizabeth had not talked about celebrating the date nor had it consciously occurred to Darcy to mark it in any significant way, yet he knew without any doubt that they would have done so. In disgust he sat up in the bathtub, irritatingly grabbing the soap, and attacking his grimy skin with force.

In London Darcy had foolishly believed that separating from his wife would grow easier with time, yet he now accepted that the distress merely multiplied. Now he had to add to the agony of missing Elizabeth the pain of missing Alexander. It came as a bit of a surprise to recognize how thoroughly Alexander had wrapped around his father's heart as an individual. He truly missed him! He missed the tight grip on his index finger and hair, the soft sighs and mewls while sleeping, the tiny pool of milk that always rested in a slack mouth after each meal, the boneless warmth of a small body nestled against his chest, the acute awareness of round blue eyes that swiveled to his face whenever he spoke, the chubby toes so adorably fun to nibble on, the loud cries that evidenced a healthy appetite and strong will, the emerging smiles that grew more focused with each passing day, and hundreds of other characteristics uniquely Alexander.

He joined Richard for a delicious and much needed full course dinner feeling depressed and subdued. Richard seemed uncommonly downcast as well, conversation minimal and both men retiring to their

rooms immediately after dinner. Darcy spent what remaining energy he possessed writing to Lizzy, restrained in his grief as it was simply too painful to articulate, instead telling about the day's events and assuring her that he would be home well before the Christening.

The second day broke with Darcy renewed in his vigor to deal with all the complex issues as rapidly as possible so he could return to his family. He was surly and he knew it, but under the circumstances no one questioned the cause. In truth, the emotions of loneliness and self pity were deeply buried, Darcy and his partners freshly attacking the business at hand. Mr. Shultz handled the manual labor aspects, Darcy and Kinnison thrilled to note that every remaining machine was up and running with six of the damaged ones revamped before the day was done. All of the debris was cleaned away and fresh timber was ordered to begin the structural repairs. Areas were rearranged to compensate for the lost space, every employee responding to the orders of Shultz and his foremen with competence. Richard donned casual attire and assisted Mr. Shultz; the military man quite adept at both receiving and giving orders.

Kinnison concentrated on the reordering of supplies and notification of both buyers and sellers as to the delays incurred due to the fire. Darcy focused on the finances. That there would be a substantial impact fiscally was a given, but the reality was that the combination of careful planning, diligent saving, and significant personal wealth well diversified by all three meant that the impact would readily be absorbed and overcome. The loss will set them back a bit and may likely affect some of their contracts, but they were confident that all would be well in time.

When it came to managing the business aspects, Darcy was in his element and supremely proficient. The years of governing a vast estate had taught him how to deal with the varied array of complications that inevitably arose. Initially the dilemmas had all been unique to him and resolutions reached through intense deliberation and hours of consultation with his Steward. Over time he came to realize that although peculiar problems surfaced from time to time, there were usually similarities to past events to draw from. Such was the case now. Therefore, despite never facing the aftermath of a fire, praise God, Darcy instinctively and through experience knew precisely what to do.

It was the human element that was distressing to him. As distasteful as it was in one respect, there was no option but to dismiss Haggar and Merran for imbibing alcohol while on duty. There were a number of other mills in the area where they could seek employment, but Derby was a small community and word would spread. Few employers

were as strict regarding the no alcohol rule as Mr. Shultz, but a fire was universally looked upon with horror. Whether the men would be able to attain adequately paying work locally was questionable. Shultz was far more pragmatic than his partners, shrugging his shoulders and completely unmoved. Kinnison and Darcy wavered a bit, but in the end the decision was clear.

The widow Hendle was spoken to personally by Darcy on the third day. He rode with Richard and a foreman named Rhodes to the tiny house in the middle of town where the woman resided. Mrs. Hendle greeted them with subdued politeness, eyes swollen and red, and body tremulous as she stood on the top steps before her front door. The Hendle children clustered around her, the youngest of four and five years clutching her skirts and staring at the tall, well-dressed, formal man with wide-eyed fright. The eldest, a skinny boy of thirteen, halted his chore of chopping wood and stood with sharpened axe in hand as he glowered at the men.

Darcy bowed, "Mrs. Hendle, I am Mr. Darcy. Please accept my deepest sympathies for your loss." She nodded, wiping at teary eyes and murmuring *thank you*. Darcy continued, "I confess I did not personally know your husband, but Mr. Shultz assures me he was an excellent foreman." He handed her a parchment wrapped bundle. "Per DKS Midlands policy, Mrs. Hendle, you will find the equivalent of one month's salary. Your position will be held for two weeks, as you have been informed, to allow for grieving. Please let us know as soon as you possibly can what your plans are."

Mrs. Hendle sniffled, "This is our home, Sir. We got no place to go. The mills been good to us so we'll be back, me and the younguns." Her hand swept the yard to encompass her son as well as the twelve year old girl standing behind her. "DKS has the best pay and all, we won't go nowheres else, milord."

Darcy nodded, opening his mouth to speak, especially to inform her that he was not a Lord, but the eldest son had stepped closer and interrupted with a grumble, "If its so great how come my da is dead?"

"Jerome!" His mother gasped. "I am so sorry, Sir! You watch your tongue young man and apologize to Mr. Darcy this instant!"

"I will not! His stupid mill killed my da!"

Mrs. Hendle was crying in earnest, attempting to choke out something, anything to placate the tall, stern man with the reputation for kindness and fairness, but also stringency and nobility. Darcy cut her spluttering short with nothing more than one raised finger her direction, piercing gaze riveted on the teenager.



Jerome flushed under Darcy's forceful but sympathetic stare, but he bravely stared back, lifting his chin slightly as if to challenge. When Darcy spoke it was softly, but with an unmistakable edge of authority and faint contempt. "Mr. Hendle, is it your opinion that your father was a fool?"

"No! How could you...."

"A man makes his own decisions in life, Mr. Hendle. Your father made his. He was a miller, a foreman in my company, and trusted with tremendous responsibility. He worked hard for his place and knew precisely what it entailed. Do you mean to slander his name by insinuating he was ignorant of the risks?" He paused, allowing the grieving boy to assimilate his words. "He took great pride in his work, was brave and strong. His sacrifice will not be forgotten. Do not allow your sorrow to cloud your judgment, Mr. Hendle. I do not claim to be an expert on theological matters, but I believe that our loved ones watch us from the Heavens. Do you wish for your father to witness your disrespect?"

Jerome shook his head shortly, eyes now downcast and axe fallen to rest on the ground, but he held his back straight and shoulders firm. Darcy smiled faintly, glancing to Mrs. Hendle and nodding slightly. The poor woman was speechless, tears falling in huge glistening drops down her cheeks.

"You are the man of the house now, Mr. Hendle. Make your father proud. Mrs. Hendle, you have my sympathies. If there is anything you require Mr. Shultz will assist you."

She curtsied shakily, Darcy bowing again before he turned. Mounting Parsifal, Rhodes leaned close and said, "I will keep a close eye on that boy Mr. Darcy. He may give us trouble."

"There is no need. Take him out of the spinning room, away from his mother. Give him more responsibility. The carding machine, I think. Work him hard for a while, exhaust him and he will give you no trouble." Rhodes looked dubious, Darcy smiling grimly and finishing with confidence as they rode away, "Trust me, I know how best to deal with grief."

\* \* \* \*

"Today is Alexander's birthday and I am missing it."

Col. Fitzwilliam, out of uniform and comfortable in a black suit of wool, peered over the rim of his wine glass at the morose cousin sitting across their secluded table in the Georgian's opulent dining hall.

Darcy was staring at his plate, mien serious as he played with the remains of dinner, fork absently scoring trenches through a small pile of mashed yams. Richard frowned, completely at a loss as to what Darcy meant.

“Ah, cousin, unless I have slept through all of 1818, a year has not passed.”

Darcy chuckled, putting down his fork and picking up his own wine glass. “No, I meant his one month birthday.”

Richard raised his brows, “Do people actually celebrate such a thing? I certainly pray you did not expect me to provide a present. This could become costly after a time.”

“No gifts or parties. I just wanted to be there is all.” He sighed, sitting back in the chair, “I miss my family Richard.” He took a sip, glancing to his cousin’s humorous face, “Go ahead, laugh, make a joke. I need to be cheered.”

Richard shrugged, “I was just thinking that there was a time when all you needed in life was my sparkling personality and delightful company. How things change!”

Darcy laughed in earnest. “Never have I thought you were *all* I needed, my friend, but you do in a pinch.”

Richard lifted his glass in salute. “We shall be back at Pemberley in a day or two. You seem to have things well in hand and there really are no reasons to stay around for the reconstruction, are there?”

“I do not want to desert my partners, but I suppose I can complete the rest from home. It is primarily paperwork from here on. Mr. Keith and I will work on it, and I will likely send him to London next month. I refuse to leave again, barring another catastrophe. It is too difficult.”

Richard was smiling at his once again morose cousin now fiddling with his wedding ring, a gleam of something indiscernible in his eyes. “I know I have said it before, but it still shocks me how profoundly matrimony has affected you.”

“And I have said it before, wait until it is your turn. It is marvelous, beautiful, the very best feeling in the world. Love, and now fatherhood. Ach! I need to go home! Tomorrow afternoon, Richard. We will be home by dinner. What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you remember Lord Fotherby?”

Darcy blinked in surprise, “Naturally! One of our greatest members of Parliament how could I not? Terrible loss to our country. Why do you ask?”

Richard looked embarrassed, ruddy face flushing further. “Well, he has been a friend to our family for decades, as you know, him and our

grandfather contemporaries. Considering his age I guess none of us were too surprised at his death, but then again there are some people who seem immortal. He was so spry.”

“He assuredly was spry. We saw him in London and I never would have imagined him dying a few months later. He was dancing with his wife at Lord Ivers’ ball more often than Elizabeth and me! Yes, a shock and loss to be sure.” He noted Richard’s grimace, chuckling and leaning forward, “So are you going to tell me the thought behind this line of questioning?”

“It is entirely your fault you know? Walking about with that ridiculous grin all the time, peace and tranquility oozing from every pore, and pardon my crudeness, but the obvious sexual satisfaction radiating continually is enough to make the most confirmed bachelor vacillate!”

Darcy grinned, flushing slightly and ducking his head in embarrassment, but not in the least offended. “Whom are we talking about? The lucky lady to turn my wayward cousin’s heart and bring me such utter joy as I now can tease him mercilessly in return? Pray tell!”

“Go easy on me Darcy. I think I am in love, yes, but I am caught up in my own Shakespearean tragedy.”

“Does this have to do with Miss Ulster? I would have imagined the Admiral presenting her on a silver platter if you asked. No, wait!” Suddenly the pieces fell into place and he gazed at his cousin with stunned amazement, “You are speaking of Lady Fotherby.”

“Now you see my dilemma?”

“When did this take place? How could you....? I mean, she has only been widowed for a few months and sequestered at the estate in Buckinghamshire I understand.”

“Alright, you want the sordid details? I have known Lady Fotherby nearly all my life, if you recollect. Her mother and mine have been friends since their society days, although I paid her scant attention, I confess, until University. I would encounter the then Lady Simone Halifax at various soirees and balls. You were there upon occasion Darcy. She had matured into a true beauty and so utterly perfect.”

He paused, shaking his head and taking a drink of wine. “Timing is everything I have come to believe,” his voice low as he swirled the red liquid and lost himself in musings. “Certainly this is true in military matters, but also in life and love. I knew I loved her and that she returned the affection. What could I do about the feelings I had? I was young and naïve with dreams of glory in battle and killing Napoleon personally, far too foolish to recognize true love. Not that I could have done a thing about it as a second son with a modest inheritance.” He shrugged, “By

the time I could possibly give matrimony any serious consideration she was long since married to Lord Fotherby.”

“I remember you fancied her a bit, but had no idea the emotions were deep. Forgive me, my friend, I never knew.”

“Oh, be still William. I cannot proclaim to any great passion. Again, I was young and not sparing undue contemplation on a hopeless situation. It is more the wisdom of age that enables me to relive the feelings and see them for what they were. That and you all dreamy and radiating disgusting happiness every waking hour of the day.”

Darcy smiled and Richard laughed, both men silent for a while. “I had not seen her in years. The rumors would reach my ears from time to time: her marriage to the far older Lord Fotherby, the birth of their two children, the elaborate galas at their homes in Town and High Wycombe. I wondered, as I am sure so many others did, whether the marriage was based on affection or merely an old man wanting a young wife.” He shook his head and grimaced. “Whatever the case, I pushed it all aside until two seasons ago when I saw her at the symphony. It was all back in a rush. Quite took my breath away, actually.”

“I can completely relate. Such is how it was to see Elizabeth at Rosings and later at Pemberley, and every day when I wake next to her matter of fact. Must have been horrible for you. I am so sorry and wish you had shared with me.”

“Shared that I am in love with another man’s wife? Yes, I can only imagine how you would have accepted *that* news! Your exorbitant sense of morality would have been highly offended and the prudish expressions and lecturing would not have been welcome, I can assure you.”

“You did not act on your inclinations and when it comes to losing the woman you love I can fully comprehend the agony. No, I would not have lectured, cousin. In fact, I am not now offended and actually a bit confused. Why do you see it as a tragedy, Richard? As sad as the passing of Lord Fotherby, it does free her, given appropriate mourning period of course. And now you are in a better position to offer yourself as suitor.”

“I suppose, although it seems rather distasteful to consider it at this juncture. The man is barely cold in his grave. Besides....” He stopped, lips pressed together and face filled with a rare bitterness.

“What? Do you judge there no chance she may return your interest?”

“Difficult to ascertain, under the circumstances. We spoke a few times at various functions in Town. Lord and Lady Fotherby were

everywhere, to my dismay. She was polite and proper, our conversations always restrained and in the presence of others. It was probably just my romantic fancy overwhelming me, but I sensed a current between us. Fills me with guilt to even contemplate the subject! Lord, Darcy, I am not capable of judging! I am a soldier. How can I compare to a man of Lord Fotherby's caliber?"

"Oh, nonsense! You are a nobleman's son, an officer of His Majesty's army, young and dashing handsome, rich, charming. Need I go on? You have far more to offer than even the famous Lord Fotherby, no matter how virile he may have been in his seniority." He sat back and picked up his glass. "I really cannot tell you precisely how to proceed. I believe in fate, but also think one needs to encourage it along."

Silence descended yet again, plates cleared by servants and the dessert course served before either man spoke. Darcy was shaken by the atypical expression of sadness on Col. Fitzwilliam's face, having come to rely on his irrepressible affability. When he broke the quiet his voice was husky with emotion.

"I saw her a couple weeks ago. Mother insisted on diverting northwest to pay her respects as friend to her mother. We only stayed the afternoon; had teas and cakes. Father related fond memories of Lord Fotherby in action during sessions of the House of Lords. Lady Fotherby smiled kindly, but did not seem overly comfortable with the topic. Even in the black of mourning she was beautiful." He sighed deeply. "How can you judge a woman's face, William? Especially when so controlled?"

Darcy shrugged and shook his head. "I am not the one to ask, I am afraid. I can read Elizabeth perfectly now, but assuredly misconstrued horribly early in our acquaintance. Even when love was apparent on her face I refused to embrace it out of fear. Did you sense anything from Lady Fotherby? Any hope?"

"Perhaps. She looked at me quite a bit, but maybe that is because I kept staring at her! When we said our good-byes and I kissed her fingers I swear she pressed against my lips and she definitely squeezed my hand. I was shocked, frankly, at the boldness. Too flummoxed to make sense of it and do more than stammer something stupid." He laughed faintly and shook his head. "Go ahead and laugh, cousin, I deserve it!"

Darcy *was* grinning, an amused twinkle in his eyes. "I have not seen you so flustered since Miss Susanne Carmichael kissed you under the mistletoe when you were fifteen! What a joy! The particularly amusing part of it all is that you are far more worldly than I, yet here you sit, as affected by a woman as all the rest of us mortals. Refreshing, actually."

“You are enjoying this aren’t you?”

“Immensely!”

“No further sympathy for the man of constant sorrows? The broken hearted romantic fool doomed to traverse the earth in pitiful loneliness? The woeful puppy with hanging tail and ears?”

“Pah!” Darcy interrupted. “I am as pathetically inept as they come when pertaining to divining romantic clues. However, even I can determine there is hope. Give it time Richard. I am convinced I shall be raising a glass at your wedding ere the year is out. Worse come to worse you can enlist Aunt Madeline’s aid. She would do anything to see you married and bringing more grandchildren her way.”

Richard cringed, Darcy laughing as he bit into his apple pie.

“Pardon me Sir, this is from Mr. Harrison.” Darcy took the offered piece of folded parchment from the maitre de’s hand with a nod of thanks and no surprise. It was the eighth such note he had received in the three days in Derby. Word spread quickly, not only regarding the fire itself, but of the presence of Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. He was quite used to such attention after so many years, actually pleasantly surprised to discover the nature of this visit causing a decrease in the usual number of solicitations. When he and Elizabeth had stayed in Derby in August they had been the recipients of no less than thirty communications, Lizzy flabbergasted that he even knew so many people in the modest sized town.

Most were requests for dinner or luncheon, others merely brief communiqués of welcome, a few frank initiations of a business venture, and a handful from men he already had business dealings with. It was the latter category that Mr. Harrison fell into.

“Who is Mr. Harrison?” Richard asked.

“The owner of the wool factory here in town, the one I contract through. He is here, apparently, and wishes to speak with me. Do you mind? Are we done discussing your love life for the moment?”

“Hilarious. Please, bore me with business discourse. I need to sleep well tonight.” Darcy laughed, motioning to a servant and within minutes Mr. Harrison was joining them at their table, tumblers of brandy on the way. After the expected condolences for the fire and congratulations for Darcys’ heir were extended, Mr. Harrison got down to business.

“First off, Mr. Darcy, I wanted to personally thank you for sending Mr. Bingley my way. Mr. Greystone dealt exclusively with Ornsby’s mill, as you know. Of course, you have a vested interest in adding Mr. Bingley’s fine wools to my inventory, but I do appreciate it

nonetheless.”

“You are welcome. I only gave Bingley the suggestion, however. I told him you ran an excellent establishment, not that Mr. Ornsby does not, but encouraged him to keep his options open. Just because Greystone managed affairs a particular way does not mean it is required to remain so. He made his own decision. But you are correct in that it benefits me as well.” Darcy grinned and lifted his glass to Mr. Harrison, who laughed and clicked the edge with his own.

“This brings me to the point. I comprehend the timing is atrocious now so do not hesitate to be honest.”

“I cannot be otherwise Mr. Harrison. Speak freely.”

He leaned forward, face intent. “I have been delving into the pluses and minuses of expanding for a couple years now. With the addition of Mr. Bingley’s wools, and Mr. Tallish as well, I am splitting at the seams. Last month I was approached by Mr. Reese and had to turn him down as I simply do not have the capability. I am not a greedy man, Darcy, and am making a more than comfortable living with what I have. However, the need is there and it is logical to strive to fulfill it if possible.”

Darcy was nodding, face equally intent, and mind already calculating. “Have you approached the other investors?”

“All but you and Lord Matlock. You have been otherwise preoccupied with the birth of your son, and Lord Matlock returned late from London this year. The other gentlemen are favorable.”

“What are your figures?”

“I have it all written up and in my office. There are three options depending on how generous you all are feeling and what volumes we wish to deal with. At the least, ten thousand pounds. That would add another wing and purchase thirteen additional machines, which would more than handle the current contracts and Mr. Reese. I can have that portion up and operating before sheering season. For thirty thousand I could triple that, plan ahead for the future. Mr. Sitwell is adding sheep to his stock as is Mr. Moorsey. I would dearly love to sign them on.”

“I concur with the concept. It makes sense from all aspects. Send the papers to me tomorrow. I will be returning to Pemberley in the afternoon, but promise to look them over as soon as possible. You can count on me for something, Mr. Harrison, at least three thousand. I will know more once we get the final figures on damages from the fire. Mr. Keith will be traveling to London next month so he can deliver the appropriate documents and drafts.”

“If you wish I can deliver the papers to my father,” Richard

offered.

“Thank you Colonel! That would be wonderful. I will send them around first thing in the morning.”

The conversation turned to unrelated business and political topics, Mr. Harrison departing as they finished their brandies. “Well, that makes two each night,” Richard said with a chuckle.

“Such is my life,” Darcy responded wryly. “Hence why I prefer hiding at Pemberley.”

“That and the lovely brunette and adorable baby.”

“Precisely! This is why I think I shall retire, my friend. Sooner I am asleep the sooner tomorrow will arrive.”

“You sound like a child awaiting Father Christmas.”

“Ah, but this is far superior. My wife’s arms and son’s grasping hands transcend any gift delivered. Remember this, cousin. It will keep you motivated in your pursuit.”

\* \* \* \*

“Honestly Darcy, we can manage matters from here on. I was going to be tarrying hereabouts with my wife’s family for a couple weeks anyway. Frankly, this will give me something to occupy my time besides pretending to enjoy their chatter.” Kinnison grinned, “Go home to your new wife and child. We will send regular dispatches I promise.”

“You and Mr. Keith are far more proficient at the paperwork and financial related issues.” Shultz grumbled from where he reclined and fanned his perspiring face. He was covered with soot and grime having spent the past three hours revamping several of the damaged spinning mules. It was actually very cold outside, clouds gathering rapidly and darkening threateningly by the moment. “You better get a move on if you want to beat the storm. I think it bodes to be a bad one.”

He was right. Flurries were already falling by the time Col. Fitzwilliam and Darcy mounted their stallions and headed out of town. Richard was candidly questioning the wisdom in riding through what promised to become a blizzard before it was over. Darcy, however, refused to discuss waiting. His prescient prediction of Derbyshire weather was not failing him; he simply ignored it in the urgent need to be home. It would prove to be a horrible mistake, one that he was rapidly recognizing before they were three miles north of town.

It was miserable. Snow falling in thick sheets, wind hitching furiously and driving the ever increasingly solidified ice into their faces, cold seeping through the layers of thick woollens they wore, and visibility



falling to near zero. The horses plodded along slowly, riders bent double over their backs. It was when they passed the barely seen sign for 'Belper, 2 miles' that Richard grabbed Darcy's arm.

"William, we have traveled eight miles in nearly an hour, with twenty more to go! We cannot do this. I say we stop in Belper for the night."

Darcy nodded, heart sinking lower than it already was; dismay augmented as with the storm currently raging with no indication of abating he would have no method of alerting Elizabeth. Being comfortably settled at the small, but hospitable carriage inn in Belper, dry and warm in front of the blazing fire with steaming mugs of coffee and a platter of roasted lamb with sautéed vegetables, did little to ease the ache in his heart. Richard prattled on in his typical humorous fashion, the room lively with other waylaid travelers and a country fiddler in the corner, but Darcy volunteered little. Eventually he would relax, make the best of a troublesome situation, and even join in a game of darts that Richard won, naturally.

The bed was comfortable and clean, welcomed by a weary Darcy even if it was the fourth night of sleeping alone. He tossed a bit, always finding it difficult to settle now that he was so dependent on his wife's warm and soft body molded into his, but finally drifted asleep. Thoughts were contented for the most part, even in his loneliness the presence of Elizabeth and Alexander as fixtures in his soul pacified him. He dreamt happily; confident that he would see their beloved faces, kiss their beloved lips, and hold their beloved bodies close on the morrow.

He had no way of knowing that he was wrong.

## **17 – Shrieks in the Night**

The blizzard raged all through the dark hours of the night. Wind screeched wildly in tones reminiscent of fighting tomcats or a woman in pain. It was one of those rare storms that old men would talk about in decades to come: “Remember the blizzard of 1817? Ushered in the new year with a vengeance, that one!” Temperatures dropped to alarming levels, the freeze seeping into the very marrows of the bones with negative consequences to some livestock and vegetation that would be felt in a variety of ways. Snow fell in record amounts, the landscape as white as an untouched canvas. It was the singular object that marred the otherwise pristine surrounds; vague flashes of brown tree trunks, the multihued bricks and stones of buildings, and partially frozen blues of waterways and lakes the only spots of color between the lopsided blown drifts of powdery snow.

Darcy woke before the dawn, shivering under the pile of blankets. It required an exceptional cold to cause his internal furnace to dampen, evidenced further by visible mist with each shuddering exhale. He rose, struggling into trousers and a thick robe to aid the apparently useless nightshirt in warding off the chill. With a sleep numbed mind he jerked to the dead fireplace, shaking as he set about the familiar task of building a fire, and sending a thankful prayer heavenward for the competent Pemberley staff that he knew would not allow his family and friends to suffer unduly from the extreme weather. Without the slightest doubt he knew that fires would be raging in all the occupied bedchambers, especially those of his wife and son.

In minutes he had a steady blaze going, chafed hands practically touching the flames in order to absorb the heat. He sat on the hearth, momentarily too cold to think of rising and checking the outside. It was yet too dark anyway, but he could tell that the violent wind had died down somewhat and the furious tinkling of icy flakes hitting glass was no more. Darcy’s lifetime of dwelling in Derbyshire told him what he already needed to know without the necessity of gazing upon the countryside: the snow would be deep. Whether his faithful and vigorous mount could trudge through the banked flakes was not the question. It was whether the storm had abated enough to allow for travel. He sighed deeply,

closing weary eyes for a moment and leaning his head onto the warming stones. The worse of the winds and thrashing snow may have dissipated, but he knew the storm continued. It was a feeling sensed in every fiber of his body, again a result of Derbyshire literally residing in his blood.

Anger rose in his chest, aiding in warming his flesh, but causing fists to clench and fresh shaking to erupt. *I must get home!* Darcy had never been the type of man to suffer from bouts of impatience, generally reasonably long-suffering, but at the present his impetuosity consumed him. With forced effort he inhaled deeply numerous times, struggling with eventual success to calm the turbulence. Oddly he discovered that meditating on Elizabeth's face, envisioning her sitting placidly with Alexander at her breast, aided the serenity. Although the thought was crushing in its agony, the fact that they would be waiting for him whether it today or tomorrow simultaneously comforted him.

The hours passed as the obscured sun slowly rose. Darcy eventually lit several lamps, passing the time in relative peace with book in hand as he sat near the fire. He must have dozed off without realizing it, because the sudden earsplitting scream which rend the silence jolted him from his chair with an instantly palpitating heart and fogged brain, body swaying from the abrupt movement. He grasped the chair arm to steady himself, moving toward the door seconds later.

The hallway was rapidly becoming a mass of surging bodies and rising noise as doors opened all along the passageway. Servants and inn guests appeared by the dozens it seemed, confusion abounding as all eyes swiveled to the hysterically shrieking maid embraced by a middle aged man wearing a robe where they stood blocking a widely open door near the end of the long hallway. From Darcy's room some forty feet away nothing in the room could be seen, but from the antics of the maid and stunned pallor of the gentleman, it must be bad.

He stood under the jamb observing the mayhem in silent bafflement and started slightly when Richard spoke into his ear, "What is going on?"

"No idea. Fix your hair."

Richard ran fingers through his unruly russet locks absently, glancing at Darcy who was attending to the chaos at the end of the hallway. "Tighten your robe." Darcy did so, flushing faintly at the realization that his entire upper chest was exposed, but no one was looking their direction, and all the abruptly roused guests were in varying states of undress.

At that moment the Innkeeper, Mr. Allenton, appeared on the landing, voice raised loudly as he inquired as to the upset. The maid had

calmed somewhat, no longer yelling, but now sobbing uncontrollably in the man's arms, he obviously dazed.

"What is all the fuss?" Mr. Allenton asked, waving and nodding apologetically to the agitated guests. "So sorry ladies and gentlemen. Please accept my apologies for the disturbance. So excitable these young girls are. Please excuse me. Pardon me, Sir. Now, Alice what is the meaning of this unseemly display? Quite horrid of you! Really should be more control. ...." At which point he glanced into the room and halted with a gasp and hand raised to his mouth. Instantly all the blood drained from his face. "Merciful God! Spare us!" He whispered.

This declaration was followed by a fresh screech from a woman who had eased herself through the crowd to peek over Mr. Allenton's shoulder. "She is dead! Saint's preserve us! A girl, dead!"

At that proclamation pandemonium broke loose. Yells and cries, bodies backing into each other in a frantic effort to escape, frightened eyes suspiciously gazing at their neighbor, and families grasping onto loved ones to ensure their existence. Nothing remotely resembling order prevailed, even the Innkeeper paralyzed in the doorway.

A shrill whistle pierced the uproar. All voices fell, the silence abrupt and complete. Darcy swiveled to his cousin who seemed to have grown taller and added years in a matter of seconds. A uniform was not necessary for all to instantly sense that here was a man of authority.

"Listen here!" He commanded forcefully, "You all must return to your rooms and stay inside until the matter can be appropriately dealt with. Now!" Only a heartbeat's hesitation before every last soul responded to the directive, shuffling hastily and quietly. In seconds the corridor was empty of all but Col. Fitzwilliam, Darcy, Mr. Allenton, a handful of servants, and the befuddled gentleman comforting the weeping maid.

Richard approached the Innkeeper, Darcy trailing behind. "Mr. Allenton, I am Col. Fitzwilliam if you recall. This is Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. Perhaps we may be of assistance." He looked into the room, expression unchanged as he returned his attention to the Innkeeper.

Mr. Allenton peered into Richard's face blankly for a moment, the man clearly stunned. "I do not. ....What?"

"Get a grip on yourself man! You, Sir, whom might you be?" Addressing the older man holding the maid.

"I am Carlyle, Colonel. Room nine, here, across the hall. I heard the girl and responded first. She, well, she is obviously distraught."

Richard nodded crisply. "You there!" He gestured to a servant, a boy of approximately fifteen, "Take Miss Alice to the common room.

Give her some warm tea and a shot of brandy. No one is to leave this establishment, do you understand?" The boy nodded, eyes round and frightened. Richard turned to Mr. Allenton, "Who of your staff is the most trustworthy? We need to send for the Sheriff."

Mr. Allenton had managed to collect himself. He remained pale, but was focused and responded in a firm voice. "Milton," he said to the boy, "Take Alice as the Colonel commands. Bolton," he signaled to another lurking servant, this one an enormous black man, as Milton and Alice moved away. "Send Mackenzie for the Sheriff. The remainder of the staff is to wait in the common room. No one is to leave! You guard the door."

This accomplished, Richard again addressed the Innkeeper. "Do you recognize the young lady, Mr. Allenton?"

He swallowed, eyes closing in silent supplication before bravely looking into the room and taking a hesitant step over the threshold. Richard followed, Darcy pausing in the doorway.

The girl was no more than sixteen. There was no doubt that in life she would have been a pretty thing, shapely figure with full breasts and narrow waist, all of which were tragically on display. She lay exposed on the bed, chemise ripped open and body splayed in a bizarre angle with smudges of blood on her thighs and the bed sheets by her legs. Her once lovely, innocent face now bluish tinged and frozen in an expression of horror. Darcy had witnessed death in all its ugliness on more occasions than he wished to recall, but nothing that compared with the raw brutality before him. It required every ounce of discipline at his disposal to remain standing calmly, but his stomach churned with a rising gorge caught in his throat.

Mr. Allenton released a moan, fist clenched before his mouth with voice faint, "It is Mr. Hazeldon's daughter. Oh sweet Jesus! How could this happen? In my Inn!" He broke down in sobs, rushing from the room and leaning into the hallway wall where Mr. Carlyle still stood.

"Richard, how should we handle this?" Darcy asked in a quiet, sick tone.

Richard was staring at the girl with a frown on his face. "I remember her. In the dining room with her parents, I assume, and a younger sister. I only noticed because I thought the gentleman looked vaguely familiar. I could not place from where, and as I do not know a Mr. Hazeldon it must just be that he resembles another. Be that as it may, I was startled at one point because this young lady was staring at me with a very flirtatious expression. I have been on the receiving end of enough such coquettishness to recognize it. This startled me, however, as she is

so young and I am not in uniform, which is generally the stimulus.”

“I do not recall her at all.”

“Of course not. You were brooding far too much and rarely noticed a pretty face even when you were unattached. What an absolute pity! Come. We should leave her be and let the Sheriff deal with this.”

“Someone needs to find the parents. They obviously do not know she is missing.” He stopped, throat tight and eyes misty. “Can we not at least cover her?”

Richard nodded tersely, lips compressed as he stepped to the bed and drew the counterpane over her pale and lifeless body. “Go with God, little one,” he murmured.

\* \* \* \*

The following hours were tense ones to be sure. Richard and Darcy retired to their respective rooms to shave and dress. Mr. Allenton coped with the situation as well as possible, placing a guard in front of the ill-fated girl’s door and appeasing the upset staff. He frankly prayed that the Hazeldon family, who were situated in two rooms on the third floor, would remain asleep until the Sheriff arrived. In this, at least, he was fortunate.

Those guests and servants who knew of the tragedy trembled in their chambers behind stoutly locked doors. It would be the Sheriff who first uttered the word, but they were all thinking it: *Murder*. Richard joined Darcy in his room once dressed. The two sat in silence, waiting.

Now that the sun was well over the horizon the outer world beyond the cold glass and benumbed atmosphere within the walls could be seen. Darcy’s prediction was accurate. Snow sat in deep drifts with fresh flakes airily falling. The sky was grayish-black with thick clouds offering nominal breaks to visualize sunny blue sky. The winds had died, thankfully, but the snowfall itself volunteered no hint of abating anytime soon.

He experienced pangs of guilt over the thought, but the honest truth is that Darcy wanted to be home. He did not know the girl, but that did not preclude him from sympathizing with the family. In fact, it was the image of his beloved sister, who was not much older than the stricken girl, in such a horrific pose that increased his urgency to be with his family. The additional responsibilities now lying upon his shoulders as a husband and father were keenly felt and taken very seriously. He trusted the Pemberley staff, knew with fair certainty that the house and its occupants were well protected, but this incident proved that the criminal

element stalked and would strike indeterminately. In a reaction typical of most men, he illogically believed that his mere presence would shield his family from any tragedy.

"As soon as feasible I wish to depart. Are you prepared to brave the cold?"

"Under the circumstances, yes. Suddenly Pemberley has never appealed to me more, or Rivallain for that matter. Depending on whether we ever have breakfast I may desert you at Matlock."

Darcy sighed, "I would be delighted just to have coffee. What will be the procedure, Richard? You know more of the law than me."

Richard shrugged, "I know military law, which is different. I imagine the Sheriff will need to question everyone, try to piece together what happened. My god, William! A crime such as this not eight doors down! Did you hear anything?"

"A number of doors opening and closing as you and I retired earlier than some, but nothing untoward. Just the wind howling incessantly. I slept well, but woke at four thirty absolutely freezing. The wind had died down to a moderate whine and it was fairly quiet aside from the usual crashing of over burdened tree branches. Whatever transpired was likely long since concluded."

"She was strangled." Richard said softly from where he stood by the window. "That was evident. I have seen death from strangulation a number of times, although not as often as...." He paused, turning to Darcy, "She was violated William, before. I am sure of it. Someone who is here, a guest or servant perhaps."

Darcy stared at his cousin, neither man speaking for a time. Colonel Fitzwilliam, commander of soldiers in numerous battles, warrior and dealer of death in times of war, was no stranger to the evil that haunted this world. There were things he had seen, things he himself had done in the name of Country and Honor that no one knew, not even Darcy. He was far from innocent, by any stretch of the imagination. Serving the Crown was frequently the polar opposite of glorious. It was more often ugly, dirty, brutal, messy, repugnant, and hellish. The contemptible reality of the baser elements had hardened his heart to a great degree. Nothing truly shocked him.

Darcy, on the other hand, for all his education and awareness of the broader world beyond his immediate existence, *was* an innocent. His knowledge of evil in its myriad manifestations was primarily read about in books and newspapers. The death and subsequent grief that was a part of his life was of a normal nature, the result of accidents or fate. Other than a couple incidents of thievery among his workers and once with a

Pemberley servant, the typical scheming machinations of businessmen, and cheating with cards or dice, Darcy had no personal experience with truly heinous sinfulness.

Both men were shaken by what had occurred while they slept peacefully dreaming of home and hearth, but to varying degrees.

The sound of footsteps on the wooden floor corridor and lifted voices reached their ears. Individual words could not be distinguished, Richard returning to his contemplation of the snow while Darcy closed his eyes.

They waited. There was no choice.

When the agonizing wails of a man and woman in intense suffering reached their ears, they barely flinched. Unconsciously they had been expecting it and were strangely relieved to have the tormenting anticipation over. It went on seemingly forever. The muffled murmur of placating voices filtered through the cries, the sporadic bark of a dictate utter by a voice of authority, and the varying tread of multiple feet.

It was Richard who crossed and answered the knock when it came. A deputy stood without, bowing briskly, "Mr. Darcy?"

"I am afraid not. I am Col. Fitzwilliam."

"Excellent! Sheriff Weeden wishes to speak with you Colonel as well as Mr. Darcy. If you please?"

They followed the deputy, bypassing the brawny attendant guarding the scene of the crime, down the stairs, and eventually to a cluttered office located beyond the kitchen. The clink of pans and pottery mingled with pleasing aromas caused both men's hungry stomachs to release sustained growls. Sheriff Weeden sat behind the desk, several pieces of parchment laid before him as he scribbled. Without glancing up at the Deputy's introduction, he waved both men to the seats situated before the desk.

"Cross, bring us fresh coffee and a tray of something to eat. I do not know about you gents, but I am famished. Roused from my warm bed with news of a murder does not allot the liberty of a leisurely breakfast." As he spoke, the Sheriff continued to write, not yet formally acknowledging either gentleman nor even meeting their eyes.

Darcy frowned, not at all used to such rudeness, glancing toward Richard whose brows were raised with a similar expression of surprise gracing his features. Slowly they sat. The room was small and windowless; disorderly with stacks of papers and boxes stuffed to overflowing with an assortment of items. A pair of mounted smoky oil sconces and one lamp on the messy desk provided the only illumination. The fastidious Darcy found the whole environment depressing. His desk



may be a bit cluttered, but it was an organized clutter and always clean.

The Sheriff of Belper was a middle aged man, short and portly with graying black hair and a face tired and lined. Thick, bushy eyebrows framed small, sunken eyes aside the bulbous nose of a chronic drinker.

“Col. Fitzwilliam,” the Sheriff spoke abruptly, looking at Richard with an intimidating stare, “I am to understand that you were the first to look closely at the deceased?”

“I suppose that is true.”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon? I do not understand...”

“Why did you feel it your place to exert your authority and examine a crime scene? Are you a professional investigator?”

Richard bristled. “I believe you are mistaken, Sheriff Weeden. I did not ‘examine’ anything. We entered with Mr. Allenton to identify the girl. That is all.”

“You covered her, yes?”

“Only to preserve decency. I disturbed nothing, I can assure you.”

“Hmmm. Perhaps. Why did you feel the need to get involved at all?”

“It was utter chaos and Mr. Allenton was unable to cope with the situation. I was merely trying to help.”

“Did you know the girl, Colonel?”

Richard inhaled several times in an attempt to calm his irritation before replying. “Sheriff Weeden, I am not appreciative of your tone. I comprehend that you have questions, but do not approve of the rudely accusatory inflections.”

“A crime of the most heinous variety took place in this establishment last night, Colonel, and I intend to find out who did it. Forgive me for not extending the customary pleasantries, but under the circumstances it is a waste of my time. I repeat, did you know the girl?” His voice had arisen slightly, fleshy chin thrust forward pugnaciously.

“No, I did not. I recall seeing her with her family while dining and later in the common room briefly. I did not speak to her, exchanged the merest glances, do not know her family, nor did I see when she left the room.”

“You were present as well, Mr. Darcy?” Darcy nodded, face a mask of regulated disapproval. “Did you know the girl or speak to her at any time?”

“I did not notice her at all.”

“What brings you two to Belper?”

Darcy answered, "We were caught in the storm and could go no further. I am sure it is a similar tale for most of the guests."

"Traveling north or south?"

"North from Derby."

"Why, pray tell, were you in Derby so soon after Christmas? Why would you not be at Pemberley with your new wife, Mr. Darcy?" Darcy's eyes were flinty, lips a tight line as he pierced the Sheriff with his most menacing stare. He did not reply. The Sheriff steepled his fingers and sat back into the chair, meeting Darcy's gaze unflinchingly. "Refusing to answer me is not wise, Mr. Darcy."

"I will answer any question you place before me that is of relevance to the matter at hand. My personal affairs have no bearing."

"Oh, but they do. A young girl was raped and killed. And I have before me two men without female companionship who leapt at the opportunity to place themselves as saviors to the incident, a devious method of displacing suspicion, one of whom it was reported to me had a light shining from his room at the wee hours of the night! Can you explain that, Mr. Darcy?!"

Darcy was absolutely livid. He stood stiffly, back straight and tense fury emanating from him in waves. Nonetheless, his voice was soft and calm, "I regret that I can shed no light on this tragedy, Sheriff Weeden. I heard nothing and saw nothing until the tumult this morning. I awoke at 4:30 and started a fire as my room was very cold. I rang no one, instead sitting and reading. That is all I have to offer on the subject I am afraid. If you have further need of me I will be at Pemberley."

He turned to exit the room, the Sheriff's voice staying his steps. "You will be going nowhere Mr. Darcy. Until the guilty party is discovered all here are suspects, including you." He wore a smug smirk on his face. *These arrogant landed gentry need to be put in their place*, he thought. *Serves them right for thinking they can circumvent the law!* "I am the authority now, Sir. Remember this. Colonel, you may leave as well. I will call if I have further questions." And he recommenced his writing without another word.

\* \* \* \*

Noon approached with the general atmosphere unchanged. The staff resumed some of their duties, primarily those involving the preparation of food, always watched over by the deputy guarding the rear door. Minimal service was forthcoming, rooms were not cleaned or beds made, baths were not drawn, and most of the guests preferred to dress

themselves rather than interact with anyone. Meals of plain fare were served in the dining room, people sitting alone and eating quickly. Conversation was minimal. Suspicious glances were frequent, especially toward anyone of the male persuasion. Word had spread despite the subdued environment, the full fate of the girl known by all.

A pall of death had fallen over the entire building. The weather remained cloudy with steadily falling snow fostering the sensation of exclusion from the rest of the world. Citizens stayed snug in their homes and travelers refused to brave the elements, therefore no one showed up seeking shelter at the Inn.

The exception to the rule was the coroner and undertaker, who reported by mid-morning, and later left with the shrouded body accompanied by a grieving father. Mrs. Hazeldon remained in their chambers, well sedated thanks to the laudanum graciously supplied by a fellow guest.

It would seem to bode well for the investigation that the Inn was not filled to capacity. Overall the establishment was of modest size. A small country coaching public house frequently bypassed for the fancier places in Derby or Matlock. Being the holiday season as well as a particularly cruel winter, travelers were few and thus nearly half the available rooms were vacant. Aside from the Hazeldons the only other entire family was the Westmorelands. Both groups were passing Christmas with relatives, deciding to tarry due to the inclement weather. The remaining guests were comprised of mostly single men journeying for a variety of business or pleasure purposes, such as were Richard and Darcy, and two couples. Sheriff Weeden suspected everyone, granting no quarter arbitrarily.

One by one each male resident was filed into the dank office where Sheriff Weeden presided. Every man was indiscriminately treated to his tactics of coercion, questions asked in an abrupt and incohesive manner with beady eyes boring harshly. It would continue at a snail's pace for many hours.

Darcy exited the interrogation absolutely fuming. With back stiff and tread a hairbreadth away from stomping, he ascended the stairs with Col. Fitzwilliam trailing silently. Richard was offended by the Sheriff's tone and disgusting insinuations, but could tolerate the intimations with equanimity as he understood to a degree why they had been rendered and was not as easily affronted as his morally staunch cousin. For a man like Darcy the very implication of indecency, especially regarding cheating on his wife, not to mention the veiled allusion to murder was abominable. Couple that with the frustration of impotence in his urge to be home and

it was a stunning blow.

They entered Darcy's chamber, the incensed man heading directly to the armoire and removing his saddle bag. Without a word he yanked the fastidiously hung shirts and jackets, shoving them into the large pockets with angry vigor.

"Ah, Darcy? What, pray tell, are you doing?"

"I am packing and I am leaving. You can accompany me or not, I do not care which, but I am going home."

Richard drew close, voice soft but firm, "William, listen to me. I sympathize with your feelings, I truly do, but you cannot leave."

"Watch me."

"What I will watch is one, or probably all three, of those burly deputies tackle you to the ground, clap you in irons, and lock you in one of the basement storage rooms. Furthermore, such an action will only cast greater doubt on your innocence. Aside from the distress this will cause your wife, imagine the confusion it will cause. You *must* think beyond your own selfish desires!"

Darcy had continued to thrust items haphazardly into the pouches, apparently ignoring Richard, until the final words at which point he rounded on him with visage a mask of icy fury. "Speak cautiously cousin."

"I will speak sense and it would behoove you to calm down and listen! A girl has been murdered William! This horrendous occurrence takes precedence over your wishes. I am sorry for the brutality of that truth, but there it is. Sheriff Weeden may be a bit rough around the edges, but he has a job to do. Our responsibility as citizens of Derbyshire is to assist him in any way possible, and certainly do nothing that will distract him."

"It is ludicrous Richard. We have nothing to do with this and he knows that. The man merely wants to exert his authority and is taking advantage of a woeful calamity to do so. It is disgusting."

"All that is true, but you are forgetting one incontrovertible fact, cousin."

"What?"

"He is the Sheriff and even you, Master of Pemberley, cannot overcome that. Do you think I like this any better? Being ordered about by a subordinate? I am a Colonel for God's sake!" He shrugged and spread his hands, mouth lifted in a faint smile.

Darcy was assuredly not in the mood for humor, but Richard's words did have the effect of dousing his anger. He sat onto the edge of the bed, hands falling between his knees as he leaned forward with a deep

sigh. "How long do you think this will take? I do not have much faith in the murderer stepping forward and confessing his crimes, do you?"

"Not especially. I suppose it depends on the situation." Darcy looked at him questioningly. Richard shrugged again and sat next to his cousin on the bed. "I do not claim to be an expert in these sorts of crimes, but I do have some experience with the lower dregs of society and criminal element. Either this man is a calculated killer and has likely done such a thing before, or it was an accident. If it the former then it may be impossible to discover the culprit, unless Sheriff Weeden is an excellent interrogator. If the latter, which is what I tend to believe, the perpetrator will be easier to crack."

Darcy smiled and lifted a brow. "You have a theory, Inspector Fitzwilliam?"

He shook his head and laughed faintly, "Not really. Perhaps I simply prefer to think we do not have a soulless, homicidal maniac lurking about." He slapped his palms onto his knees and stood up abruptly, "Enough speculating! I am famished and I know food will improve your disposition. Let us see what the cooks have managed to throw together. Cheer up cousin! You still have me for company!"

Darcy met Richard's grin with a sardonic sneer and shake of his head, "Marvelous."

\* \* \* \*

Darcy's attitude in general was not improved with coffee and a full stomach, but physically he felt better. He and Richard reposed in friendly companionship at the small table nestled near the fire. Darcy had purposefully crossed to the table farthest away from the window having no wish to stare at the gloomy surroundings. The dining room was empty except for two other tables, one with an elderly couple and the other with a distinguished gentleman of some sixty years. They ignored each other completely. The girl, who nervously served them with frightened eyes darting back and forth, related that the other guests had all eaten and quickly returned to their rooms.

The food was plain, but satisfying. Aside for the vague undercurrent of persistent tension it was a relaxing interval in a cozily warm room. The cousins conversed softly about a variety of subjects, none of which involved the current crisis. Mr. Allenton entered at one point, speaking timidly with Darcy and Richard before moving on to the other guests.

"Poor man," Richard said, "I doubt anything remotely similar has

ever happened to him.”

“I do pray his business does not suffer due to this event.”

At that instant a handsome young man of approximately twenty years appeared on the threshold. He was well dressed; comportment clearly revealing him to be a gentleman of means, but there was an air of distress about him that was equally evident. An accompanying servant pointed to Mr. Allenton and the young man hastily approached. Richard and Darcy curiously observed the interaction as Mr. Allenton frowned then paled. His eyes widened and mouth fell open, hands kneading together as he glanced about the room as if searching. With readily apparent relief he settled on Richard and Darcy, striding swiftly toward their table with the young man trailing.

“Mr. Darcy, Col. Fitzwilliam, this is Mr. Hugh Stafford. He and his brother are guests here, have been for a week now. Anyway, he is concerned as his brother, Mr. Jared Stafford, is not answering the knock at his door and Mr. Hugh here says he heard odd noises coming from inside.”

“What sort of odd noises?”

Mr. Stafford swallowed, clearing his throat nervously before answering, “It makes no sense at all Mr. Darcy. We retired to our rooms late having, well, imbibed fiercely.” His face was beet red, head hanging as if expecting the older men to scold him. Richard smiled faintly, recalling his first youthful indiscretions and feeling for the lad. However, the events of late did not lend well to humor. Mr. Stafford resumed, “I was worse off then Jared, but we were both well in our cups. He is younger then I, but generally better able to recuperate from these overindulgences. Not that we do this often, you understand!”

“Of course not, Mr. Stafford.” Darcy said placatingly.  
“Continue.”

“I just rose an hour ago and was surprised Jared had not woken me earlier. I went to his room, but the door is locked and he does not answer. I hear banging about and,” he hesitated in embarrassment, face flushing, “I think....crying.”

The three older men exchanged significant glances, Mr. Stafford confused. Darcy continued, “Mr. Stafford, are you aware of what has transpired at the Inn today?”

“No Sir.”

“A girl was murdered last night, Mr. Stafford. Miss Hazeldon. Do you know her?”

But the question was redundant as all the blood had drained from Mr. Stafford’s face, his knees literally giving out as he sank into a nearby

chair. "Sweet Jesus! Miss Hazeldon? Do you mean Miss Felicity Hazeldon? Murdered? No! It cannot be! Oh dear God! Who could do such a thing? How...." His voice broke in a sob, "How did she....? Oh god!"

"How well did you know the young lady, Mr. Stafford?" Richard asked sharply.

"I....That is...I knew her a little. They have.....the Hazeldons have been here for, what four days now, Mr. Allenton? She is a lovely young lady, so sweet and kind. Jared will be crushed! He fancied her a bit, you see. Her poor, poor parents! This is horrible! Too horrible!" He released a moan, head cradled in shaking hands. "Have they caught the villain who did this?!"

Mr. Allenton had watched and listened with a dawning fear that he attempted with all his might to submerge. He honestly liked both young men, judged them of the finest caliber, so the thought of either of them being involved had frankly not entered his mind despite the friendly association between the two families. Mr. and Mrs. Hazeldon were also fond of the fellows; knew them to be reputedly of an excellent family with modest wealth, so had not inhibited the acquaintance between their eldest daughter and Mr. Jared Stafford. The Innkeeper had placed their names last on the guest list given to Sheriff Weeden and obviously Mr. Hazeldon had not mentioned their names with any sort of suspicion.

Frankly, given the rather flirtatious and forwardly improper personality of the deceased girl, Mr. Allenton had reckoned it could be any of the dozen men currently residing at his establishment. Inwardly he begged God's forgiveness for such an uncharitable thought toward the dead, but that was the truth of it. Not that she in any way *deserved* her fate, heavens no! But in his opinion young ladies needed to be very careful who they focused their charms on. Miss Hazeldon was not always scrupulous, nor her parents as diligent as they should be. In truth Mr. Allenton had felt rather sorry for the younger Mr. Stafford placing his favor on the coy girl, hoping that he was mature enough not to take her seriously.

Darcy and Richard were grim. "Mr. Allenton, has Sheriff Weeden spoken with Mr. Jared Stafford? Does he know about the girl?"

"I have not seen him yet this morning, Sir. The Staffords are last on the list and I know the Sheriff has not seen everyone yet." He paused, spreading his hands. "I do not know for certain, Sir, but think it unlikely. They were quite intoxicated last night."

Richard looked at Darcy, "Locked in his room and sobbing? Seems an odd crapulent reaction no matter how intense the headache.

Sounds like guilt to me.”

“Or fear.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Mr. Stafford was glancing from one troubled face to the other in confusion. “Are you suggesting.....Wait!” He jumped up angrily, “Are you suggesting my brother had something to do with Miss Hazeldon? That is absurd! How dare you...”

“Calm down Mr. Stafford.” Richard rose, as did Darcy, and placed his hand lightly onto the upset young man’s shoulder. “Lead us to your brother’s room and let’s see what we can discover.”

The chamber of Mr. Jared Stafford was at the very end of the hallway, just beyond Richard and Darcy’s chambers, and completely opposite of where Miss Hazeldon’s body was discovered. The three older men stepped in the wake of a fuming Mr. Hugh Stafford, who paused before the closed door and angrily glanced at the others before pressing his lips together and raising knuckles to rap on the solid wood.

“Jared? It’s Hugh. Open up and let me in.” Silence. “Come on Jared! It is well past the lunch hour and I am famished. We need food, brother.” Nothing. “Jared you are worrying me. Open the door, please.”

“Go away Hugh,” a muffled, slurry voice issued from behind the stout door. “Run back to mother and father. Tell them I am dead. Gone, gone.....into the abyss.....no hope.....no bloody hope....” The words trailed off into hushed gibberish accented by the crash of something glass shattering against the wall.

No longer angry, but merely frightened, Hugh looked to the older men. The face barely on the edge of manhood was now reverted to the pleading desolation of a confused youth. Darcy nodded to Mr. Allenton who retrieved a bundle of keys from his pocket. The muted scrape of a heavy object dragging across the wooden floor reached their ears as Mr. Allenton finally found the correct key and inserted it into the lock. He turned the knob, throwing the door open, and nimbly stepping aside, clearly not wishing to be the first to view what they all inwardly feared to behold.

It was far worse then any of them had imagined.

The small chamber was freezing cold from the yawning windows, and in utter ruin. Broken shards of glass and pottery lay everywhere; the linens had been violently flung off the bed with numerous ripped strips of fabric littering the floor; the curtains had been slashed with a knife and then wrenched from the wall, rod and all, to lie in a heap by the window; the tall mirror was smashed in four places by the heavy crystal tumblers whose remains could be seen in a pile at the mirror’s base; pictures were



jerked from their wall hooks and tossed randomly; deep gashes marred one of the thick bedposts as if a sword fight had ensued with the unoffending column; and through it all were splatters of tiny blood drops and bloody footprints.

As appalling as the room itself, even more gruesome was the sight of the eighteen year old boy slumped in the chair positioned before the unlit fireplace. He stared with lifeless eyes into the ashes, holding a sharp knife in his right hand and a nearly empty bottle of whiskey in the other. Whether he was a handsome lad could not be discerned so ravaged was his visage. His entire being was depraved: shoulder length blonde hair loose and snarled; eyes red rimmed and bloodshot; four deep bloody fingernail scratches down his left cheek; torn, gaping, and blood smeared linen shirt displaying a bruised upper chest; stocking clad feet lacerated and bleeding from a dozen shard inflicted wounds; and tremorous hands with swollen, bruised knuckles lifting the bottle to pale, dry lips. He muttered indecipherable words under his breath, momentarily unaware of the four shocked men standing in the doorway.

“Jared!” Hugh whispered, “My God what happened to you?”

Jared glanced up blearily, blinking several times to focus, eyes alighting on his elder brother with bare recognition. “Brother. I told you to leave. Let me die as I deserve. Tell mother.....tell her I love her. Now, go away.” His voice was flat and low, turning away dismissively for further contemplation of the ashes.

Richard and Darcy shared glances. Richard cleared his throat and stepped forward, while Darcy whispered to Mr. Allenton to fetch the Sheriff. Hugh was shocked beyond words or coherent thought and stood pale and silent.

“Mr. Stafford, my name is Col. Fitzwilliam. This is Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. We are here at your brother’s behest to offer assistance.” He stepped closer, carefully avoiding the glass. “Perhaps you can share with us what has you so distraught?”

Jared shook his head, tears springing to his eyes. “No point. There is no point. It is over....my life is over.” He choked out a sob, drinking the last drops of whiskey and then staring into the container as if baffled why it was empty. “Over....over and done.” He laughed hysterically then frowned; face darkening as abrupt rage swept through each feature. With a harsh yell he heaved the drained decanter at the opposite wall where it shattered, Richard ducking instinctively as glass pieces sprayed widely.

“All over!” Jared screamed, lurching unsteadily to his feet and fixing Richard with a baleful glare. “Because she lied to me! Lied and

screamed and screamed and screamed!”

“Calm yourself Mr. Stafford. Are you talking about Miss Hazeldon?”

“Yes! Her! The lying strumpet! Said she loved me, wanted me!” He was raging and pacing imperviously through the rubble, hands gesticulating with the long knife dangerously brandished, and words barely decipherable, “Said, ‘Meet me Jared. Once we are truly lovers we can be together forever. No one can stop us.’ Then she says no. No! Can you believe it?! First she wants it, wants me, then she doesn’t! Tease! Whore! A woman cannot do that! Then she starts screaming and would not stop! I told her to stop, begged her to stop, but she wouldn’t. Told me I was hurting her. Why would I hurt her? I was loving her! I loved her!”

He halted suddenly, swaying as he glowered defiantly toward Richard. Darcy had moved cautiously into the room, circling to the left. Hugh was crying unabashedly from his weak slouch near the door, hands covering his face. None of them noticed the return of Mr. Allenton with Sheriff Weeden and two deputies by his side.

“Mr. Stafford, please, put down the knife and....”

“No! Go away I tell you! All of you!” Twirling about toward Darcy with knife raised in a surprisingly firm grip given his obvious level of intoxication, Jared stepped backward toward the open balcony doors. “Stay away! Leave me be so I can die in peace. Die like she.....like....Oh god!” Releasing wracking sobs with head hanging dejectedly and knife dangling loose at his side, Jared succumbed momentarily to grief and remorse.

Darcy, who was now nearer, leapt forward, grasping at the weapon wielding arm. His control was fleeting, however, as Jared reared precipitously, bodily knocking into the far larger man. Surprise was partially on Jared’s side as Darcy was unbalanced and lost his grip, but the knife slithered out of Jared’s hand and flew through the air, nearly impaling Richard who again called upon his excellent reflexes and ducked just in time.

An animalistic growl erupted from the young man’s throat, eyes scanning the room and noting the additional men. With a final shove square on Darcy’s chest, sending him staggering backward into the splintered bedpost, Jared pivoted and dashed toward the balcony.

“Jared, no!” Hugh yelled, brought out of his stasis and launching after his brother, but they were too late. Jared catapulted himself off the balcony, disappearing from view with only bestial snarls trailing behind before being cut off abruptly.

succeeded in piercing the scattering clouds. Stomping muddy boots and shaking snow drenched cloaks in the north entrance foyer, servants dashing to assist, the men breathed deep sighs of relief.

Richard made a beeline for his room while Darcy inquired as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Darcy, informed that she and everyone else were in the Court Room cheering a tennis tournament. This was certainly the truth as far as it went. Georgiana and Kitty were currently engaged in a fierce competition, George playing referee from the net line, and the remainder of Pemberley's guests applauding, whistling, and shouting encouragement. However, a rapid sweep of the room revealed that Lizzy and Jane were absent.

Darcy's heart fell, but had no time to deal with the disappointment before George spotted him. "William! It is about time! We thought you had gotten buried in a snow bank." He crossed in long strides, enfolding his nephew in a bone cracking embrace with stunning blow to the shoulder. "It is good to have you back, son. We have all missed your serious face, but none more so than your lovely wife and precious son."

"Thank you Uncle. Where might I find them?"

"In the conservatory. Your son decided it was meal time and disrupted the entire game. Quite threw Georgie off and she completely missed the ball, match point to Miss Kitty." He grinned.

Darcy grinned identically in return. "Extend my apologies to my sister. I am sure she will overcome. Now, if you will excuse me?" George nodded and Darcy waved a general greeting toward the crowd, hastily retreating before anyone else felt the urgent need to accost him.

The conservatory is an enormous room, easy to become lost in, but there are only three alcoves sheltering enough to nurse a baby. The nearest to the entrance from the hallway adjacent to the Court Room was the wisteria arbor so it was to this that Darcy headed. His choice was correct, the murmur of treasured voices reaching his ears as he approached eliciting a beaming smile and spring to his weary step. Lizzy's tinkling laugh at some quip of Jane's sent his heart soaring to heights almost painful in its intensity.

A gentle rap on the trellis edge to alert to his presence was followed with a declaration, "Pardon me ladies, but may I interrupt your pleasant interlude?" He peeked around the frame just as Lizzy released a gasp, meeting her instantly shining eyes with radiant smile bursting forth. The sisters sat and gently rocked on the wide swing, Alexander nuzzled against Lizzy's shoulder, apparently finished with his meal and currently staring raptly at the brilliant purple blooms draped behind his mother.

Jane stood, approaching her brother-in-law with a dimpled smile. "William, how delightful to have you home. We have missed you and Col. Fitzwilliam most profoundly. Far too many females languishing about without male attitude to sustain a balance."

Darcy took her hand, kissing fingers with a courtly bow. "Dear Jane. You look beautiful and in excellent health. I pray all is well?"

"Excellent, Sir. I have little to complain about. Thank you for asking, but I am quite certain you do not wish for a protracted conversation about my health. If you will excuse me, I do believe I shall see how the tennis match is proceeding." And with a smirk toward Lizzy, she departed.

Lizzy already had one arm extended toward her husband, fingers beckoning and instantly entangling into his damp hair when he sat. She drew him close, Darcy offering no resistance as he met her lips for a hungry kiss. He encircled with one arm, palm cool on her face as fingers stroked, the other hand joining hers on Alexander's back.

It lasted for a very long time. Pauses for deep breathes lasting mere heartbeats before craving lips and tongues reconnected. Only the burning need to taste her flesh moved him away from her intoxicating mouth to trail moist kisses over jaw and neck.

"Oh, William, I missed you so! I know it has only been five days, but it feels like an eternity. And then this horrid blizzard! I so feared you would be stranded in Derby for longer. I could not bear it!"

He had reached her ear, scattering kisses and nibbles amid gentle flicks of his tongue and hot breath. "I promised I would be home for the Christening, my heart. Nothing would keep me from you and our son!" Returning to her mouth vehemently for another extensive kiss, both panting heavily when he finally withdrew to rest his forehead onto hers. "I so love and adore you my wife. It has been an agony."

"You must tell me everything, beloved. Allow me to comfort you."

He pulled away with a smile, needing to gaze into her stunning eyes. "I will, love, naturally, but not yet. I simply require your voice and touch to comfort me now. Your beauty soothes me. Are you well, my dearest wife? All has passed quietly in my absence? You weathered the storm safely?"

Lizzy laughed, kissing him tenderly. "Listen to you! You are the one off having adventures and you ask what we have been doing? I can assure you it was much as you have already seen. Constant entertaining larks and endless hours of lying about with the only interruptions of import being your son's appetite, which shows no imminent signs of

waning!”

The object of her last remarks had turned his head from contemplation of wisteria at the first sound of his father’s voice and was now ecstatically enthralled by the beloved face. Darcy met the baby’s gaze with equal enchantment and joy, removing his arm from about Lizzy’s shoulders to take the babe from her.

“Let me look at you, little one. Have you been a good boy? Taking care of your mother? Yes? That is papa’s bright boy. Give me a kiss, sweet love.” And he proceeded to shower tiny kisses all over Alexander’s face and chubby neck, an exercise he adored as infant giggles and squirms spewed forth.

Darcy hugged him close to his chest, Alexander fidgeting irritably at the cold fabric, reaching a hand to cup Lizzy face. “I am happy to be home.”

## **18 - Catharsis**

“There you are!” Lizzy laid her embroidery hoop aside and smiled up at her weary, but so very handsome husband who had entered their sitting room with a contented sigh.

“Yes, finally. Forgive me dearest for ignoring you. I wanted to settle a few matters with Mr. Keith before they escaped my tired brain.” He crossed to his wife, sitting onto the ottoman before her chair and leaning for a kiss, hands warm and soothing on her knees. “Thank you for waiting so patiently.”

“I cannot claim any great patience as I was near to storming into your study and evicting you forcefully.” She smiled, but reached up to stroke his cheek with concern evident in her eyes. “You have had a grueling few days, my heart. I can see it in your eyes without knowing the specifics. I should scold you for insisting we retire early only to spend the past hour with your Steward, but I shall not. I am just happy you are here. Shall I call for tea?”

Darcy shook negative, hands clasping hers and stroking gently. “No thank you. I had some tea in my study. All I wish for now is to disrobe and relax with you.” He kissed her cheek, nuzzling against her soft skin and inhaling deeply. “Alexander is asleep?” He inquired lowly, following with a gentle suck to her earlobe.

“Hmmm. For the time being. He will require a snack in two hours or so before satiated enough for a long sleep.” She withdrew to gaze into his beautiful eyes. “We have time to enjoy each other before the other man in my life demands my attention.”

Darcy chuckled, initiating a long and lazy kiss while Lizzy began working the various buttons and knots necessary to accomplish her spouse’s desire to be unclothed.

The afternoon and early evening after the two snow-encrusted, frozen men finally arrived home had been filled with greetings and conversation, neither man elucidating explicitly as to their adventures. They barely managed to bath and change clothing before accosted joyously and distracted with refreshing cuisine and glittering entertainment. Richard, generally the hardy soul square in the thick of any revelry offered until late in the night, had pleaded weariness, retiring

immediately after dinner. Darcy politely requested the same, only to then retreat to his study for a 'brief' interview with Mr. Keith.

All the guests understood. One glance into the pinched faces of the two men and it was clear that they required rest. In truth the occupants of Pemberley were now entirely comfortable with devising their own amusements; the Manor well equipped to provide anything that one fancied. Lizzy simply disappeared with a vague murmur that it was time to nurse Alexander, which was a sincere obligation they were quite familiar with by now. Few would even notice her prolonged absence and no one would question it when they did.

She fed their son hoping all the while that Darcy would arrive to share the moment as she knew he adored doing. Then she retreated to their sitting room, attempting to distract her mind with boring needlepoint while she alertly listened for his unmistakable tread in the corridor. Now he was here and her heart and soul were wholly complete.

Yet she felt anxiety. That he was physically exhausted was clear; but it was also glaringly evident, at least to her, that the trip had taken an emotional toll that transcended the physical. Never in their time together thus far had she sensed this degree of disquietude in his soul. She was uncertain if lovemaking was what he needed most, consoling conversation, or merely sleep. That he would share all the recent events was not an issue for contemplation, as she knew absolutely that he would; it was the immediate course of action she was unsure of.

However, within seconds of entering, his wishes were abundantly clarified. Lizzy smiled inwardly as she pulled the choking cravat free and tossed it aside. Her William may be a complex person, but in the end he was simply a man and she estimated, even in her ignorance on the subject, that the male species were all the same. Sexual pleasure would always be preferable, offering a release unique and cleansing under any circumstance. Knowing her husband's rampant amorousness and considerable virility, she rather doubted any amount of weariness or distress could staunch his desires. And since she was the only woman who elicited these desires, the only woman who would ever be allowed to consummate these desires, and the only woman to reap the marvelous benefits from these desires, she had no cause to question. If making love was the foremost urging of his heart then she would happily acquiesce.

She slithered from his tight grip, kneeling between his knees to remove boots and stockings. Darcy took advantage of the position to unclasp the jeweled combs from her hair and thrilling in the vibrant vitality of her fragrant tresses flowing through his fingers.

"I missed you, my beautiful wife. More than I have the words to

convey. My bed was lonely and cold, my sleep troubled with the want of your body in my arms. I even missed our son waking me at ungodly hours of the night.”

Lizzy rose onto her knees, clasping arms about his waist while Darcy dexterously attacked the row of buttons down her back. “I missed you as well, love, although I had the advantage of nestling Alexander against my chest. It is not nearly as glorious as your nakedness surrounding me, but it soothed me to a degree.”

“He slept with you?”

Lizzy nodded, “I could not bear to sleep alone. I hate it so! Besides, it was terribly cold and I worried for him. At least that was the excuse I used.” She smiled, leaning to bestow sucking kisses to his exposed neck. Darcy shivered and moaned lowly, hands tightening on her waist as he succumbed to the exhilarating sensations.

“Oh, Lizzy! How desperately I need you.” He whispered faintly, vocal cords overwhelmed, and fingers trembling against the thin chemise covering her exposed back. His eyes were closed, ardor rising rapidly as she unbuttoned his shirt with lips as warm and soft as finest velvet trailing down the midline of his chest. Delicate hands moved gracefully over the quivering flesh of his torso, grazing puckered nipples before stripping the linen off broad shoulders and reaching to trace the strong bones of his back.

Halting and pulling away after an electrifying dip of her tongue into his navel, Darcy jerking and gasping in delight, she stood and peeled the gown off her shoulders. The corset joined the puddle of fabric at her feet. Darcy groaned, reaching instantly to encircle her hips and draw her toward his aching mouth, but she chuckled softly and clasped his hands. Tugging gently she stepped backward and drew him to his feet, Darcy swaying slightly.

“Come, lover. Follow me and hold tight to my hands. I would not wish you to faint from the sudden lack of proper blood circulation to other muscles of your body!” The last with a playfully arch glance to his groin and wide grin.

“You minx! Seducing me to achieve such a state and then teasing mercilessly! Do not fear, my beloved vixen, I am quite capable of standing, walking, and doing a great deal more. Lead on and I shall follow happily, but hasten my sweet or I will be convincing you of my capabilities on this chair!”

Lizzy laughed, turning and steering the few feet to their bedchamber with her enchanted and extremely aroused spouse literally inches behind. His breath brushed over her bare shoulder, lips grazing,



the rising heat of his body felt deep into her bones, and his free hand roamed insistently over hip and thigh as she walked. The second they entered their favored sanctuary he flattened his palm over her lower abdomen, hauling her backward onto the hard surfaces of his chest.

With intimately probing fingers rendering her breathless and incoherent, she listened as whispering lips brushed her ear, “I do pray you have slept well over the past days, Elizabeth eternal love, as I intend to keep you awake most of the night. Loving you once will not satiate me, I can assure you. I require the glorious sounds of your ecstasy and erotic writhings of your body in rapture numerous times to quench my thirst even partially. The hunger to feel your warmth encasing me as we love cannot be satisfied until a banquet course has been served. I need to feast on every inch of you and drink of your intoxicating wine to be truly satisfied. I must bring you to the pinnacle of perfect pleasure ere I utterly lose myself in your depths. Lord, my precious wife, how beautiful you are and how deeply I love you!” The latter breathless exclamation as he tenderly rotated her now naked form to face him, eyes afire as he indolently inspected head to toe while fingertips breezily traced her curves.

Lizzy groaned, moving decisively and clasping his face in her palms, lifting on tiptoes to passionately claim his mouth. His poetic words, always so spontaneously uttered from the heart, never failed to stir her tremendously. Lizzy was in a sudden fever of desire, yet she automatically knew that this was one of those times when Darcy’s deepest needs transcended her own.

Over the course of their marriage they had learned the blissful happiness achieved in intuitively seeking to discover the innermost yearnings of their partner. It was so incredibly easy to do. A mere glance, fleeting touch, whispered word, or barest kiss was enough to sense the internal necessity. In the main they discovered that their individual cravings at any given interlude were comparable; their minds and spirits so linked that inevitably they hungered for the same level of intensity, be it slow and languorous or fast and furious.

Yet there were those occasions of altered synchronicity. One would wish for a crazy, scorching assignation with rapture attained in a swift, blinding crescendo while the other preferred gradually building to a prolonged, soothing climatic wave. One would wish for the comfort and intimate familiarity of their bed with bodies pressed together naturally while the other longed for an exotic locale or position. It was at those times when the full nature of their love for each other was called forth. The ability to sense the emotional reasoning behind their lover’s wishes,

the willingness to suppress one's self-centered passion and focus on their spouse to detect who held the greater demand, and then the cheerfully gratifying compliance in submitting and responding accordingly. The beautiful result was not just the inevitable physical bliss that they always experienced no matter how they made love, but the additional joy in recognizing they had served the other. Ofttimes it was the wonder of touching and fulfilling those buried places that all people possess which brought the highest pleasure.

Such it was now.

Lizzy was frantic with lust. The abrupt burst of passion taking her off guard in how quickly it consumed her. The flaming urge to rip the remainder of his clothes off and literally climb up his body until they were joined where they stood was burning through every cell; the vision of what she knew from past exposure was an incredible lovemaking experience sending currents racing to the point where she could barely stand upright. Nevertheless, without needing to examine how she knew, instinctively she recognized that her husband ached to be tenderly loved. His arousal was swift and marked, but his softly spoken words and gentle caresses as well as something completely indefinable felt radiating from his core alerted her to his unspoken plead.

With a coarse groan she softened her kiss, hands loosening their crushing grip to his face and traveling to tangle in his hair. The sensation of firm muscles and the rigid length of him brought shudders to her flesh, but she forced each sinew to relax, pliantly melting into his embrace. Eventually their eyes met. Darcy smiled gently as he stroked over her backside, the knowledge of her sacrifice and his gratefulness clear in the glittering blue of his gaze.

"Elizabeth Darcy," he murmured reverently, "My wife."

While nibbling kisses to swollen, ruddy lips he clutched her upper thighs and hoisted her up. She instinctively wrapped legs about his waist, much as she had previously imagined, while he walked sedately toward their bed. Within minutes Lizzy would totally forget her prior salacious insanity. They nestled under a blanket, bodies entwined as they commenced a languid exploration with Darcy fulfilling each spoken phrase as he feasted and drank. Hands and mouths were everywhere; Darcy leading and Lizzy responding as sensations blazed and ebbed only to blaze anew at some fresh sensory assault. Nerves throbbed to unimaginable levels as time slowly passed.

True to his promise, Darcy did love his wife more than once just in the initial hours before Alexander woke. Satisfaction given selflessly in the fulfillment of his vow to pleasure her first and only then unleashing

all restraint for the unparalleled heaven that results from burying his body deeply into hers. The blanket was thrown back as body heat seethed. Lying on sides with Darcy controlling and eyes never leaving her face, arms tightly about as he clutched her tenaciously to his front, movements varied in force and pace, stamina profound with the burning need to maintain the blissful unity for as long as humanly possible. Every thrust reaching further into the core of her body and releasing further shreds of the pent up turmoil of the past days.

It was cathartic. All the moans and sighs of his beloved purging; each stroke within her purifying; every successive level of passion attained supplanting the sorrow until there was no room for anything but happiness. It was then and only then that he fully surrendered. Pure, absolving pleasure as to be found only with his wife.

Mutual cries reverberated. Darcy's guttural shouts rising to the rafters. Lizzy's rapture paling under the intensity of her husband's unleashed climax. Tears sprang to her eyes at the stupendous reality of their love.

"I love you William," she gasped hoarsely, Darcy far too caught up to be more than peripherally aware of her declaration.

But he felt the sentiment emanating and embraced her even tighter, if that is possible. Perspiration blended. Breath mingled. They lay on their sides with limbs tangled and flesh connected on multiple planes, clasp and caressing as hearts so gradually returned to a normal pace. *Airy I love yous* uttered between feathery kisses. The aftermath as bodily functions resumed their pre-excitement state was as delightful as the build up. The tenderness and vulnerability of being so rawly exposed aided their ever increasing melding as one soul, and in this particular situation assisted the final dissipation of Darcy's dolor.

He pulled her head gently onto his inner shoulder, kissed the top of her head, and sighed. "I do not think I have ever needed to love you more, my heart. Thank you. I am unsure if I can express how urgently I required your love, but I will try. Be patient with me."

"You have all the time in the world. I am not going anywhere."

"Hmmm.... Yes, I know this to be true and it fills me with bliss. My good fortune staggers me, but I accept it nonetheless."

"And so you should! How deficient of you to not accept the Almighty's wondrous blessing....me!" And she leaned her head back to meet his sparkling eyes with her own, both chuckling.

He stroked her cheek, happiness radiating. "Guess who else is in love?"

"Who?"

“The confirmed bachelor himself. Our wayward cousin Richard.”

“You jest!”

“God’s truth. Behind that flippant exterior beats a heart as sappy as my own. He confessed over dinner one night to harboring a decade long affection that I had no clue about whatsoever.” He paused, running the back of his hand along her clavicle and neck. “You remember our attending Lord Ivers’ ball in London?”

Lizzy blinked, eyebrows rising in a surprised expression much as Darcy had worn when Richard seemed to abruptly change the subject. “I....do, yes.”

“You recall Lord and Lady Fotherby? I believe you conversed with Lady Fotherby, did you not?”

She nodded, still puzzled. “I spoke with them both briefly and Lady Fotherby sat near me for a spell at one point. They are lovely people, or rather I suppose I should say Lord Fotherby was. He rather intimidated me I confess. I do not know if I will ever accustom myself to actually speaking with people who are so noteworthy, the legendary famous who are names read about in newspapers. I think I stammered a bit, but his wife was unassuming and we shared a time of stimulating conversation.”

“You never stammered, beloved. Were always charming and witty, my perfect Mistress of Pemberley exceeding all my expectations and swelling my ego outrageously.”

“Pride, Mr. Darcy. Tsk, ts.”

“Indubitably. But also merely the truth.”

He bestowed several kisses, Lizzy finally murmuring against his lips, “We were discussing Richard’s love life.”

“Hmmm....Were we?” He captured her lower lip, sucking gently.

Lizzy giggled, pulling away but he only followed, her giggles increasing and voice mumbling without the ability to articulate properly, “William, finish your tale. Curiosity is killing me!”

He let go of her lip with a laugh. “A rumormonger you are, Mrs. Darcy!”

“You started it! And quit changing the subject! One minute Richard in love the next a ball attended months ago! Focus, my dear, and tell me.....Wait!” Her eyes opened wide as comprehension dawned, Darcy observing her with a broad grin. “You mean Lady Fotherby?” Nod. “Richard is in love with Lady Fotherby?!” Nod. “How? When? I do not see...”

“Allow me to enlighten you, and rest assured I was as flabbergasted and I have known the man all my life!” He proceeded to

tell her the entire woeful tale as recounted to him, leaving nothing out, and adding his own commentaries from recollected incidents of ages past. "I remember the two flirting a bit, but it is standard practice amongst most of the society seekers, as you witnessed yourself. A time or two he mentioned Lady Simone's beauty or grace, repeated a handful of witty ripostes or clever stories with a gleam in his eye. The gents teased him a bit, but that too was standard practice so I thought little of it."

He chuckled, closing his eyes in humored remembrance. "It was dangerous, Elizabeth. Merely glancing at a lady was fodder for merciless teasing, let alone speaking of one. Luckily it was an equal opportunity mocking torment so no one took it very seriously."

"How about you? I know how you despise being teased."

He smiled. "I avoided looking at or talking to any women as much as possible, which was not too difficult since they all frightened me half to death."

Lizzy burst out laughing, Darcy rolling to his back with her in his arms and laughing as well. "There! You now know all of my secrets. You were not the first woman to leave me hopelessly tongue tied, although the reasons were very different. Social skills were never my forte, especially when in my teens. Thankfully I was ridiculous and boring so the young ladies ignored me as well, saving me from the worst of my friends' innuendos and taunting."

"I rather doubt they ignored you, after all I have seen your portrait from the year you left for Cambridge and you were entirely too dashing to be ignored. So what is Richard to do?"

Darcy shrugged, eyes on the breasts so gloriously displayed resting on his chest as Lizzy was propped on her elbows above him. Reaching to trace an index finger over the softness, dipping into the welcoming cleavage, he answered absently, "Not much he can do at this juncture. Lady Fotherby is in mourning and will be for a few more months. Eventually, however, she will return to society functions. Richard should have no trouble encountering her from time to time, especially if he is proactive as I suggested he be. His greatest obstacle will be all the other men placing themselves in her path. A wealthy widow of her beauty will be sought after. I encouraged him to press his suit forthwith. If she holds any affection for him, which seems at least possible given the clues extended, he should have no trouble."

"Who would have thought you would ever be giving another advice on romance?"

He glanced up at her teasing face with a grin. "My arts worked on you, did they not? Found me irresistible, charming, dashing? Had to have

me as yours immediately? Wanted me desperately?” He accented the huskily uttered words with firm strokes down her sides and a tight squeeze into his pelvis.

Lizzy squirmed and laughed, “Live with your delusions if you must, Mr. Darcy, although rewriting history is considered a sin in some quarters!”

He merely grinned and returned to the delightful contemplation of her bosom. “You no longer leak milk and feel softer, not so....lumpy.”

“Lumpy?! Yes, I suppose they did at times.” She shook her head in amusement. “My body seems to have adjusted. I also do not now leak when he cries although I still experience the mild burning sensation. Mrs. Hanford says I always will. At least they are not as heavy and cumbersome, or perhaps I am merely finally adapted to the changes in my physique.” She smiled at Darcy’s rapt attention, running fingers through his thick, very messy hair while she observed the play of expressions crossing his elegant features. His thoughts were transparent, thus she was not even slightly surprised when he gently rolled her onto her back and buried his face into her chest with a happy sigh.

His playful delight did not last long, however, as the bell above the right side of the bed rang. With a final kiss to each pert nipple Darcy rose, kissing her lips before exiting the bed.

They had come to refer to this final nursing as Alexander’s bedtime snack as he inevitably ate voraciously prior and needed to merely fill the tiny void before succumbing to a deep Darcy style sleep that lasted for six to sometimes eight hours. Naturally he was not always so predictable, often waking in the darkest hours of the night for necessary nourishment or comforting. Mrs. Hanford assured them this was typical and to be expected for months to come. Generally the Nanny attempted to calm the baby herself, not wishing to disturb her Mistress unless essential; however she was under orders to alert the Darcys the moment Alexander was inconsolable. Neither regarded it as a burden to attend to their son’s needs, whether it actual food or simply cuddling.

They were fortunate in that Alexander was a temperate infant. He had only suffered two episodes of severe infantile colic, probably as a result of something Lizzy had eaten, Mrs. Hanford informed. Those two nights of pacing and rocking with a disconsolate, screaming baby were hideously memorable, rating a notation in his baby book. The three had taken turns attempting to placate the suffering and irritated babe, only Lizzy managing limited success at her breast, but even that normally comforting place was largely refused. The frantic parents were distraught,

doubly so by the increasing hoarseness of their son's voice and purple cast to his face. The first night Darcy was so worried that he woke George, insisting he examine Alexander, which the good doctor was more than happy to do. He and Mrs. Hanford exchanged understanding glances, George assuring the new parents that it was normal albeit distressful. He personally brewed a concoction of herbals including fennel, chamomile, anise, and dill that did seem to help, or maybe Alexander just wore himself out. Whatever the case, they kept a bottle of the extract in the nursery just in case. Generally his tantrums were directly related to the degree of emptiness in his stomach and therefore easily remedied.

Darcy particularly enjoyed this late night snack as Alexander was not so ravenous and more apt to willingly play with his father. He walked slowly into the bedchamber, Alexander placated for the moment with his father's little finger. "Have you been a good boy while I was gone, my sweet? I believe you have gained another half a pound, you gorger. You nearly have two chins!" He laughed, Alexander pausing his steady sucking to gaze into Darcy's eyes. He had a firm grip to the index finger, chubby fist curled tight, and his legs kept a regular rhythm of strong kicks. He was always moving, Darcy had discovered. Unless asleep or completely satiated with mother's milk, his body was in action. The day before Christmas he had kicked so hard that he flipped from his side to back, limbs flailing wildly and eyes wide in stunned amazement at the abrupt change. Lizzy and Darcy laughed delightfully at his expression then showered him with kisses and praise.

Darcy sat on the bed beside a reclining Lizzy, not ready to relinquish the lively bundle cuddled in his arms. With eyes locked onto his son's face, he asked of his wife, "Has he had any bouts of colic while I was away?"

"No. He was a bit fussy two nights ago and slow to suckle contentedly. I gave him a few drops of tonic and we rocked. I discovered that gazing into the flames soothes him. Finally he nursed and slept well. I was very relieved it did not ripen into a serious episode as you were not here to sing to him." She chuckled at Darcy's wry smile. "I would not count on him being musically inclined as he seems to prefer your singing voice to mine."

"Have no fear, love. Georgie adored my singing and she is incredibly talented. Maybe you will be the Darcy male to break the mold, my darling." He brought the baby to his lips for a number of tender kisses, Alexander patiently enduring. Darcy ran a hand all over his son's round body, marveling anew at the combination of vulnerable softness

and solid strength. Developing rolls of fat could be felt on his arms and legs, his entire body dominated by an enormous abdomen, head hard and still covered with thick brown curls. He removed one thick knitted bootie to nibble kisses to a plump, pink foot. "Praise be to God for keeping you so healthy and perfect," Darcy whispered, kissing his brow, "I love you, my son, my precious, precious son."

"We received a few more gifts before the storm struck. I piled them with the others in the parlor." She reached up to tickle over Alexander's exposed toes, dropping her hand to caress lightly over Darcy's bare knee emerged from an open robe. "We received a package from Lady Catherine and Anne, including an envelope addressed to us which I assume is a wedding invitation."

"You did not open it?"

"I wished to wait for you. I heard from Charlotte as well, a brief note as they likely all will be for a time to come. She says that the girls are in excellent health, the youngest, Rachel if you recall, has nearly caught up to her sister Leah. What a relief it must be for them."

"Rachel and Leah. Lovely names, although I find myself thankful they were not male children or they may have been christened Cain and Abel."

Lizzy laughed, "Or Jacob and Esau, neither option boding well for future sibling tranquility. Anyway, Charlotte says the wedding plans are consuming life at Rosings. I gather it is to be an extravaganza. Apparently Mr. Collins was disappointed that the ceremony would be taking place in the Ashford Cathedral with the Bishop presiding."

"Foolish man! What did he think?"

"You know the answer to that question! The date is officially set as February 27, a week after Mary and Mr. Daniels. That is fortunate, if we decide to travel."

Darcy patted the hand lying on his knee, smiling sympathetically, "Do not worry over it, love. I will do all in my power to ensure you are present at your sister's wedding and that Alexander is safe. The carriage is solid and we possess a plethora of thick quilts and down comforters. Alexander is healthy and a temperate infant who will travel well, I judge, especially cuddled by us. We can journey in short stages over several days. Of course, all this depends on you, my wee love," he paused for fresh kisses, Alexander cooing and wiggling, "Stay strong and grow stout so we can proudly show you to the rest of your relatives."

Lizzy smiled joyously at her husband's antics, nodding in agreement. "Let me see, what else happened while you were gone. Reverend Bertram visited to say he cleared and cleaned the balcony and



opened the side rooms to allot more space.”

Darcy laughed, “I have told him at least three times not to fret over it. He seems to imagine half of Derbyshire showing up for the affair, which I deem unlikely. We may esteem our son’s Christening as a premiere event, but I assured him that a baby’s naming in general is not a cause of major enthusiasm.”

“It has been many years since a Darcy heir was christened, my dearest, so to the good Reverend it is an event of momentous importance. Allow him his moment of glory. By the way, I took the liberty of planning a luncheon party of sorts for that afternoon since the family is here and several of our friends are joining us. Mrs. Langton was instructed to keep it simple and not lavish too much attention on the meal or christening cake, orders that I am sure she will ignore. I trust this meets with your approval?”

He looked at her with a humorous smile and twinkling eyes, “Yes, it meets with my approval, Mistress Darcy. Another occasion to swell with pride at the blessings gifted me in you and our son is always welcomed. Although you, my little ball of energy, will not be attending I am afraid. We have been fortunate thus far to avoid any illness and I will not press our luck.” Alexander erupted in fresh squirms at his father’s tickling fingers under his chunky arms.

“Care to hazard a guess as to whom else is in love, or a reasonable facsimile thereof?” Darcy lifted the left brow inquiringly. “You will never guess.”

“If you say my baby sister I may have to cry.”

“No, silly. I am speaking of Miss Bingley.”

“You are not serious?! Who is the unfortunate gentleman?”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy! Shame.” But she was laughing and he was unrepentant. Lizzy shook her head, slapping him playfully on the knee. “His name is Sir Wallace Dandridge of Chelmsford, Essex.”

“Ah, that mystery is solved.”

“Pardon?”

He shrugged, telling her of Bingley’s frustration regarding endless references to Essex. “I do not believe she has thus far confided with her brother. How did you discover this piece of stunning news?”

“Girl talk, my love.” She replied sweetly with a flutter of her lashes.

Darcy grunted, “Female blathering is the germane phrase, but I am thankful you were not bored in my absence, my dearest love.”

She raised her chin at his lopsided grin, pouting adorably. “I see. And you and Col. Fitzwilliam swapping romantic advice qualify as

professional consultation?”

“Precisely! So when shall Miss Bingley become Lady Dandridge?”

“We gather that it is not official as yet. She hints strongly to an ‘understanding’ of some nature, reveling in the secrecy of it all. Perhaps Sir Wallace is waiting on an opportune moment to speak with Charles.”

“Do you judge her truly in love?” His inflection clearly indicating his dubiousness at a positive response.

“Difficult to say. Charles is right. Every other sentence is ‘Sir Wallace this’ or ‘Sir Wallace that’ and once she even called him ‘Wally,’ then blushed crimson. It was hysterical. Still, I speculate that she is as enamored by the gentleman’s title as the gentleman himself. Perhaps I am being uncivil, but she does seem particularly smug by the fact that he bears a title and none of our husbands do.”

“I am positive I could buy myself a title if it would please you.”

Lizzy snorted and pinched his knee. “Ouch!”

“You deserved that, ridiculous man!”

“All flippancy aside I do pray she has found true emotion and happiness. I am acquainted with Sir Wallace and he strikes me as a kind man. If they are blessed with a fourth our joy they will be content. Of course no child could possibly surpass my Alexander for sheer cuteness and sweetness, is that not correct my pudgy lamb?” He clutched the baby under his arms, bringing the round abdomen to his mouth for blowing tickles.

Alexander released a short squeal, fingers instantly grasping fistfuls of Darcy’s hair with legs kicking crazily. Lizzy laughed aloud, reaching up to augment the babe’s entertainment with additional tickles to his feet.

The devotional lasted for another fifteen minutes before Alexander’s tolerance gave out, yelps emitting as tiny face lost all serenity. “My turn,” Lizzy said with a laugh, pulling the blanket away as Darcy positioned a now seriously hungry baby at his mother’s breast. After adding a couple more logs to the fire, Darcy stripped his robe and joined his family on the comfortable bed.

There was something incredibly intimate and peaceful about these interludes with their son nestled between their bodies. Watching him suckle from Elizabeth, the most basic of maternal acts, was joyous. Darcy could not quite explain it, but it brought a level of tranquility and pride to his soul that was immeasurable. The love he felt for his wife escalated profoundly and the elation in all aspects of fatherhood rose astoundingly. Basically it was an internal happiness that washed over and through him.

He snuggled close, nose pressed to Alexander's curls and fingertips caressing lightly. "I missed his birthday."

Lizzy frowned in puzzlement. "I beg your pardon? William, you were only gone five days."

He smiled into Alexander's hair, "His one month birthday and do not pretend you did not note the day, my heart."

"I bestowed an extra dose of kisses, told him he was a month old, and confirmed the all consuming love his parents hold for him. Otherwise it was just another day, love. Do not fret so." She stroked over his cheek, "You were merely melancholy about the mill catastrophe and being away."

"I suppose." He sighed, rolling away slightly and meeting her eyes. "I missed you both terribly, but I confess having Richard as companion eased the pain. I am afraid I was not initially too pleased; quite rude to him actually. I thought you had sent him, which irritated me, but now that I think on it I would have appreciated the gesture."

"Thank you, but I had nothing to do with it. We were informed of his departure by a hastily penned note found on his breakfast setting. I wished I had thought of it, in fact, and was very grateful that he chose to insinuate himself. It eased my mind to know you would have him there to cheer your gloominess."

"That he did, to a degree, as well as rolling up his sleeves and working alongside the others." He paused, collecting his thoughts, and progressively launching into the details of the fire and its repercussion. He left nothing out. Beginning with a dry narrative of the damage, leading to detailed enumeration of the financial aspects most of which Lizzy understood, and lastly the human element including the exhortation to the Hendle boy.

Lizzy had turned to the other side to nurse Alexander on the opposite breast, Darcy spooning wholly head to toe and continuing his account with chin resting into the bend of her neck. He leisurely caressed both Alexander and Lizzy while he spoke in hushed tones. Lizzy kept silent, allowing him to clear his thoughts totally. Only when his words began to space out did she interject.

"The poor boy," speaking of the Hendle youth, "so tragic to lose your father so young. I am sure your words encouraged him to dwell on his father in a positive light."

He ran a finger down Alexander's downy cheek, voice thick and low, "I thought of Alexander and remembered your chastisement before I departed..."

"William, don't..."

“No, it is alright beloved. You were correct, completely. Life is uncertain, naturally, and I do not plan on leaving this earth anytime near soon, but I would like to hope that my death when it comes will be later rather than sooner.” He paused yet again, Lizzy waiting. She did not need to see his face to know that he was struggling with how to express a painful sentiment. “I never imagined that I would be able to consider my father’s death as it occurred a . . . positive, so to speak, from a certain point of view. I have such full memories of him, joyous times, years of mentorship and friendship. The years we shared taught me how to be a man, a husband, a father, a Master, and so very many other qualities that I cannot fathom them all. Now I have been gifted the opportunity to pass on this knowledge to Alexander and any other children we are blessed with. God, what a fortunate man I am!”

He reflexively clutched her tighter into his body, face pressed into the tender flesh of her neck with misty eyes on their sleeping son. He shook his head shortly, “Forgive me Elizabeth, for momentarily forgetting to prioritize my responsibilities. If this time away has taught me anything it is how important family is above all. And how fragile life is,” he finished quietly.

Lizzy rubbed the thigh lying on top of hers then removed the slack mouthed infant from her breast, nestling him a couple feet away before turning in Darcy’s arms to gaze into his face. She embraced him, palms soothing over his back, and kissed tenderly. “You are the very best man in all the world Fitzwilliam and need never apologize to me for being human and vulnerable. But I do appreciate it.” She smiled with that humorous lilt to her lips that he so adored, “I never thought I would be saying this to that stoic, reserved man I met in Meryton, but you need to learn to suppress your reckless impetuosity to a degree. And listen to the superior wisdom of your wife.”

She grinned sunnily, Darcy grinning and laughing in return. “Agreed.”

“Do you truly predict no financial deficits from the fire?”

He was stretched above her, propped on one elbow with head resting in his hand, the other breezily running over her body. He shook his head negative, “We spent hours pouring over the figures. I am confident that our capital is abundantly sufficient to cover the cost of repairs and buying new machines. It will take a couple months, especially this time of year with weather interceding, to get everything functioning at full capacity. I trust Mr. Schultz to handle those aspects efficiently.”

“So what still worries you?” Fingering the tiny creases between his brows.

“Until we have everything restored there is no way we can fulfill our current contracts. Fortunately it is the slow time of year, but there are nonetheless stacks of waiting cotton that needs to be processed, and more constantly arriving from warehouses. That is one of the issues I discussed with Mr. Keith. I will be writing several letters over the following days to hopefully placate our clients.”

“Surely they will understand and sympathize with your plight.”

“Undoubtedly they will. But business is business. Their livelihood depends on us processing the raw cotton and providing cloth. Our livelihood depends on a finished product, with orders needing to be filled on the other end to keep contacts happy; and so if necessary our buyers will seek elsewhere. I do not blame them as I would do the same. Financially it is not the here and now that concerns me, but the future five, six, eight months down the line. It is imperative that we not lose clients for the future profits and function of our company.”

“So...will you give incentives? Offer discounts if they stay with you? Process some bales for free or half cost, that sort of thing?”

Darcy smiled and cupped her cheek, “Very wise, Mrs. Darcy. You have learned from my rambling orations after all.”

“I always listen and attempt to understand. Perhaps I am smarter than I thought!”

“You are brilliant, my love. We have considered all options. The mill will be running for longer hours than usual, although we are limited there as well since I refuse to allow the women and children to work for more than ten hours a day. Mr. Shultz plans to hire additional workers on a temporary basis to keep the mill operating as long as possible. That will help tremendously.”

He bent for a kiss and then resumed his pose with a serious cast to his face. “I warn you now, beloved, I will be very busy for a time and will need to travel over the next several weeks. Day trips for the most part to those clients in the vicinity. Only a couple further abroad, but I will avoid traveling if possible. Mr. Keith will make the trip to London in my stead. I can trust him on that count.”

“Will you need to return to Derby anytime soon?”

A shadow flickered over his features and he averted his eyes. His jaw clenched briefly and lips pressed together for only a moment, but Lizzy frowned. “I will, yes, but on another matter.”

“What other matter? William?”

He looked into her eyes, shaking his head slightly and forcing a smile. “Later, my love, later. Do you trust me?”

Her eyebrows rose, “Absolutely! Do not be ridiculous!”

He smiled again, a true smile from the heart, "Then put it aside for now and just let me love you." And without further ado he rolled his body onto hers, fitting naturally within clasping limbs as flawlessly as lock and key. Pressing firmly and insistently, but with the utmost tenderness as he captured her mouth for a prolonged kiss. He wiggled and squeezed, not penetrating yet, but merely enjoying the delicious feel of her vitally alive figure under his. He ran both palms gradually up her sides, under her arms, pressing with firm fingers the entire length of each round arm, stretching over her head until reaching her flattened palms, and holding tight. Lacing his fingers between hers, fully extending with the weight of his frame crushing her into the soft mattress.

He abandoned her mouth finally, traversing the silky expanse of her neck to an ear for teasing licks and nibbles. Lizzy was breathless with desire, but managed to choke out a few words, "William, we should....the baby is....Oh God!....I....that is, we should put him in his cradle."

"I want him to stay with us tonight," he murmured huskily, hot breath waving over her ear and sending shivers cascading through her body.

"But, we should not do...." Gasp! "....this with him...." Moan. "....here." Finishing very weakly.

"He is soundly asleep and likes to be rocked anyway." He lifted slightly to meet her eyes, both of them smoldering with dark passion, but his additionally sparkled with humor. He clasped both wrists in one strong hand, keeping her arms extended, and leisurely rubbed back down her side. Firm strokes and squeezes to a round buttock, then drawing the knee up and over his waist, studying and responding crazily to the flying ardor revealed in her expressive eyes. "He will be unaffected, my lover. You will not be."

And with that grating declaration he dove in, hard and all at once. He groaned deeply in his throat, eyes closing in exalting pleasure. "Oh my Lizzy! I love you, I love you!"

He was correct; Alexander never flinched. The antics of his loving, impassioned parents registered not at all unless it was to be soothed into an even deeper sleep by the rhythmic swaying and cadenced gasps. The satisfied slumber of an infant is an enviable state with few noises loud enough to disturb. This is a beneficial reality considering his parents were animated and highly energetic in their mutual exhilaration.

Lizzy was granted her earlier wish in experiencing a lovemaking session of highly intense enthusiasm. There was little in the way of gentleness in their uninhibited passion, but much in the way of furious

innervations. Before the need was comfort and cleansing, now the need was a celebration of life and vitality. The emotion was ferocious, the energy spent exorbitant, the excitement fervent, and the release euphoric.

Darcy rolled away, shuddering and inhaling vigorous lungfuls of air. Rarely did they break intimate contact immediately after attaining completion, but the basic need for oxygen called for it. He clasped Lizzy's hand tightly, silence descending except for their rasping respirations.

Lizzy recovered her faculties first, reaching to brush her knuckles over Alexander's rosy cheek, and then turning to her husband's side. She kissed his shoulder, sighing in utter contentment. He kissed the crown of her head, rubbing against the soft tresses, his voice rough and low, "I fear I may need rescind my earlier promise, my heart."

"Which promise is that?"

"That I keep you awake all night with constant loving. I believe you have unhinged me and depleted me wholly. Not that I am complaining, mind you."

She could feel the smile and giggled, kissing the sweat gleaming muscular shoulder again. "I can live with the disappointment. Until some time tomorrow that is." She lifted, running a hand down the damp hairs on his chest while peering into sparkling blue eyes. "I love you, Fitzwilliam Darcy, with all my being."

Darcy cupped her chin, feathering fingertips along her skin. He stared, simply stared, for several minutes only then pulling in for a soft kiss. Lizzy brushed the hair away from his noble brow, bestowing a tiny nibble to his upper lip. She tried to withdraw, but he held her close, airily skimming pecks and nuzzles about her face.

"Elizabeth," whispered so very softly, "My beautiful Elizabeth. You heal me with your devotion. You infuse me with your life and verve and goodness. I now have the strength to share the remainder of my trip with you."

She shook her head. "You are tired, my love. I can see the circles under your eyes and hear the weariness in your voice. Your adventures can wait until you have slept."

Darcy, however, was shaking his head negative. "I appreciate your concern, dearest, and I do need to sleep. First, though, I want to tell you all. It is important to me."

"You are frightening me, William. Are you sure you are well?"

"Forgive me, beloved! I do not mean to imply anything ill with my health. Have I not proven my vigor?" He grinned and Lizzy chuckled despite her unease.

“You are incorrigible! And you should not jest with my worries. I have sensed from the moment I saw you in the arbor that something serious was amiss, but convinced myself it was merely weariness or thought it related to the fire. Now I am truly alarmed.”

He pulled her closer and kissed tenderly. “I accept your chastisement, love, and beg your pardon. I have a story to tell it is true, but the honest reality is that I desire to keep it from you completely. I abhor the very idea of causing you pain.”

“William, sharing your life means sharing everything....”

He halted her with another kiss, “Do not say it Elizabeth. Trust me; I have learned the lesson of hiding anything from you or making an attempt to shield. I cannot say it is easy, as I always endeavor to bring you only joy and contentment, but I promised to be forthright at all times and I will. This is why I want to reveal all so I can sleep with you in my arms knowing there are no lingering secrets to disturb my blissful dreams.”

She was staring intently into his eyes, frowning. “Thank you. I could not bear it if there was turmoil in your soul or some actual circumstance transpiring that I was not aware of and given the opportunity to alleviate. I love you, William, far too much to allow you to suffer if there is anything I can do to help.”

His smile was radiant; bursting with adoration. With a gentle nudge he rolled her to the side, clasping her two small hands in his, and bringing the tiny fingers to his mouth for tender kisses. “I love you too, my dearest wife. No secrets, ever. I must warn you though; there are certain fine details that I will not tell you. Trust me, they in no way affect the overall account, but I refuse to divulge for my sake as well as yours. In this one minor point I exert my authority as your husband. Can you accept this and trust me?”

She searched his suddenly serious eyes, the firm set of his jawline very familiar, and she knew there would be no changing his mind on this one point. Somehow she sensed, without having any clue as to what his story was, that she did not want to know the ‘fine details’ so she nodded in agreement.

He nodded in return, bringing her hands to lie against his chest, and with a sigh, began.

“Richard and I left Derby the day before yesterday.”

“Two days ago? During the blizzard?!” She blurted, biting her lip instantly. “Sorry.”

He chuckled faintly, “Yes, it was appallingly foolish. I allowed my impetuosity to rule, as you recently scolded me. We barely made it



unfrozen to Belper, finding shelter at the Inn. I was in a foul mood, Elizabeth, I admit with shame. I wanted to be home so dreadfully, missed you and Alexander with a constant sharp stab of agony, and wholly ignored my normal wisdom and temperance. Thank God for Richard, literally, or I would likely be in a serious predicament right now, but I am getting ahead of myself.

He closed his eyes and continued slowly in a muted tone, "It was a typical evening and night. Dinner, light entertainment, early to my lonely bed, dreams of you, prayers that the storm would abate as I was stubbornly insistent that I would be home by the following day no matter what. I woke in the dark, very cold, which is unusual for me as you know, built a fire, and fell asleep eventually after reading for a time. I tell you these details as they pertain to events as they unfolded later. Anyway, shortly after dawn practically the entire Inn was jolted to wakefulness by the screams of a maid who happened upon a half open door several rooms down from mine where lay a young girl who had been murdered in the night."

Lizzy gasped, "Oh my God!"

"Here is where you do not necessarily need to know the specifics, my heart. Suffice to say it was chaotic and horrifying, to put it mildly. Mr. Allenton, the Innkeeper, was in no frame of mind to exert control and so Richard, commander of men, stepped up. I found myself tagging behind mechanically, all of us confused and shocked. It was gruesome, beloved; a sight that haunts me." His voice was hollow and mien gray. Lizzy squeezed his hands tightly and he squeezed in response. "In time the Sheriff arrived and assumed charge of the situation, which was fine by me. I only wanted to leave, I admit with shame."

"Who was she? The girl?"

"Her name was Miss Hazeldon and she was nearly seventeen." He had opened his eyes and was studying Elizabeth, fingers absently stroking over her knuckles. "We did not know her, of course, although Richard vaguely recalled seeing her in the dining room. The room where she was found was some distance down the hall from ours and between that and the blizzard winds we heard nothing. I do not know that anyone did, actually."

"How did she...? Did you....see how she....?"

"I will not speak of it, Elizabeth. There are some images no one should be a witness to, but especially not a genteel lady. Your imagination is too vivid, dearest. I wish I could erase what I saw, but sharing it with you would only make it worse for me. Do you understand?"

She nodded, in truth having no desire to clarify what was already

racing through her mind. Nonetheless, her heart ached for her husband and fumed with the awareness that there was naught she could do to obliterate the memory. "What happened next?"

He sighed, "Nothing for a long while. We waited in my room. The entire establishment shut down, as you can presume, between the storm without and the tragedy within. Eventually the Sheriff asked to speak to us as the two first upon the scene. He was atrociously rude and disgustingly insinuating. Questioning our motives for assisting and why there was a light shining from under my door." His mouth twisted in fresh anger. "I am deeply ashamed of myself and hesitate to confess my actions as I do not wish you to think less of me..."

"Do not be a fool!" She interjected, Darcy smiling wryly.

"Your faith in me is touching, my love, but your label is apt. I was a fool. I was grossly offended by the Sheriff's manner and allusions, deeply distressed by what had occurred, plagued by a persistent unreasoning fear for you and the others at Pemberley, angry and impatient, fatigued, overcome emotionally by recent events, and plain moronic. None of which is an excuse for the temper tantrum I threw. Alexander would be turned over my knee in a heartbeat for acting half as outrageous as I!" He shook his head, cheeks ruddy in remembered indignity and embarrassment. "I nearly slugged Richard, but thankfully he spoke sensible words that penetrated my thick skull or I probably would have acted rashly and still be clapped in irons as he predicted."

Surprisingly Lizzy was giggling, her smothered chuckling breaking Darcy from his narrative. "You find this amusing, Mrs. Darcy?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"I suddenly had a mental picture of you and Richard grappling about on the floor, pummeling each other as unruly boys."

She continued to giggle, Darcy chuckling as well. "Nearly, but I finally called upon the restraint and forbearance generally a chief character trait. I saw reason, or more aptly accepted the futility of my situation. It was bitter, Elizabeth, very bitter to be so out of control."

"Yet you are home. So, did they catch the villain? He is not still running loose, is he?" Her voice unconsciously raised an octave, eyes wide with fright.

Darcy draped with one arm and a leg, drawing her closer and kissing her forehead before tucking under his chin. "We caught him. A young man just eighteen on a pleasure tour with his brother. Fancied himself in love with Miss Hazeldon, thought she returned his affection, and..."

He fell silent, trembles and pounding heart felt by Lizzy. He did

not speak for several minutes and when he did his voice was agonized, “I thought of Georgiana, Elizabeth. I have never seen anything quite this horrible, but I know what unscrupulous men are capable of. What they believe is their right; what is somehow owed them as the natural conclusion to a flirtation and roused desire. How some regard women as property and worthy of only what pleasure can be taken from them, forcefully or willingly it matters naught. Wickham was such a person, as I knew so very well. When I arrived at Ramsgate, unexpectedly discovering his plot, my greatest fear was that he had violated Georgie. I knew it to be a very real possibility. Praise God, I was in time as I am absolutely convinced he would have taken her virtue either to secure her or wound me without the slightest consideration to her fragility or sensibilities. I refused to even envision how Georgie would be destroyed by such an animal using her in that way. Yet never did it occur to me that she could have died. Some say rape is a fate worse than death. As a man I cannot judge whether this be true or not, but I believe I am sensitive enough to fathom the horror of it. However, nothing could be worse than what happened in Belper.”

He finished in a bare whisper, embracing Lizzy so tightly she could hardly breathe, but she endured. She caressed him tenderly, comforting as best she could, not knowing what to say. It was all so sickening.

“Women are so trusting,” he resumed. “Innocent and pure. Protected and sheltered. All as it is meant to be, as God has ordained it. Yet this very nature can be their undoing. I thought of Georgie and any daughters we may have and I thought of you. I remembered Orman and how you believed Wickham.”

His voice caught in a harsh growl. Lizzy quickly looked to his precious face, clasping between loving hands, “William, my soul, please, please, stop! Do not think on the past, I beg you!”

“You must always be cautious, my Lizzy. Promise me!” His countenance was fierce, eyes boring.

“I do...”

“You were correct to scold me for being foolhardy; forgetting my responsibilities to you and my family. I will not forget it again. My place is here, protecting you and our son, and all the others dependent on me. I cannot allow myself to brainlessly or selfishly bring harm to my person because I *must* be diligent in my duties! I will not fail you, Elizabeth.”

“I know...” She was crying, tears sliding down her cheeks to be swept away by his gentle fingertips and soft lips.

“I promise to safeguard you, my wife, and you must promise to

obey. Promise to be wise, wary, sensible, and aware, Elizabeth. I cannot survive without you. I know this to be true as a mere five days drives me insane! I need your face, your love, your voice, your touch.”

Darcy trailed fingers and lips airily over each feature. It was only the need to enforce the murmured declarations of his love which prompted him initially. There was no intent to arouse his wife again; the driving power simply the serene necessity to reconnect with every particle of her form. Exhaustion washed over him in waves as the final vestiges of the days tragedies were illuminated and scattered. He ached deep into his bones with sleep clawing at the edges of his consciousness, yet he could not halt hands and mouth which urgently required the final cathartic sensation of his second soul’s satiny and vibrant flesh.

Lizzy, by the same token, experienced a similar abrupt weariness of heart and body. Her husband’s troubles had shaken her, the love she held granting her the ability to feel his sorrow. Yet, with each unifying act of lovemaking, with each cleansing conversation, and with each current kiss and caress she knew he was healed. Although weary her heart nonetheless leapt for joy in the knowledge that their unique bond had worked another miracle.

Considering the expended energy and emotions of the evening thus far it was a marvel that either would respond sensually. Then again, never could Darcy touch his wife without desiring to arouse her. He was well down the luscious curves of her body before fully comprehending her rising ardor and his yearning to please her. The lush swell of her breasts were his personal undoing, Lizzy sighing and moaning in the unique manner indicative of rising pleasure.

“I love you immeasurably, Elizabeth,” whispered between tender licks and suckles of warm, sweet milk. “Always and for all eternity you are mine. Only mine.” Skillful hands and tongue wending over the daily tightening and flattening expanse of her abdomen, dipping into the sensitive cave of her naval, and then further until nestled amid her creamy, firm legs.

Lizzy gasped, clasping fingers through his hair and arching into the marvelous sensations he roused in her. Transcendent intimacy in how he loved her, attending only to her passion, reaching deeply and with focus to those places that brought the greatest pleasure. Eyes avidly watched her reactions while hands caressed and soul exalted at the knowledge of how she responded to him. Very early in their marriage he had discovered the blissful delight experienced by servicing her; the joy felt in being welcomed in so intimate a way was not necessarily better than making love to her in the traditional manner, but added a glorious

dimension to the melding they each day saw growing. Now, after a year, giving to her was nearly an obsession; something he craved frequently as an act pleasing to both of them if in divergent ways.

At her final cries and pleading to stop ere she perish from the crashing sensations, he rushed to embrace her tightly to his chest. Relishing the diminishing shivers and flushed heat of her skin; smugly smiling with an egotistical happiness that he could rouse her so amazingly, especially after the previous interludes. Darcy never took their marital relations for granted, always thankful and mildly surprised at the fount of pure rapture they managed to burst open every time. He knew without a doubt that he was a very lucky man, far beyond many others, and he fully intended to prove his worthiness for such good fortune by treasuring his wife.

He sprinkled tender kisses onto her head, fingering through the tousled curls cascading wildly over their pillows, murmuring incessant endearments and professions of enduring love. He absorbed her heat, attuned to every breath and heartbeat, eyes gazing upon the contentedly slumbering shape of their son nestled several feet away while the prior tendrils of sleep reasserted themselves.

Lizzy rained tiny kisses to his chest, free hand gliding deliciously over the hard muscles of his back and derriere and then around to encompass the promising evidence of his ardor. "Your turn, my lover," she whispered against the pulsing hollow of his throat.

Darcy chuckled sleepily, lazily pushing toward her, but stilling the manipulating arm at the elbow. "Not necessary dearest. Thank you, but I am too tired. My most pressing desire is to embrace you all through the night with our precious son lying close."

"Your words say one thing, my life, but your body speaks volumes otherwise." And of course it was true. Darcy was quite certain he could fall asleep in seconds and not budge for hours, but the titillation of his wife's dainty and competent hand fondling him was irresistible. While his increasingly foggy brain fought succumbing to the oblivion of sleep, his potent manliness responded to her enchantment. Nevertheless, it was fortunate that his sensuous wife was not as exhausted or nothing would have been accomplished. Darcy, despite the physical manifestation to the contrary, was simply too worn out to muster supplementary strength.

Lizzy took charge. Rolling him onto his back she rapidly straddled his hips, joining with ease. Darcy groaned weakly, hands slack on her thighs, misty eyes shining with profound contentment at the electrifying feel of her surrounding him and the captivating vision of her

feminine figure with luxuriant tresses tumbling rising above him.

“I love you eternally Fitzwilliam. Only for you, my life and breath. Always and forever, you are mine.”

It did not take long. A few minutes of tender motions and he yielded to the comforting surge of pleasure procured only with her. His satiated, stuporous brain was only vaguely aware of her moving away afterwards to add a log to the fire. He opened his eyes briefly, ponderously scooting closer to Alexander and laying one broad hand onto the baby’s back before falling into a daze. The brief rush of air over his back that minimally roused him was quickly supplanted by the radiant warmth of Elizabeth nuzzling with breasts pressed harshly between his shoulder blades. Her arm snaked over his waist and breath soothingly wafted across the nape of his neck.

“Good night, my darling. Sleep well.” A tender kiss planted at the top of his spine was his last memory. His final thought was a reciprocated wish for refreshing sleep, but the sentiment would remain unspoken as consuming, blissful, therapeutic, and revitalizing sleep overwhelmed.

## **19 – Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child**

Per tradition and the precepts of the Anglican Church of England, the christening ceremony served two vitally important objectives. One was the official naming and declaration of the child before the congregation, family, and God. The second was to receive the baptism into the Body of Christ, ensuring that the child begins his or her life on the proper pathway toward a mature affirmation of faith leading to complete salvation.

In order to correctly fulfill the first objective the christening was to take place on Sunday during the normal worship service when the local congregates were assembled as witnesses. These witnesses accepted the partial responsibility of overseeing the spiritual upbringing of the child, who is henceforth a part of the flock. With this idea in mind, it was also critical to perform the rite at the parish church where the parents are members and by the Pastor who ministers to them.

Generally the christening took place a month or so after birth. This delay is not to imply that the child does not exist or is in some way invisible to God prior to his baptism, certainly not! The reason was strictly related to the necessary protection of the fragile infant's health. Illness and often subsequent death was a frequent reality of these harsh days with minimal medical knowledge.

Due to this irrefutable fact, the christening of Alexander William George Bennet Darcy was scheduled for the Sunday that fell three days after Christmas. At the original scheduling for this date it was agreed by his devoted, and anxious, parents that at one month of age he should be old and strong enough to tolerate leaving the safe confines of Pemberley's sturdy walls. The hasty departure of his father had necessitated a postponement until the following Sunday, arranged by Mr. Keith as one of the tasks assigned at the last minute by his Master.

The dawn of January Fourth of 1818, with Alexander now a full five weeks old and very stout, should have brought nothing but high enthusiasm to both his parents.

In the case of his father this was true.

Darcy had wholly recovered from his ordeal; his natural heartiness only requiring a long, peaceful night of sleep while snuggling

his wife and child. The past days had been hectic ones between duties to his guests as well as extended hours with Mr. Keith and three days on horseback to visit local clients, but the robust man in the prime of his life suffered no depreciation. Being home within the bosom of his family, amid the comforting rooms, entertained and well fed, was all he needed to restore his equilibrium. The final crown to his joy was the formal presentation of his son and heir, and the necessity of ensuring the new life's dedication to Christ. With these pleasant thoughts premiere, Darcy woke as the first rays of sunlight bathed the snow drenched landscape and drew his sleeping wife closer with a dreamy smile.

In contrast, Lizzy roused roughly an hour later, Darcy having fallen into a light doze, and vaulted from the bed. She dashed to the nearest window and ripped the curtain aside. Darcy jerked upright in sheer panic, shock rendering him speechless.

"The sun is shining!" She exclaimed ecstatically, glancing to her befuddled spouse then turning back to contemplate the outside. "No wind or rain or clouds! Oh thank you, Lord! Do you think it warmer?"

She whirled back to Darcy, who was now faintly smiling in amusement. His answer was to gaze pointedly at her rock hard nipples and spreading goose bumps as the frigid cold of the chamber waved over her bare flesh. He quite enjoyed the view of her alabaster nakedness and wildly disheveled hair as illuminated by the filtered beams of light, but she was beginning to shiver so he held out his arm beckoningly.

"I think you know the answer to that question, my darling. Come back to bed and let me warm you." She hesitated, her face falling slightly as she glanced outside again, before sighing and turning toward the welcoming bed and spouse. Darcy enfolded her, pulling down into the cushions, and covering with thick comforter and radiant body. He kissed her forehead, "Do not fret so, my love. He will be bundled securely up to his eyeballs. No harm will come, I promise. He must travel beyond Pemberley sooner or later and this is the appropriate occasion."

"I know," she mumbled petulantly, "I just....worry."

Darcy smoothed the hair from her brow, kissing tenderly. "Focus instead on how precious he will look in his gown, fat rosy cheeks surrounded by lace, while we stand together at the altar with his Godparents. This is a magnificent day, beloved! Be filled with only cheer, I beg you. I know for me it is a day I have longed for for many years, one of the best days of my life after the day you married me."

"Of course you are correct. Thank you, love." She smiled, "He will be absolutely adorable, to be sure. Oh, I just love him so much! And you too, my dear husband," and she hugged him tightly, losing



themselves in soft kisses and caresses until Alexander's hunger overruled.

\* \* \* \*

The selection of an infant's Godparents is a solemn task undertaken with the utmost seriousness. The responsibilities of the adults who willingly assume this role are critical and never taken lightly. On down through the ages the Church instituted custom of assigning mature persons, at least two of whom must be the same sex as the infant, was approached with deep forethought. A Godparent's place in the child's life is a vital one. He or she is ascribed the honored task of ensuring that the innocent babe grows strong in the tenants of faith, assisting in the teaching of Christianity as essential to one's existence so that one day the aware youth will consciously declare his belief in Christ for full salvation. Logically, therefore, the Godparent needs to be a man or woman of faith themselves and in close enough proximity to the youth during his formative years.

The Godparent is not a legal Guardian, that station ascribed for variant reasons, although they can be deemed so if all parties wish it. In Georgiana's case guardianship was granted to the two men closest to her who were the most mature yet also youthful and financially stable. James Darcy had stipulated in his will that if his son could not fulfill the duties of Master of Pemberley and primary Guardian for any reason, the estate would be managed by Col. Fitzwilliam until Georgiana married. However, since financial and physical wellbeing is not an obligation of the Godparent, the role is not dependent on wealth, blood, or station. Thus it was that Georgiana's Godparents are her brother, Aunt Madeline, and Mrs. Reynolds. Fitzwilliam James Alexander Darcy was baptized by Reverend Bertram in the Pemberley Chapel thirty years prior with his proud parents flanked by James Darcy Sr., Mr. Henry Vernor, and Anne's sister Lady Muriel Griffin.

Naturally not all families placed extreme importance on the selection of Godparent. The amount of prudence undertaken was directly correlated to the depth of religious faith within the family. In the case of the Darcys, faith was a major facet in their day to day lives so the decision was severely contemplated. Lizzy may not be as strongly adherent to religion as her husband, but she certainly understood the importance to him and the prerequisite of choosing wisely. For several weeks prior to Alexander's birth they had discussed the options. Although they had felt strongly that their firstborn would be male, they still had to consider all alternatives. They gravely considered literally

everyone they knew, but their hearts and sound deduction inevitably returned to two names that without any doubt they knew to be perfect.

Still, they waited until after Alexander was born before approaching the persons they believed destined to accept the charge.

It was two days after the birth with Lizzy still recuperating and not venturing beyond her bedchamber. When Darcy was not present, which was rarely, and even a good portion of the time when he was, Jane would be found placidly sitting nearby with a cup of tea or embroidery hoop in hand. One eye would be on the flashing needle and the other on her sister and new nephew, talking quietly if Lizzy was awake, and ready to jump up the instant she needed anything. Her constant vigil and serene presence soothed all of them and granted Darcy the relieving freedom to move beyond the chamber as required. Of course, he did not go farther in those early days than the hallway, his dressing room, or sitting room where he would attend to his personal needs or relax with Bingley over a cup of hot chocolate. Georgiana and George came and went, but the Bingleys were a permanent fixture.

Per a preplanned arrangement of the new parents, Darcy returned to Lizzy's bedchamber that afternoon after claiming ultimate victory over Bingley at a handful of backgammon games. The companionable conversation, stimulating competition, and snack of Mrs. Langton's excellent gooseberry jam smothered biscuits had been a delightful intermission, but he missed his new family. "Come Bingley," he said to his friend, "Let us see what our beautiful wives are gossiping about. Besides, you have not gazed upon my handsome son since early this morning. He needs to recognize the face of his Uncle Charles."

Darcy was already at the door, Bingley trailing with a chuckle and privately wondering if he will be as giddy upon the arrival of his firstborn. *Most likely*, he thought with a smile.

Jane sat on a settee before the roaring fire with needlepoint in hand, talking softly as Lizzy completed burping Alexander from the pillowed comfort of a second settee while Georgiana reclined on the chaise with a forgotten book on her lap. The men joined the ladies, Darcy crossing instantly to his wife for a tender kiss and taking Alexander from her sore arms as he sat beside. General conversation ensued, Lizzy leaning gratefully against the solid strength of her husband's side. It was Darcy, sleeping baby cradled in his arms, who broached the important subject in his typical forthright manner of speaking.

"Charles, Jane." They glanced over simultaneously, brows lifting slightly at the serious tone, "Elizabeth and I have a question of extreme magnitude to ask of you. It is essential you understand that we have given

this a tremendous amount of consideration and are absolutely convinced of the wisdom in our choice. Although we would make every attempt to comprehend a negative response, it would be deeply distressing as we are confident in our judgment. We in no way want you to be obligated, however, if you feel just cause to decline.”

“Speak freely Darcy, without the extended preamble!” Bingley interrupted with a laugh, turning to his wife with a sidelong glance at his friend, “Mr. Darcy could run for Parliament considering how long winded he can be at times.”

Lizzy chuckled from where she leaned on Darcy’s shoulder, patting his arm. Darcy pressed his lips together, not angry but not as amused as the others in the room, continuing as if Bingley had not spoken, “Personality traits notwithstanding, Elizabeth and I wish to humbly request that the two of you consider accepting the position of Godparents to our son.”

Jane smiled softly, eyes tearing as she gazed at her sister. She had speculated that they might choose her and Charles, although Lizzy had extended no hint of such; nor had Jane mentioned the speculation to anyone, not even her husband. It was more a conjecture based on hope. Still, as greatly as she had secretly wished to be given the esteemed role in her first nephew’s life, she was deeply moved.

Charles was stunned and it showed in the comic wide-eyed slackness of his face. As close as he was to Darcy, and perhaps partially because of his intimacy with the morally reserved man, he naturally assumed the choice would be a near relative or even one of his life long Derbyshire friends. Bingley well knew Darcy’s strong religious convictions. Conversely, he had not been raised as rigidly, his lackadaisical father more apt to sleep late on Sunday morning suffering from a massive post-drunkenness headache then escort his children to Church. Faith based tenets were taught tenuously at best throughout his youth and only in later years in his desire to break away from the waywardness of his early existence did Bingley begin to attend services with any sort of regularity. What he had discovered was a fount of peace and stability that he embraced, but not to the great degree of Darcy.

Darcy was smiling affectionately at his young friend, insightfully clarifying in his quiet voice, “You see, my dear friend, being a Godparent is not exclusively about teaching Alexander the specific doctrines and theological creeds. That is what the Church and Pastors are for. It is more about being an example of those Biblical principles, living them out within sight of his immature mind, teaching as a model of what is virtuous and acceptable. You and Jane exemplify everything that

Elizabeth and I want our son to be in life.”

“Of all the couples we know,” Lizzy added, “Not only do you breathe integrity and love and faithfulness, but you truly love him. We know you always will. It is vital to us that Alexander grows knowing that his Godparents are not merely accepting a tradition or honored obligation, but are performing a duty out of devotion.”

Bingley glanced at his wife, throat tight as he swallowed the forming lump, their eyes meeting with instant communication. No hesitation or need to discuss the matter. “We would be honored, William, deeply honored,” he finally squeaked out. “Lizzy, thank you. Yes, absolutely we will stand with you before God and commit ourselves to Alexander.”

The Darcys were content with the Bingleys as chosen Godparents. It truly had been an obvious choice and despite the formality demanded, neither had suspected a refusal. The choice for the third Godparent had transpired with far more circumspection and surprise. Georgiana was the easily agreed upon Godmother, if their child had been a female. It is not that several other female family members and friends would be wise choices, but the relationship between Darcy and his sister was simply too devoted to seriously contemplate naming another.

The final decision for Godfather although arrived at in a bizarre twist of events and conversations, was equally as perfect.

\* \* \* \*

“There, there my darling. Hush now and do not be so vexed with your mama. You look absolutely adorable.”

“I thought he had grown so big until now. That gown swallows him! No wonder you are irritated, my lamb.” Darcy bent to kiss the flushed cheek of his fussing son, securing waving hands. “Only for a short time must you endure, precious. It is very important, even if you do resemble a blob of meringue confection. Be strong, my son, as life is full of these travails and clothing is rarely comfortable.” Alexander had calmed somewhat at the resonant murmurings of his father, but additional wails were clearly bubbling under the surface.

“Hold the skirts up so I can find his feet. Thank you. I should have placed the stockings and slippers on first. Oh, there he goes! Ticklish feet. Talk to him, dearest, before he loses all control and wrinkles the material beyond repair.”

Darcy bent again to croon placatingly into a tiny ear while Lizzy

finished the difficult task of placing small garments on a flailing limb. Mrs. Hanford stood nearby with the bonnet and silver cross in hand, smiling at the scene. Alexander was well fed and wishing to fall asleep as was typical, but instead was being subjected to the horrors of dressing in a lace encrusted gown with dozens of buttons that had required him to lie on his abdomen for far too long, frustrating him even further as he could not yet raise his head adequately to gaze about. At least now he was on his back so all the surroundings, including the two beloved adults who cared for him so devotedly, could be visualized in the appropriate perspective.

“It is alright, my sweet, cry if you must. I cannot say that I blame you as you do look rather ridiculous...”

“William! He does not! He is adorable.”

“He looks like a girl or a doll all smothered in satin and lace. I cannot believe I ever had to wear this frippery, but traditions must be adhered to. Yes, that is the way of life, my son, lesson number two after the revelation that clothing is generally uncomfortable.” He nibbled on Alexander’s neck, crying slowly replaced with baby giggles.

“I am sure you were equally as adorable in this gown, love, although you would have filled it out better since you weighed nearly two pounds heavier than Alexander at birth. Your poor mother.”

The christening gown currently disturbing Alexander had been sewn by Anne Darcy during her first pregnancy, expressly to be worn by the Heir to Pemberley. When that first child had ended up being a girl, Alexandria, she had instead been christened in the gown worn by her mother, the far more elaborate gown packed away until Fitzwilliam was christened.

Initially Lizzy had imagined sewing a gown as well, but the plain reality is that she was not very skilled with a needle, especially when dealing with fragile fabrics. While in London she had examined several ready made garments, considered purchasing a couple that she liked, but was too embarrassed to do so. Darcy would laugh at her later when she finally confessed that she was shamed to admit her deficiency to him. As sentimental as Darcy tended to be in many respects, he honestly could care less what his child wore during the baptism ceremony. It was only upon one of his excursions through the stacks of boxes stored in the attic that the resolution presented itself.

His forays into the storage areas of the attic had begun with the quest for baby furniture. Along the way he had discovered numerous boxes containing a plethora of infant toys, memorabilia, school implements, childhood clothing, and more. Darcy had been overjoyed

and rather amazed. He knew his parents had amassed a large quantity of keepsakes; their penchant for saving valued items a character trait passed on to their children, he just had not realized the breadth. Therefore, what had begun as a simple retrieval of cradle and rocking chair ended up being a walk down memory lane.

It was common during those long days of late summer for Lizzy to discover her dusty spouse surrounded by boxes and scattered piles of oddities. One such day, not too long after their return from touring Derbyshire, she heard the ghost of his laughter reaching her ears as she approached the narrow stairs leading to the eastern attic where the family artifacts were accumulated. She smiled as she mounted the steps, grinning further at the sight of him sitting on the wooden floorboards with long legs crossed amid the cobwebs and chaos. Coats and cravat had been discarded in the stifling heat of the airless room, folded neatly over a threadbare chair, his fine linen shirt smudged with grime and hands filthy. He was reading a tattered book of sorts, grinning and chuckling.

“What is so humorous?”

He glanced up at his wife, motioning for her to come forward and clearing a space amongst the clutter by his side. “Remember I told you that when I was a boy I attempted to write a story about traveling to another planet? My mother kept it!” He shook his head. “I never spoke of it to a living soul so have no idea how she confiscated it. She kept everything! Every report I wrote, test I took, all my tutor’s comments and marks, love notes to my family. Georgie’s as well. Her boxes are over there.” He waved to a group assembled in perfect order against a far wall. “I will bring those down so she can look through them when she returns from Wales.” He shook his head in amazement. “Unbelievable. I fear I have not been so diligent with Georgie’s school work, but think Mrs. Reynolds has as some of the items I saw are from well after father died.”

Lizzy was reading the juvenile novel of a conquering Martian hero named Admiral Achilles and his red haired companion Sergeant Hector with barely controlled mirth. Darcy glanced at her face and nudged her side, “Go ahead and laugh. God knows I did. Give me some latitude, please, as I think I was eleven when I wrote that.”

“And reading *The Iliad* at the same time?”

He shrugged, reaching into another box, “I always wanted to be Achilles. Handsome, nearly immortal, fleet, heroic.”

“And how were you supposed to have arrived upon the shores of Mars?”

“I do not think I ever worked that part out. Look here, the puzzles I remember playing with!” He pulled out numerous twisted

wooden and metal brain teasers such as those purchased in Derby. "Hmmm.... I shall have to take these down and see if I can recall the mystery. Add them to the others that I have yet to solve. This whole box contains classroom apparatus: slates, abacus, a globe, old textbooks....Lord, these are outdated! Why keep such things?"

Lizzy had finished chapter one of the Martian tale, turning to an open box by his feet. The box was larger than the others, really a moderate sized chest with elaborate scrolling, and had *Fitzwilliam* etched onto the lid in gold embossed cursive. "What is in here?"

"All my infant things. My grandfather built that chest. He was an incredible whittler. You recall the collection of miniature sailing vessels in the library that he created? Some of these," he indicated the interlocking wooden puzzles, "were designed by him. He was very gifted. Unfortunately neither my father nor I inherited the talent. Father built a similar chest for Georgiana, but it is more functional than ornate. Hers is in her room as was this one in mine until I moved to the Master Chambers. I am not really sure why it ended up in the attic." He shrugged.

He watched Lizzy pull the various items out, both smiling as he reverently fingered each one. "I thought my mother foolish for keeping so many silly things. Until now, that is. As a soon-to-be father I appreciate the value of every token, each one a testimonial of a precious moment lived and deserving of remembrance. I suppose when one is young one imagines that all events are etched permanently upon the mind, but time has a way of eroding some memories, or perhaps the brain can only hold a finite amount of information."

Among the maternally cherished treasures were two tarnished silver and polished stone rattles; well gnawed and cracked teething rings of rubber, ivory, and coral; several sets of dented, tarnished miniature dining utensils, cups, and bowls; a stuffed grey Irish wolfhound that was threadbare and lumpy, missing one button eye and floppy ear; three equally ratty, stained blankets; a pouch containing a mass of fine, light brown hair; a collection of bibs, bonnets, booties, and gowns likely special gifts from some relative or friend; a tied bundle of envelopes enclosing birth congratulations; a hairbrush and comb, both missing teeth and bristles; and a dozen odd toys perfect for small hands.

Lizzy had lifted the lid on a tiny silver case lined with scarlet velvet in which resided dozens of varying sized, pearly white teeth. She chuckled, grasping one of the tiniest between her thumb and index finger, "Yes, it is as you say, dearest, but much more." She placed the tooth onto the palm of his hand, continuing in a soft voice as he gazed at

the miniscule white rock lost on his large hand, "It is so that years later you can do precisely what you are doing now, rumbling through old boxes covered in dust and filled with seemingly useless paraphernalia, and know that your parents loved you so much that nothing was deemed superfluous."

He smiled, rolling the tooth about on his palm. "They waited many years for a son and after losing my sister, well, I confess I was hideously pampered and a bit spoiled. Then there were all the long years until Georgie. Naturally I was loved, but I judge it was partially because my mother had no one else to dote on."

Lizzy laughed, "There is likely a great deal of truth in that. I know my mother kept very few of our childhood mementos. What souvenirs I have were kept by me. She was far too busy having more babies, not to mention definitely unsentimental."

"However many children we are blessed with, Elizabeth, they will be equally overindulged. I promise you that. What's this?" He withdrew a carefully sealed smaller box, placing it on his lap.

Lizzy gasped at the revealed contents, fingers immediately caressing over the delicate fabric. "Is it yours?"

"Must be as this box contains all my keepsakes. Ah, yes, look here, my birth announcement: *Fitzwilliam Alexander James Darcy born to Mr. James and Lady Anne Darcy on November Ten of 1787.*"

"It is beautiful." Lizzy spoke softly, truly stunned by the gown of exquisite satin and Alencon lace overlay. It was white with short puffy sleeves, a lined skirt three feet long with the lace extending three inches to end in a scalloped pattern of leaves and bluebells, and minute pearls sewn over the bodice. "You wore this." It was a reverently whispered statement rather than a question.

"Apparently. I remember mother saying she sewed a gown while expecting my sister. There is a box of belongings that were Alexandria's over there," he pointed to a lone box. "The awaited heir required something extravagant, she said." He smiled wistfully, eyes dim in memory.

"I cannot believe she created this herself." She bit her lip, looking shying to Darcy, who was still lost in reminiscence. "Would you mind terribly if our baby wore this?"

Darcy snapped to the present with left brow raised in surprise, gazing at Lizzy in bafflement, "Why in the world would I mind? It is your decision, beloved, although I thought you planned to make a gown yourself. Would you not prefer our son to wear something new?"

Lizzy's cheeks were flushed and she ducked her head in



embarrassment. "Well, I rather like the idea of him wearing what you wore. A sense of continuity and good fortune. But if you must know the truth it is partially because I am not skilled enough to create a garment half this lovely and your heir deserves the best."

He gently clasped her chin, lifting to meet her eyes as he leaned toward her, "Elizabeth, it is *our child* who deserves the best in all things, no matter the sex. I do not care what gown he or she wears when baptized, only that he is healthy and that the ceremony takes place. The choice is yours." He kissed her tenderly, caressing over the soft bulge of their son. "If you sew it, then it will be perfect. If you buy something or have it made, it will be perfect. If you wish to use this gown, then it will be perfect."

"Thank you William."

He stroked over her cheek, leaving smears of dirt, "As for your sewing techniques or lack thereof, I married you even though you are so hideously flawed and I love you anyway."

He was grinning widely, Lizzy laughing and shoving forcefully so that he nearly fell over. They both ended up dust covered, but happy and content when they finally left the sweltering confines. Arms were laden with items that were cautiously if hastily laid aside in the rushing need for a cleansing bath.....together.

So the decision had been made. Lizzy now happier then ever that she had chosen Darcy's christening gown. It was gorgeous and Alexander did look adorable despite Darcy's commentary to the contrary, but it was the recognition that it had been meticulously hand sewn by her mother-in-law and once encased her husband that brought a sensation of cohesion to her soul.

The accompanying bonnet and shoes were newer, the ones worn by Darcy thirty years ago placed into a small glass case that now sat on a shelf in the nursery. Not only were the shoes too big for Alexander, Fitzwilliam Darcy truly having been a big baby, but the gradually unwrapped gifts for Alexander had revealed worthier alternatives.

Alexander had not received any Christmas gifts per se. All the gifts addressed to the young master which began arriving some three weeks after his birth were set aside to be opened nearer to his Christening. Lizzy was stunned by the constant barrage of packages delivered by Royal Mail or servants or the hands of the gifter. Once again she was struck anew by the prestige and eminence of her husband as Master of Pemberley; the full scope of what that title portended was signified by the wealth of accolades and blessings pouring in.

The red velvet drape once encumbered with gaudily wrapped

holiday presents was now equally as laden with gilded and sparkling packages of all sizes from all over England. A number had arrived with the Bennets from the relatives and friends of Lizzy. A generous package containing three wrapped gifts was sent from Darcy's family in Devon. There were the parcels from Lady Catherine, Anne and Raul, and the Collinses, all delivered together while Darcy was away. They had received an abundance of written congratulations with a smattering of small gifts from friends and associates in London and elsewhere. No word yet from Austria, but the birth announcement had likely barely been conveyed. Other more modestly wrapped presents mysteriously appeared at all hours of the day and were clearly from the staff. The biggest surprise was a complete layette of quality Irish linen dyed a brilliant sky blue from Darcy's Uncle Phillip and his family.

Opening the surfeit of gifts became part of the evening's entertainment for the three nights following Darcy's return from Derby. The bulk of offerings consisted of knitted blankets and quilts; cotton, wool, and linen baby dresses in every color of the rainbow with matching bonnets; an adorable collection of toddler boy outfits with small trousers, ruffled shirts, and tiny jackets; several rattles and teething rings; a profusion of bibs in all sizes, and a dozen satin pillows.

"I will need to change his clothing three times a day for the next six months to wear all these dresses," Lizzy exclaimed. She held up a lovely gown of faded pink with white ribbons crisscrossed down the front and along the hemline, a gift from Jonathan and Priscilla Fitzwilliam.

"I am surprised you are not weeping at all the time wasted sewing gowns yourself, considering how you detest such activity." It was Jane teasing from where she sat beside her sister, refolding and repacking the individual presents to be put away later.

Darcy hid a smile in the rim of his tea cup. He stood across the room ostensibly watching the unwrapping, although in truth the procedure was becoming a bit boring. Not that he would confess this to his wife or any of the other women in the room who seemed to be inexhaustive in their enchantment over each item, many of which frankly looked precisely like the last as far as he was concerned. All the other men had pretended attentiveness for thirty minutes maximum before meandering to far corners. Darcy maintained his vigil from a purposefully selected locale near enough to partake in the festivities when necessary, but also converse covertly with Bingley and Col. Fitzwilliam. For two nights he had diligently observed the unmasking with a mixture of the extreme pleasure experienced with anything regarding his son, and an

ennui that he vaguely felt guilty about, but could not control. Tonight, thankfully, they had finally worked methodically through the gifts from business associates, friends, staff, and distant relatives to the ones presented by close family and friends.

"I cannot argue with the truth of that statement, Jane." Lizzy responded to her jest while looking to her husband's glittering eyes with a faint shake of her head. Darcy merely raised one brow.

"Mrs. Darcy, this is from me. You saw the beginning pattern and have been gifted an array of quilts, but I do hope you will like it."

"Thank you Miss Bingley! I am sure we will love it. And have no fear, as cold as it is here in Derbyshire I am sure we will have great need of blankets and quilts aplenty. Jane has already informed me of the beauty of your creation, and I see she was not exaggerating. Look William! Oh, Miss Bingley, it is truly incredible."

Darcy drew near in honest awe. The quilt in question was magnificent: a collage of poplin pieces in varying degrees of brightness exceptionally woven into a Crown of Thorns pattern. The entire quilt was a bit larger than a true infant sized blanket, which was a bonus.

"Caroline, this is a marvel!" Darcy exclaimed, losing his usual formality in surprise, "How wise of you to create it larger as it will fit well over his toddler bed. The colors are remarkable! Thank you so very much, Caroline. We will treasure it always."

Caroline was beaming, all the typical arrogance erased in the light of the Darcys' praise. For one of the first times in all his years of acquaintance with her it suddenly struck him how truly beautiful she was when allowed to relax her features and light with an honest smile. Abruptly the epiphany bolted through him that this is what his wife and friends saw in his countenance now as compared to the severe façade presented for most of his life. With a surge of emotion bordering on affection, coupled with a profound gratefulness for his blessings of love and joy, he grasped one of Caroline's hands and brought the fingers to his lips for a thankful kiss.

"Thank you Caroline, from the bottom of my heart." He spoke softly, the words reaching only the immediate bystanders, "Elizabeth and I will cherish this gift created from your heart. Our greatest wish is that someday we may be honored to return the gesture when you are blessed with the exalted joy of motherhood."

Caroline's mouth had fallen open, eyes misty as she gazed into Darcy's shining visage, swallowing the lump formed with difficulty before murmuring, "You are welcome, Mr. Darcy."

Kitty stepped into the slightly awkward tableau, handing her gift

to Lizzy. "It is no big thing," she stated apologetically, "but I did do all the work myself!"

Lizzy laughed. Of all the Bennet sisters, Jane and Mary were the only two who excelled and actually enjoyed working with needles in all the various methods. Lydia hated it the most, probably never finishing a project in all her life, but Kitty came second. Lizzy delighted in embroidery, as long as it was not too complicated a pattern, and found a relaxation in knitting, but that was it. Crocheting was out of the question and sewing she abhorred. Lizzy had noticed a calming of Kitty since Lydia's departure, and upon rare occasion observed her head bent over a hoop. If she had created a gift of any sort with her own hands it would be a prize to be sure, no matter the caliber of craftsmanship.

As anticipated, the gown sewn and detailed by Kitty was not a masterpiece. But its beauty was in the simplicity of design, especially as compared to many of the fancy infant dresses thus far given. Constructed of plain white cotton with eyelet lace along the collar and sleeve edges, the gown itself was pure in its minimalism. Clearly Kitty had devoted her skill and time to the embroidered border of the skirt. In painstakingly perfect stitches and every color imaginable she had fabricated a flowing pattern of inch high stick figure children at play: skipping rope, swinging, bouncing a ball, running, jumping, rolling a hoop, swatting a shuttlecock, tumbling, and blowing soap bubbles. It was playful, colorful, and utterly delightful.

"Oh, Kitty! I love it! The pattern is wonderful! I can imagine Alexander doing all these fun pastimes. Thank you so very much!" Darcy thanked a blushing Kitty with a regal bow and courtly kiss to the fingers.

Hugs and kisses became rampant and enthusiastic as the family gifts were gradually unveiled. The men began to drift closer to the fray with sincere smiles of delight. The presents varied widely and reflected the personalities of the individuals involved. Silver implements abounded per tradition with Alexander provided a wealth of eating utensils, porridge bowls, and cups. The Gardiners, Bennets, and Lady Catherine, as the eldest family members, especially adhered to the tradition of silver, each implement beautifully carved and shiny. Lord and Lady Matlock gifted a gorgeous silver and lapis lazuli inlaid brush and comb.

Anne and Raul sent the complete series of S. & J. Fuller paper doll books. These were instantly popular among the guests, all present opening halting as the precious books were passed from hand to hand with each adult reverting to childhood as the dolls were dressed and the story verses read aloud. Darcy finally confiscated the expensive books before, "they are smudged and creased beyond Alexander being able to

read them.”

Samuel and Marguerite kept to the theme of literature with both volumes of Ann and Jane Taylor’s *Poems for Infant Minds*, *Rhymes for the Nursery*, and *Hymns for Infant Minds*, signed to Alexander Darcy by the loyal personal servants. Not surprisingly Mary and Mr. Daniels gifted a small white-dyed leather Bible and accompanied publication of inspirational quotations from spiritual writers.

Numerous gifts came from the servants, most of a simple nature such as the crocheted blanket with embroidered clusters of Sweet William from Phillips and his wife, but two stood out from the rest. Mr. Clark and the entire grounds-keeping staff presented Lizzy and Darcy formally with a three year old oak sapling, carefully cultivated in the orangery from an acorn harvested off the enormous oak marking the eastern boundary of the private garden. Standing with grubby hat in hand, his staff crowded behind, Mr. Clark had nervously delivered his speech to the touched Darcys that afternoon in the Conservatory.

“Reckoning how much you enjoy gardening, Mrs. Darcy, and as Pemberley for generations now has gained renown for her landscaping, we,” he swept the hat toward the shuffling gardeners, “figured a tree to mark the young Master’s birth was appropriate. It will grow with him, strong and enduring, so it had to be an oak. There is a perfect plot in the garden for it, with a few re-plantings come spring, but of course you can decide to plant it wherever you wish it to be.” The Darcys assured him that the private garden would be preferred, trusting to his expertise. Lizzy was so choked up she could barely speak, Darcy maintaining his equilibrium adequately enough to thank the Groundskeeper and his excellent staff with the essential pomp and formality.

Mrs. Reynolds provided the final habiliments to the Christening outfit with a superbly crafted bonnet of lace and satin, and tiny slippers of pliant kid leather sewn by her hand. She had produced both with Darcy’s christening gown in mind, keeping to the old-fashioned style and sparing no expense in purchasing fine Alencon lace similar to the original. The entire project was taken on faith, hoping that her Master and Mistress would choose her gift over the ones worn by Darcy. The reality is that it solved a problem as Darcy’s infant shoes were too large and the bonnet strangely plain considering the elaborate gown. Lizzy loved them and was thrilled to have Alexander wear an ensemble from a myriad of sources. The finishing touch came from the Bingleys. As Godparents they added an elaborately carved stout silver cross pendant on an ebony and ruby beaded chain to their other gift of five softly woven cotton towels sized for a small body. The necklace was stunning,

the fiery red and bold black a masculine contrast to the ruffles and lace. Darcy was elated.

Col. Fitzwilliam, typical man, went farther afield from the standard infant paraphernalia. His box was far and away the largest, too big to set into a lap. Rather he deposited the hefty, and obviously heavy, unwrapped parcel onto the low table before Elizabeth. Grinning widely he addressed Darcy and Lizzy, "I am well aware that this is not a customary christening gift, but then neither is the gift you bestowed upon your son, Darcy."

Darcy raised a brow, "What are you referring to?"

Richard grinned further, glancing to Lizzy's baffled face. "Surely you have informed your wife of the generous bequest awarded to your infant son?"

Lizzy started laughing. "Shame on you Colonel, trying to cause your cousin trouble. Of course he told me about Wolfram. Asked my permission, if you must know, although I judge he would have finagled the transaction somehow whether I deemed it suitable or not. My only stipulation was that he forbids Alexander to ride a fully grown stallion until he can competently manage a pony."

"Which will be by the time he is six or seven," Darcy stated firmly, prideful assurance evident on his face. Lizzy merely shook her head, but Darcy was lost momentarily in dreamy visions of squiring his son about the corral. Horses never far from his thoughts upon any given day, it had occurred to him soon after Alexander's birth that the year old colt Wolfram would be in the full bloom of his maturity when Alexander was ready to make the transition from pony to horse. He was sitting in his study at the time, pouring over a detailed list of the current stable stock when it struck him: the perfect endowment – deeding the ownership title of Wolfram to Alexander Darcy. His heart began to race and within seconds he was dashing from the room to find his wife, skidding to a stop midway down the hall when additional enlightenment dawned: Lizzy may not be so overjoyed at the idea. For a second, just the barest second, the old dominant arrogance flared and he thought, *Who cares what Elizabeth thinks? I am his father, after all!* However, this treasonous thought was rapidly smothered. Instead, he paced in the corridor for quite some time while running over the various ways to broach the topic and make it palatable to his non-horse loving wife. In the end he threw up his hands, literally, and just decided to be honest. This approach worked the best in the majority of situations anyway.

Luckily he found Lizzy in the nursery actively nursing their days-old baby and wearing the beautifully wistful expression dominant when

Alexander was at her breast. At moments like this he could probably sell her on anything! For a spell he lost himself to the identical exalted abstraction, forgetting why he had come in the joy of gazing at his son, but eventually rational memory reasserted itself.

“Dearest, I came here specifically to ask your opinion on a matter that I have been contemplating. It will come as no surprise to you, of course, to hear that my greatest hope is that Alexander, as well as all our children, would inherit my love of horses and riding.”

“I doubt if that will be an issue to worry over, my love.”

Darcy smiled, “Well, I do pray for the desire to be imbedded in his soul as it always was in mine, but I do not wish to be presumptuous. However, with that supposition in mind I have an urge to gift Alexander a horse, but not just any horse. Wolfram is who I am thinking of. He was born on the very night that you came here as my wife, you have bonded with him to a degree, and as the offspring of Parsifal I know he is of the very best lineage and dear to me.” He shrugged, “The latter reasoning is merely sentimental on my part, but there it is.”

Lizzy was smiling softly, but her eyes were slightly disturbed. “I think it a lovely idea, but will not Wolfram be too old for Alexander to ride?”

Darcy laughed at her ignorance, “Oh no! A well cared for, sturdy Thoroughbred can live for twenty-five to thirty years easily, often more although not ridable in its seniority. Wolfram will be in his prime when Alexander transitions from pony to horse. They will have years together. My first stallion, Pericles, was given me by my grandfather when I was nine and I rode him exclusively until I was twenty-one. He was my friend and loyal companion. He only died four years ago, but could no longer run as fast as I wished nor jump fences. Parsifal was of Pericles’s lineage, his grandson actually, but still a colt. Nonetheless, I was in love. I rode various horses for a couple years until he was mature enough to carry my bulk in the demanding way I required.” He laughed, closing his eyes in memory, “Mr. Thurber was nigh on to throttling me I think as I haunted the stables incessantly. He was new to the position of Head Wrangler and not yet familiar with my personal involvement. He grew accustomed to me in time. Anyway, I insisted on caring for Parsifal myself, no one else was to break him or train him or ride him, ever.” He looked at Lizzy with serious eyes, one finger stroking over Alexander’s cheek absently. “The relationship between a man and his horse can be a strong bond, Elizabeth. I want Alexander to experience that if possible. As for Wolfram, he is a special horse and will be perfect for our son until he is an adult and can pick a replacement as I did. Does this meet with your

approval?”

Lizzy nodded, but her eyes were yet mildly troubled. Darcy chuckled, bending to bestow a light kiss. “I can read your thoughts, Mrs. Darcy. Have no fear. I will not be trudging through the snow with our fragile infant in my arms to be introduced to his future steed.” He kissed her again and then kissed Alexander’s hand before rising to leave. “Spring will be soon enough!” And with that final declaration and a roguish grin, he departed.

The proper documents were signed and notarized, ownership of one Wolfram deeded to Alexander Darcy of Pemberley. The new owner was unimpressed, not even opening his eyes when a proud father informed him of the transfer. A month later he was still indifferent to the notion, but Darcy was abundantly curious as to what Richard was gifting.

“In all honesty Elizabeth, horses are as important to me as Darcy.” Lizzy smiled at that understatement, Richard continuing, “I think Wolfram an excellent choice, but in the meantime, until he is strong enough to ride a full grown horse he will need to ride a pony. If I know my cousin he already has one of the Connemaras picked out for him.” He glanced at Darcy with a questioning grin, but Darcy merely pressed his lips together, his expression speaking volumes nonetheless. “So, with that in mind, I had this fashioned for my newest cousin by a leather maker named Anderson in London.”

Darcy was already whistling, familiar with the prestigious Anderson and his equestrian products; standing with unveiled excitement to lay eyes on what he now suspected was in the box. He was correct. It was a pony sized saddle crafted for dressage in the fashion of Gueriniere and included all necessary tack. Fine cowhide tanned and dyed a deep brown then polished and oiled until gleaming and supple. *Alexander* was stamped into each saddle flap in a stylized script with a shooting star bursting off the R’s final curve. The entire ensemble was exquisitely constructed.

“Along with this saddle ensemble I vow to lend my superb horsemanship skills to teaching Alexander to be a superior rider. I am better than Darcy, so it only fitting I extend my expertise.”

Darcy merely grunted his disdain toward that statement, otherwise ignoring the grinning Richard for meticulous examination of the saddle. Collectively the men assembled for inspection, offering vastly superior interest over this one item than all the others combined. Needless to say, it was the finest gift granted as far as they were concerned and would continue to hold their attention as Lizzy resumed the unwrapping.



Georgiana and George applied their artistic talents to their offerings. In the case of Georgiana this was to be expected, but George was a complete surprise. Georgiana had begun creating a wealth of baby items upon first hearing the news, even when it was not a certainty. Therefore Lizzy and Darcy had already been the grateful recipients of numerous garments, decorative furnishings for the nursery such as the floral adorned silk lamp shades and painted tile table sitting next to Lizzy's rocking chair, and two enamel decorated porcelain flower vases. Her gift for the christening was equally as stunning and exhibitiv of her talent.

Painted on miniature ovals of silk were striking likenesses of Lizzy and Darcy from the shoulders up, the portraits sewn above each other onto a twelve inch square quilted wall hanging with the following poem masterfully stitched alongside:

*This little tiny baby  
Was sent from God above  
To fill our hearts with happiness  
And touch our lives with love  
He must have known  
We'd give our all  
And always do our best  
To give our precious baby love  
And be grateful and so blessed*

"Georgie! Oh! It is so beautiful!" Lizzy jumped up, handing the picture to a dazzled Darcy, and embraced her sister tightly.

"This is incredible, Georgiana. Precisely as we look now when Alexander is born. How absolutely marvelous!" Darcy smiled incandescently. "You truly astound me, baby sister. Now I only wonder why I pay anyone else to paint portraits when I have a remarkable artist within my household." He cupped her head, leaning for a kiss to her forehead.

"Here is a seriously accomplished woman, yes William?"

Darcy stroked his teasing wife's cheek, still embracing his blushing sister, "I am surrounded by accomplished women, my heart. I love you with all my soul Georgie. This will hang above Alexander's cradle, the faces of his adoring parents watching over him eternally and the poetic phrases conveying our everlasting sentiments." He enfolded her against his chest, murmuring into her hair, "How fortunate our boy is to have such a fabulous Auntie. Thank you my dearest, thank you."

“Enough mushiness! Break it up so Elizabeth can open my presents. Two! For you, my darling niece.” George breezed in, bowing with a flourish and handing the largest of the last two presents to Elizabeth while linking arms with Georgiana. “I would say the best has been saved for last, but I doubt my meager offering can transcend Georgie’s. I shall boast nonetheless as I too created these masterpieces with mine own hands.” He lifted his long fingered appendages, digits waving. “Skilled surgeon’s instruments employed in the creative process for my grand nephew and partial namesake.”

Lizzy laughed, shaking her head. “Are you ever serious Uncle?”  
“Rarely, my dear. Only when delivering babies. Now open.”

The formless, cushiony bundle was wrapped in one of his Indian scarves; a particularly flamboyant one of chartreuse and orange, all tied with blue string. Lizzy was smiling even before revealing the contents, upon which she burst into huge gales of laughter. Darcy merely shook his head in resignation. Nestled between sheets of tissue paper was a wardrobe of baby and toddler sized Indian outfits! Casual dhotis, salwar, kurti, salwar kameez, all in bright colors and exotic prints, and one formal Khalat robe of thick wool lined satin in turquoise with woven peacocks and Bengal tigers.

Gasps and exclamations of awe rose from the gathering crowd, hands reaching to inspect the kaleidoscopic miniature garments.  
“Elizabeth dear, I fashioned these from the cloths I brought with me or new ones purchased in Town. My nephew deserves to be breezy and as handsome as his Grand Uncle, do you not agree? On a practical note, youngsters should wear clothing that is unencumbering to developing extremities and allows the genitalia to freely grow.”

“Uncle!” Darcy chastised with a pointed glance to Georgiana’s reddening cheeks.

George merely shrugged unperturbed. “It is the truth of it William. That khalat,” he nodded toward the robe Darcy held in his hands, “is of the same fabric as mine. Very elegant, I daresay, and Alexander will be exceedingly comfortable while reclining with his favored companion, me!” His grin was broad, Darcy laughing and rolling his eyes.

“Do Indian children really dress like this, Dr. Darcy?”

“Actually, Miss Kitty, Indian children rarely wear more than a loincloth. It is far hotter in India, if you recall. But on occasion they do, yes, although I confess the colors are traditionally beige hues. For some unfathomable reason neutral tones do not appeal to me,” he concluded with false confusion.

"I adore your attire, Dr. Darcy, and so admire your bravery in wearing brilliant colors. Goodness knows I would never have the nerve." Mrs. Gardiner offered, George bowing gallantly in her direction.

Mrs. Bennet was closely examining one of the kurtis. "I am extremely impressed, Sir, at your sewing abilities. These stitches are remarkable!"

"Thank you Mrs. Bennet. I do have vast experience with needle and thread, although not often utilized with fabrics you understand." He grinned, Mrs. Bennet staring incomprehensively for several seconds, then paling and eyes widening humorously as understanding dawned. Muted snickers rippled through the assembly. George continued, "Of course, as a bachelor I am not blessed with the joy of a loving, devoted wife to darn my socks and mend ripped hems, therefore I must attend to such tasks myself. Tragic, really." He hung his head, tone mournful as the women collectively *Aaahed*.

Mr. Bennet snorted and Mr. Gardiner coughed a laugh, George winking sidelong. Darcy was inspecting the exquisite two-year old sized robe, speaking with skepticism, "You intend to maintain you sewed this yourself? Forgive me, Uncle, as I have no experience with needlework, but my wife informs me that working with such a delicate fabric is incredibly difficult."

"I would not be too swift in gauging sewing skills in general against anything Lizzy has told you, Mr. Darcy." Mary interjected with a teasing glance to her sister, who retaliated by sticking out her tongue.

Darcy's lips twitched, but he held his laughter in check. "Be that as it may, Miss Mary, I persist in believe my uncle dissembling."

"Oh very well! If you must know I had assistance from a seamstress in Lambton. The patterns, however, were all mine and I picked the materials specifically so Alexander will be most adorably adorned."

"Well, I love them!" Lizzy declared, lifted on tiptoes to kiss her uncle's cheek. "Alexander *will* be adorable. I can already see him dashing up and down Pemberley's halls in a flash of color. Thank you so very much George."

He smiled, kissing Elizabeth's forehead. "You are welcome my dear. Well, William?" He turned to his nephew with a raised brow.

"I concede that six months ago I would have been horrified at the prospect, but I suppose I have grown accustomed to the attire." He smiled dreamily, "Yes, Alexander will look adorable. Very well then, I like them as well as long as you realize they are for private only. We have our public reputations to maintain."

“What an old foggy you are!” Richard asserted with a laugh.

“I do not see you dashing out to garb yourself in flamboyant Indian wear, Colonel.” Darcy said primly, fresh laughter erupting.

“Now I have the opportunity to redeem myself after being revealed as a sewing incompetent.” George handed a small package to Darcy. “This I did create with my own hands, honest to God.” He smiled sweetly and sincerely, speaking with emotion, “It is important to me that Alexander have something from me that he can carry with him always. An everlasting remembrance of his beloved uncle.”

“Oh! George! It is exquisite!”

Lying in the palm of Darcy’s hand and taking up the entire area was a finely detailed, three dimensional carving of an Asian elephant in pristine ivory. With white trunk raised in the air, mouth agape, curved tusks proudly lifted, small ears erect, legs spread in a run, and tail swishing, the inanimate pachyderm projected a realism so astounding that one held their breath waiting for the trumpet sound to burst forth. Each crease of the rubbery skin and coarse hair was etched in meticulous technicality, the artisanship clearly a gift of expert proportions.

Darcy was practically speechless. “When did you learn to whittle? I had no idea.” He paused, choked up from the breathtaking beauty of the object in his hand coupled with the rushing memories of his grandfather creating such miniature works of art. Of all the various visions burned upon his memory, the sight of his beloved grandfather with hands masterfully wielding a whittling knife as a flawless creation of wood or other raw, shapeless material gradually evolved into a work of art was foremost.

“My father taught us all. You remember how much he loved to carve. My twin and I were the only ones who inherited the propensity, although after Alex died I refused to touch a sculpting knife for years. Now I find it calms me and the aptitude remains within my hands.”

“Have you seen many elephants?” Kitty asked in awe.

“Hundreds, Miss Kitty. They roam freely in certain regions and the locals do ride them as the stories proclaim.”

“Have you ridden one?”

“Dozens of times.” He chuckled at the wondrous expression on her face. “They look as if they would be slow and plodding, but the contrary is true.” He launched into a lengthy dissertation of Indian mammals and lifestyle that filled the bulk of the evening. The sculptured elephant would eventually be encased in glass and placed next to Darcy’s christening bonnet and shoes in the nursery. Alexander would treasure the figurine for all his life, adding many others sculpted by Uncle George

to his collection, always gracing a place of prominence in whatever room he dwelt in.

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“Finished!” Lizzy gently patted the silver cross lying square on Alexander’s chest. “He is perfect.”

“Yes, he is.” Darcy kissed a silky cheek, drowsy eyes fluttering briefly and full lips releasing a moist sigh.

Alexander had finally succumbed to the draw of infant slumber, allowing the donning of bonnet and pendant to proceed with minimal pique. He was resplendent. Wispy chestnut curls escaped the lacy edges of the bonnet, framing his round face and accenting the alabaster fairness of his skin. Pudgy body encased in flowing white lace and satin with the train extending well beyond his leather slippered feet and cascading over the side of the dresser. Darcy had jokily added a daub of his cologne declaring that Alexander needed a dose of manliness to augment the bold pendant in counteracting the frilly gown.

“Are we ready then?” Mrs. Hanford asked. She held the blanket, a thick one of bleached spun wool trimmed with lace and ribbon.

Lizzy nodded. Darcy lifted his sleeping son carefully so as not to startle, while Lizzy assisted with arranging the gown. The trio of adults, all dressed in fine garments for the momentous event, gingerly made their way to the main parlor where their friends and family awaited. Everyone was there dressed in their Sunday best. Lord and Lady Matlock with Lady Montgomery and the Fitzwilliams; all four of the Vernors; the Hugheses; the entire Bennet clan and Mr. Daniels; the Gardiners; Col. Fitzwilliam and Dr. Darcy; the three Bingleys and two Hursts; the senior staff members; and Georgiana.

Quiet conversation drifted as all eagerly waited. A hush descended as the Darcys appeared on the threshold. All eyes lit on the quietly dreaming life, adoration pouring forth. Darcy wore a broad grin, happiness ebullient as he crossed to the three Godparents.

“This is it. Are you ready?” His answer was a trio of radiant smiles and affirmative nods in concert.

## **20 – Christening**

As Lizzy had noted upon rising that morning, the sun was blazing in a brilliant cobalt, cloudless sky bathing the earth in eye piercing sparkles reflecting off the banks of snow. Yet, despite the reality of a fierce sun, the air was only a few degrees above freezing. The faint rays of warmth able to radiate through the chill succeeded in melting the layered frozen flakes enough to edge the chapel's eaves with glistening spikes of twisted icicles and provide background sounds of muffled drips from snow laden trees.

Bundled to his eyeballs, as promised by a protective father, Alexander was rosy cheeked and red-nosed, but otherwise unfazed by his first excursion abroad. He slept through the entire short jaunt to the church, nestled in Darcy's arms with Lizzy incessantly retucking the tightly wrapped blankets, only blinking and stretching briefly upon alighting from the carriage. Reverend Bertram assured that the wide drive and stone pathways leading to Pemberley's quaint house of worship were scoured clean of every speck of ice. This allowed not only for safe passage, but also for an accumulated crowd of local citizens craning for a second glimpse of the young Master.

The notable softening to the perpetually reserved Master of Pemberley over the past year had given the excited folks the mistaken idea that he was eminently approachable. However, one glance at his solemn visage as he disembarked and they instantly parted as a wave.

Darcy undertook this event with the utmost seriousness. If there was one aspect of his existence he understood deep into the core of his being it was the significance of this moment and the obligatory protocol associated. Besides, he was not about to allow several dozen people to touch or breath on his newborn son, nor subject him to the atmospheric elements for longer then absolutely necessary. So he turned to offer a hand to his wife, lent an arm to her dainty gloved hand, and imperiously walked into the brightly candlelit interior with nary a glance to either side. It was left up to Mrs. Darcy to extend kind smiles to the onlookers.

The front pews were reserved for the Darcy family and friends, some of whom were already seated and the remainder who trailed behind. Reverend Bertram greeted from the inner narthex, bowing

properly at the Darcys and exchanging a short whispered conversation. His estimation that the modest chapel would be bursting at the seams with attendees proved to be inaccurate, but the seats were filled to a capacity not seen in many a year. Darcy submerged his emotions behind a composed façade, but he was profoundly moved by the devotion expressed in their participation.

A hush fell over the previously talkative assembly as Mr. and Mrs. Darcy carried their son to the designated bench in the front row. The sanctuary was pleasantly warm due to the combined effects of thick stone walls, a mass of bodies, and the four braziers burning coal in each corner. Lizzy gently worked to remove the woolen blankets, revealing Alexander in all his lacy satin glory. A ripple of whispered awe ran through the congregates with *adorable, precious, so sweet, handsome, and gorgeous* prevalent among the adjectives used. Lizzy and Darcy shared a private smile and loving glance, hearts swelling with immeasurable pride and happiness.

The murmur of voices continued as the worshippers filed in and shuffled to their seats. The front rows rapidly filled with the immediate family and closest friends of the Darcys, lastly the three Godparents taking their places to the right of Lizzy. She clasped Jane's hand, squeezing gently as Reverend Bertram made his way down the aisle.

Resplendent in his formal vestments, black cassock covered by a delicate white surplice and accented with a stunning cross of gold and green satin stole, he stood in regal command behind the pulpit. The kindly face of the grey haired elderly gentleman shone upon each person equally, caring eyes touching every face with faint nods and smiles bestowed. He signaled his wife, who sat at the five year old pianoforte which was a gift from their Patron when the prior one grew impossible to tune adequately, and she applied competent fingertips to the ivory keys for the initial bars of *Come, and Let Us Sweetly Join* by Charles Wesley as the white robed choir entered to stand in their designated location.

Alexander's eyes opened as the first voices rose in song. With the serious expression typical of the weeks old infant, he gazed up at his father, who was equally as seriously concentrating on the choir, and quietly settled in to listen to the disembodied singing and cadenced music as it lifted, harmonized, and swirled about the chamber.

The good Reverend had been graced the opportunity to christen a multitude of infants during his long tenure as Rector; therefore he well knew the limited patience that most babies had for ceremony. Years ago he learned the necessity of keeping the introductory worship as short as feasible in hopes that infantile fortitude would persevere throughout the ritual itself. Even at that there had been many a child whose wails nearly

drowned out the verbalized blessings well before the assault with tepid water to a delicate forehead. Thus it was that as soon as the final strains of echoing music died, he lifted his hands and requested the congregation join him in prayer.

With bowed head Darcy listened to the invocation while smiling at the blue eyed stare fixed on his face. One chubby hand rose, reaching with wavering control, and instantly wrapped tiny fingers around the large thumb offered. It was no surprise when Lizzy's soft hand crept over Darcy's broad dorsum, fingers lacing and simultaneously caressing both husband and son.

"Gentlemen and ladies of Pemberley Parish, welcome to this first Sunday of the year of our Lord eighteen hundred eighteen. Every day and every year granted to us by the gracious Hand of our merciful God is to be treasured and accepted as a gift. Nonetheless, there are certain days, certain years, and certain events that are marked as momentous. Supreme over all human celebrations are those that exalt our awesome Father, sacrificial Savior, and renewing Spirit. Yet, in the process of uplifting our hearts and minds in honoring and commemorating human occurrences we are also reminded of the grace and mercy of the Creator of all. Today is such a day."

Reverend Bertram paused, eyes sweeping the assembly and resting lastly on the Darcys. He smiled, continuing in his ringing voice, "Of all the miracles we daily witness, second to the reawakening of a lost soul finding Christ is the miracle of a new life created in the union between two who love and are joined in the Holy State of Matrimony. Today, this Fourth day of January, we gather here in God's sanctified House to welcome a new life. Further, it is our joy and honor to perform the sacred ritual that will set this innocent babe, born into sin and darkness, upon the true path of Light and forgiveness.

"The Christening Sacrament, baptizing a soul in need of redemption, serves numerous functions. It is a welcoming of the child into the family, community, church, and the world. It is a formal blessing of the child, just as Jesus blessed the children in Mark chapter ten, verses thirteen to sixteen. It is a celebration of the life given, a life that is treasured and loved; a way to publicly thank God for this transcendent joy. It is to dedicate the child to God, vowing to raise him in the tenets of Christian faith. It is to purify by the washing of water, symbolically cleansing of the stain of Original Sin and imparting rebirth through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a time of formal naming and presentation of the reborn Child of Christ to God and the parish community.



“All of these functions are willingly and wholeheartedly entered into today by Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy. With unification of purpose and free submission to God they bring their first born child, a son, before us now to receive the Sacrament. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, if you will join me here with the Godparents as well?”

Darcy rose, heart nearly exploding with the surging joy. Try as he might the regulated mask was slipping and he fervently prayed that the threatening tears could be kept at bay. Glancing to his silently weeping wife he fleetingly envied the societal custom that said it was acceptable for women to shed tears but not men! The five of them, with Alexander quietly awake from the comfortable position nestled against his papa’s solid chest, gathered next to Reverend Bertram on the elevated chancel where he now stood beside the baptismal font.

Darcy stared into the beaming faces of each Godparent, one by one meeting their eyes to convey an unspoken message of thankfulness and abiding affection. Jane Bingley, serene and beautiful in a pale yellow gown, golden locks shimmering in innumerable curls upon her regal head, cerulean blue eyes shining and brimming with steady love as she locked with Darcy’s azure gaze. Charles Bingley, stately in a tailored suit of brown, red hair gleaming in the sunrays through the high windows, orbs wide with lingering traces of amazement, but tender with eternal friendship. And lastly, George Darcy, resplendent in a modern suit of vivid blue with long fitted trousers and waistcoat of cream velvet, brown curls lying impishly over a high noble brow, dimpled and toothy grin extending to identical Darcy blue eyes with fathomless depths of compassion, twinkles of humor, and profound familial devotion.

Darcy and Lizzy turned their attention to Reverend Bertram, confident in the certain knowledge that Alexander was to be perpetually surrounded by the very best of souls.

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### *A Series of Conversations*

“Did you read this article?” George tapped a printed column on the day’s newspaper.

Darcy glanced up from the letter he was writing, squinting to see what article his uncle was indicating from his chair several feet away. They sat in the library and office combination room at Darcy House on a scorching late afternoon in June, Darcy at his desk attending to business while George leafed through the London Times. “Which article is it?”

“The one about William Blake’s speech at the Guildhall in Cheapside. More of his free love and religious mysticism nonsense.” He shook his head in disgust. “I may not be the best one to point fingers at another for disturbing the societal mores, but the man sees visions for goodness sake! They have a name for such people.”

“I have heard him speak a couple times. I concur that he is odd, but he does forward some positive notions regarding equality and abolition of slavery. His artwork is interesting and I actually own two of his relief etchings. Of course, he has opposed our King and spoken out against many of the Churches tenets.”

“Exactly!” George sat forward in agitation, fluttering the paper in the air. “The latter appears to be his primary theme these days as this is the second such expose I have read since coming home. It disgusts me.”

Darcy was gazing quizzically at his uncle with head cocked. “Forgive me Uncle as I mean no disrespect, but I am frankly rather amazed at your vehemence. I would have suspected that your religious views had altered somewhat after your years in India.”

George’s left brow shot up, but then he fell back into the enormous chair with laughter ringing. “Yes, I suppose that would be the natural assumption,” he said, tugging on the edge of his blue silk tunic. “In truth the opposite is the fact of it, William.” He paused, smiling with eyes distant in memory. “I confess that by the time I had finished my education my mind was far centered on science and medicine then religious doctrine. Nonetheless, I was raised by your grandfather and you know how staunch he was. I think I was permitted to absent myself from weekly worship two or three times in all my youth, and two of those times was only because I had the mumps!”

They both fell silent, smiling inwardly with personal memories of the somewhat imposing but dear man who was the anchor at Pemberley for five decades.

George broke the quiet, voice calm and introspective. “It is interesting, William, to see how differently men deal with trauma and the ugliness of the world. During my studies and clinical employment at London’s hospitals I saw a tremendous amount of both. Yet I was still young, naïve, and hungry for knowledge, so I placed a shield about my heart, so to speak. Forced the realities of what I saw out of my ready consciousness and focused on the cold facts of science. Once in India I quickly became immersed in the culture, which I still adore to a great degree, but was rapidly sunk into the harsh brutality of suffering. It breaks men far stronger than me. Many leave after short enlistments or become so hardened they are stony of soul.” He paused, shaking his head

in sadness.

“How did you learn to deal with it?”

George smiled, “Ah well, I could impress you and say I am of sterner stuff; a better man than that.” He met Darcy’s eyes with a twinkle, “Primarily I made a choice. I chose to focus on the good I was doing. I chose to focus on the people themselves, to dwell with them, be friends, learn who they are, share their joys and sorrows. In essence I chose to expand my heart, let it encompass these people who are so wonderful and real irregardless of their skin color or odd beliefs. Additionally I returned to the roots of my faith.”

He paused again, staring at his folded hands with a flicker of old grief crossing his face. Darcy waited. Finally George resumed, “After Alex died I retreated from the world for a spell, literally. On the day of the funeral, once it was over and before the guests had even departed, I packed up a sack of essentials and went to the cave. For two weeks I stayed there, alone, fishing for food, eating wild berries and such. I had no plan, you understand, unless it was a vague one of dying myself.” He shrugged and laughed faintly.

“What happened?” Darcy, totally unconsciously, had risen and was now sitting in the chair across from his uncle, elbows on knees as he leaned forward and avidly listened.

“Your grandfather happened! He marched into the cave, bellowing at me to come out of the inner chamber as he was too big to squeeze in. I contemplated ignoring him for about a second, but one did not ignore my father. He did three things. First, he hugged me tight for about fifteen minutes until I finally broke down and cried. Then he abruptly pushed me away, patted my head, smiled kindly, but stated firmly, ‘Enough George. Time to get busy and move on.’ Before two more days had passed I was literally buried in chores. He set me to working as a common servant about the Manor and, lastly, volunteered my time serving the old curate, Reverend Halifax, and at the orphanage. It worked. Of course I would never forget my twin, but the aching grief ebbed in time and I learned to think beyond my own selfishness.” He looked at his nephew, eyes serious. “Faith became very important to me. Part of the reason medicine drew me was because of Alex’s death; the perhaps stupidly misplaced belief that proper care may have saved his life. Yet it also was the desire to aid God’s creatures, all of whom are loved by their Creator even if they do not know Him.”

“You are a missionary, Uncle.”

George laughed, “No, not hardly! Only a man of superior medical expertise. I rarely share my religion with others so that precludes

me from being counted a missionary, but it is a vital aspect of who I am. I admire all people, even if they do not admire or respect themselves, and I do not see it my place to upset them in their religious beliefs. If they are comforted in their gods then who am I to take that from them?"

"So, your convictions were never shaken by Hinduism?"

"You still sound surprised." He grinned teasingly. "I am essentially a simple man, my boy. I do not like things too complicated and the Hindu religion is far too complicated. Many tried to explain it to me and of course I do understand a great deal, but it only served to strengthen my faith. A dear friend of mine loved to debate me on the subject, but she was never all that serious about converting me. Rather she preferred to stir me up for fun." A tender smile lit his face, eyes soft. Darcy watched him closely, wondering, but George snapped out of his momentary trance with a cough. "Besides, they do not eat beef! Are mostly vegetarian, in fact, so it would never work!"

Darcy could make no claims to theological proficiency having never specifically studied the subject, but his years of regular church attendance and Bible reading had translated to what he presumed was a superior knowledge on the topic. Imagine his surprise through subsequent and frequent conversations with his wayward uncle to discover the far wider breadth of the older man's comprehension. They debated upon occasion, but primarily Darcy found himself listening and learning. It was the launching point where many of Darcy's preconceived ideas regarding his uncle's character and morals were proven false.

It was not that he had an overwhelmingly negative opinion of George. However, he could not previously claim to really know the man intimately and George's general air of flippancy and irreverence had translated to Darcy as disregard for what was appropriate and moral. He eventually realized that the old prejudices of his own character that he thought eradicated after nearly losing Elizabeth were partially intact. Even his repugnance for George's keeping of a mistress ended up not being the moral debasement that he imagined.

Three days after the Summer Festival, Darcy and George accidentally discovered themselves alone, sipping lemonade on the eastern edge of the terrace. The women folk had been driven to Rowan Lake for an afternoon of private bathing in the cool waters of the spring fed lake. Bingley was at Hasberry and Richard had escorted Dr. Penafloor into Matlock to meet a group of local gentlemen for a dart tournament at the Club. Darcy had pleaded a stack of work requiring hours with Mr. Keith, only just finishing as the sun lay low on the western horizon. Informed by Mr. Taylor that Dr. Darcy reclined under the canopy

erected away from the harsh afternoon sun, Darcy decided to join him with fresh drinks and victuals.

“Ah!” George declared upon noting the laden tray in his nephew’s hands, sitting forward from his slumped repose, “What have you brought? Gooseberry tartlets and sweet cream! Divine!” He snatched one before the tray was safely placed onto the table, biting deep with a sensuous moan of delight. “Oh, Mrs. Langton you genius. William, no matter how prestigious it is to have a French chef, if you ever replace that woman I shall turn you over my knee.”

Darcy laughed, chewing with equal pleasure, “Have no fear, Uncle. I am a Darcy through and through, which means I appreciate excellent cuisine served in healthy proportions. If I want my son to grow as tall and hardy as me then I would be unwise to restrict his diet to miniscule portions of rich fare. That only leaves one fat and lazy.”

They ate in silence, enjoying the array of pastries provided. George Darcy, for all his natural jocularly, was much like his nephew in that he did not suffer the pressing need to fill the space with useless chatter. The men passed as much time together in quiet companionship as they did in conversation. They happily snacked while staring at the mesmerizing play of sunlight on the rippling waters of the lake and jetting fountains. The varied sounds of summer soothed their ears and lulled tired brains. It was quite some time before the hush was broken and then it was Darcy verbalizing unconsciously what he had been dreamily musing on.

“Elizabeth and I spoke about your recommendation that I stay with her during the birth.”

“And?”

Darcy chuckled lowly, glancing at George with an arched brow, “You recall my shock at the notion? Well, for all the difference in our physical features I do believe her expression mirrored mine. I did not bring it up until last night. I needed to consider the matter and come to grips with the notion myself.”

“Plus you deemed it wise to wait until she was adequately pliant and amenable?” George interrupted with a naughty grin and a wink, Darcy flushing but shaking his head in resignation.

“No, I was required to wait until my sociable relatives allowed me to finally retire before my pregnant wife fell asleep! Anyway, we agreed to the arrangement, provided we can convince Mrs. Henderson before she storms out in a contemptible rage.”

“Do not be ridiculous. You are the Master of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy of Derbyshire, etcetera. She has nothing to say about the matter

and in the aftermath of your brilliance in the birth chamber will undoubtedly see the logic and spread the word, thus starting a fashionable trend that will benefit millions. It will be a revolution sweeping all England and then Europe. They will probably name it after you and you will be famous!”

“Precisely another valid reason why I should *not* be there, but, alas, you have planted the seed too firmly.” He paused, George waiting as he sensed Darcy’s seriousness and knew it best to remain silent until the younger man gathered his thoughts. With low, halting voice he resumed, “Tell me truthfully, Uncle. Have you seen many men in the birth chamber and can swear that it beneficial to the woman?” He stared fixedly at the distant fountain. “I will sacrifice my life for Elizabeth’s comfort without hesitation, but I confess to not relishing witnessing what reputedly is a heinous trial for the woman I love.”

“You are not all that fragile, William. As to your question, yes I have seen many men attend and assist in birth. It is not so uncommon a practice in India. And, of course, doctors have been doing it for centuries. Personally I have always been rather affronted; pridefully insulted at the concept that childbirth is a woman’s purview. As if a man cannot have the stomach for it! Besides, there is nothing more miraculous then seeing your offspring come into the world. It is beautiful.”

He concluded in a bare whisper. Darcy glanced over sharply, noting George’s faraway stare and the undisguised sorrow waving over his face. A rush of intense curiosity lanced through him, but he held his tongue. The months building their relationship had revealed a man astonishingly similar to himself, and if there was anything Darcy hated it was prying. He was a fiercely private man and knew his uncle to be the same. If George wished to share what was clearly a painful subject then he would do so without Darcy’s urging.

Therefore silence once again fell, each man lost to internal memories and musings. Enough time passed that Darcy had almost forgotten the last words vocalized when George spoke.

“I was a father for a brief time.” He looked into Darcy’s surprised eyes with a grim smile and then he shrugged. “I have spoken of this to very few people. Raja does not even know. My daughter was born two months early and lived for a week. She was perfect. Bronze skin, black hair, tiny fingers and toes. We named her Bhrithi, which means cherished. I did everything I could think of, but she was too fragile. She would be ten years old if she had lived.”

He paused to swallow audibly, eyes closing as he leaned back to

rest his head onto the cool stones of the Manor's outer wall. "Frankly I do not know why I yet hesitate to speak of these parts of my life. Years of maintaining secrecy are difficult to break, I suppose. James knew. He was my closest friend even with the distance between us." He smiled fondly.

"Uncle, you do not need to share this with me if it is uncomfortable."

"Quite the contrary, William. Surprisingly I do not feel 'uncomfortable,' but merely do not wish to burden you with my affairs unnecessarily. It is all past now, but I yearn for the honest relationship I sense building between us to continue. I know you are aware that I had a mistress. Previously I was unperturbed by your reaction to the fact. I do not suffer from embarrassment or the fear of disparagement." He laughed, opening one eye to peer at Darcy, "My towering self esteem and arrogance is not a façade! If you thought less of me for living immorally I honestly could care less. But, you see, this too has changed. Oh, I am still arrogant and likely will be until the day I die, but your opinion matters. Quite annoying actually, but there you have it."

He closed the eye, smiling dreamily. "Jharna was the wife of my mentor, Dr. Kshitij Ullas, and daughter to a marvelous friend, Thakore Sahib Pandey. We were friends but nothing more until after Kshitij died, well after in fact. Jharna and Kshitij were a rare find in that they truly loved each other. He was far older and a widower for many years when he married Jharna. It was an arranged marriage, as most are there, Jharna given as partial payment when Kshitij saved Pandey's life. Of course, all this transpired long before I came to India. By the time I met them they were the parents of two young boys, happily married and in love. Jharna was supremely fortunate in that she had a wealthy, influential father who doted on her and a husband who arranged for her to be cared for after he died."

He sighed, "Hindu women have few rights, William, even worse then here, and their religion precludes them from enjoying life after being widowed. If not for a supportive family, Jharna would have been banished. Should have been, according to many, or encouraged to commit sati, suicide that is, when he died. Instead she retreated to a secluded house Kshitij prepared for her and lived as a recluse raising their sons. Our relationship evolved gradually. My love for Kshitij and grief upon his death brought us together as friends comforting each other. Two years passed before either of us realized our friendship had progressed into love. What we felt for each other, the relationship we lived was wrong on many counts from both our cultural beliefs, but

nothing has ever felt so right at the same time. I begged her to marry me, come to England, but she refused. Jharna was a Hindu and her place was there. I understood this, respected her bravery and viewpoint, but the immorality of our situation distressed me. Not for what other people thought, but for my personal principles. Maybe it was weakness on our part or perhaps superior strength of conviction. I do not know. It never bothered Jharna so much. She was one of those rare souls who accept the whimsies of life as freely as the trees accept the wind and rain.”

“I wish I could have met her. She sounds remarkable.”

“That she was.”

“Tell me more.”

George looked at Darcy’s trusting face, eyes full of affection, and he smiled. And he did tell him more, then and in numerous conversations that would span the future time they shared.

While the friendship and familial bond between Darcy and George flourished rapidly aided by these solitary intervals, Lizzy’s attachment was delayed. She liked him instantly at the first words out of his mouth when entering Darcy House and his compassionate care for Darcy’s shoulder. Her delight in his humor was instantaneous. However, true affinity and devotion was longer in coming due to the plain fact that they passed little time together. This would change as the months progressed and their conversations deepened.

In mid October, days after the vow renewal of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, Lizzy lumbered with mildly waddling gait down the peacefully quiet second floor hallway. It was nearly lunch time and Darcy was out on a jaunt about the estate while Georgiana was with her tutor. The persistent heat of summer combined with an ever increasing physical burden sapped her strength, necessitating afternoons at rest in the cooler rooms of the house. Therefore, any household chores required her attention early in the day before weariness consumed her. Thus she was heading for her parlor where a stack of papers and ledgers waited on her small desk.

Her attention was captured as she passed the yawning expanse at the top of the Grand Staircase. George stood in the foyer focused on one of the three gigantic tapestries that lined the southern wall below the window embrasures. With a smile she diverted from her pathway, carefully navigating the marble stairs with hand tight on the banister, and silently joined him in contemplation.

“I cannot recall how many times I lost myself in staring at these, attempting to trace the interwoven lines and memorize all the names. Do you know we actually were tested on our family tree?” He turned to Lizzy



with a grin and she shook her head. "Oh yes! You would think our tutors part of the family as vigorously as they enforced our ability to readily trace our ancestry. I was always gifted in rote memorization but Alex was pathetically inept, poor soul. The first time, I think we were maybe eight or so, I told him to just toss in a ream of Alexanders and Jameses and Henrys and Roberts and he would fool the tutor." He laughed. "I was wrong, of course, and we both received lashes across our knuckles."

"The first time I visited Pemberley, with my uncle and aunt, we breezed through the foyer and I confess I was struck more by the ceiling and sculptures. It was the following day that William, Mr. Darcy as he was to me then, brought us here for a closer inspection at my request. I think he was a bit embarrassed, not wishing me to think him unduly proud of his home. He was trying so hard to impress me with his humility, you see, not realizing that I was already in love with him. He steered me to the opposite side, away from the tapestries, but I noticed them anyway."

The tapestries under discussion were enormous, masterpieces of weft-faced wool hung from four-inch thick rods of polished oak. The first, woven in shades of forest green and gold, was ancient, tracing the Darcy family from Baron John Darcy in 1335 to the late 1500's. The second tapestry, maroon and silver, resumed the lineage, noting the elevation of Conyers Darcy to Earldom in 1682, a peerage that became extinct when Robert Darcy died childless in 1778. The Pemberley line of Darcys had long since diverged from the noble line when a second son, Frederick Darcy, had taken his inheritance and settled in Derbyshire to raise sheep in the mid 1400's. While the noble antecedents dwindled, the Darcys of modest wealth and prestige multiplied and financially prospered. The majority of subsequent lines were left unrecorded as the family proliferated and disseminated, but the uninterrupted chain from the current Master of Pemberley to that distant Baron was explicit.

The final tapestry, navy blue and copper, was half filled with spidery lines and stitched names with dates. They stood gazing at the recent decade's entries with soft smiles elicited by the memories evoked.

"What were your thoughts?"

Lizzy laughed, "That I was woefully inadequate to ever imagine my name woven next to his. That the Bennets would be hard pressed to trace their ancestry five or six generations, let alone nearly five hundred years! That Mr. Darcy must be thinking the same exact thing and wondering what insanity possessed him to propose to me in the first place. So many thoughts that were false or unimportant."

"And here your name is," he pointed to the embroidered

*Elizabeth Bennet* now linked with gold filigree thread to *Fitzwilliam Darcy*, “and soon your child will be added. Families are all the same, Elizabeth. Filled with scoundrels, lovers, saints, sinners, noblemen, and paupers.”

“Do you not experience a sense of overwhelming pride to belong to such an auspicious heritage?”

“Indeed I do, but then it does not take much for me to be overwhelmed with arrogance.” He grinned rakishly, Lizzy shaking her head and chuckling. “Seriously, I recognize the eminence of belonging to an ancient legacy, but it is the living people who thrill me more profoundly.” He encircled her slender shoulders, hugging to his side, “Without William, Georgie, and you, none of this,” he swept a hand toward the woven genealogy, “would have any meaning. I love you Elizabeth.”

He kissed the top of her head. Lizzy blushed, ducking her face to hide the stinging tears, but patted the hand resting on her shoulder. “I love you too George.”

Lizzy was incredibly moved by George’s spontaneously offered declaration. Her affection for the older man had steadily grown in the nearly four months of his sojourn, but the frequent interruptions due to the individual travels undertaken along with the press of visitors had kept her from spending extended periods alone with him in serious conversation. Darcy managed to closet himself with his uncle dozens of times, equally for the express purpose of getting to know the older man and to avoid the unrelenting social fervor that had invaded their lives. Lizzy generally enjoyed his lively company in the presence of numerous others, rarely glimpsing the mature intelligence and earnest nature that her husband spoke of in their private moments.

This would change as the weeks of October and November unfolded. With the manor practically empty and Darcy gone for nearly three weeks at one point, George stringently applied himself to the dual role of manly protector and companionable entertainer. He took it upon his broad Darcy shoulders to ensure the womenfolk were well cared for. Thus Lizzy discovered his lanky shadow looming every time she turned around. Thankfully she did not mind in the least. By the time Alexander was born she felt as close to the good doctor as if he were truly flesh and blood. The intimate nature of the birth itself and subsequent medical attention rather cemented the relationship as a special one.

When George casually mentioned that he was contemplating a position at Matlock Hospital, the burst of hopeful delight that flowed through each of their hearts was powerful. Georgiana and Lizzy’s sincere love for George had assuredly grown and the thought of him leaving was

increasingly a cause of distress. Yet neither could claim the intensity of emotion that Darcy now held for his uncle. Only Lizzy was privy to the innermost thoughts of her husband and over numerous late night conversations as they snuggled in cozy post-lovemaking splendor he revealed the depth of his affection.

“I know it will not be precisely the same as when my father died,” he said on one such night in November as they lay entwined, referring to George’s probable departure, “After all, he will not be permanently gone. We can exchange correspondence of a far more familiar nature than we ever did before and there will be the hope that he may return someday. I can prepare my heart in a way that I obviously never did with my father. Yet, on the other hand, I was still so young when he died. It was years before I fully grasped what I had lost and by then the pain was dulled and I had grown accustomed to his absence.”

He paused, staring unseeing at the beamed ceiling and absently caressing Lizzy’s arm that rested over his chest. She observed his face in the flickering half-light and waited. “No, that is not the whole truth of it. It has only been *since* developing this relationship with Uncle George that I have come to fully grasp what I lost when father died. It is not only that he reminds me of my father, because as akin as they are in many respects there are glaring differences. Nor is it that I desire a mentor or father figure in my life, although I do to a degree; but it is that I sense he needs me, needs all of us in fact.” He turned to gaze upon his wife, fingering a lock of hair as he resumed in a husky tone. “For so long, when I allowed myself the luxury of dwelling nostalgically on father, I always mused on what he meant to *me*. The benefits I would reap from his companionship, how wonderful it would be to watch our children with their grandfather, and so on. Always egocentric. I never looked at it from the perspective of what *he* lost by not knowing me, or you, or our children.”

He kissed her forehead, nestling a cheek against her silky hair. “I know George misses his work and the many friends he has in India. He speaks fondly of Jharna’s boys, who are grown men now, and expresses sadness at the distance now between them.”

“Well, that would be expected I suppose as he helped raise them.”

“Hmmm. He can be guarded at times with his emotions. Quick to blurt a quip when the subject grows sensitive, even with me. He sidesteps with a joke or broad gesture, but not always. Besides, he is too like me to camouflage completely. It is clear that it is the loss of loved ones that distresses him the most. The honest affection he feels for us has taken him aback, I believe, and he fears trusting it or giving in to it. I

understand this as well as I experienced the same anxiety when I fell in love with you.”

He pulled away, burrowing lower under the covers until at eye level with her. Smiling, caressing gently down her side and around to fondle the swollen expanse of belly, he continued in a familiar hoarse tone, “Such all-consuming, powerful emotions can be terrifying. Oh, but the bliss of potent love! Nothing compares and any eventual grief is tempered by the unsurpassed joy. George knows this, has experienced this, and merely needs to succumb to it happening again with us.”

“Stop that!” She exclaimed with a giggle, swatting his fingers away from her protruding naval.

“But it is so cute and fun. Poking out and begging to be tickled.” He nudged her hand away and resumed the play with a grin.

“Fitzwilliam Darcy, I am warning....” But he halted her with a kiss, fingers abandoning the springy flesh to roam lower. Discussions of complex relatives were forgotten for the time being.

The events of the following weeks intervened and took precedence over mundane topics, which is why it was some five days after George’s interview with the Matlock Hospital administration that any of them learned the details. In typical George fashion he concealed with a jest and it was several more days before Darcy was able to corner his uncle for a serious tête-à-tête.

The question of who to name as the second male Godfather had been a topic of debate for months. The Darcys had considered everyone and with the wealth of upstanding, devoted male friends Darcy possessed the answer was challenging because the choices were so numerous! A man of lesser character and meager religious convictions would not have struggled so, but this does not describe Darcy, so he agonized over the proper course.

Oddly, and to the surprise of them both, George’s name gradually entered the mix. Initially Darcy was frankly stunned that he would even consider the option. Yes, he knew by this time that his uncle was strong of faith and not the moral reprobate he had assumed, but his capriciousness did not really qualify him for the post of Godfather. However, this too seemed to be waning as his ‘vacation’ was taking on a decidedly permanent air.

In a bold move not conventionally like Darcy, he decided to confront his vacillating uncle. It was long past time for honest communication and blunt ultimatums. Therefore, exactly six days after Alexander’s birth and while a weary wife and son were sleeping, Darcy sought out his uncle who was, not shockingly, reclining in the library. In

Darcy's chair. With long legs stretched onto a cushioned ottoman.

"Perhaps I should write to Mr. Chippendale and request he make an identical chair."

George glanced up at Darcy's grinning face. "Could you? This is by far the most comfortable chair I have ever sat in. Perfect for my frame."

"Precisely why I ordered it made to my dimensions six years ago. I was tired of being cramped into uncomfortable creations of hard wood and sharp edges." He sat in the opposite smaller albeit exquisite wing back Chippendale, folding his hands and closely examining the expression on George's face. "I am positive something could be arranged."

George smiled with genuine delight, moving his feet to clear space on the ottoman. "Take a load off, my boy. There is plenty of room."

"Thanks all the same, but I do not fancy assuming such a pose outside of the privacy of my chambers."

George laughed aloud, nearly snorting, and shook his head. "Oh William! You are such a treasure!"

"How fortuitous that you think so, and you have offered the perfect segue into what I came to speak to you about."

George lifted a brow, "Really! How serious you are Mr. Darcy. Should I throw down a belt of whiskey to prepare myself?"

"If you believe it would bolster your fortitude, then by all means belt away. Just bring me one as well."

George laughed, rising and crossing to the small sidebar to pour them each a glass of fine Irish scotch. "So what has you seeking me out when you could be with your beautiful wife and adorable baby?"

"A topic which greatly concerns them, as a matter of fact. Thank you." He took a sip, waiting until George was settled before launching forth. With penetrating gaze fixed and tone sober, he began. "Uncle, you know that Elizabeth and I adore you. You and I have talked extensively about our kinship, so there is no need to reiterate our mutual accord. However, I think we have both shied away from verbalizing our feelings. My wife has encouraged me to tell you of the depth of my sentiments." He grimaced slightly then shrugged. "Women are far more effusive in vocalizing their emotions, but in this instance I suppose she is correct."

He crossed his legs and inhaled deeply, opening his mouth to commence, but was halted at George's chuckle.

"Let me spare you any emasculation William. I love you and you love me. You have become the son I never had and I have to a degree

arrogated the role James rightfully deserves. There, it is out in the open. Feel better now?"

Darcy smiled wryly. "Immeasurably. Elizabeth will be so pleased." He sipped his drink before continuing, "Very well then. All that being clarified, we have an important request to make of you. A requisite preface is forthcoming though so be warned. Apparently I can be long winded at times, as a dear friend recently pointed out."

"I never have noticed," George murmured with a perfectly straight face.

Darcy ignored him. "Uncle, you are welcome to dwell at Pemberley for as long as you chose, for the rest of your life if that is your desire. I do hope you know that." George nodded, frowning slightly in confusion. "I have not asked your plans and we have tried not to sway you in any way as it is ultimately your decision. However, I need to tell you in the clearest words imaginable that the heartfelt wish of us all is that you would chose to reside here forever. Simply put, I do not want to lose you. Forgive the cloying sentimentalism, but that is the truth."

George was momentarily speechless, swallowing, and inhaling deeply to calm the abrupt rush of emotions. He nodded finally, voice soft when he spoke, "Thank you William. You have no idea how I appreciate that, and since we are being forthright then let me say something." He leaned forward, bony elbows on his knees as he met Darcy's piercing gaze with an identical one. "I have purposely been evasive because....well, I guess I needed to hear you say what you just did. I have been gone for a very long time. When I left, my father was Master of Pemberley and I never questioned my reception if I chose to return. With James it was much the same, although I never considered the idea. I think I undertook this journey home with a latent desire to stay, but refused to acknowledge it because I had no clue what my greeting would be. So much had changed and the Pemberley that was my childhood home was no longer the ready refuge it had always been."

"But it is," Darcy declared firmly.

"Yes, I know that now." He sighed, sitting back into the soothing shelter of the enormous chair and smiling fondly at his nephew. "I love India and know it will forever be a part of who I am. But I have missed England and Derbyshire. I have missed family, my family. Jharna's death brought that world to an end for me and made me realize fully how adrift I was. I need to be here, William. I *want* to be here, so with your blessing I will accept your offer." He grinned, lightening the solemn mood as usual with a joke, "You can even banish me to the north wing or one of the servant's houses if I become annoying."

Darcy's lips twitched, but he shook his head and held a steady stare, intoning gravely, "I am afraid I cannot allow that, Uncle. After all, my son needs to have his namesake and, if you are so willing, his Godfather near at hand."

George's mouth dropped open and eyes widened in amazement. Darcy laughed aloud, lifting his glass in salute, "To Alexander and his Godfather. Lord help us all!"

\* \* \* \*

Reverend Bertram's elderly, but trained speaking voice rang out, easily reaching to the farthest ear and readily commanding the attention of the vigilant flock, "Loving parents, family, and friends, you have come to witness the dedication of this blessed child to God. Realizing that this baby is very special because by his birthright he is a Child of God." He turned to Darcy and Lizzy, "Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, your gift of love for each other made this child possible, and your guidance, wisdom, and love assures the happiness of this new life. May you remember to listen with your heart to the indwelling Christ as you nurture, love, and watch this loving Child of God grow into his divinely inspired potential. Do you receive this child as a gift from God?"

In a clear voice they both responded, "Yes, we do."

"Do you wish to give thanks to God and receive His blessing?"

"Yes, we do."

"Then let us pray. God our Creator, we thank you for the wonder and miracle of new life and for the mystery of human love. We thank you that we are known to you by name and loved by you from eternity past. We thank you for Jesus Christ who has shown us the way of love. Bless these parents that they may cherish their child. Make them wise, patient, and understanding to help him grow as he ought. Surround this family with the light of your truth and the warmth of your love. We praise you Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen"

"Blessed be God forever," the entire assembly intoned.

"What name have you given to this child?"

"Alexander William George Bennet Darcy," carefully articulated in ringing tones by a proud father.

"Who stands with you as persons of testified faith to offer their willing services as support in bringing Alexander to a conscious knowledge of Christ at the earliest possible age?" Each Godparent answered by stating their names. "Do you vow to uphold the tenets of your faith, set an example of Christian life and behavior, do all within

your power to maintain a lasting relationship with Alexander and the Darcys, and be a support to them in the fulfillment of their vows until such time as God releases you when called home to Him?"

"I do."

"I do."

"I do."

Lizzy was furtively dabbing at her teary eyes. She was afraid to look at Darcy who she felt standing stiffly beside her; one glance at what she knew for certain was his patented rigid expression when overcome would surely send her over the emotional edge. She was correct, of course, as Darcy's jaws were frankly beginning to hurt from the tight grip he forced upon each muscle and bone to prevent dissolving into tears. Alexander, in contrast, had accidentally wrapped his fingers around the ties to his bonnet and was happily ignoring all the drama about him in the delightful contemplation of flapping lace.

In fact, he was noticeably more disturbed by the sudden interruption to his play when passed from the familiar location next to the strongly beating heart of his father into the strange arms of another man than by anything that had transpired thus far. The surprising motion caused his arms to flail and partially lose their clasp on the entertaining ribbons, and then to make matters worse his mother leaned over and removed the bonnet entirely! The indignity and annoyance of it all was almost too much to bear and his face screwed up in preparation to vocalize his opinion on the subject.

Fortunately Darcy could read his son's thoughts quite well and placed a firm hand onto his chest, leaning slightly to hush placatingly and capture Alexander's gaze before it was too late. His timing was impeccable, Alexander calmed and distracted by the beloved face and voice.

Reverend Bertram chuckled, beaming upon the assembly. "Father to the rescue! Thank you Mr. Darcy for saving me from the arduous task of raising my age-crusted voice above the din!"

Darcy bowed slightly with a soft smile as the crowd rippled with quiet laughter. Alexander's attention was now riveted to the kindly old man that he was grudgingly allowing might be alright, especially since his mother and father were close by. Lizzy clutched onto Darcy's forearm and he enclosed the dainty hand with his warm one, fingers lacing as he gently tugged her closer to his side.

Reverend Bertram stepped behind the venerable baptismal font, a thick pedestal of white marble with curved inlaid strips of black marble and beaten copper between the four sides richly carved with images of



Jesus blessing the little children. On top sat a bowl of intricately scrolled sterling silver, very old with aged tarnish spots impervious to the diligent efforts of numerous Pemberley servants on down through the centuries. This bowl served one purpose only: to hold the blessed water for christening Darcy children. Last used for Georgiana, the bowl had nonetheless been polished regularly and stored safely awaiting this very day.

Now Alexander's head of massed brown curls dangled over the water filled bowl as Reverend Bertram plunged his hand into the tepid liquid and said, "Alexander William George Bennet Darcy, I baptize thee in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Alexander blinked and flinched in surprise at the sensation of water poured onto his head, but remained peacefully gazing into the Rector's face. Lizzy squeezed Darcy's arm, impulsively laying her head onto his shoulder while he blinked so furiously as to be unaware of anything but his own struggles to retain control.

Dipping into the small chalice of oil, Reverend Bertram anointed the babe's forehead with the shape of a cross, speaking clearly, "I sign thee, Alexander, with the cross; the sign of Christ and His Church."

Mrs. Bertram approached, handing a lighted candle to Darcy, Lizzy, and each Godparent, while the Reverend completed the sacrament, "Shine as a light in the world to fight against sin and the devil." Rotating and lifting Alexander so all could easily see his face, he finished in a booming voice, "Congregates, I present to you Alexander Darcy!"

A cheer went up, claps resounded, and shouts of *Alleluia* burst forth, as Mrs. Bertram and the choir added to the clamor with a rousing hymn. The noise was the final straw for Alexander who broke into serious cries just as Darcy hastily handed his candle to Lizzy and reached to rescue the upset infant from the Reverend's arms.

"Hush my lamb, it is over now! Shhhh....Papa has you now, my son." The murmuring continued as Lizzy assisted with the cumbersome layers of satin and lace while directing chubby fingers to a crying mouth. It would placate for a spell, but eventually Lizzy needed to retire to a separate room for nursing while the regular worship and Bible teaching proceeded.

After the service a relieved and ebullient Darcy gladly welcomed the congratulations of the citizens, his jovial smile a sharp contrast to the somber man who had entered the chapel. For some reason that he could not properly identify he felt as if a weight was lifted. In a perhaps illogical rationale it was as if Alexander was more real now, permanent and

protected in a way he had not quite been before. The final crescendo was the formal entry into the parish registry of Alexander's full name, birth date, parents' names, and father's listed occupation as Master of Pemberley. A gathering of family and friends observed the procedure, Darcy applying quill to parchment page with studious intensity and writing each letter in his firm hand with precise penmanship. Legibility for centuries to come would not be an issue.

He turned with a broad grin, the last vestiges of proper reserve erased momentarily at the sea of shining faces. George clapped him on the shoulder, glancing at the register and nodding.

"Excellently done William! All spelled correctly too. Amazing." Darcy merely grinned wider.

The intended quiet, intimate luncheon was anything but. True to Lizzy's speculation Mrs. Langton and the entire staff had blatantly ignored any urgings of the Mistress and thus presented a meal of stupendous proportions. The already elaborate holiday decorations were enhanced, the table dazzling with candles and ribbons in abundance, and the Christening cake a masterpiece of exquisite artwork. Darcy was stunned by the latter and he had known his cook for years. The cake was five layers stacked individually with pillars and cascading flowers interweaving. The enormous concoction required a table all by itself. Each layer was decorated differently and of a variant flavor: chocolate; three white with strawberry, raspberry, and vanilla custard fillings; and lemon, of course.

George presented the Bingleys with a gift identical to what he proudly displayed on his lapel. A triangular shaped pin of gold with the etched relief of a cherub in one corner and the words, *Alexander's Godparent* scrolled below! This one item alone would be a topic of amused conversation for the bulk of the evening.

The humble gathering visualized evolved into a full scale fete. Lizzy received numerous praises for the lavish affair and was too embarrassed to confess that she had little to do with it. The guest of honor made a brief appearance, dressed in a lovely but practical gown, and staring with wide-eyed intensity at everyone from the security of his mother's arms. Nothing in the way of formalized entertainment was planned, not that it was necessary with so many festive people engaged in lively discourse, except for a musical interlude orchestrated by Georgiana, Kitty, and Mary.

Georgiana and Mary played a duet, voices raised in harmony with Kitty in a lyric paean to Alexander---

*"Blessings on the little baby, sweet and fresh from Heaven above.  
May his days be filled with beauty, may he grow in truth and love.  
Lord, bless this tiny infant who will make the world so fair,  
Keep this precious little life forever in Your care.  
He who as a little Child began a life divine to show to man,  
Proclaims from Heaven the message free, 'Let little children come to Me.'  
We bring them, Lord, and with the sign of sprinkled water name them  
Thine.*

*Their souls with saving grace endow, baptize them with Thy Spirit now.  
Angel mine, Oh angel mine! Close your eyes until morning time.  
Do not worry and do not fear, we will not leave, we will always be near.  
We thank the Lord every day for the gift of love He gave.  
You are our angel sent from above, sweet child we cannot help but love.*

*"Sleep my child and peace attend thee all through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee all through the night  
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping, hill and dale in slumber sleeping  
I my loved ones watch am keeping, all through the night.  
Hush little baby mama and papa's near, to brush your hair and calm your  
fears.*

*To kiss your cheek and hold your hand, until you drift to sleepyland.  
To help you count those little white sheep, and sing you songs until you sleep.  
To tell you tales of kings and queens, of Jack and Jill and wonderful things.  
So snuggle up and hold me tight, and dream sweet dreams all through the  
night.  
And every night when the sun goes down, you will still be the sweetest little  
baby in town."*

The compilation of poems and nursery rhymes placed to music was an excellent cap to the afternoon. The guests said their adieus as the sun sat low on the horizon, darkness and icy roads not conducive to staying any later. By night fall the Vernors, Sitwells, Hugheses, and Lord and Lady Matlock were safely ensconced in their own Manors leaving the Darcys, Bennets, Gardiners, and Mr. Daniels to lazy and sedate companionship. No one was particularly hungry for dinner, nibbling instead on the remains from luncheon and pieces of cake. Quiet chitchat reigned for several hours, but everyone felt the pull of an early bedtime after the exhaustive events of the day.

Darcy joined his wife in the nursery relieved to have removed his

formal attire and anxious to devote attention to wife and son. Although they had carefully shielded Alexander from the festivities, he seemed unusually weary; not even nursing as well as typical and falling asleep at Lizzy's breast rather than on Darcy's shoulder as was his norm.

Darcy noted the concern on Lizzy's face. "Do not fret, love. He has had a busy day is all. There is no fever and his color is unchanged." He kissed the tiny forehead nestled under his chin. "Tomorrow he will wake frequently demanding your attention to make up."

Lizzy chuckled, smoothing the blanket tight over his body. "Most likely that is true. I know I am exhausted by the day's events so can commiserate." She leaned onto her husband's arm, yawning hugely, "I can hardly keep my eyes open! One of these days I am going to fall asleep while rocking him and he will tumble to the floor, I just know it! Perhaps this comfortable chair was not such a wise idea."

Darcy laughed, rising and extending a hand. "I have no fear that you will ever drop our son. Come, dearest, there is one last ritual we must attend before I can tuck you both into bed. Grab that candelabrum."

Lizzy raised a quizzical brow, but he merely smiled and wiggled his fingers, so she took the proffered hand and lit candelabrum without a word. Darcy led out of the warm chambers into the chill of the hall. As always there were spaced lamps lit so safe navigation was not an issue. Inerrantly down the staircase, along the silent second floor hallways to the Grand Staircase, and down again to the massive foyer.

Slipped and bare feet made no sound on the marble expanse as they crossed to the blue tapestry. Darcy pointed, voice hushed but throbbing with emotion, "Look there."

"Oh!" Lizzy covered her mouth as tears sprung.

Darcy cautiously readjusted the inert body of his son until he was facing the woolen veiled wall and stepped closer. "Alexander Darcy, our son. There you are my wee love, forever a part of a noble heritage," he whispered, fingertip tracing the embroidered rendering of Alexander's name and birth date linked to his parents. Lizzy's fingertip followed, tears freely spilling down her cheeks, but chin lifted with immeasurable pride.

They stood for several minutes, Alexander sleeping on and unaware of the importance. Darcy, like his uncle and every Darcy child before, had spent hours examining these tapestries, often considering them the bane of his existence. Only with maturity did the true significance of family and ancestry dawn. He chuckled now in remembrance, Lizzy glancing into his amused visage.

"What is so funny?"

"Currently Alexander is innocently indifferent to the history

unfolding here, and in years to come he will grow to hate the convoluted connections and bizarre names. I can assure you from personal experience that it will probably not be until he stands here with his wife and child years hence that he will fully appreciate what is revealed on these walls.”

“Perhaps. Nonetheless it is a wonderful accomplishment and we can be proud for him.”

Darcy nodded. Lizzy sat the candelabrum on the floor and encircled her spouse’s waist, snuggling securely into his warmth and sturdiness as his free arm drew her tight. For a long while they remained gazing in silence until the cold of winter seeped into even Darcy’s bones, only then retiring.

## **21 – Encourage Affection**

“Please hold still Miss Bennet. I do not wish to prick you with the needle.”

“Yes, be cautious Kitty or you will end up with a blood spot on your gown. Georgiana could hide such a flaw, but you may have difficulty!”

Lizzy laughed at Mary’s quip, Kitty ignoring all of them as she continued to attempt craning for a glimpse of the trailing yards of organza bustled over her bottom. Madame du Loire knelt behind Kitty, needle and thread busily cinching the gathers along the waistline.

The Twelfth Night Masque was three days away, the modiste and her assistants attending to the final alterations to Kitty and Georgiana’s gowns. Kitty had chosen an organza in pale turquoise, delicate lace edging the entire creation. Madame du Loire worked her magic, crafting a ball dress exquisite and stylish. It was far and away the most elegant gown Kitty had ever owned. Her delight was uncontainable, hence the wiggling and incessant fiddling at the fabric. Fortunately the couturier was experienced in dealing with flighty young girls, managing the minute alterations without mishap.

Georgiana, in sharp contrast, stood nearby on a chair in a pose of serene passiveness. Far more accustomed to the oftentimes time consuming task of painstaking tailoring, Georgiana gazed composedly into the tall mirror while the seamstress adjusted the hemline. Her gown was velvet in a vibrant maroon. The sleeves to both dresses were elbow length, modest in style generally speaking except for daring necklines that displayed maturing décolletages.

Lizzy sat on the sofa beside Mary, Alexander asleep against her chest within a swaddle of purple and yellow Indian linen, eyeballing the figure of her newest sister with tremendous amusement. Her humor arose from the visualized expression she knew would cross her husband’s face upon seeing his ‘baby’ sister so attired. While Darcy plotted Georgiana’s official introduction into Society come spring with businesslike precision he nonetheless persisted in thinking of her as yet a child. Lizzy teased him for this paradoxical attitude, but he always looked at her with utter incomprehension. He had not quite figured out how to

deal with the contradiction that a Georgiana of marriageable eighteen and a debutante was no longer the grubby faced youngster in his mind's eye.

"Mary dear, it is not yet too late to fashion a gown for you," Georgiana spoke softly at the reflected Mary sitting beside Lizzy. "Please reconsider!"

Mary lifted her chin stubbornly, but did smile faintly at her dear friend. "Have we not exhausted this discussion Georgiana? Balls hold no interest to me, which is fortuitous. A solicitor and his wife will likely receive few invitations to fancy dances, a fact that is abundantly pleasing to both Mr. Daniels and me."

Lizzy hid a smile into the top of Alexander's curly haired head. As news regarding the upcoming Masque became a prime topic of conversation the inevitable subject of Mary and her betrothed attending was advanced. Lizzy can vividly recollect the expression of utter horror that flew over Mr. Daniels' instantly pale face. He had snapped his eyes to Mary with such mute pleading that everyone in the room had collectively coughed to avoid laughter.

Gradually over the past weeks the young man had relaxed his glaring discomfiture at being a guest in Mr. Darcy's home; the extended hours with his fiancé greatly easing the embarrassment. He had even loosened enough to join the family in several entertainments including the numerous manly pursuits partaken of each evening. Nevertheless, the concept of dressing the part of high society and attending a formal function was beyond endurance. Thankfully Mary's opinion of such diversions alleviated his distress. Still, privately he prayed for the days to pass speedily, fearful that at any moment his normally sober, rational fiancé would succumb to the female twittering and change her mind.

It did not help that each day hours were passed in the ballroom as Darcy, Richard, Charles, and George, surprisingly, led the ladies in waltz lessons. Georgiana was fairly proficient, but neither Kitty nor Jane had ever attempted the dance. In two short years the scandalous dance of Vienna had spread like wildfire through England, even making an appearance at Almacks. Although generally frowned upon and denounced harshly by some commentators, it increasingly showed up at even remote village assembly halls. Per typical human nature, this antagonism only served to advance the popularity of the intimate dance. Also typical was the blind eye turned to all historical evidence regarding the acceptance and fame of far more sensational dances, such as the Volta, by Royalty past.

Mr. Daniels need not have worried as Mary viewed the waltz as further indication of the steady slide into debauchery and sinfulness! She

could not deny that the couples were graceful in how they glided about the room, but her cheeks flamed and lips pursed nonetheless. Georgiana and Kitty were oblivious, far too enamored with the entertainment.

Several other dances were practiced beside the waltz. Jane's natural poise ensured her ability to adapt, but Kitty was unfamiliar with the stilted formality of a grand ball. Meryton Assembly country dancing of a different character altogether so studious attention was paid to teaching her the propriety demanded.

It was tremendous fun. The Matlocks and Bennets even joined the lessons upon occasion. Thus the days between Christmas and the christening were overflowing with mirth and exercise. Darcy and Richard gladly lent their talents once returned from Derby. Richard, like George and the always effervescent Bingley, happily squired any of the single ladies. Darcy refused to dance with anyone but his sister or wife. Naturally there was a bit of teasing, but generally the mood was too felicitous to encourage mockery even to the slightly uptight Master of Pemberley.

All the frivolity mollified Lizzy and Darcy in their mild sadness over not being able to attend this year's Masque. Once again, in the comfortable environment of his own ballroom and surrounded by familiars, Darcy displayed his feline grace and dancing expertise. It was an eye opener to most in the household, even those closest to him as such fluency was a rare spectacle. Caroline was frankly stupefied, her past dances with Mr. Darcy leaving her with the opinion that for all his stellar qualities the man had no balletic facility whatsoever! Lizzy delighted in the activity even when Darcy was absent, but especially once he returned. Not since their impromptu dancing on the pier at Caister-on-Sea had the lovers embraced in rhythmic twirls and steps. The controlled movements necessary when amongst others only sparked their desires, the waltzing resumed in the privacy of their chambers where it rapidly crossed the established lines of decency.

The final session during the early afternoon of the fifth of January, the day of the Masque, was purely for enjoyment as all the ladies now knew how to dance quite well. The three Bingleys had returned to Hasberry after Alexander's christening party to ready for the extravaganza, as had the Matlocks. Also unfortunately, the Gardiners had departed for London, Mr. Gardiner's business requirements necessitating their return. The remaining Pemberley inhabitants gradually broke from the light-hearted amusement to either seek rest in preparation for a very late night or other placid diversions if not planning to attend the gala.

Georgiana gently grasped Richard's elbow as they exited the



ballroom. "Cousin," she whispered, cheeks flushed as she eyed the retreating bodies nervously, exhaling in relief when none noted them hanging back, "I request a moment of your time."

Richard smiled, "Why so formal, Georgie?" He lifted her chin until meeting her gaze, "What disturbs you, little mouse?"

"Will you ever cease calling me that?"

"Probably not. What is it?"

"I...want to ask a favor of you....for tonight." Richard nodded encouragingly. "Will you stay close to me? Ensure I do not err in any way.....make a fool of myself or do anything untoward?"

Richard frowned. "Why in the world would you think this possible, my dear? You are a proper lady, graceful and beautiful, decorous, a perfect Darcy in every way."

"That is precisely the point!" She flared, pacing away a couple steps then turning to him with teary eyes. "I am a Darcy and as such the expectations are so high! People will be looking at me, judging, waiting for me to misstep. And if I do....I do not want to disappoint William or any of you."

He crossed the short distance, placing tender hands onto her shoulders. "Listen to me, dearest. Firstly, I am your guardian, a position I take quite seriously, as well as your cousin and friend. Of course I will be there for you, my sweet mouse. As will your uncles, Aunt Madeline, and the Bingleys. You will be amongst friends of Derbyshire. This is an excellent introduction for you and you will perform brilliantly, I know it! Do not fret so."

"But I do not know anyone else! I never made friends with other girls, except for Bertha Vernor and Amy Hughes. I wish I could be as frivolous as Kitty," she finished in a rueful tone.

Richard laughed. "As much as I admire Miss Kitty, you are not so blithe and should not wish to be other than who you are. Did you not relax and enjoy yourself at the dances in Wales? Father and mother said you loved it and were fabulous. They were very proud of you and I know their recommendation is what swayed your overbearing brother's protectiveness into allowing your attendance at the Masque. You requested to attend with enthusiasm, or so I was informed."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"It is a good idea. Georgiana let me assure you that Derbyshire events, for all the outward pomp and circumstance, are not all that formalized. I have attended thousands of balls, cotillions, soirees, military receptions, and the rest. Trust me, Sir Cole's Masquerade is a relatively carefree extravaganza. You will have a marvelous time, I promise." He

offered an arm, steering toward the door, “Besides, you will have that ridiculous mask to hide behind. Pretend you are an exotic lady of the orient, a world traveling Princess deigning to mix with the mere mortals of this quaint Shire, imperiously granting your expert dancing capabilities to the country bumpkins with two left feet, bestowing precious smiles and prized witticisms uttered in dulcet tones to the fortunate, flirting outrageously with fluttering fan and batting eyelashes as they swoon at your feet.....”

And on it went down the corridor with Georgiana’s nervousness mostly evaporating in the face of her cousin’s nonsense.

\* \* \* \*

“Hand me the scrubber please, love. It is on his dresser.”

“Hold still crazy little man or soap will fly into your eyes! He is nearly outgrowing this tub. I believe more water ends up sloshed onto the floor than left in the basin.” Darcy handed his wife the requested soft bristled brush, returning to his seat well away from the splash zone.

Lizzy attacked Alexander’s hair with a chuckle, “Yes. I have come to consider the wisdom of simply taking him into the tub with me since I end up practically soaked as it is. Be still, my sweet, or you will get soap in your eyes as papa predicted. Ah, thank you Mrs. Hanford.”

Bathing the rambunctious infant was rapidly becoming a three person job. Alexander loved the water, limbs thrashing in delight throughout. Lizzy preferred to perform the task herself, but required some assistance as one whole arm was burdened with an increasingly pudgy body in constant motion. More than once she had lost her slippery grip only to have Alexander slide under the surface or end up with suds thick over eyes and mouth. Amazingly Alexander did not seem to mind. The castile soap Darcy purchased was the finest in the country and very mild, and other than a surprised expression, blinking eyes, and sneeze or two, Alexander was unfazed by these mishaps.

True to Darcy’s prediction, the towel covered stone tiles immediately before the nursery’s wood stove were nearly saturated by the time the cleansing was complete. Darcy stepped in with warm, dry towels to secure the wiggling baby, wrapping snugly as he rubbed the trapped moisture from every crevice and fat roll.

“Was that not tremendous fun, my lamb? How clean you are! And smelling so very sweet. Sweet enough to eat even without the coconut oil slathered onto your skin. No, no, do not fuss! I know you miss your tubby but this is fun too, is it not?” He placed him onto the

padded dresser top, removing the wet towel, and proceeding to blow air tickles onto the pink skin of his belly. Fingertips tickled further, Alexander hoarsely grunting infant laughter and grabbing fistfuls of hair.

The afternoon playtime continued, Darcy thrilled to be a part of it all. Too often he was tied up with work or entertaining, not able to always leave and assist Lizzy with the procedure. Due to the unrelenting chill of winter, baths were given at the warmest time of the day. Sun, when it was allowed to peek through dreary cloudbanks, shone through the three tall windows flooding the room with light and filtered warmth. Augmenting the roaring blaze in the newly installed Franklin style stove, the chamber was balmy as summertime. Alexander had no opportunity to grow cold while his mother and faithful nanny doted on him with fragrant oils, massages, incessant kisses, and mushy phrases of love. When his father was added to the mix the atmosphere was highly saccharine!

Alexander loved every minute of it.

As with all afternoon bath times, this one ended with the babe at his mother's breast. Warmth, comfort, and contentment engulfed each pore and cell. Darcy sat beside Lizzy, gently caressing wife and son while joyously observing a healthy appetite illustrated.

"I thought we could bring him downstairs for this evening since it shall just be the six of us. Your father has had scant time alone with his grandson lately."

"How thoughtful of you! He will be thrilled. I know he is saddened at the reality of their vacation coming to an end. Of course it eases the separation knowing that we will be traveling south next month." She sighed, leaning her head onto Darcy's shoulder, "I confess I am looking forward to the respite. Peace and quiet sounds blissful right about now. Even tonight is an anticipatory caesura from the hectic environment of late."

"You are not the least bit grieved to miss the Masque?"

"No. Oh, I would adore dancing with the handsomest man at the assembly, naturally. You, you understand?" She glanced up at his face with a playful lilt to her lips, Darcy merely smiling. "Yet all matters considered I would much rather have you all to myself here, with Alexander. Besides, all the dancing over the past several days has quite exhausted me! I judge I can happily eschew the activity until the spring."

"What a pity," he whispered into her hair, "I was planning to ask for your favor once Alexander completed his meal. Hopes dashed once again!"

"Do not be so hasty, Sir! A properly extended dance request from

a worthy gentleman is rarely refused by an interested lady, no matter how weary she may be of the pursuit.”

“So the challenge is for me to couch my appeal in flowery prose? Hmmmm..... Not quite sure I am up to the test.”

“My soul weeps at the discovery of your pessimism, Mr. Darcy. I thought you brave and wholly stalwart; willing and able to face a contest head on. How disappointing.”

He chuckled and then fell silent, kissing the crown of her head. Eventually Alexander was satiated; mouth slack with sticky drool inevitably staining his father’s shoulder. From that point on it was a simple matter of nestling him onto his round abdomen and tucking the blanket.

“Here, let me take care of that so Samuel will not scold you yet again.” Lizzy approached with a wet cloth, attacking the milk spot with vigor while shaking her head. “Why do you not place the cloth over your shirt?”

“I cannot feel him as well then. It is a small price to pay for the sensation of his pliant warmth and breathing. Actually I should just remove the shirt as I prefer his skin touching mine, but do not think it wise to appear so with Mrs. Hanford nearby.” He chuckled, as did Lizzy still busily blotting the sullied linen. “Besides, Samuel has given up scolding, merely glaring and frowning with pursed lips.”

“There. The wet spot is larger, but at least the milk is gone.”

She turned toward her dressing room, intent on returning the wet cloth, but Darcy stayed her with a firm grasp. He tossed the cloth away, sizeable hands claiming both dainty ones. His mien was utterly serious, blue eyes rapt and capturing her surprised gaze. Standing a proper distance, but with a slight bow nearer her mesmerized face he spoke in resonant oratory tones.

*“Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove,  
That valleys, groves, hills and fields,  
Woods or steepy mountains yields.*

*“And we will sit upon the rocks,  
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks  
By shallow rivers, to whose falls  
Melodious birds sing madrigals.*

*“And I will make thee beds of roses,  
And a thousand fragrant posies,  
A cap of flowers and a kirtle  
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;*

*“A gown made of the finest wool,  
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;  
Fair-lined slippers for the cold,  
With buckles of the purest gold;*

*“A belt of straw and ivy buds,  
With coral clasps and amber studs;  
And if these pleasures may thee move,  
Come live with me and be my love.*

*“The shepherd swains shall dance and sing  
For thy delight each May morning;  
If these delights thy mind may move,  
Then live with me and be my love.*

“Dance with me, my lovely Elizabeth?” he finished in a bare whisper.

She rose on tiptoes, kissing sweetly and murmuring against full, moist lips, “Yes I will dance with you, my love.”

In their typical modified waltz pose they began. Over time their amusement of private dancing had evolved, incorporating steps from numerous established dances with those created spontaneously as they swayed and glided about the room. The choreography changed from time to time, Darcy leading and Lizzy responding with flawless grace, adding her own twists and bodily gyrations as the emotions moved her. Neither pretended even for a second that the activity was anything other than an erotic precursor to astounding lovemaking. Yes, it was enjoyable in its own right, both of them fond of dancing. Nonetheless, they easily separated the heightened passion of these interludes from the proper delight found in a ballroom setting.

Boundaries of social decorum were thrown aside. Caresses were intimate, bodies entwined, kisses interspersed all while spinning, undulating, circling, weaving, and floating. They became increasingly daring with each passing session, experimenting with sensual motions purely designed to inflame each other. Boldly they writhed, wiggled, and smoldered; the gay amusement and animal sexuality palpable.

Today Darcy rose to her challenge, huskily whispering snippets of poetry as they danced. Usually it was Darcy who lost all restraint long before Lizzy, but today he seemed determined to drive her mad with desire. Never losing the faint humorous lilt upon his lush lips, voice especially rhetoric and sonorant, eyes lusty and trenchant, rhythm elegant and nimble, figure powerful and masculine, in all ways spiraling her sensibilities insanely.

Thus it was she who harshly pulled him into her where she leaned breathlessly against the bedpost. Frantic fingers attacked buttons on both their garments while he loomed placidly before her. She feverishly removed impeding clothing while he feathered steady fingertips over her neck and exposed skin, mouth exhaling hotly breathed poetry onto a tingling scalp and sensitive ear.

*"Your smile stops the minutes  
And as moments they dance in candlelight.  
While your eyes whisper secrets,  
My heart with wings takes flight.  
In search for more of you to know,  
Of why and what make you so,  
Then mystery pleads her case  
And once again I found your face.  
There to know beauty true  
And gentle winds of peace and love,  
With eyes like jewels shining,  
Looking to the One above.  
And the moments which find life there  
Become the brightest stars above,  
Which live forever beautiful  
In the sky of my heart's love."*

Lizzy had paused, panting heavily and having managed to bare the majority of their bodies, hands now stilled at his waist as she listened.

"I recognize Marlowe, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, and Keats. Who wrote the last one?" She withdrew minimally, gazing upward into his glowing visage.

"Did you like it?"

"Very much. It was beautiful."

He smiled, bending closer and grazing along her cheek, "I wrote it for you. Elizabeth, my heart's love."

"You wrote it!?"

He chuckled, tickling her ear, "You sound so very shocked. I was once forcefully informed that only a fine, stout love is nourished by poetry. I do believe ours qualifies. Besides, Jane should not be the only Bennet daughter to have pretty verse written for her." He nibbled tiny bites across fragile collarbones, hands airily removing her thin chemise. "Has my ideal method of encouraging affection borne fruit?"

She nodded, moaning lowly in response to stimulating fingers. "Indeed. As has my recommendation of dancing. You appear highly affectionate."

"Indeed," he grated, claiming her mouth in an impassioned kiss while pressing harshly against her, wide palms flattened on her bottom. Unhastily they kissed, Darcy voracious, but in no rush to relent the crashing pleasure to be found in her mouth. Until, that is, the rising appetite to taste the other delectable parts of her body overrode. Steadily moving lower he assaulted every inch of flesh, hands and mouth utilized effectively.

Lizzy truly thought she would faint. "Fitzwilliam!" she pleaded, not certain if she was begging for him to pause for a moment's respite or to hurry ere she perished from the aching need for oneness.

"Hold on, lover," commanded gruffly, Lizzy momentarily too befuddled to understand what he meant. Clarity was provided seconds later, Lizzy gasping and reaching to cling to the mahogany carved post above her head. Thankfully her masterful husband had a firm grip on her thighs, drawing them over his shoulders mere seconds before all muscle strength evaporated as a result of what he was doing to her. Lizzy arched, whining and rasping vocalizations of blinding bliss, knuckles white, and body convulsing.

"William, please!"

Darcy rose, holding securely to welcoming legs, imbedding swiftly and totally. Lizzy clutched him, torso falling onto the rigid muscles of his upper body, moaning and shivering as hands made their way through his hair. Darcy remained motionless, absorbing her raging heat and diminishing spasms with delight, murmuring poetic endearments incessantly.

"Dancing and poetry," his impassioned, rough voice casting jolts along sensitized nerves, "A lethal combination. I love you so desperately my Lizzy!"

One short step to the left, falling together and entwined onto the blanket chest at the end of their enormous bed, Darcy never relinquishing the hold on his wife. Subsequent words either of poetry or anything remotely coherent were forgotten. The only dancing hereon was

the timeless dance of passionate lovemaking.

\* \* \* \*

“Are we still waiting on the ladies?” George boomed, breezing through the open parlor doors, scanning the room, and quickly noting the absence of Kitty and Georgiana.

“Did you seriously expect them to be prepared prior to you?” Darcy inquired with a laugh. “You truly are innocent of a woman’s ways.”

“Humorous, Mr. Darcy,” Lizzy sniffed. “George, you are supremely handsome in that outfit. I believe you and Richard will be competing for whom is the most sought after bachelor.”

George wore a formal sherwani in emerald green with elaborate gold embroidery covering the front, far more sedate than the majority of his outfits, but impeccably tailored and exotic nonetheless. Richard, of course, was in full dress uniform, resplendent in red and white. Both men cut striking, if very different, figures. The gallant bows directed Lizzy’s way in response to her compliment were identically flamboyant however, except for the crisp military heel click that Richard added compared to George’s tip of an invisible hat. Darcy groaned dramatically, shaking his head.

“I must disagree with you slightly Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet spoke with a grin from his casual stance near the fireplace, “As debonair as I am certain Dr. Darcy would be considered in most quarters, I do have it on very good authority that nothing quite sets a female’s heart to racing as a man in uniform. Watch your Ps and Qs, Colonel, or you may end the evening inadvertently engaged to a plethora of ladies.”

“Thank you for the warning, Mr. Bennet. I shall be cautious.”

“Perhaps I should advance the rumor that my garment is the official uniform of the Indian army. A man my age must resort to devious means and grasp onto any advantage possible.”

“Do the Indians have an official army, Dr. Darcy?” Mr. Daniels asked in confusion.

“Only in Punjab, but do you imagine that most of the naive girls of Derbyshire know this?” He grinned lecherously.

“My uncle. Godfather to my son. I am so proud.” Darcy declared dryly, the room erupting in laughter.

Voices and giggling interrupted further banter, a sudden flurry of colorful fabrics appearing at the wide double doorway. Mrs. Bennet led the pack, breathlessly fluttering in with voice raised over the din, “Oh



how I wish I were young again! So marvelous, a Masque! Mr. Bennet! Look at our little Kitty. Is she not a vision of perfection? Wealthy suitors will be falling at her feet, I am sure of it!”

Katherine Bennet, nineteen years of age, rosy dimpled cheeks and sunny smile, was indeed a vision. The chosen turquoise gown superbly fitted to accentuate each voluptuous curve she possessed as well as a generous bosom. Her hair was styled with a mass of curls held in check by a thin, jewel encrusted tiara. Kitty fell firmly into that category generally labeled ‘cute.’ Of all the Bennet girls Kitty most resembled her mother in both figure and character. Not overly intelligent, but with a sunny disposition and infectious smile that easily captivated men and women alike. Kitty would never lack for friends or suitors, although the acceptability of such acquaintances may be suspect as Kitty did not possess a discerning nature. Like her mother she had a tendency to blurt without thinking, to avoid any activity requiring extensive reasoning, to speak and laugh boisterously, and to ignore many of the finer nuances of etiquette and propriety. With maturity and positive outside influences some of the worst of these characteristics were tempering, but it is unlikely that Kitty would ever attain the level of grace and elegance that high society demanded. Unlike her mother she was rarely somber or distressed. Kitty would never suffer from nerves or anxiety as she enthusiastically embraced life. All was gay and delightful to her. Passionate in essence, optimistic in outlook, lush in figure, and ebullient in personality, Kitty would enliven the life of some lucky man provided his expectations for more than that were not too high.

Georgiana Darcy, eighteen years of age, tall and slender, was equally a vision. Apropos for her stature and natural regality, the gown of thick maroon velvet lent an air of heightened prestige and maturity. The alterations of the past year were glaringly obvious to all who knew her, but never as forcefully as at this moment. Georgiana stood at five foot eight inches tall, figure svelte but with a curvaciousness that Lizzy only now in her maternal state had acquired. Well proportioned with an modest bust line, delicate waist, long boned limbs and digits, and sloping neck atop which rested a beautiful head. A woman’s head. All traces of the child long since evolved into the image of her stately mother. Eyes slightly deeper blue than her brother’s, hair golden blonde, features dainty, and skin fair. Georgiana was beautiful.

Lizzy kept her gaze directed toward her husband, transfixed by the play of emotions that crossed his face. Initially it was shock; eyes bulging mildly and mouth dropping slightly at the notable womanly figure and maturely developed flesh visible. This was followed by a deep

flush with lips pressed tightly, eyebrow creases formed instantly, and the flash of irritation with clenched fists as she had expected. What surprised and moved her was the gradual transition from protective anger to what can only be described as mournful remembrance; vivid mental portraits of his beloved mother now manifested before his eyes. His mouth relaxed into a tender half smile, softened eyes misty and infused with mingled profound love and unrelenting sadness, whole body sagging minutely as hands momentarily pressed into his belly to ease the knot of grief. Lastly was the abrupt lifted chin, proud cast to every feature of his face, squared shoulders, and beaming smile as he strode commandingly toward his sister.

Lizzy noted it all, her astute ability to interpret his emotions clarifying every thought. Georgiana too had swung her gaze to her brother upon entering the room. As well as she knew him, the rigid control he maintained at all times outside the privacy of his innermost sanctuaries meant that even she could not always correctly interpret his thoughts. Tonight, however, the naked displays were evident and she silently responded to each expression. Embarrassment at his shocked perusal of her body; shame and fear at his anger; tears and trembling at his mute grief, knowing that she resembled her mother; and finally an exulting pride and relief.

He reached for her outstretched hands, enfolding warmly. Voice low and husky, "Georgiana Darcy. How beautiful you are! When did you become a woman? If only father and mother could see you now. How proud they would be!"

"You are not displeased, brother?"

"No, my dearest. Merely woeful that my innocent, pubescent sister has apparently disappeared. I have a terrible need to be relied upon and now it fully strikes me that this role is rapidly dissipating! My selfish heart may well suffer with the blow of losing you, baby sister."

Georgiana giggled, a decidedly unsophisticated sound, "I am only going to a ball, William. Tomorrow I shall be back for you to boss around and brood over."

"Where does this sharp tongue come from?" He asked with a laugh.

"Try to blame me if you must," George interjected, "or perhaps even your wife who has a sharp intellect and independent streak a mile wide, but actually she inherits the tendency from your mother. Lady Anne was blessed with a piquant wit and James encouraged it. Neither ascribed to the idea of women as weak minded vessels, thank God. Georgiana, you are radiant! Red is assuredly the color for you."

Both girls were swarmed under a barrage of gushing accolades; the men appropriately complimenting their beauty and the ladies fawning over each button and ribbon. In a scene reminiscent of last Twelfth Night it was Darcy who assumed control and ushered the group toward the waiting carriage, well aware that the flattering could go on forever.

Darcy personally assisted Georgiana into the carriage with a farewell kiss to her fingers and proud smile. Then he turned to George and Richard waiting on the gravel drive. All humor was erased, piercing and serious eyes boring as he flatly stated, "I am trusting you two to keep a diligent guard over my sisters. Do not let me down."

Richard nodded soberly. George squeezed his nephew's shoulder, eyes equally as serious but voice soft, "Have no fears William. We will vigilantly protect with our lives if need be. The girls will only have joyful stories to tell, I promise."

Darcy searched their faces for a moment more, nodding once in satisfaction before rejoining Lizzy on the steps.

Kitty had badgered Georgiana into accenting with a mask, informed by Madame du Loire that the affectation was highly in style amongst the youthful singles this year for some unknown reason. Strangely, Georgiana had embraced the idea, displaying an unusual playful side at odds with her natural shyness. Obviously Kitty's silliness was influencing Georgiana as much as her steadiness was influencing Kitty! Coats and gloves were donned, Mrs. Bennet fluttering about assisting, and delicate feathered, bejeweled masks were carefully adhered to strategically placed hair clips. No one was overly surprised when George whipped out a mask designed to resemble a peacock, with authentic feathers adorning. It was quite spectacular and worn with a panache truly breathtaking to behold.

Thus, with laughter and teasing and further adulation, the foursome finally embarked. A hush fell over the foyer, except for Mrs. Bennet's brash vocalizations which lasted up the stairs and into the parlor. Even her zeal finally yielded to the soothing atmosphere and silence of the others, the evening at Pemberley passed in the serene manner that Darcy and Lizzy had desired.

\* \* \* \*

For the party goes the evening's atmosphere would be as far removed from serene as is possible.

The Cole family was a Derbyshire staple for nearly as long as the Darcys. Only slightly less wealthy and with acreage roughly three-fourths

the size of Pemberley, the Coles were the second largest landowners of the region. As one of the foremost landed gentry for centuries, the Coles, even without Sir Walter Cole's honorary title gained as a reward for bravery during the Anglo-Dutch War of 1780, were a prestigious family and their home reflected their prominence. Not quite as grand as Pemberley, Melcourt Hall was nonetheless an imposing structure and currently extravagantly festooned and ablaze with light.

Caroline Bingley did not approach tonight's ball with the thinly veiled contempt felt at the Meryton assemblies. She had never resided at Pemberley during the winter season so had not attended one of Sir Cole's masquerades, but she knew the family's reputation as a distinguished one. Moreover, the opportunity to dazzle and further advance her fame was always grasped onto with vigor. One never knew what possibilities could arise at such an affair.

Kitty was innocently exuberant. The thought of dancing and being amid a festival atmosphere was enough to enthuse, and despite the caution impressed upon her over the past week as to proper society behavior she was musing on little besides the potential fun to be had. Georgiana felt residuals of nervousness, but excitement had overtaken the jitters. Warm, encouraging smiles from Richard greatly calmed her fears. Jane Bingley, much like Lizzy the year before, felt the need to present herself in the most positive light feasible. Charles Bingley's residence was recent, but with the hope of constructing the foundation for a future progeny habitation and community, this Derbyshire societal fete was step one in establishing those roots.

The annual Masque truly was an event with a capital E. Peers of the realm and elite gentry from all over Derbyshire as well as a handful from nearby Cheshire, Nottinghamshire, and South Yorkshire attended. Hazardous weather often influenced the resultant luminaries, but never was the ball a failure. Thankfully the climate over the past several days had mellowed somewhat with no fresh snow falling and the skies fairly clear. It remained bitterly cold, but this fact inhibited no one from traveling nor affected the abundant display of female flesh in stylish gowns. Rather it provided the excuse to don fine furs as an additional example of one's wealth and prestige.

Fashions alter during a year, both men's and women's. Hair styles change, trendy accessories vary, topics of gossip fluctuate, dance techniques and music transform, entertainments differ, and even the privileged bon ton suffer vacillating membership. Certain traditions do persevere, however, and one is the apparent necessity for the youthful single ladies to collect strategically so as to chatter about the latest

happenings while unobtrusively observing the arrivals. Last year the leading interest was the new Mrs. Darcy. That subject was now seriously passé, the Darcy name uttered only briefly in reference to Miss Darcy's expected appearance. Yet this raised minimal curiosity compared to the far more exciting rumors of eligible gentlemen anticipated attending the gala.

Strict, unwritten codes of etiquette meant that the now married ladies who had attributed to the rumormongering last year now stood with their peers. This in no way diminished the group as there were always new additions to take their place. Thus a knot of glitteringly dressed and adorned bachelorettes on the prowl stood in several loose clusters about the foyer edges.

"Oh! Here comes Miss Vernor!" Miss Hattie Kennan declared. All eyes turned to the doorway with enthusiasm as the Vernors, older and younger, completed their greetings with the Coles. Miss Bertha broke away from her parents, smile brilliant, and left hand extended as she dashed to meet her friends. Finally putting aside her acute disappointment and anguish over losing Mr. Darcy, Bertha had discovered a wealth of suitors clamoring for her attention. The past year had actually been quite a delightful one for the stunned young lady, and her maneuvering mother, as the prospective choices multiplied. Sadly for Mr. Bates and Mr. Sitwell, Bertha was not inclined toward either. Rather she had immersed herself in the exhilarating amusement to be found with a myriad of beaux, waiting patiently for the right one. That place was eventually inhabited by the eminently worthy and deliciously handsome Baronet Niles Ramsey from Nottinghamshire, the engagement having been announced just last month.

"Dear Bertha!" Miss Astin Fairholm cried, "I have been literally *dying* to talk to you and see the ring! Look! Oh, how beautiful."

Congratulations and swooning persisted for quite some time, other friends meandering by to gush over the ring and her conquest. Miss Vernor was not the only newly affianced, Miss Ewell and Miss Irvine also receiving and accepting proposals in recent months. Of course, as exciting as secured engagements, and they most assuredly were since every last maiden there dreamed of little else, the discussions involved a glut of intriguing material with voices frequently colliding.

"My brother tells me that Lord Blaisdale is coming to the Masque," Miss Amy Hughes offered into the clamor, to the united gasp of each girl.

"Are you certain?"

"Here in Derbyshire?!"

“You tease!”

“I think I shall faint!”

“Have you seen him?”

“Is he not yet in mourning?”

“Is he alone?”

The questions and exclamations surged forth, Miss Hughes flushing at the barrage of attention. This was truly momentous news, as she had known prior to breaking it, but the response quite took her breath away. It was several minutes before anyone gave her the chance to answer.

“He is reportedly a guest of Lord Mather for the Christmas holiday, thus invited to the Masque. No, I have not seen him. I do believe his sister is accompanying him, and their mourning is not officially over, but I am sure they will adhere to the proper customs.”

John Clay-Powell, Viscount Blaisdale, was one of hundreds of titled peers of the Realm known by name and reputation. No one could possibly list all of them. Certainly those ladies currently gathered at Melcourt Hall had no interest in the vast number of royalty, or non-royalty for that matter, who literally and figuratively ran the country. It was a perhaps sad reality that immature females of society were abundantly fascinated by the trappings that wealth and prestige provided, but bored by how that wealth was acquired. Therefore, it was only those noble gentlemen of available status that piqued their interest. Lord Blaisdale was one such man.

New to his title and seat in the House of Lords as of eight months ago, Lord Blaisdale was a childless widower in his late thirties with an enormous estate in Staffordshire, a country home in Fife, Scotland, a townhouse in London, tremendous affluence and prominence, and considerable magnetism and attractiveness. If the murmurings of his womanizing, gambling, and borderline roguish behavior had reached their innocent ears, each young lady chose to ignore it. It was an accepted fact that a man in Lord Blaisdale’s position needed only one thing: a wife. And nearly every girl there judged herself up to fulfilling that post.

Georgiana and Kitty alit from the Darcy carriage with sparkling eyes darting everywhere at once in a vain attempt to absorb it all. Two years ago the fashionable ball gown choice had been white. Not so this year. Color abounded in literally every hue imaginable with elaborate masks prominently veiling many faces. No real attempt at disguise was intended, the embellishment an amusement primarily. Strains of music filtered through the raised voices and laughter. Crowds of bodies

occupied nearly every available space with the line of carriages without visible end. Not a single fireplace burned; a supplementary heat source unnecessary even on this chill night in early January.

Lord and Lady Matlock were found in the parlor, George and Richard gradually drifting to join them with numerous halts along the path to engage in conversation. It had been three years since Col. Fitzwilliam had been able to attend the Masque, many of the Derbyshire residents having not seen him in years. Dr. Darcy was remembered by dozens of old friends and anxiously accosted by strangers who merely desired meeting the legendary, world traveling, eccentric Darcy.

Richard suffered a momentary panic when Georgiana, with Kitty in tow, was waylaid immediately after passing through the formal reception line by Miss Vernor and Miss Hughes. Cognizant of the promise he had made to his cousin, he fully intended to be a chaperone, of sorts; but it quickly became clear that she was managing fine. George kept one eye centered on his niece no matter where she and Kitty migrated.

The young ladies wholly and sincerely welcomed Miss Darcy into the fold, thrilled to have a new member, and totally confident in the indisputable reality that she was of the highest class. Miss Bennet was welcomed equally without question, few even remembering in the sprightliness of the moment that she was of a lower class. As Darcy had predicted to Lizzy, these inconsequentials disintegrated in time. This was especially true in what was for all its glamour nonetheless a country gathering far removed from the inherent snobbishness of a London society event.

The Bingleys arrived shortly thereafter. After long years of association with Darcy, Bingley was passably acquainted with several of the male citizens of Derbyshire. The short months of his and Jane's residence had not afforded them the opportunity to socialize too often except for a handful of dinner invitations with prominent families near Hasberry Hall and the village of Winster. Jane's exposure to the women of the region was limited to the aforementioned local couples and the friends of Lizzy, who had embraced her readily as Mrs. Darcy's sister, but also on her own merits. Gerald and Harriet Vernor greeted them effusively, including Caroline in the welcome, and took a same sex Bingley under their wing for the evening.

While the single ladies giggled and gossiped, the bachelors surveyed their prospective dance partners with glee. Naturally there were the older gentlemen who had mastered the giddy emotions of youth; they appraised from a respectable distance with outward indifference and

generally tended to favor the slightly older unattached females who had also regulated their flightiness. Nonetheless, the groups of excitable single men grew with each passing year and were more than adequately numbered to squire the energized girls.

A barely discernable ripple of unknown origin passed through the company, a signal from who knew where that the dancing was about to begin. It was at this vague indication that the separated parties slowly began to merge. Brothers sought sisters, and vice versa, as a way to properly be introduced and initiate conversation with those of the opposite sex.

Georgiana, to her shocked delight, found herself amid a thick cluster of admirers. Her innocence and sheltered existence did not prepare her for the full impact of being a Darcy. As her brother had for years been the prime bull of Derbyshire, Georgiana was the prized heifer. This would have been the case irregardless of her semblance, but, again like her brother, Georgiana's physical beauty heightened the attraction. There literally was not a man in the place unaffected by her presence.

"Brother," began Miss Hughes, "allow me to introduce Miss Darcy and Miss Bennet. This is my brother, Mr. Avery Hughes, and my cousin Mr. Tyndale." Bows and curtsies all around, Kitty dimpling flirtatiously and Georgiana shyly flushing.

"Mr. Hughes it is a pleasure to see you again," Georgiana said. "How are you enjoying Cambridge?"

"Very much, Miss Darcy. Of course, I am rather obligated to respond positively or my father will chastise me for not embracing my studies."

Georgiana laughed, "Well, I do hope the sentiment is largely true. My brother speaks fondly of his time at University. Quite makes me jealous at times, in fact."

Mr. Tyndale interjected with a smile, "It is a pity females cannot attend, I believe. Certainly would liven up the occasional stuffiness of the atmosphere."

"Be careful what you say aloud, Mr. Tyndale," Miss Vera Stolesk declared with a flick of her folded fan, "Such scandalous talk has no place at a ball."

Mr. Tyndale bowed her direction, "Forgive me Madame. Permit me to beg your forgiveness by complimenting you on your ensemble. Lovely mask. I hardly recognized you until hearing your voice."

"Oh, posh Rydell! Quit flirting so outrageously. You have known Miss Stolesk since you were a baby!" It was his sister, Miss Hilary Tyndale teasing, the group laughing as Mr. Tyndale again bowed with a



flourish.

“Miss Bennet, how are you enjoying Derbyshire?”

“It has been delightful, Mr. Blake, thank you. Primarily I have been visiting my sister and snowed in at Pemberley, but that has allotted me time to play with my nephew.”

“You have unfortunately arrived at the worst time of the year for sightseeing, sadly.”

“But at the perfect time to attend a Masque!” Kitty retorted with a giggle.

“Indeed, and most fortunate for us.” This minor flattery uttered quietly by a young man yet introduced; a tall, dark haired gentleman of twenty years standing silently at the edge of the group. He smiled, deep dimples flashing and several female knees instantly growing weak.

“Mr. Falke, you have an annoying habit of sneaking!” Miss Trent declared with a dramatic hand over her heart.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Trent. I did not wish to intrude unwarranted, but did wish to make the acquaintance of these two lovely ladies if at all possible.” Georgiana blushed prettily, Kitty boldly flashing her own devastating dimples his direction.

“Subtle, Mr. Falke,” Miss Vernor laughed. “This is my dear friend Miss Georgiana Darcy and her sister-in-law Miss Katherine Bennet. Ladies, Mr. Anthony Falke of Haddison Manor in Chapel-en-le-Frith.”

“That is in the High Peak District, Miss Bennet, which I am grieved to overhear you have not been so fortunate as to see.”

“As am I, Mr. Falke. Luckily my sister, Mrs. Darcy, will be residing in Derbyshire for many years to come so perhaps someday I will be fortunate enough to travel.”

“Let us pray this is so.” He smiled again, turning to Georgiana, “Miss Darcy, the pleasure to make your acquaintance is profound. My father speaks very highly of Mr. Darcy. I have had the pleasure of meeting your esteemed brother on two occasions. My congratulations on the new addition to your family.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He turned again to Kitty, “Miss Bennet, may I have the honor of the first dance?”

“I do believe Miss Bennet has promised the first dance to me.” A surprised Kitty glanced upward into the face of Col. Fitzwilliam, mouth dropping open, but gloved hand automatically lightly clasping the larger one offered. “She has promised me only one, however, so perhaps the second set will be gifted to you, Mr. Falke, if you ask so appropriately once again. Miss Bennet?”

She hesitated for another second, Richard gravely observing with only the hint of a smile. George stood behind Georgiana with a broad grin. Most of the gathered people were silently amused, Mr. Falke composed and undeterred.

"I will happily wait upon Miss Bennet's pleasure. As long as my name appears upon her dance card at least once I shall be satisfied."

Kitty gazed into his twinkling eyes, coquettish nature rising to the fore. "The second set is yours, Mr. Falke, if you wish it." He bowed gallantly, dimples making another brief appearance before moving away.

"Well, well! These evenings always start with a dazzle. Miss Darcy, you promised to dance with your decrepit uncle first so as not to shame me later in the evening when my ancient brain can no longer recall the steps. Gentlemen, I regret I must steal my niece away. Shall give you all time to reconnoiter and plan further attacks. Draw straws amongst yourselves for the hand of the assembled ladies. Miss Vernor, Miss Hughes, quite charming. I am breathless in the sight of all this beauty." He bowed politely. "Miss Darcy, shall we?"

"Uncle," Georgiana whispered as they maneuvered toward the dance floor, "I have quite a good memory and am sure that neither Kitty nor I promised our dances! Is this a plot of my oppressive brother's to keep me from enjoying the company of other gentlemen?"

George laughed, "Not at all my dear! This is a scheme devised by the good Colonel and me with the opposite effect, which would likely aggravate your oppressive brother." She looked at him suspiciously. "You see, every eye will be on you and Miss Kitty. You are two of the surprises of the night. The mystery girls who have sparked the interest of every eligible male in the room. We are two of them, so understand how these emotions work. You are a Darcy, which instantly excites them, plus you are beautiful. Miss Kitty is an enigma, also beautiful, and the sister of Mrs. Darcy, who created such a wave last year. Now they will observe you with increased engrossment as you both glide so elegantly about the floor. By the time you reach the edges after this set, you will have every man engaging you. You, my sweet, and Miss Kitty will not sit down for the rest of the evening, I can assure you."

They took their places in line, Georgiana blushing adorably. George bowed, Richard doing the same toward Kitty from their location three couples away. The notes of the allemande began, the partners stepping to meet each other, as George continued, "Of course, this likely would have been the case without our interference, and so it was most probably a ploy concocted out of selfishness so that the Colonel and I could dance with two of the prettiest ladies in the house."

Georgiana laughed, a musical sound reaching the ears of many a spellbound lad standing nearby as George had presumed. "You, uncle, are a tease and a fibber. I think this ploy was to heighten your own intrigue amongst the eligible women! You snared partners who could not refuse so that the scrutinizing ladies will see how debonair and graceful you two are. No one will refuse either of you from here on out!"

George grinned, laying one bony finger alongside his nose, "Entirely too clever for your own good, Miss Darcy. Since we now understand each other, let us show these people how it is done!"

Whether the tactic had any bearing whatsoever, who knows? Dancing partners were in abundance for all folks involved. George and Richard did sit out for a set or two as the night progressed. Kitty and Georgiana did not.

\* \* \* \*

The arrival of Lord Blaisdale occurred while the girls were dancing the second set; Georgiana with Mr. Avery Hughes and Kitty with Mr. Falke. Therefore, they missed the spectacle.

Dressed in the sober black of mourning, the man was nonetheless an imposing figure. Standing at an even six feet, burly build with a slight tendency toward heaviness, Lord Blaisdale had wholly inherited the traits of a Nordic ancestry. Hair so blonde as to be nearly white worn long and tied with a ribbon in the back, striking pale green eyes, high cheekbones, prominent eyebrow ridges, and full lips perpetually lifted with an expression of amusement or perhaps constant derision. To claim that he was merely handsome would be an understatement.

His sister was equally as arresting. Not much shorter than her brother and every inch as Nordic in coloring and physical features, she was a beauty long sought after by dozens of suitors. Darcy knew her and had briefly considered her, but aside from the fact that she would likely not have returned the interest as his income was not up to the standards she desired, he found her to be cold and superior. Even then, always in fact, Darcy had sought a woman of passion and liveliness. Sybil Clay-Powell did not possess those traits. It was Lord Mather who had finally won her hand, undoubtedly due to his supreme income and title. Unfortunately the planned summer wedding had been postponed as a result of her father's death.

The three of them entered in a stately fashion, all dressed in colors of mourning. Rules of mourning were vague in the Georgian Era.

Few set regulations applied other than the requirement for sober colors and minimal decoration to garments, nominal entertaining for a period of at least six months up to two years in the case of widows, and public appearances only if vitally important. Conventions of grief were often put aside out of necessity, such as the widow or widower who needed to remarry due to income essentials or for the care of parentless children. Hasty remarriages and renewing social engagements may be frowned upon and gossiped about, but were generally overlooked if the cause was legitimate and decorum maintained.

Therefore, the appearance of the Clay-Powells, whose father had now been deceased for eight months, was not even fodder for a minor rumble except for those inevitable old-fashioned folks who relish finding fault with just about anything.

Caroline Bingley sat on a settee in the parlor amid a group of women conversing quietly. The room was located away from direct view of the foyer, thus the occupants were unaware of the newest arrivals. Caroline affected a pose of aloof indifference, but the truth was otherwise. The Cole Masque, as noted previously, may not quite compare to an ultra elite affair in London, but it paralleled the typical function that the Bingleys were usually invited to. Caroline may have snobbery perfected as an art form, but she did enjoy dancing, friendly gossip, and witty repartee with handsome gentlemen.

Due to this internal desire for frivolous entertainment, sitting serenely with a cluster of married women was not precisely to her taste. Providentially, just as she was about to yawn from boredom, she noticed a trio of ladies giggling as they crossed a far hallway heading toward the ballroom. Caroline's heart leapt as these three women were known to her from London society, two of them actually close friends. With a murmured *pardon me* to Jane, she stood and gracefully steered toward the direction taken by her friends. It was a ghostly impression of being watched that caused her to pause momentarily and glance over her shoulder toward the foyer.

Her breath caught at the pair of vivid green eyes fixed upon her. Suddenly as if in a dream where the press of bodies disappeared into thin air, Caroline's only awareness was of the regal presence bearing down upon her.

"Miss Bingley, what an absolutely exquisite delight it is to see you here. I had no idea I would be blessed by the miracle of your presence, but I am thrilled beyond comprehension."

"Lord Blaisdale. Surely the pleasure is all mine."

## **22 – Nocturnal Diversions**

The Darcys lounged in their darkened sitting room. A raging fire, impenetrable damask curtains tightly drawn over the windows, and each of them wearing thickly quilted robes adequately prevented any bodily chills. Darcy sat furthest from the blaze, feet bare and robe gaping open to reveal unclothed legs from the knees down and chest largely exposed, yet he actually felt sweaty. It did not help that Alexander lie asleep nestled snugly against his father's chest with robe flap blanketing, tiny body generating heat in droves. Of course, the proud papa considered any inconvenience in personal comfort well worth the joy of bonding with his firstborn. Lizzy, conversely, sat in an identical chair beside her husband with only a small table separating and less than three feet away from the fireplace, wore Darcy's old robe belted securely and drawn taut, and burrowed her stocking clad feet between his warm soles on the ottoman.

Darcy read the book propped on a small pillow upon his lap while hands soothingly caressed his son's soft form. Alexander wore a woolen gown of lavender edged white, but the delicate fabric did not hinder the rapid beat of his strong heart detected against Darcy's chest. The entire experience was deeply peaceful, Darcy bestowing occasional kisses to a curly hair shrouded head while absorbing the printed words of Goethe. Alexander had finished his final meal well over an hour ago, but Darcy refused to part with him. This was not an unusual situation, the young family frequently passing their final hours after socializing and before retiring to their bedchamber in a pose of domestic felicity.

Normally Lizzy relaxed into these moments as thoroughly as did her spouse, but not tonight. She glanced at his intently placid mien, simultaneously amazed and annoyed at his apparent lack of distraction. She too held a book in her hands, but could not focus on the words.

The evening following the departure of the effervescent ball attendees had passed delightfully. The six remaining Pemberley inhabitants enjoyed a relatively quiet meal and casual entertainment together in the parlor. Alexander experienced a lengthy time of wakefulness, docilely endured being shifted from embrace to embrace, finally secured within his grandfather's arms for the bulk of the evening.

The infant was far too young to comprehend the varied interconnectedness of these people, but he instinctively recognized those faces whose affectionate eyes bespoke of a rooted love and devotion transcending the normal. Mr. Bennet's grizzled countenance was top on the list and the babe pliantly relaxed while seriously being spoiled by a doting grandfather.

Conversation was light. Mr. Daniels and Darcy played chess. Lizzy played cards with her mother and sister. Tea and cocoa were sipped with accompanying treats nibbled. The masque was mentioned upon occasion, but generally the topics ranged elsewhere. The party naturally broke up when Alexander demanded sustenance sometime around ten o'clock, good-nights extended as the others headed to their respective rooms.

Now the Master and Mistress reclined. Darcy, as always, was largely relieved to merely remove his encumbering clothing. The added bonus of embracing his son and contentedly sitting next to his wife was heavenly. He may not be consciously dwelling upon it as the riveting prose of Goethe captured his willful attention, but the stark contrast to how full his life now was compared to just over a year ago never deserted his soul. Never for a moment of any day did not the veracity of his present happiness invade and uplift his spirit. On some level, no matter how totally immersed he may be in a business transaction or physical activity or conversation or whatever else demanded his concentration, Elizabeth, and now Alexander, were blissfully anchoring his core and lurking on the periphery. At times he so startlingly and thoroughly sensed their presence that he would turn his head, sure that they were standing nearby. But it was simply yet profoundly the living reality of their hearts intertwined amid his.

Although the life experiences, sufferings, and upbringings of the two were very different, a commonality reigned in how altered they both were in a myriad of ways, how centered and completed and healed, while also more richly *themselves* in a manner that defied comprehension. Elemental acts, such as idling away the hours before bedtime, were pleasanter than at any other time in their lives.

This truth was why it odd that Lizzy would be in any way ill at ease. Odd, perhaps, but clearly not related to any dissatisfaction with her husband and current life as evident by the question which ruptured the tranquility.

"What do you think the girls are doing now?"

Darcy looked to his wife with a raised brow, eyes glancing to the softly ticking longcase clock in the corner, pursing lips seriously prior to

answering. “Well, let me see. It is nearly eleven, which means that dinner is completed yet it is not time to crown the King and Queen, therefore dancing is the primary diversion. Consequently, they are most likely standing in an unobtrusive corner talking with a well selected collective of unsociable individuals, praying that the night will end as rapidly and painlessly as possible.”

He turned with a shrug, Lizzy snorting and rolling her eyes. “Somehow I rather doubt that!”

“Then why did you ask me? I can only venture a guess based on personal experience, hence my answer. You would have a far better grasp on the possible activities, which, God help me, undoubtedly include flirting and dancing with lustful adolescent boys.” He shuddered, Alexander startling faintly and releasing a gurgling sigh.

“More personal experience, Mr. Darcy?” She laughed at his flush, then also released a sigh and tossed the unread book onto the floor. “I wish I could observe them dazzling, and I am dying to hear all the details!” She slyly glanced at her smiling spouse, “And do not pretend you are not wishing you could be there as well, to intimidate those lustful boys if nothing else.”

He shrugged again, “I trust Richard and Uncle George. They know I would skin them alive if any harm came to the girls. As for the details, there is no question we will hear all about it, especially you who will surely be sequestered most of the day in your parlor reliving each second. Thankfully I have a hunt planned so will only suffer the synopsis.” He too put the book aside, neatly onto the table, holding Lizzy’s gaze with a tender smile. “Perhaps I should relinquish our son to his cradle and engage you in an activity that will divert your attention away from useless pondering.”

Lizzy grinned salaciously, eyes brightening, and ran one foot seductively along his bare leg to inner thigh, “Hmmm.... What sort of *activity*, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy burst out laughing, again startling Alexander who jerked and fluttered his eyelids, wiggled and rubbed his tiny face into his father’s scratchy, hair covered skin before capturing the first two fingers of his right hand and returning to slumber happily sucking. Darcy patted the infant’s back placatingly, attempting to croon amid the escaping chuckles.

“You, my insatiable love, have a wicked mind! I was referring to a competition over the backgammon board, as your fangs always come out with that game. However, I suppose my direction could be altered if you so desire. I intend to stay awake until Watson informs me the celebrants have returned anyway.”

Now he was grinning salaciously while Lizzy reddened slightly, but returned his smile. "Well, since we have until then I imagine we can do both. I have not properly trounced you in backgammon for weeks, so a humbling is in order." She jumped up, leaning over husband and baby and bestowing a chaste kiss to inviting lips. "I will put him to bed while you set up the board. Say your prayers Mr. Darcy as I fully intend to spank you until you beg for mercy."

Darcy grasped behind her neck, halting her mere inches away from his mouth, "Are we still talking about backgammon?"

But she did not answer, smirking instead with a lifted brow and tiny shrug.

The first three games were serious affairs. Darcy had discovered far back in his youth the horrid ill luck he possessed with dice and cards. It was a running jest for as long as he could remember and legendary amongst his peers. Whether this twist of fate prevented him enjoying gambling games or he never would have developed pleasure in such pastimes is unknown. That is not to say he never prevailed in the rare game of chance or refused to partake altogether. Rory Sitwell, especially, was fond of gambling card games and Darcy had learned that even though he would likely eventually lose every last pence anted, the competition and male camaraderie could be moderately amusing. The main problem, aside from inherently being a man of financial sensibility, was that Darcy hated defeat! Games requiring skill of some sort were his forte.

Backgammon was a game that required a melding of both skill and luck at dice. Lizzy was blessed with an eerily magical talent for rolling doubles or the precise combination needed to either hit Darcy's checker and send it to the bar or keep her checkers together. Darcy seldom rolled doubles and was forever forced to separate his checkers into lone blots on a pip just waiting for his ruthless wife to knock them back! Lizzy was a fierce competitor which Darcy loved as he was also. His saving grace was a patience and tactical strategy that Lizzy lacked. Her swift, impulsive moves often proved her undoing. Although in the long run Darcy lost more often than he won, the victories were enough to sustain his interest and retard utter humiliation. Plus, he simply adored any entertainment undertaken with his wife.

Darcy surprisingly won the first game, barely. Lizzy won the second by a fair margin and the third was a slaughter with Darcy passing three rolls of his dice unable to release the two checkers captured on the middle bar. Lizzy smugly gloated while setting up the board yet again, Darcy suddenly extremely distracted by the fact that during the intensity



of the past rounds the old, voluminous robe had loosened and was now gaping open to reveal tantalizing glimpses of a chemise supported, succulent bosom. He opted not to point the fact out, praying fervently that she would remain ignorant as the game commenced.

For the first time in a very long while Darcy paid not the slightest attention to plotting and maneuvering. In fact, he barely noticed the fall of the dice, absently relocating from pip to pip before returning his rapt gaze to the ever increasing view of flesh before him. Lizzy's frown deepened as she studied the board with undisguised chagrin. Her husband was thwarting her every move, rolling the perfect combinations, and clearly on the road to annihilating her! When she glanced to his face he seemed as serious as always, although mildly abstracted, and the faint flush to his cheeks was odd. With more than half her checkers still scattered about, Darcy rolled a shocking double six taking his frankly blood deprived brain completely by surprise upon realizing that he had just won the game! He blinked several times, Lizzy releasing a snort of disgust as she fell back into her chair.

The abrupt movement and contact with the hard chair back caused her lactating breasts to bounce delightfully above their stays, Darcy's gaze instantly riveted in the same moment that Lizzy realized her entire front torso and right shoulder were exposed. He paused with the final checker in his fingers, Lizzy laughing lowly with an embarrassed flush spreading over her cheekbones and hands rising impulsively to close the robe.

"Stop." Hoarsely commanded as the checker fell randomly onto the board and he stood. In seconds he was there, Lizzy standing without thought, separating the robe completely and running warm hands around her waist toward the short corset's ties in back. Pulling tight into his body and bending to administer lazy licks to pert breasts, his pleased wife encircling broad shoulders and moaning faintly. Darcy handily released the specially designed undergarment necessary for his beautiful wife's comfort due to a significantly enlarged chest, never halting the delicious and highly arousing oral attention given to each breast, while skillfully divesting her of the two concealing garments.

"Are we finished with backgammon then?" Lizzy whispered in a voice caught between breathless excitement and teasing sauciness, fingers tightly enmeshed in thick brown hair.

Darcy's husky voice rose from the depths of her cleavage, words spaced as lips continued their assault, "I am now more than ready to cry for mercy while you spank or in any way chose to exert your superiority over me, Mrs. Darcy. I am utterly at your disposal and in your power."

“Careful what you wish for my lover. I am very clever, remember?”

She tugged his head away, meeting darkly glittering orbs of blue before pulling in for a searing kiss, running forceful hands down his robe covered back until encountering a firm derriere. She caressed thoroughly over each taut cheek, Darcy moaning deep in his throat and instinctively intensifying the already furious kiss, accenting with a rough clench of each tiny but incredibly strong hand.

Darcy’s knees buckled slightly, gasping for air as he withdrew an inch or so from her devastating lips while simultaneously crushing her lower body into his with a grinding writhe. “Lizzy! Unbelievable minx and temptress! God, how I love you! Anything.....anything you want of me and it is yours!”

She answered with a tender bite to his lower lip, “I only want to love you Fitzwilliam. Take me to bed.”

The ball would not end until nearly dawn, the Pemberley attendees reaching their limit and returning home just before three o’clock. Darcy stayed awake as he promised, quietly extraditing his body from his wife’s warm clinging one to respond to Watson’s soft knock. Lizzy had succumbed to satiated exhaustion barely a half hour prior, Darcy fighting his body’s satisfied urge to do the same with difficulty.

He was no longer stupefied by the apparently bottomless depths of amorous arousal they both elicited in the other. He never took it for granted, but had gradually come to accept it as what was obviously a natural offshoot of their tremendous love. Perhaps in some small part of his psyche he sheltered an egotistical sliver of pride at this raging virility as indication of his manliness and worth, but truthfully he gave the credit to her. The undeniable fact was that although virtuous upon his marriage, Darcy was a functional man nonetheless and had *experimented*, shall we say, prior to marriage, whether he wanted to or not! Yet never had he attained the levels of arousal or frequency, even when in the first blooms of manhood, than he did with Elizabeth. If he thought about the situation rationally it flabbergasted him and quite literally seemed physically impossible. Yet there *it* was, over and over again matter of fact, and since she was always the cause of *it* and was more than willing to deal with *it*, then he accepted the reality wholeheartedly.

Lizzy seemed to suffer no shock at her limitless wantonness and quite blatantly expressed her happiness in the state of affairs as often as feasible. Plus, she was abundantly clear about how smug she was in the power to raise her husband’s passion. Often it was her need to observe his positive reaction to her very touch that encouraged her passion

before any actual activity began! She wasted no mental effort in analyzing the logical aspects of their desire for each other, simply employing every tactic that occurred to her at any given moment to please him, which always worked and in turn massively pleased her.

Their lovemaking had assumed a life of its own, varying from session to session. Tonight they entered a place caught blissfully between wild, animalistic fervor and playful, teasing appetite. The tickles, laughing, and silliness were intermingled with growls, bites, and harsh exertions. With a mutually driven need to possess each other they danced endlessly, giving as they took in wordless hunger to convey the depth of feeling. They reached heavenly completion in unity, their bodies not once more than inches apart and hands not moving over perspiring flesh as they recouped.

Still gasping after a dazzling climax, sight and clarity slowly restoring as she stroked the rigid thigh lying alongside hers, sweaty and shaking body adhered over her backside while crushing her into the soft mattress, Lizzy murmured into the pillow, "This is far better than dancing at a ball."

Darcy chuckled, breath tickling her ear and hoarse voice reverberating through her back, "No regrets, my lover?"

"Lord no! Only in that I must request you move as I cannot breathe!"

He chuckled again, kissing softly to the luscious bend of her neck before complying. He rolled away from her back, but brought her with him, wide palms supporting full breasts and fingers teasing sensitive nipples. She allowed this erotic after-play for a moment and then turned in his arms.

"I love you William."

"I love you Elizabeth, so very much." He kissed her nose.

"Do you still intend to stay awake until they return? After expending this much energy I find it difficult to believe you will manage it." She accentuated her tease with a well placed fondle to his groin, Darcy retrieving her gentle fingers with a heavenly sigh.

"You know me well, dearest. It will not be easy at all to hold you in my arms and not surrender to the bliss of gratified slumber, but I want to make sure they arrive safely. The roads are slick in places." He embraced her tighter, nestling into the bed as they naturally assumed their customary positions with her head lying perfectly on his inner shoulder with body loosely draped over and molding to his.

She idly played with the damp hairs on his chest, sleep rapidly consuming her malleable flesh, contentment and sheer sexual

gratification overflowing. "You are a good man, my heart." She yawned, snuggling even closer, "I fear you have expertly leeched every ounce of energy from my bones so I make no promise to wait with you."

"Do not try, love." He kissed her head, "Alexander will have you up soon enough. Sleep, my Lizzy. I love you."

"And I you," in the barest whisper.

Thoughts of last year's Masque with his stunning wife at his side and dancing with him for the first time since their marriage occupied his mind and kept him awake. While he mused on these pleasant remembrances and listened to the deeply regular cadence of her breathing as a result of their exhilarating evening, the entertainment of the party goes drew steadily to a close with events both ordinary and momentous having transpired.

\* \* \* \*

Kitty was quite literally having the time of her life. Always vivacious and naturally congenial, she readily made friends among those humble Derbyshire youth who accepted her regardless of her rumored low station. Many of them were the offspring of moderately wealthy country gentlemen anyway, so the glaring social differences were not as apparent. Naturally there were a number of haughty socialites and arrogant patricians who refused to acknowledge those beneath them even if they did arrive with family connections of the highest caliber, but they in no way dampened the overall spirit of merriment. Besides, Kitty was blessed with a general naiveté and natural nescience to events beyond her immediate sphere. Since dance partners clamored for her favor and pauses found her in the midst of lively clusters of young people, she had no reason to fret over murmurings from the imperious.

"What part of Hertfordshire do you dwell in, Miss Bennet?" Mr. Falke asked. His socially allotted two dance sets were passed, much to his annoyance, but that did not mean he could not converse with Kitty as much as possible.

"Our estate, Longbourn, is near Meryton, Mr. Falke."

"Oh! Meryton! We have passed through your quaint village many times on our way to my uncle's cottage!" Miss Vera Stolesk declared with enthusiasm. "You remember Alicia, do you not?" She turned to her cousin, Lady Alicia Nash, laying a hand on her arm, "We paused there two summers ago to water the horses. When the bridle broke. Anyway, we visited this delightful confectionary to pass the time and enjoyed these gooseberry pastries that were simply to die for!"

“Yes, I do recall that. Oh, the pastries were divine.”

“You must mean Mr. Janssen’s shop. He is Dutch and creates true marvels. My mother is particularly fond of his treats, to papa’s dismay!” Kitty giggled at the understatement, privately recalling numerous overheard irritated chastisements regarding the cost.

“Last summer we begged father to stop, but he was anxious to reach our destination.” Miss Stolesk continued. “I was quite cross about that and pouted as prettily as I could, but he would not be swayed!” Several laughs followed that statement, especially as Miss Stolesk demonstrated the adorable pout.

“I would surely never be able to deny you anything after such an expression, Miss Stolesk.” Mr. Geoffrey Teddington offered with a florid bow, Miss Vera fluttering her lashes playfully.

“You must join us this summer, Miss Bennet.” Lady Alicia stated firmly.

“Oh yes! You must!” Miss Stolesk emphatically agreed.

“Our family owns a country estate north of Stevenage and we spend each summer there, after the season in London. Days upon days of horseback riding, picnics by the river, strolls along the country lanes, and evening soirees. It is my favorite time of the year.”

“Would it not be an inconvenience?” Kitty asked politely, vainly trying to keep the excitement from creeping into her voice.

Miss Stolesk waved her hand breezily with a shake of her head, Lady Alicia answering, “Gracious no! We have people in and out all summer long! Father goes for the shooting, declaring that the birds are far and away the very best in Hertfordshire.” Her tone clearly indicating her disinterest in the subject while the young men all nodded sagely in agreement with Lord Stevenage’s assessment. “Mother paints and grows orchids, an award winning member of the Orchid Society you see, while we frolic and amuse ourselves in any way possible. It is decided then!” She briskly declared with a clap of hands, “Miss Bennet will join us. If, that is, you believe your father will allow it?”

The truth is Kitty had no idea if Mr. Bennet would allow such an excursion, but she refused to face that horrid possibility choosing to confidently state the affirmative. Smiles greeted her acclamation from numerous sources, several of the gentlemen already glowing with delight as the Earl of Stevenage’s summer extravaganzas were famous and widely attended. The ‘cottage’ humbly described by Lady Alicia in point of fact an enormous manor rivaling Pemberley.

“Miss Darcy,” Miss Vera Stolesk interjected, Georgiana startling and flushing instantly as a dozen set of eyes alit on her face, “You must

join us as well. The more the merrier as they say!”

“Well, I...” she stammered, blush deepening, which the enchanted men thought endearing, “I cannot promise....my brother, well, he is....protective, to say the least.”

Lady Alicia laughed, clicking her folded fan lightly onto Georgiana’s hand, “Oh, yes! We all know the reputation of the formidable Mr. Darcy! I will talk to my father. He is quite persuasive and knows Mr. Darcy well. I am certain he can arrange it to my satisfaction.” She sounded very confident.

Mr. Falke chuckled lowly. “Perhaps you should practice your pout, Lady Alicia, to ensure it has greater influence than Miss Stolesk’s.”

“I have no need to stoop to such devious tactics, Mr. Falke. I simply wait until he is enmeshed in a game of cards and he will absently grant me anything!”

They all laughed, Mr. Falke’s dimples flashing as he bowed slightly, “Indeed, far more straightforward and honest.”

The frivolous banter continued with plans laid for Derbyshire winter diversions and springtime London amusements until the orchestra signaled the beginning of the next set. Mr. Falke claimed Georgiana and Mr. Teddington escorted Kitty.

Col. Fitzwilliam and Dr. Darcy honestly did strive to closely oversee the interactions of the flittering girls, but it was an assignment not always successful. Melcourt Hall was an enormous structure with a dozen of the main rooms open for the party. Crowds of bodies occupied literally every space and the flood of traffic was incessant with celebrants constantly on the move as they danced and socialized. Keeping track of two girls amid the ebb and flow of activity was extremely difficult. Add to those straightforward facts their own socializing and the truth is that the older gentlemen, for all their well intentions, lost track of their energetic relatives far more than they would ever confess to Darcy.

Fifty-four years is far from ancient, especially when one possesses a sparkling personality, limitless charm, extreme handsomeness, youthful vigor, and wealth. Dr. George Darcy was gifted with all these traits and many more so was thus a sought after guest from numerous quarters. Old friends from his youth delighted in renewing their acquaintance and reminiscing. Curious and respectful gentlemen of his peerage clamored for introductions and improved friendship. Ladies were quite plainly infatuated and flirty, which George shamelessly encouraged and relished. Unlike his nephew, George indulged in the joy of notoriety, jolly banter, and frivolous entertainment.

“Are there truly lions and tigers running wild in India, Dr.

Darcy?”

“Indeed, Mrs. Longham. Majestic creatures. Exotic flora and fauna unseen here, although I am sure you have been so blessed to view wild animals from time to time in circuses?”

“Of course, but one imagines they are vastly differing in their natural habitats.”

“This is true, Madame. Unfortunately the specimens displayed in such venues are generally weakened and domesticated to a degree. Certainly not allowed to interact and perform normally.”

“I saw a lion tamer once with three ferocious beasts,” Miss Carmichael breathlessly interjected. “It was terrifying! Their fangs and razor sharp claws!” She shuddered dramatically, fan fluttering crazily. “Surely they could not be any *more* horrifying!”

“Quite the contrary, dear lady. Once, not but one year after arriving in Bombay while yet young and incredibly naïve, I traveled with another physician up the Ulhas River. We were on our way to a remote village in the jungles where a pestilence had erupted. It was my first extensive journey away from the immediate, more civilized regions around that great city and you can imagine how enthusiastic I was. But also rather frightened, not that I would have confessed this to my wiser mentor and experienced native guides!”

His audience of mixed sexes was already spellbound; George’s Darcy inherited flair for the dramatic enhanced over the years by listening to the indigenous people’s storytellers who have perfected the art form. His voice naturally assumed a slightly singsong rhythm with gestures and facial expressions adding emphasis and enlightenment. His choice of garment, handsome face mildly lined from years of harsh sun, and modulation of voice to a Hindu flavored accent augmented the effect. None of this was accidental on his part and he reveled in the attention.

“We sailed on a machwa. That is an open decked fishing vessel built by the natives, wide but offering no protection from the elements, you see, and sitting quite low in the water. The Indians use poles to propel the boat along with the currents, wind upon occasion aids movement, but this was in the hottest part of the year when breezes were rare. Oftimes we would creep along not much faster than a snail. I found it all so fascinating! Vegetation of a lushness and variety not seen here. Colors vivid, leaves appearing as if polished with fine lacquer. And the wildlife! Ah, teeming it is.”

“Were there crocodiles?” Interrupted one wide-eyed woman.

“Indeed, Madame! Enormous brutes which thankfully prefer to

hide along the shores under the shaded waters. There are other reptiles of stunning variety as well as birds vibrantly colored who mimic extraordinary sounds, insects of truly hideous sizes and shapes. It would be far too terrifying for me to elaborate further. Even I grow squeamish at the vision of the monstrous spiders and beetles.” He shuddered, eyes closing momentarily as the women collectively shivered.

Resuming after a melodramatic pause, “I cannot fabricate nor embellish, so must truthfully confess that I did not espy the full complement of Indian creatures indigenous to the region upon this first trip. Over time, as I was there for some thirty years, I would become closely acquainted with the beasts both large and minute which inhabit the waters, jungles, and deserts. Ah, the stories I could tell! But we would be here all night listening to me drone on and that would not be entertaining in the least!”

Instantly several voices, both male and female, rushed to assure him that it was decidedly entertaining and none would wish to be elsewhere, Oh absolutely not! George humbly accepted the accolades, hesitantly resuming his tale upon the urging of an increasing fan club, twinkling eyes in sharp contrast to the meek tilt to his head. He described the verdant jungle, open grasslands, murky waters, insect riddled air, and sultry atmosphere rife with alien odors so vividly that each listener was instantly transported to this foreign land.

“I sat on the edge of our machwa, bare feet dangling in the tepid waters, simply absorbing it all. Suddenly,” spoken with an abrupt tonal catch, causing everyone to jolt slightly, “my mentor, Dr. Ullas yells, ‘Dr. Darcy! Look quickly!’ Naturally I obeyed, leaping up so rapidly that the boat swayed dangerously. Our driver scowled at me, but I ignored him because the sight before my eyes was riveting. There, roaming majestically over a mangrove ringed valley covered with tall grasses was a group of leopards.”

The oohs and aahs were intense. “What were they doing, Dr. Darcy?”

“That is the exciting part, Mrs. Allen. Leopards, like all the great cats, are shy creatures. They tend to hide in shady areas away from any traffic zones, stealthily lurking and gliding through the forests, nearly undetected in the thick underbrush or high within the tree branches. Of course, the river is not exactly a major thoroughfare, so we were invading their solitude. Unlike lions, who travel in large packs called *prides*, leopards prefer small clusters of three or four. Also, they generally are nocturnally active so what we witnessed, I came to realize in time, was extremely rare indeed.”



Another infinitesimal caesura, the rapt audience holding their breath. "It was mating season, you see, and two males were in the throes of a serious dispute over an outstanding specimen of a feline female. All species on earth, so it appears, become incensed and foolishly aggressive when captured by an attractive lady." He flashed a dazzling smile and nod toward each captivated woman, blushes flaring prettily all around. "She paced imperiously; tail swishing while her suitors circled each other a time or two before engaging. It was brutal and noisy. Roars, fangs, and claws."

"Was there.....blood?"

"Some, yes. All thoughts of medicinal treatments for the stricken villagers fled my mind, I daresay. Both leopards appeared evenly matched. Easily five feet long, not counting the tails, two hundred pounds with stocky bodies covered with gorgeous black spots on tannish brown fur. Incredible animals! Jaws squared and strong, teeth as needles, and a growling roar that sent shivers up my spine."

"Did they notice your boat? Were they angry?" Gasping with a hand to her mouth, Mrs. Longham whispered, "They did not.....attack, did they?"

"Be still, dear lady. They were far too caught up in the moment to notice us. We glided silently and slowly past, for the first time truly grateful for the lack of breeze as we were able to observe the entire spectacle. The fight itself was not lengthy, but intense with ferociousness and animalistic power. They did not seem to seriously be attempting to kill the other, but merely to display their prowess and superiority. They would stalk each other for a few moments, angry eyes locked with ears flattened on their massive heads. Then they would leap, engaging in a grapple with upper bodies clenched, equally attempting to inflict damage while simultaneously writhing to minimize harm to their own flesh. Several times they embraced in combat, the noises rising while the she-leopard observed her would be mates. A particularly vicious swipe with what looked to be half foot long claws across the nose of one effectively ended the battle. He slunk away with blood dripping, I apologize for the graphicness, while the victor wasted no time in approaching his harshly won mate."

"Was she impressed and amenable to the winner?" Mr. Longham asked.

"Apparently she was quite impressed as they instantly attended to those activities I believe most species would consider a pleasurable reward for such valor and blatantly exhibited virility." He grinned widely, the ladies flushing and twittering as decorum demanded although it was

clear that most were energized by his allusion.

While George Darcy charmed his way through every available and unavailable woman in the entire establishment, Colonel Fitzwilliam applied his own extensive magnetism and congeniality. The greatest difference is that while George enchanted with a flamboyant cheekiness fully intended to sow the seeds for future socializing and romantic trysts if possible, Richard's heart was firmly planted in High Wycombe with Lady Simone Fotherby. He merely joked, danced, and conversed for the sheer enjoyment factor. Primarily he visited with Gerald Vernor and Albert Hughes, his oldest friends from childhood, and danced with their wives or his mother. Bachelors of all ages were in abundance, but the son of Lord Matlock, a Colonel in His Majesty's service, and a man of no mean attractiveness and wealth was assuredly a prime object of flirtatious advances in varying degrees. Simply put, the good Colonel was not in danger of boredom from lack of receptive dancing partners. He might well have been in danger of bold female advances, however, which is why he cautiously interacted; years of confirmed bachelorhood perfecting the art of moderated teasing banter.

"After tonight's revelry I am not so certain a hunt scheduled for the morrow was a wise idea. Who thought of that anyway?" Gerald Vernor asked.

"Obviously the one man who is not here imbibing imprudently and is undoubtedly already sleeping!" Rory Sitwell answered with a laugh.

"Be cheered Vernor. At least we are trekking through your lands, so you have that advantage over the rest of us."

"True Colonel, but he has that fabulous long rifle. Gerald tells me he managed quite well with it, at targeting anyway." Mr. Henry Vernor gestured toward his son, who nodded affirmative.

"Yes, he did well, but you know Darcy. He can hit nearly anything. Almost as good as me, as annoying as that is to confess." Richard winced.

Lord Matlock spoke in his quiet tenor, "Did he reach four hundred yards?"

Richard shook his head, "Not quite. Probably 300, 325 would you say Hughes?" Mr. Hughes nodded. "Fairly impressive for the first go around. Took a bit of sighting it in and compensating for the dimensions and weight, but Darcy has a knack for firearms. Sitwell did quite well also," Richard concluded with a clap to his friend's shoulder.

Mr. Sitwell had a glow of heavenly rapture upon his face. "It was stupendous. Exquisite instrument! Well worth trudging through the snow from Reniswahl Hall. I may never have forgiven him if not invited. You

really must shoot it, Lord Matlock.”

“I shall be joining you tomorrow, if I can drag my old bones out of bed by noon. I will ask William if I may try it out. Prove to you young bucks that the mature stag can aim true.”

They all laughed, Mr. Gerald Vernor voicing their admiration, “We have no doubt of that, my Lord. My father can outshoot me any day of the week.”

“And don’t you forget it, my boy,” Henry Vernor declared with an authoritative scowl leveled at his son, who flippantly saluted in return. Mr. Vernor the elder smiled and chuckled, “You may need to exert your familial clout, Lord Matlock, as I doubt Darcy will readily part with his weapon on this first hunt utilizing it. You know how serious he can be.”

“Well there is the understatement of the century,” Richard intoned under his breath, earning a humorous nudge from Albert Hughes and chuckle from Charles Bingley.

“Not a problem. One of the advantages of closely knit families is *knowing* things, you see. Blackmail, if all else fails Mr. Vernor.” Lord Matlock winked broadly, eliciting more laughter.

“When do you return to your regiment, Col. Fitzwilliam?” Mr. George Fitzherbert asked.

“In two days, which is why the hunt was scheduled for tomorrow. So we can teasingly blame Darcy, but it honestly was due to me.”

“At least it is for mid-afternoon and if the weather remains fair it should be tolerable. Worse come to worse we can always retire to Sanburl Hall sooner than expected where the fireplaces are ablaze and the brandy flows!”

“Here! Here!” Several glasses lifted at that pleasant vision.

“How shocking. Thank goodness the womenfolk no longer solely rely on tough manly men to provide our sustenance or we would likely starve.” They collectively turned at the words of Harriet Vernor who had arrived with the wives and a few hopeful singles as the strains of music recommenced for another set of dancing. “Afraid to be rained upon, my dear?” She smiled at her husband.

“Moisture is damaging to the mechanisms, Harriet,” he answered dryly. “We would hate to see Darcy’s fine weapon suffer. Think how upsetting that would be to Mrs. Darcy.”

“Of course. Mr. Bingley, your lovely wife sent me to request your company on the terrace. She was in need of fresh air. Just through the music room there.”

“Thank you Mrs. Vernor. Excuse me.”

"Is she well, Mrs. Vernor?"

"Merely with child, Colonel, as you would not quite comprehend....yet." Richard blushed and smiled before remembering to grimace as he normally would have.

Across the room a trio stood apart, one pair of vivid green eyes following the movements of a certain jewel adorned red haired coiffure.

"John, you cannot be serious," Miss Sybil Blaisdale uttered with disgust. "Her family's wealth is from trade, for heaven's sake!"

"All families make money from trade of some sort, Sybil, whether they acknowledge it or not. Besides, that was generations ago, her brother now is a landowner, and frankly I can do whatever I want! Who is going to shun me, for goodness sake?"

Miss Blaisdale released an indelicate sound, adequately voicing her contempt. "Be that as it may, I still do not comprehend the attraction you hold for her."

"Of course you do, my dear," Lord Mather interjected. "You simply choose to ignore it."

"What is it with you and red hair, John?" His sister asked with a sigh.

"Red haired women have a fire, a passion hidden beneath waiting to be awoken. It is intoxicating!"

"So keep bedding your flaming tress harlots! Satisfy your lusts there. Why marry this one?!"

"Because she fascinates me, Sybil, always has. Besides, it is not just the hair, as you well know."

"So make her your mistress. You can conquer this fire you claim she has, have her whenever you want, and marry someone of your station."

Lord Blaisdale shook his head, "No, not now. Three years ago I considered it, although I do not think she would have agreed. Fire, Sybil, and a strong will. It is different now. Nothing hinders me. She is poised, beautiful, fashionable, highly accomplished, and socially acceptable. All traits for an excellent Lady Blaisdale. And, if I may remind you, I did marry as our parents and you judged worthy and look at what a disaster that was. Susanna was a timid mouse! Took me three months before I could consummate our marriage and proceeded to be a struggle thereafter. Each time I felt as if I was assaulting her! Nine years to conceive and then she miscarries and dies." He shook his head in remembered grief and repulsion.

"I will not argue the inadequacies of your late lamented wife, John, but I do not think her failings had anything to do with hair color."

"Perhaps not, but I have yet to entertain a red haired woman who was not passionate."

"The fact that they were mostly prostitutes may have something to do with that, John." Lord Mather offered with a smirk.

Lord Blaisdale smiled at his friend, but shook his head, "Not all, as you well know Robert, nor do I only refer to bedroom activities. Passion extends into all areas of life."

"You men are disgusting."

"Save your false fastidiousness for mixed company, darling. I do not appreciate it otherwise." Lord Mather lifted Sybil's hand for a proper kiss, randy eyes engaging hers while the other hand stroked over her derriere.

"Good Lord I will be relieved to see you two married! I just pray you can keep up, Robert."

"Have no fear, Johnny. We are equals."

"Indeed, Sybil. This is precisely why you of all people should comprehend my desiring a union of equal passion. This may shock you, dear sister, but I am actually weary of brothels and chambermaids. And, be prepared for further amazement, I truly do want legitimate children. Little red haired children who will try my patience, but keep my life lively."

"How can you be so certain she will provide an heir?"

"I cannot be certain unless I marry someone who has already procreated, and I refuse anyone else's seconds. Only a virgin will do, my own to awaken and possess."

"Surely you are not claiming to love her?"

"Do not be ridiculous! Love is for children and fools. I am talking about stability, perhaps even felicity, but with spice and entertainment."

"Then marry Lady Anne Hathers. She has red hair and an enormous dowry."

"As well as an enormous body and a face like a horse! Be serious Sybil. Red hair alone is not enough to raise my desire."

"Perhaps Miss Evelyn Newton? She is quite lovely and from a distinguished family."

"And she is sixteen. A bit of maturity would be preferable and I do not find bedding a girl who could feasibly be my daughter appealing. And do not dare mention Miss Haskell or Lady Prudence Caraway." He shuddered. "Caroline Bingley is perfect and you know it. Stop arguing with me and just accept it. I *will* have her now that I am free and she is past her ridiculous infatuation with Darcy. That man is as cold as stone

and never would have appreciated her anyway.”

“You may have waited too long. I hear she is on quite friendly terms with Sir Wallace Dandridge. Practically engaged, so the tale goes.”

Lord Blaisdale pivoted to his sister abruptly, face tight and eyes blazing, “Where did you hear this? Is there any truth to it?”

She shrugged, unmoved by his intensity and hint of anguished voice, “Just rumors at the moment. She spent weeks there this summer becoming acquainted. Perhaps he discovered and awoke this hidden passion you exult in.”

“Sybil, I could strangle you right now. Luckily I am familiar with Sir Dandridge and the man is a milksop, so I have no fear of him awakening anyone’s passion as he likely possesses none of his own!”

“I believe that he is considered a gentleman by most definitions of the word.” Lord Mather intoned with a grin.

“Well, good thing I do not hold to those restrictive definitions then.”

“I pray you are right about her, brother. She has never stuck me as particularly passionate. Rather cool and arrogant, far more than she has a right to be. Disdainfully looking down that long nose at everyone, eyes calculating, and pose rigid. Cold fish, I fear.”

Lord Mather laughed aloud, “You just described yourself, my love. I thought the same for years, until that day in the library, alone. Changed my opinion fast, did you not?” Miss Blaisdale smiled faintly, a coy glint from her green eyes as she glanced to her betrothed.

“You two are making me ill. You do give me an idea, however. Excuse me.” Lord Blaisdale left his sister and best friend, walking purposefully toward the object of his interest.

Caroline had recovered from the shock of seeing Lord Blaisdale. Their initial conversation was cut short, barely past the pleasantries when the young woman she had been heading toward interrupted. Since then she had attempted to ignore the tingling sensation of being watched and the bizarre current his gaze roused. The man unnerved her, always had, a feeling that in and of itself was unsettling and actually made her angry. Caroline prided herself on being in control of her emotions, never ruffled, even when events were clearly spiraling beyond her grip as with the entire Mr. Darcy situation.

She first met the then Mr. Clay-Powell at a dinner party in Town four seasons ago. He was married at the time, thus dismissive and invisible as far as Caroline was concerned. She had heard of the Clay-Powell family, naturally, their wealth and power too vast to be ignored, but with the only son wedded he simply was not a topic of interest to the

socially grasping women of the ton. That he was handsome could not be denied, but her gaze was riveted on Mr. Darcy to the point of nearly excluding everyone else, especially an unavailable man. The only reason he entered her consciousness at all was due to the pointed stares directed her way all evening.

For the next two years she would encounter him and his timid wife at various events. Always she felt his eyes upon her; examining as one would a fascinating piece of art with cryptic meanings discernible only to the artist. Whenever they happened to be at a function together he inevitably incorporated into her group, welcomed wholeheartedly by everyone of course, and occupied her in direct conversation, eyes penetrating. If Caroline harbored great passion in her soul as Lord Blaisdale presumed, she was unaware of it and did not recognize the emotion in others. Those perceptions were years away, not to be fully germinated until spying the Darcys in a shadowy garden at Pemberley. Nevertheless, she was not totally stupid and understood that he was intrigued by her. From anyone else, especially Mr. Darcy, she would have responded with perfected coquettishness. Instead, she was merely annoyed at his rudeness and impropriety in engaging her in conversations unwanted.

Only once did she chance upon him after his wife's death.

It was the middle of August; weeks before her hopes would come crashing down upon her head when Mr. Darcy proposed to Elizabeth Bennet. That horrid event was future, however, and Caroline was attending a symphony performance with her brother, sister and Mr. Hurst, and Mr. Darcy. The appearance of John Clay-Powell less than three months after his wife's untimely demise was cause for a minor scandal. Talk rippled through the assembly, even the generally regulated and tight-lipped Mr. Darcy scowling and verbalizing his moral disgust. It was no great secret that the marriage between Lady Susanna Knowles and John Clay-Powell was one of social arrangement, but this was typical and no reason to ignore rules of decorum.

When Mr. Clay-Powell approached, Darcy's scorn was reserved, but apparent nonetheless. Bingley was confused, having no idea why they were being addressed in the first place and not sure how to act under the strange circumstances; Mr. Hurst was partially inebriated as usual and Louisa embarrassed; but none of that truly mattered as Clay-Powell offered only brief greetings, focusing the longest on Caroline with a lingering kiss to her gloved knuckles and prolonged stare. Darcy's scowl deepened, not due to any affection for Miss Bingley, but some actions were simply not right no matter who was the recipient.

Caroline maintained her aloof demeanor, curtsying gracefully, and ignoring the bewildering stirrings evoked by his bizarre intensity. Any attempt to understand the situation faded when Mr. Darcy urbanely stepped in with an offered arm, brusquely extending his condolences for Clay-Powell's loss. It was a pointed reminder of impudent behavior that even a notorious rogue like Clay-Powell could not discount. He bowed politely, departing the scene with black thoughts.

It seemed quite clear to him at the time that Miss Bingley's overt stalking of the elusive Mr. Darcy had finally paid off. By the time word reached his ears that Darcy was engaged to an unknown country girl, he was overwhelmed with personal trials as his beloved father was stricken with the wasting illness that would eventually claim his life. He did spare some occasional thought to the possibilities of seriously pursuing Miss Bingley, but fortune was not shining upon him. Until now.

His surprise at seeing Miss Bingley at the Cole's Masque was genuine. The Blaisdale estate lay far to the south in Staffordshire, near Cannock, whereas the Mather estate rested literally on the Derbyshire border east of Leek, hence why Lord Mather and his guests were invited. The life altering developments of the past year had allotted scant time for the newly titled Lord Blaisdale to dwell on gossip. He had heard of Mr. Charles Bingley settling in Derbyshire, but had not consciously considered the whereabouts of Miss Bingley when urged by Lord Mather to accept the invitation to the ball. It was primarily Sybil who desired entertainment after months of mourning necessitating restricted socializing. Even a country Twelfth Night Masque was preferable to another night of forced confinement, to which her brother could not argue.

Whatever the impetus, be it divine fate or dumb luck, he intended to grasp onto it.

"Miss Bingley," he bowed low, standing directly in front of her and barely glancing at her companions, "I do believe the waltz is next on the dancing agenda. I would be deeply honored if you agreed to dance with me."

"It would be my pleasure as well, Lord Blaisdale," she responded with a regal incline of her head.

Waltzing was gradually becoming more acceptable; however the attached scandalous tone yet remained and heightened the charged atmosphere swirling around the couples as they initiated the flowing steps of the dance. Caroline and Lord Blaisdale felt the currents running over and through them, but both were in clear control of their faculties. Similar calculating minds judging, analyzing, and gauging the situation as



they flawlessly glided about the room and shared the standard dialogue.

“Lord Blaisdale I must first extend my condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you, Miss Bingley. It has been a difficult adjustment. You have lost a father so surely relate to my grief.”

“Indeed I do. I discovered that family surrounding me tremendously aided in the grieving process. Have you found the same to be true?”

“Absolutely.”

“Your mother is well I trust?”

“Quite well. Managing admirably, in fact. She is a wonder of strength in crisis. We all look to her for guidance and example. For myself, it has been enlightening.”

“How do you mean?”

“To observe the fortitude a woman can possess. To fully grasp what it is to be ‘Lady Blaisdale’ clarifies in my own mind how essential it is for me to select wisely, when the time comes again.”

“I see your point. I do pray your decision adequate to your needs.”

“I intend to ensure it is, Miss Bingley. I must compliment you on your gown, if I may be so bold. Quite stunning. I admire ladies who are not afraid to embrace the latest fashions, who set trends. You have the grace and figure to do so and should never allow anyone to convince you otherwise.”

“Thank you, my Lord. You are very kind.”

“Merely speaking the truth, Madame. How is Mr. Bingley finding Derbyshire?”

“He loves it. Wholly assuming the life of a gentleman farmer.”

“And you, Miss Bingley? Do you appreciate the country?”

“Absolutely. For a time, that is. Society is less varied than in Town and I confess that by the end of winter I shall be screaming for the delights London has to offer. I think a balance is best, do you agree?”

“Indeed I do. We appear to be quite similar in our thought processes, Miss Bingley. This pleases me. I tend to prefer London and will now be required to pass large portions of my time there, so it is fortunate that I own a comfortable Townhouse and enjoy entertaining. Now I must attend diligently to the task of finding a woman to stand at my side. Someone accomplished, beautiful, and hospitable.”

“I wish you luck in your search, Lord Blaisdale.”

“It has reached my ears that congratulations on your engagement may soon be in order, Miss Bingley. Is there truth in the rumor?”

“Truth can be a relative term, my Lord. Official congratulations would be presumptuous at this juncture, but I am anticipating a positive development in that quarter very soon.”

The song ended at that point. Lord Blaisdale internally jubilant while Caroline calmly rationalized. He offered his arm, walking off the floor toward the terrace doors. “Your cheeks are a bit flushed, Madame. I deem a breath of fresh air is requisite. And, if you wish to know the truth, I do not want to part from your glittering company.”

“And do you always get what you want?”

“Generally, yes.” He smiled down at her, steering to the railing and slowly detouring past the clustered guests to the shadows beyond. “You dance exquisitely, Miss Bingley. Another stellar quality to add to your growing list of attributes.”

“You are quite full of compliments, Sir. I hardly know how to express my continued thankfulness.”

“Add it to all the other expressions of thanks you now owe me and we shall mutually devise a way for you to adequately communicate your gratitude that will be pleasurable for us both.” They paused in a narrow alcove, only the dim echo of music and laughter and subdued glow of gaslight on the damp, snowy surrounds a reminder of others. Essentially they were utterly secluded and the gleam in Lord Blaisdale’s eyes and suggestive huskiness of voice caused a shiver to run up Caroline’s spine.

The friendly, borderline flirtatious banter while dancing had relaxed Caroline. It was familiar and comfortable, making her forget the past intensity of the man before her. Now her breath caught and the odd tingles rippled over her skin, vulnerability and faint anxiety causing her heart to palpitate as her eyes locked with his.

Lord Blaisdale read her expressions with glee. He leaned back slightly, smiling with confidence. “Miss Bingley, I am aware that you do not know me well, not at all really, so permit me a moment to share myself with you. I am a forthright man, for the most part. Confident, assured, very cognizant of what I want in my life. And, as you aptly pointed out, I almost always get what I want. Any time I allowed others to lead me it was a disaster. My marriage is a perfect example.” He paused, watching her closely. Caroline was engrossed, mind racing. “I never wished for Susanna’s death, but cannot pretend that it was an event of overwhelming grief to me. She was a disappointment on numerous levels, intimately and publicly. I vowed never to make such a horrendous mistake again. You are shivering, my lady. How thoughtless of me! Here, allow me.”

He removed his jacket, stepping within inches of her body and pulling the fine woolen fabric over her slender shoulders, fingers purposefully brushing along the skin of her collarbones. "There. Is that better?" He whispered.

Caroline nodded, afraid to meet his eyes, "Much better. Thank you Sir."

"Caroline. May I call you Caroline?" She nodded. "Excellent. Now, look at me Caroline." He spoke with a ring of authority, her eyes rising instantly. His gaze bore into her but she held on, not looking away as a tendril of irritation washed over her. He smiled suddenly, quite brilliantly, and leaned against the railing, putting a safe space between them. "Excellent again, Caroline. I knew you had fire."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Let me be blunt, my dear. You would have to be an idiot, which I do not think you are, to not know that I have been infatuated with you for years. Yes, even when my wife was still alive. You intrigue me, Caroline. I have watched you, learned about you, wondered and wished. Does this flatter or frighten you?"

"A little of both, my Lord."

"Good. Obviously when I was married my desire for you was unattainable, at least I did not reckon you would be amenable to anything other than marriage....Ah, I see that is correct. Good. My esteem for you would be diminished if that were so. However, I did seriously contemplate approaching you for an arrangement. Are you shocked by this Caroline?"

"Not completely, Sir. I am not a fool. I know gentlemen keep mistresses, although I would not have entered such a relationship. The question is why you are telling me all this."

"Do not play coy with me! Because I still desire you, Caroline. More than ever. Only now you can be my wife. I can give you all that you have ever wanted, more than you would have with Darcy or Dandridge, and I will have the wife I should have had in the first place. Does this idea appeal to you? Or do you harbor romantic notions of true love?"

She was staring at him boldly now, evaluating. "Not completely, no. I think it possible for some, but not necessary and certainly not common. However, I do not merely want a marriage of cold convenience. It is undeniably true that you can provide materialistically and grant a prestige that I would very much enjoy. I may not be a romantic fool, Lord Blaisdale, nonetheless I have learned in recent months that a marriage can offer an abundance of pleasures beyond the mercenary."

He grinned wickedly. "Are you referring to sexual pleasures, Caroline? If you are then you are correct."

Caroline reddened, glancing away for a moment. When her gaze returned to his face it was calm and composed if with yet a hint of rosiness. "I am referring to communication, respect, affection, joy, and even peace. Are these characteristics you would want in a marriage?"

"Considering my marriage possessed none of those, or sensual satisfaction, then I think I can answer in the affirmative." He stepped nearer. "I do admire you, Caroline. I think we are very alike, you and I. This frank conversation proves that communication should not be a problem with the other named virtues falling naturally in the aftermath. What about intimacy? Do you suspect this very essential aspect of a good marriage to be one you can also desire?"

"I have no experience in the matter, my Lord, so cannot answer with any reliability."

"I think you are flirting with me, Miss Bingley! Be cautious, my dear, as it is vital to me that my next marriage be one of passion and I do intend to ensure it will be before I commit myself in any way."

"How do you mean? Would you take advantage of me, Sir? Ruin my reputation and be branded a scoundrel in the process?"

"Many already consider me a scoundrel and if I was proved wrong in my judgment of you then I would care not one whit for your shattered reputation. Are you virtuous, Caroline? Seductive teasing has its place and is welcomed, but I will not take a wife who has known another. I want to be the one who unleashes your potential, who teaches you the ways of love." He quietly observed her flushing face, the demure and innocent flashes in the eyes that a virginal woman, no matter how skilled at saucy flirting, can hide. He smiled in satisfaction.

"You do not need to answer. It is apparent. Ah! How greatly will I enjoy being your teacher, Caroline!" He was very close to her now, reaching one finger and running softly over her bare flesh. "Know one thing clearly, Madame. My next wife will hopefully be my last and we will enjoy each other in every way imaginable, including those you listed. Yet never doubt for a minute that I am the master and I will not be played with." His finger stroked lower, Caroline's breath now exhaling in short fits as a result of his mesmerizing touch and autocratic words. "I want a lively wife, Caroline. One who will embrace adventure, crave passion, be witty and charming. But I also insist on propriety, faithfulness, and submission to my dominance. Only in our bed will I submit and only then if it brings mutual delight. I want Lady Blaisdale by day and wanton lover by night. I want a mother for my children, manager of my

households, elegant hostess when entertaining, proud and beautiful wife on my arm, and savage temptress in my chambers. Can you accept this, Caroline?”

His lips were almost brushing hers. Caroline could hardly breathe, let alone think coherently. Never had she experienced such rushing and crashing sensations. Dimly she heard his words and filtered through them, nodding slowly as she realized she had never wanted anything in all her life more than this.

Steeling herself, she withdrew a pace, lifting her chin and meeting his fierce stare. Her voice was firm when she spoke, “I can accept this Lord Blaisdale and will do my very best to comply with your demands. However, I must be honest and confess that I do not know if I am capable of the more....private requirements you wish for.”

“Do you truly doubt your potential or are you toying with me?”

“You have stressed your repugnance for such behavior, my Lord. Another attribute of a successful marriage that has been revealed to me is honesty. This has not necessarily been a natural trait of mine, but I have seen the positive affects of the quality in my brother’s union. Additionally, you have been exceedingly forthright with me so it is only proper for me to extend the same. You are offering me an incredible opportunity and I would be a fool to pass it up. Perhaps I am a fool for risking your rejection, but I....” She swallowed, dropping her gaze from his penetrating stare.

“Yes, Caroline? Tell me.”

She glanced away, noting afresh their solitude. With eyes averted, she haltingly resumed. “You intrigue me as well, Lord Blaisdale. I....feel...strange sensations...when near you.” She flickered her eyes to his, voice low, “It is easy for me to pretend. It is a perfected art form among women of my class, as I am sure you know.” She smiled, again briefly catching his stare. “But I do not....I have not...” She stopped with a frustrated sigh.

He clasped her upper arms, gently pushing her against the stone wall and kissing with light pressure for mere moments before deepening with an unrestrained passion. Caroline was taken utterly by surprise, stiffening for a second before the surging waves washed all innocent hesitation away. His hands roamed unchecked, stirring and rousing skillfully, body pressed into hers.

Time had no meaning. Caroline came alive in places unknown to have perception. She discovered her hands and arms squeezing and wrapping around him, boldly exploring.

Never had any man handled her in such a way. Sir Dandridge’s

tentative touches and timid kisses had educed no flutters or shivers. Lord Blaisdale's assault overwhelmed her to the point where she mustered not the slightest embarrassment or offense at the breach in gentlemanly behavior. Rather she flew, soared to raging heights of pure pleasure as his fingers moved over her most intimate regions. Even through the layers of clothing separating them he skillfully drove her wild until shudders and moans erupted with blinding white spots dotting her vision.

She gasped, clutching onto him for stability. He pulled away scantily, grinning with supreme satisfaction, stroking lightly over her cheek until her misty eyes cleared.

"What.....did you do? I do not understand....Lord Blaisdale, please.....I."

"Do not fear, Caroline love. You have proven what I already knew. And I believe you can now address me as John."

## **23 – Snippets of a Physician’s Memoirs**

*November 27, 1817*

*Pemberley*

My grand-nephew has finally arrived safely! Oh, what a blessed day! I am walking on clouds, Jharna. All transpired as it should, nearly textbook perfection. Elizabeth was simply marvelous. Brave, focused, strong, and lucky. Births are always a frightening event. I have seen so many go terribly wrong, where even my expertise was of no use. I feared this greatly, as you know my dear lover. E has become so dear to me and knowing how essential she is to W’s happiness and, I fear, sanity, had me very afraid of how horrible it would be on all of us if anything went wrong. Thankfully, praises to God, all is well.

William surpassed even my expectations. He sweated quite a bit and if his jaws do not pain him for the next week I shall be shocked, but aside from those outward physical manifestations he was calm and strong. It is so beautiful to observe such unity of purpose. These two continue to astound me in their devotion and accord. I am so very proud of my nephew and further delighted to be a part of this exceptional family. Very well, Jharna, I shall say it....We Darcys are wonderful! In the blood, I daresay.

Alexander is a beautiful baby. This I can state emphatically and with all honesty. You would scold me, Jharna, when I spoke of ugly babies. As a woman you thought all infants gorgeous, but I always insisted that was not the case! Alexander is truly adorable. Of course, we Darcys are a handsome bunch, so I was not too surprised. Laugh if you wish, but you know it to be true. He looks very like his father, but of course infant features radically change over time, so we shall see. I was quite pleased to note he has curly brown hair. Of course, he could very well inherit this from his mother, but I believe I shall claim it as a likeness to his favored uncle!

How pleased I was to hear he was to be named as my beloved twin! I realize it is not a direct homage as W never knew his uncle, but just having the name alive and gifted to another soul is thrilling to me. Some, those superstition folk, would deem it a bad omen or ill-luck. I do

not believe this at all. My Alex was a remarkable person, full of life and love. I am fully aware that this Alexander is unique, but there is a sense of continuity and blessing to it. I cannot precisely place it into words, but it is a comfort. Additionally, W whispered to me as I was departing the scene that they are also naming him George! I nearly burst into tears! Even now, hours later, I am overcome. Perhaps I need sleep. It has been a very long day. Yes, surely that is it. I think I shall check on E again and then retire for the night. Emotions are taking hold and that cannot be!

*December 4*  
*Pemberley*

I have been sitting here for a full fifteen minutes, unable to clarify my churning thoughts. As benumbed with emotion as I am, I do believe I have rarely felt so happy and content. I just came from the library where W accosted me for a pointed chat. Jharna, you know how I have struggled with my innermost feelings these past months. Ga! Years, actually. The need to be home, to find a family that I was not sure was available to me, has burned inside for so very long. I have missed you so much, my dear love, and often did not honestly know if it was merely grief and loneliness that drove me or an honest affection for these people who have become so central to me. Was my growing love for them in any way false? Everyone in my existence whom I *knew* I could rely on was gone. Would the remaining Darcys fill that void or was I wishing for something that could never be?

I have tarried in a place of joyous relaxation, wallowing in the comforts of my ancestral home and the acceptance that has surrounded me, yet always with a slight reserve. Afraid to give in totally to the love I felt for William and Elizabeth and my sweet Georgie. Afraid to embrace life at Pemberley. How does one utterly reinvent their life and focus at my age? Yes, even I, who trod through jungles teeming with hazards and embarked upon life-saving excursions to the farthest reaches of the East, knew fear. What a bitter tonic to swallow!

Yet all that doubt and fear was wiped away in a second. All it took was William expressing his love for me in direct words and furthermore asking, nay, begging, that I not leave! His words precisely, as I will never forget them, were, "I need to tell you in the clearest words imaginable that the heartfelt wish of us all is that you would chose to reside here forever. Simply put, I do not want to lose you."

Tears yet again! Arch!! Old age is creeping! Cloying sentimentalism indeed! We Darcys seem to be a romantic bunch for all



our strength and proper character. And then the moment that truly sent me over the edge and sealed my fate: W and E have asked me to be Alexander's godfather. Of all the possible imaginings that have flit through my brain, this one was an utterly unprecedented surprise! Knowing William's strong religious convictions, his protectiveness for his family, and serious nature.....well, I am overwhelmed. And honored beyond comprehension. I cannot write of it anymore.

So, it is decided, and I cannot adequately convey even in my trusted journal how deeply moved I am. And relieved! Frankly, the thought of another sea voyage around the Cape of Good Hope was more than I could fathom. I truly think I would have slunk off to hang a shingle in some obscure English village before doing that. I will need to wait a bit, allow this sudden change in my fortune to sink in before I decide my full course of action. I was very impressed with the small hospital in Matlock. Frankly, they could use a man like me as the physicians who deign to work there are not extremely knowledgeable. It might be nice to try doctoring in a more traditional manner. Make house calls and all that. Not sure how W would feel to having messengers banging on the door as all hours of the day, so a system will need to be arranged. Perhaps I could teach. I have enjoyed mentoring the handful of worthy neophytes, such as Raja, who have come my way. For now, however, I will simply bask in the glow of being loved and needed.

*December 15*

*Pemberley*

The Bennets arrived today. Amazing how the addition of five souls livens up the Manor! I believe Col. Fitzwilliam and the Matlocks will be arriving in a few days, and naturally the Bingleys will be joining us at some point. Also Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are possibly expected soon. I do hope so as I found them both to be delightful folk when I met them in London. Naturally Alexander was the center of attention, a position he assumed with aplomb. He is an extremely temperate infant, scarily so. Oh, that is not to say he has not had his moments of serious temper! Just two nights ago I was awoken at the inhuman hour of two-thirty in the morning with W nearly ripping his hair in worry over a bout of colic! I brewed a tonic that may help the accumulated gas, but is more to soothe fretful parents as they feel they are proactively solving the problem. Still, these miniscule tantrums aside, he is a serene infant. I do not know if he will remain so, but I am guessing it is probable. W was such a baby. I do recall this, not that I was about all that often. But James spoke of it,

especially as it was a stark contrast to their firstborn, Alexandria. Of course, therein lays the humor of the situation. James and Anne knew how fortunate they were to have a complacent baby, whereas W and E will be fooled into thinking all infants are so mild mannered. Woe to them if their next is of a different temperament! Not that I am wishing such drama upon their lives, but it will be amusing to witness!

*December 24*

*Pemberley*

Christmas Eve. Have I written enough declarations of how stupendous it is to be home for the holidays? Or how fabulous Pemberley is adorned? The answer is yes, but I am compelled to gush once again. I truly cannot recall the Manor ever appearing so festive and glittering. I am sure that it was as my parents loved the season, but I suppose one takes these things for granted when in their youth. The Christmas celebrations among the English and other Christian residents in India were rather subdued in general. Mistletoe and holly are non-existent, for one thing, so it has been decades since I have reveled in the merry atmosphere surrounding Christ's birth. All the Darcy heirlooms are in place as I remember them, mistletoe ornaments are literally at every corridor intersection, and I expect the entire forest is stripped of all greenery. The smell of pine is almost overwhelming! To top it all off, Mrs. Langton and her remarkable staff have been serving a plethora of edible delights that defy all logic in their sumptuousness. I have nearly eaten myself sick several times each day. Thankfully I am keeping myself active with the numerous entertainments to be found both within and without or I would likely weight three-hundred pounds.

My rusty tennis skills are honing rapidly with the constant challenges. My dear Georgie and Miss Kitty are excellent players, but it is Col. Fitzwilliam who has presented the greatest contest. I tease him that with peace prevailing, our soldiers have nothing better to do than play games! He retaliates by thrashing me soundly in all manner of athletic pursuits. The good colonel is quite proficient. W and I continue our lessons in thang-ta. His command of a sword is impressive as it is and with learning Indian martial art techniques he soon will be formidable. As in everything my nephew takes an interest in, his ready aptitude and intent focus staggers me. He still prefers to concentrate on the sword dance rather than wielding a spear, but he is learning. Mainly I enjoy the opportunity to spent time with him, and we both relish the physical exercise. My pachisi and carom boards are being used frequently, but

with so many other diversions it is often difficult to find free persons to play with.

It is no surprise that I prefer to stay indoors. It may take several years for my India thinned English blood to thicken adequately enough to tolerate the harsh climates again. E teases that I am surely going to burst into flames as I sit so near the roaring fireplaces, but I cannot seem to stay warm. I have allowed Mr. Gardiner to persuade me to accompany him to the lake a time or two, and have skated once, to my severe humiliation as I have lost all traces of skill and grace on a blade. You never could grasp the concept of floating over ice, Jharna, and now after all these years I think I concur with your assessment that it is unnatural and ridiculous! Us manly men have embarked on the obligatory horseback rides and hunts a number of times. Of course, in this one sport I gleefully engage, far too stimulated to feel the bitter cold too profoundly. Not that a hot beverage, preferably alcoholic, sipped beside a fire is not appreciated upon my return. Aside from these excursions I have kept insulated inside Pemberley, happily embracing woolen suits for the time being.

E was in a particularly jolly mood today. I noted the anticipatory gleam in her eye; a gleam that was innocently absent in W's, therefore I was not too surprised when she whisked him off immediately after dinner never to be seen again. My naughty mind assumes she has decided to act upon the information I imparted two days ago, plotting an early Christmas present for my fortunate nephew. I fully expect to encounter a frankly radiant and satisfied nephew in the morning, and a smug niece.

I feel a bit like a child again. Sitting here in my comfortable chambers with the fire blazing, sipping cocoa, and writing in my journal, but sensing the urgency to retire so that the morning will speedily arrive! I do believe that Christmas Eve was the only night of the year that Alex and I would not sneak into James or Estella's rooms after our scheduled bedtime. I know for cert that I could add up all the gifts I have received for the past ten years and it would not equal what sits addressed to me in the parlor. Took all the reserve at my disposal to not examine and shake each one! So, off to bed for me. Good-night, sweet lover. No matter how many lovely presents I receive I will still miss the one gifted by you every year in honor of my beliefs.

*December 29*  
*Pemberley*

W has been gone for four days now without word beyond the

initial note assuring his safe arrival. Poor boy. We are not overly worried at receiving no further messages, well aware of how busy he must be. And now a blizzard has struck, so it may be days before he and the Colonel are able to make their way home. Or rather it probably *should* be days before they make it home as the snow is falling in massive amounts, but knowing the stubbornness of my nephew I judge he will be pushing through every snow bank with determination! Actually, that worries me more than anything. E was especially quiet this evening. She spoke not of her husband's absence and none of us advanced the subject, yet it was quite clear how distressed she was. Like me, E knows of William's occasional rashness, especially where his family is concerned, so my guess is that her thoughts are tortured from both angles.

I forgot to mention that yesterday was to be Alexander's christening. Naturally the date was postponed with W leaving. We went to church as usual, E staying home with the baby, all of our thoughts on what the day was supposed to entail and our hearts heavy accordingly. Actually, another week is a good thing, giving Alexander more time to mature. He certainly appears hale enough, but one can never be too cautious with newborns. One positive to the postponement is that I can add a few finishing touches to the elephant. He looks fine, but my perfectionism keeps me adding additional embellishments. I probably should quit looking at him or I will just end up messing him up. How many times did that happen, Jharna, usually because I would not heed your caution? No, I shall not answer that question!

Aside from W's abrupt departure, the days have passed pleasantly enough. The festive atmosphere is too strong to be dissipated by a tragedy miles away. I am currently writing with my new steel tipped pens! I have been practicing on spare pieces of parchment before applying them to my treasured journal. They hold the ink differently and have an unusual feel in my fingers, but I have finally gotten proficient enough to not fear blotching the pages. Unfortunately the hunt planned with Mr. Vernor and Mr. Hughes was cancelled due to this blasted foul weather! Guess my new saddle will need to wait a bit longer to be broken in. Perhaps it is just as well as my *derrière* and thighs are yet sore from the day after Christmas! I appreciate the gift, but must confess that I had forgotten how long it takes for a new saddle to loosen and form to one's individual figure.

This blizzard rivals any storm I recollect hitting Derbyshire. I am sure there have been other storms of this degree, but I was thankfully either absent for it or too young. Of course, when I was in my youth I relished the snow and lightning storms. Thought all of it was

tremendously exciting with no concept of the damage done or potential catastrophe. I do remember one severe lightning storm when I was perhaps 10 or 11. I am not really sure, but Alex was alive so it must have been about then. Anyway, we children sat glued to the parlor windows in fascination, watching the rain pour in solid sheets, and counting the second or two between the lightning and deafening thunder with squeals of delight. Father stood behind us tense and grim, staring into the hazy grey landscape and jerking whenever a noise arose. None of us understood his posture, or thought of it much, until Mary finally asked him what was wrong. She, of course, sat huddled with mother, eyes round with fear and body trembling. Father replied in his rough voice that he was watching for a burst of flames from any of the outbuildings or trees. Alex, Estella, and I just laughed, but James was quieter after that and did not clap as enthusiastically. Thankfully nothing occurred on our lands, but there were fires in the forest and Mr. Vernor lost one of his barns. I still always thrill at the electric excitement of a lightning storm, but no longer blithely consider it just an amusement.

Dinner has been announced so I will close this entry for now. We remaining men-folk are planning a billiard tournament of sorts for later. Will not be quite the same without William participating, although perhaps I shall have the opportunity to win a game for a change! Until later, or more likely tomorrow since I doubt I shall be sober enough to write before bed, I say my adieu dear Jharna.

*January 10, 1818*  
*Pemberley*

Finally done! It has taken me days to get the details written for posterity's sake. Now that Pemberley is again calm, with all visitors departed, I have fulfilled my self-appointed duty as historian. These past days, be honest George, *weeks*, have been delightfully hectic and I have not attended to these pages with my usual diligence. Please forgive me, Jharna.

Yet now that I have recorded the facts of the christening and Christmas and the masque, I am not yet content. Reading over them I discern the haste in the writing, the lack of my usual humor and personality and musings as I jotted the necessary details. Time to fill up pages with my useless ramblings! Ha!! Well, it is MY book, and considering my arrogance in assuming that someone will someday care to read what I had to say, I am obligated to ruminate further. Or perhaps I am simply bored. It is very quiet around here with the Bennets departed

and Col. Fitzwilliam as well. W has insisted that G resume her study schedule, and the baby takes up much of E's time, so I am often left to my own devices.

I suppose I had forgotten how serene it is in Derbyshire during the winter. Of course, when I was a child I had my siblings to keep me company, but gradually they moved on and in my adolescence there were years of just me. Well, Phillip was there, but he was monumentally boring so barely counted. Yes, I do recall endless days of staring upon snow-caked landscapes as my tutor, Mr. Averson, droned on and on. A large part of it, I now realize, is my preference for warm weather. Even with all the fond memories of skating and sledding, I much prefer swimming in the pond, fishing and hunting, and riding. Those are the memories that loom grandest in my mind. So, I will content myself with reading before a warm fire while sipping fine whiskey or cocoa until the spring thaws. Fortunately W is not too busy this time of the year either. He does manage to spend inordinate amounts of time at the stables, but other than that he appears to have relaxed into a pose of laziness. Of course, W can tolerate boredom for only short periods of time before he ropes me into a bout of fencing, billiards, racquets, or something to work up a sweat. Thus with the good comes the bad! I now have muscles in places even I did not know muscles existed. Nonetheless, we will have over a month of laying about before our planned journey to Hertfordshire and Kent for the weddings.

But, I am getting ahead of myself! I shall write of those events as they unfold. Yes, it is quiet now. The Bennets left two days ago. It was clear that Mr. Daniels and his betrothed were anxious to leave. I have never seen a bride-to-be less nervous than Miss Bennet. Rather she spoke calmly of the necessary pre-marital tasks with all the logic of a businessman! Mrs. Bennet possesses a personality nervous enough for the lot of them, I suppose. I shall miss chess and conversation with Mr. Bennet, and do hope we manage some time for quieter pursuits in February. Ah, here I go again, thinking ahead when the here and now is so pleasant. Focus man!

The Cole's Masque appears to have been a stunning success from all accounts. G has already received three engagements for teas, a development that has given W something new to frown about. I wrote about the numerous conquests of both G and Miss Kitty, but not of W's response to the information. My poor niece tried to hedge, played the entire spectacle down, but Miss Kitty was far too effusive. I daresay I and the Colonel did not help matters, and I think she was near to strangling us all! One of the few times I have ever seen my sweet Georgie in a

temper or irritated with her friend. W glowered from the corner, growing quieter and stiffer as the stories unfolded. What a hoot! I must confess I am thankful for the stabilizing, rational voice that is Elizabeth. I truly do shudder to imagine how G's steps into womanhood would be handled with only her rigid and severely controlling brother to supervise matters. E watched her husband closely through the entire rehash of ball events and although I have not a clue as to what passed between them, by the next day W's face was not as tight and he has allowed G to accept the invitations.

Now, whether her positive influence will sway him to permit a summer visitation to Lord Stevenage's manor in Hertfordshire with Miss Kitty I have no idea. The girls were all atwitter about that development, Miss Stolesk and Lady Alicia wasting no time in accosting their fathers about the invitation. As luck would have it I was conversing with my old friend Harold Stolesk and Lord Stevenage when the young ladies broached the subject. Apparently they were quite captivated with my niece and her friend, a sentiment I can readily comprehend. Kitty was glittering and dimpled, bouncing on her toes in anticipation, whereas G stood sedately with nervous glances my direction. We spoke of it briefly on the ride home, G clearly thrilled at the concept of a summer holiday elsewhere, but certain that W would never allow it. In truth, I believe she is correct. Fortunately I too have received an invitation to the Nash estate, so perhaps I can act as chaperone. Do not laugh Jharna! I can be a responsible adult when forced. For the time being I told both girls to keep it quiet. W knows Mr. Stolesk very well and is acquainted with Lord Stevenage, which will hopefully predispose him to say yes. Ultimately it is his decision, naturally, but I judge it a beneficial growing experience and will offer my view on the matter, for what that is worth. Perhaps my status as Darcy godfather will lend credibility to my opinion. Col. Fitzwilliam was favorable and as guardian he has a certain amount of clout.

It was such a joy to watch Georgiana. Oh, how like Anne she is! So beautiful and naturally graceful. Every male eye in the place followed her, yet she is innocently unaware of how incredible she is. My joy is in knowing that I will be here to observe her maturing and partake in her future. I have no idea what that future will be, but I sense that it shall be amazing. I feel so blessed. Miss Kitty is simply an adorable young lady. She charms naturally, but there is frivolousness to her personality that I fear will prevent her transcending. I pray I am in error, but then not all are destined for more than a standard existence.

For my final reflection: Col. Fitzwilliam. I have noted something

odd, intangible even. The carefree bachelor who casually and gleefully led this older, carefree bachelor on numerous romps through the wild streets of London this August past has inexplicably mellowed. He feigns the same capriciousness, but his heart is unmistakably not in it. He danced less than half the sets and carefully selected undesirable women, dancing twice with his own mother! Not that Lady Matlock is not a beautiful woman, but surely not a chosen partner for a handsome man like the Colonel. Overall he was subdued, hobnobbing with gentlemen for the largest bulk of the night. Quite unusual. I suppose there is a woman involved somewhere, seems to happen to the best of them eventually, but I have no clue who she is. Assuredly no one at the Masque. Whoever she is, I do hope she returns his affection. Richard Fitzwilliam is a dear man, brave and worthy. Any woman would be fortunate to have him as suitor. Another delightful future to observe unfolding! Yes, many favorable reasons to be pleased with my decision to stay in Derbyshire!

*January 21*  
*Pemberley*

The Bingleys visited today and brought the most stunning piece of news imaginable! It seems that Miss Bingley is betrothed to none other than Lord Blaisdale of Staffordshire. We were under the impression that she had an understanding of some sort with Sir Dandridge, but apparently it was not sufficiently binding enough to prevent breaking for a larger fish. Lord Blaisdale was at the Cole's masque, although I did not speak with him which is why I made no previous mention in these pages. I was not even aware that Miss Bingley spoke with him, not that I paid much attention to her whereabouts. I confess I was terribly rude and never asked the lady for a dance. Clearly she suffered no ill effect from my neglect, not that my ego is injured by the fact.

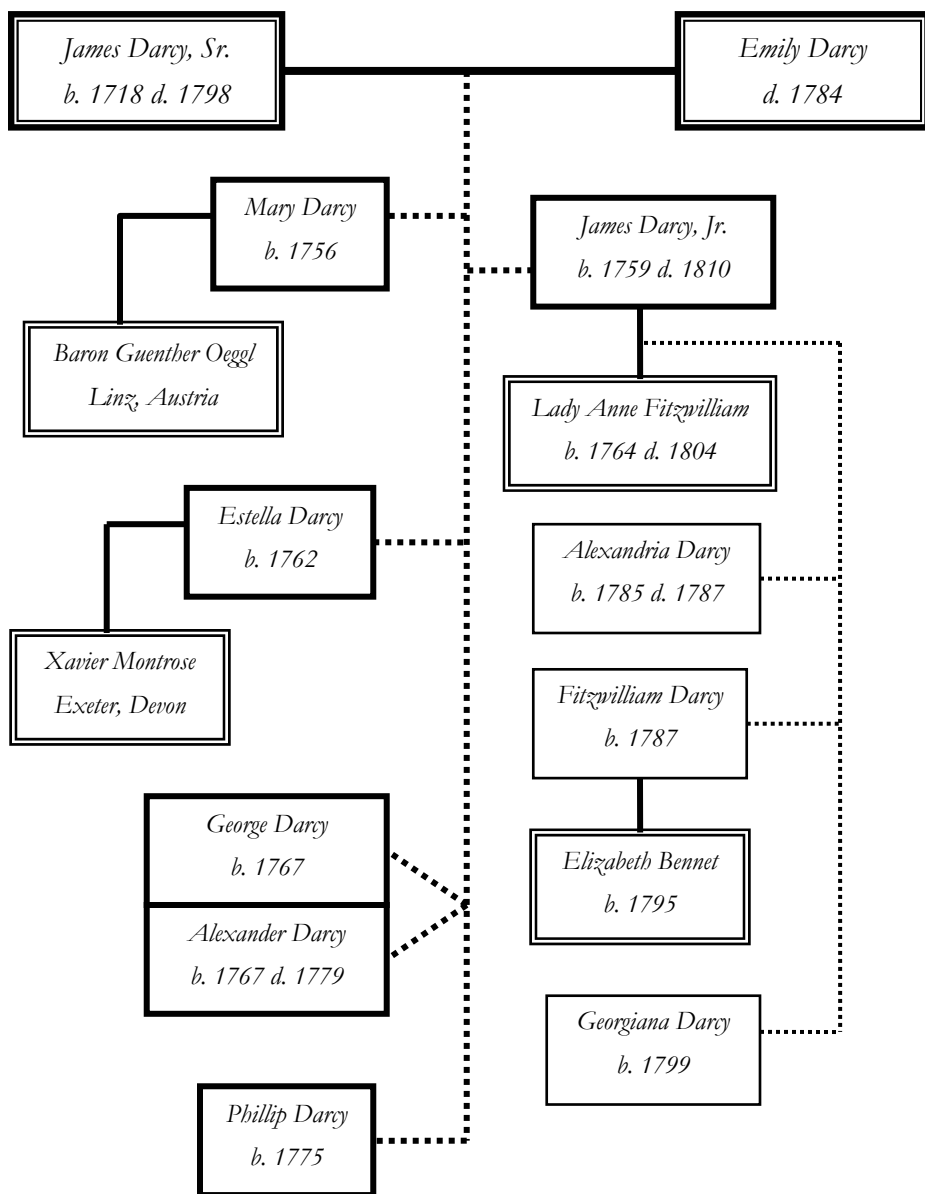
Anyway, Mr. Bingley still appeared to be in a daze over the situation. According to him, Lord Blaisdale has called upon Miss Bingley a handful of times since the Masque, wasting no time, obviously, in making his intentions known. He did ostensibly ask permission to court, followed quite rapidly with permission to wed. As much as I adore Mr. Bingley, I rather believe his natural meekness was overwhelmed by Lord Blaisdale's brash domination. Not that I think he would have refused. It is a far better conquest than I would have suspected Miss Bingley capable of. Forgive me, Lord, for that indelicate statement, but it is only the truth. Frankly I am as dazed as Mr. Bingley. Lord Blaisdale's reputation is not particularly a praiseworthy one. I hold no great affection for Miss



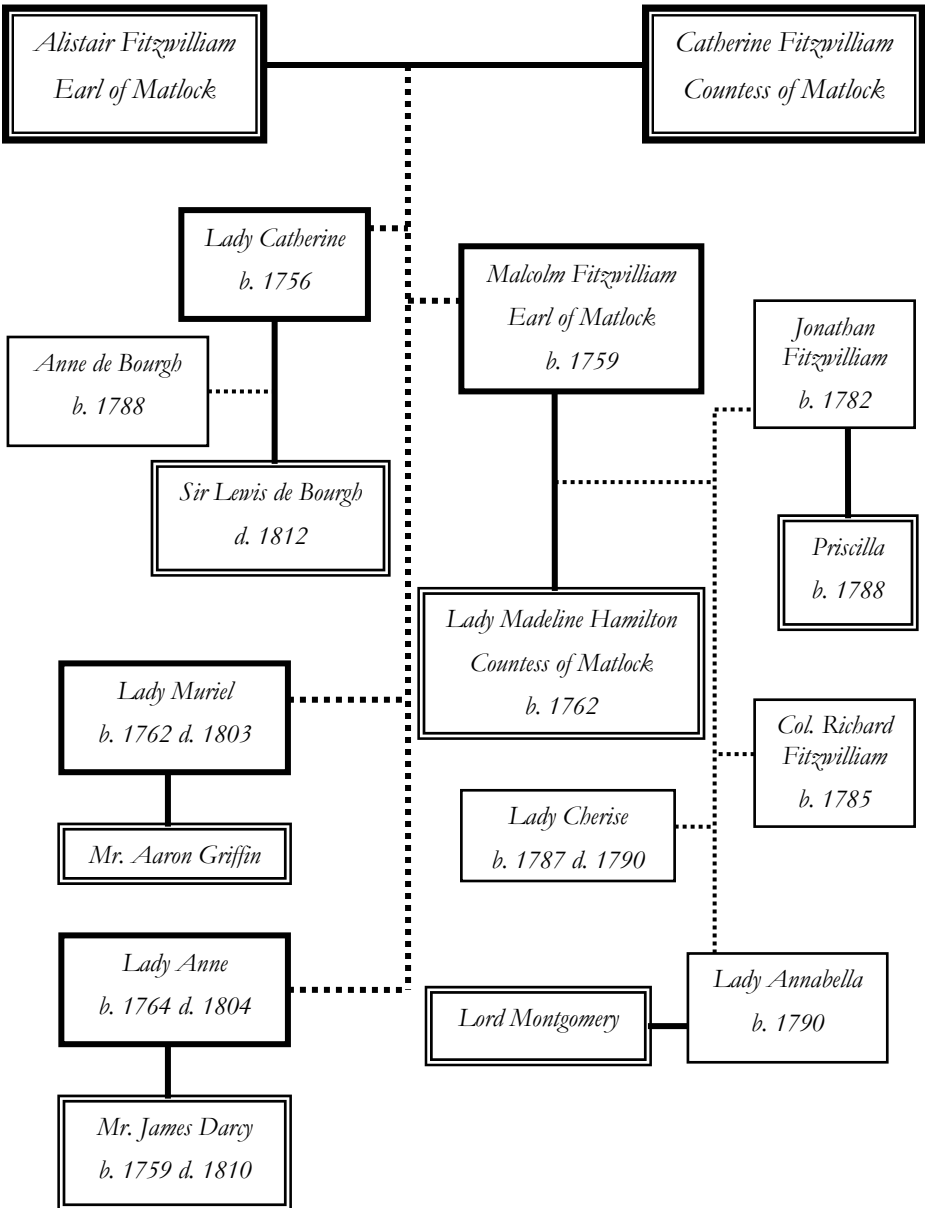
Bingley, but find that I am mildly dismayed by the news. I wonder if she knows what she is marrying into? Then again, perhaps they are too opportunistic rogues made for each other. That appears to be W's assessment. He said little, as usual, but what words spoken were highly eloquent even without the descriptive cast to his face!

Another future to observe with inquisitive interest! Should be amusing if nothing else. Aahh....The excitement of real life! Weddings, babies being born, young love, and my own fresh paths to tread. And here I thought settling at Pemberley would be mundane! Perhaps after the wonders and wilds of India it lacks a certain exotic ambience, but it is far from dreary. What pleasure in life, family, carefree happiness, joie de vivre! I feel young again in the joy of vital life, buoyant and spunky, forever brash and masculine! Are you laughing at me, Jharna? Or smiling with warmth and delight? The latter, I believe, as I feel your devoted presence surrounding, my love. I embrace my future, but am thankful for my past. This, as the poets eloquently expound, is what life is all about.

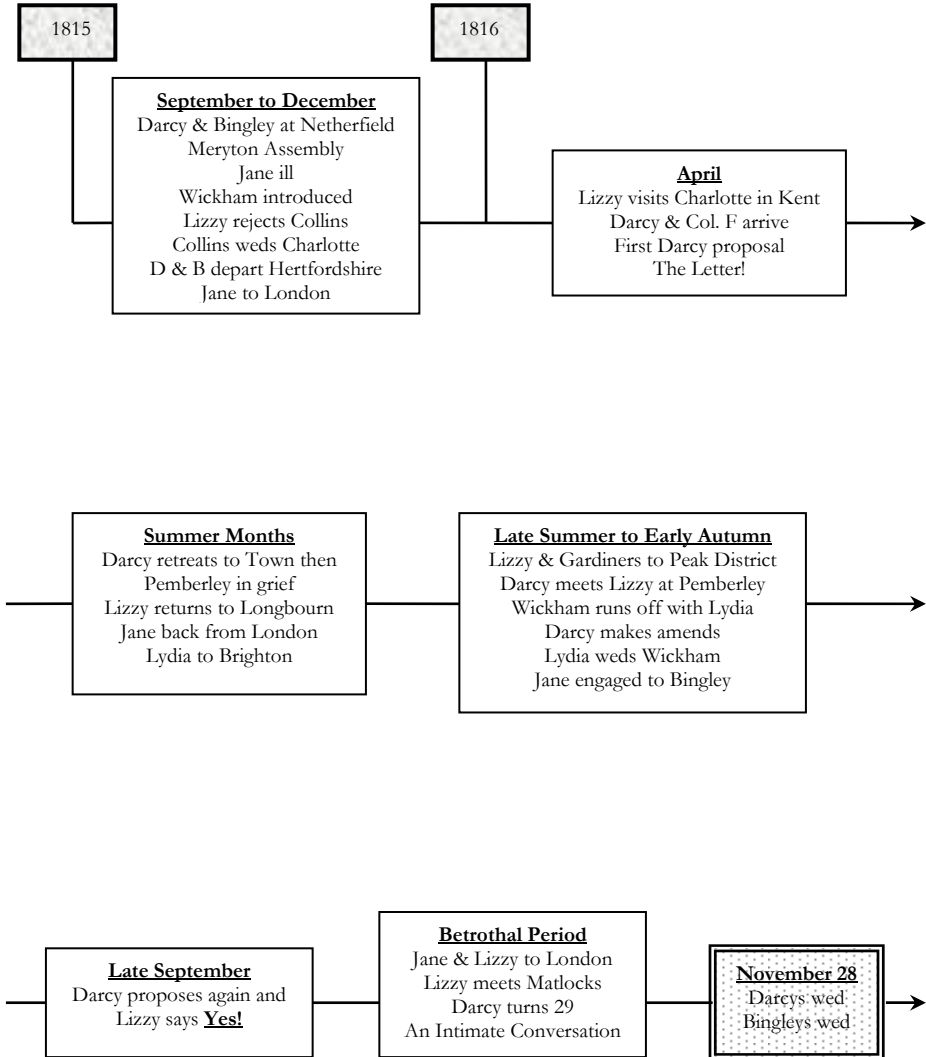
## **Darcy Family Tree**

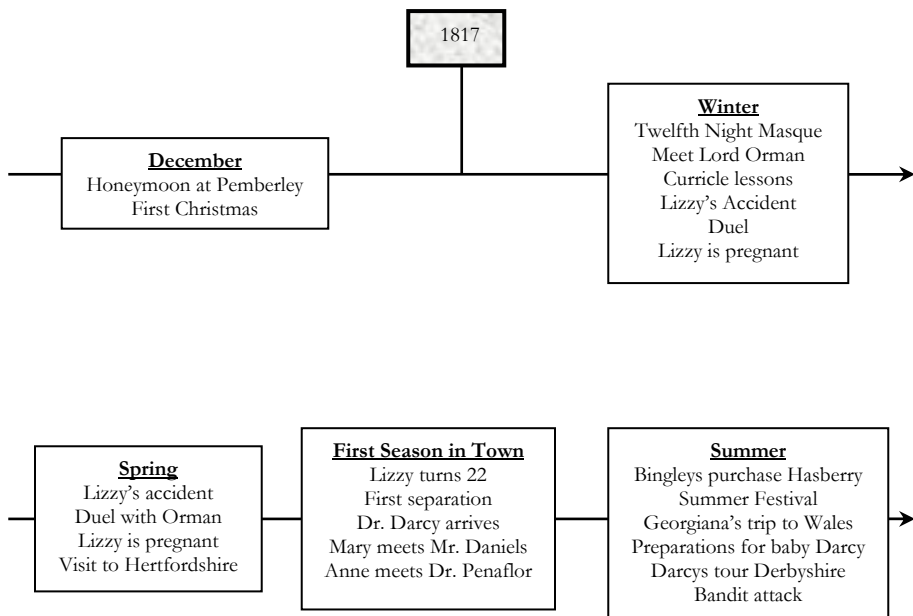


## **Fitzwilliam Family Tree**



# **Timeline**







*"I love you, my Elizabeth. You are my soul, my blood and bone, my very life."*

*The quest to meld as one is realized. The two have become one soul, and together they travel down the*

*pathway of life. The tale of matrimonial happily-ever-after began in Two Shall Become One—Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy and continued in Journeys Beyond Pemberley and now recommences in The Darcys at Year's End.*

*Elizabeth and Darcy have been married nine bliss-filled months when our story resumes. Happily ensconced at Pemberley, they await the birth of their first child with beloved family and friends surrounding. It is a period of peace and anticipation, with a number of adventures, as time marches toward both their first anniversary and the end of the chronological year.*

*Join our favorite couple as their relationship reaches new heights with each passing day, as they vacation at the seaside, as they welcome their firstborn, as they celebrate their anniversary and second Christmas as a family, and as they at every turn embrace the love gifted to them.*

*The romance and bewitchment is never-ending.....*

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