In the Depth of Winter

by theredrobin

Summary

Darcy and Elizabeth's first winter at Pemberley promises both passion and heartache.
Surprises

There are all kinds of surprises.

There are the pleasant sort which leave you feeling flushed with warmth and tingly from the tips of your fingers straight through to your core. There are ones that momentarily keep you rooted to the spot as you try to process just what in God's name actually took place. But there are also the kinds that are the most unwelcome things in the world and resonate within you to inspire a shock that is almost too much to bear.

Elizabeth was impatient with excitement and nervousness as she sat waiting for Darcy in the library in front of a crackling fire.

This was to be her first winter with him at Pemberley, and she wanted to do something special for him. The idea had come to her nearly three weeks ago, right after the first dusting of snow frosted the grounds, and she had immediately set to work seeing if her plan could be put into motion in time. To Elizabeth's absolute delight, everything was working in her favor.

Since then, it had snowed twice, the last time being just the evening before so the entirety of Pemberley was covered in white.

To-day was the day she finally was able to share what she had designed for him. Only an hour earlier, she had gone to Darcy in his study and enticed him to come to her by means of a teasing smile and the promise of a surprise. A grin tugged at his own lips at the sight of her, and he gave his word to come the moment he was free to, urgent business keeping him from joining her at once.

Elizabeth was now quite restless with his being detained for so long, and she was about to remove from her seat to go and call him again when a hand touched her arm. She started from the settee and then arranged her face into an uncharacteristic scowl.

"Really, Fitzwilliam!" she said, mock anger in her tone. "I thought you would never come."

Darcy, seeing her irritation was feigned, decided to play along. "Elizabeth, it is not me you should be cross with, but the solicitors in London. If it were up to me alone, I would see the townhouse in shambles if it meant coming to you sooner."

She laughed, but quickly resumed her expression of haughty ill humor to keep up the charade. "Very well, I shall forgive you on one condition."

"That being?"

"That for the next several hours, you will wholly listen to and obey everything I say."

Darcy's smile was broad and genuine as he nodded in assent. Elizabeth, breaking all pretense now, rose on tiptoe to kiss him, and he responded in kind the moment her lips touched his own.

As her fingers tangled in the curls at the nape of his neck, she wondered lazily why she had bothered to arrange some other activity when she was perfectly content to continue on this way for the rest of the afternoon. Before he could hold her to him and distract her entirely from this morning's intentions, with an effort she broke away and whispered in a conspiratorial accent, "Go get your coat."

With that, she ran off, leaving Darcy behind in a slight stupor.
Darcy stood at the front doors waiting for Elizabeth to reappear.

He had, on a compulsive inclination, grabbed his scarf and hat when he went to retrieve his coat like she had asked, wanting to be prepared in case whatever his Elizabeth had in store would keep them out in the wintry air for some time.

Darcy was glad he thought of it because as Elizabeth came into the entrance hall wearing her wrap, he saw that she also had brought a fur-trimmed bonnet and scarf...two, in fact.

He eyed the extra scarf in her hand, and she spotted that it had grabbed his attention. She grinned impishly.

"Bend down, Fitzwilliam. You are much too tall for me to do this otherwise."

Warily, he leaned towards her. With a few deft movements, she tied the cloth round his head, completely covering his eyes. She stole a quick kiss before telling him he could straighten up again.

"Can you see anything?" came Elizabeth's voice from somewhere to his left.

"Nothing."

"Perfect. Stay put there, I shall only be a moment."

He heard her footsteps dash away and, after a minute, back again. Then, her small, gloved hand slipped into his own and he curled his fingers around it.

The sound of the great oak front doors creaking open was accompanied by a chilly draft that breezed through the frame.

Elizabeth was tugging at his hand now, but paused. "Are you quite warm the way you are?"

"Yes."

"Good. No peeking."

Without another word, she pulled him outside behind her, veering off to the right and into the woods.

She was very vigilant in leading him through the trees and snowy banks. Not often did the brittle branches of shrubs and undergrowth graze his greatcoat, for she was careful to hold them away from Darcy so they did not scratch him. He felt as safe being led blindfolded by Elizabeth as if he were walking by his own sight.

They had been wandering at this slow but steady pace for nearly half an hour when she brought them both to a stop and released his hand.

"You can look now," said her voice from behind him. "We are here."

Darcy pried at the knot at the back of his head and tore the scarf away.

They were in a sizable clearing, one that was vaguely familiar to him. It must have been just on the outskirts of Pemberley's grounds. The trees that huddled around to create almost a curtain of vegetation were old, sturdy things, but here and there new little sprigs poked out as if to claim their
own spots where they could. It was quiet here too, every sound hushed by the layer of snow that glossed everything, making it all look clean and pure. Right in the center of the clearing was a pond, almost the length and width of Pemberley's grand ballroom and frozen over.

All at once Darcy remembered.

He knew why the place looked familiar to him: he had been here before, many times in fact. His parents had brought him here to go ice-skating when he was a boy, and later, with them came Georgiana. At the time, she had barely been able to stay upright on her two chubby, unstable legs on solid ground, let alone on the slick surface of the ice. He remembered the day when Georgiana had escaped their mother's arms and ran out onto the ice alone as if to prove she could do as the rest of them did on her own, only to slip and fall and scrape up her knees rather badly. It was nothing a cup of hot chocolate back at home could not put right, but the day would for another reason forever remain ingrained in his memory as a recollection tinged with bitter-sweetness. It was the last time his family had ever come here together, and he had not returned since.

He turned around to look at Elizabeth.

She gazed back at him anxiously, inspecting him like he was sickening for something. "Are you upset with me? I did not mean to make you sad."

Darcy told himself to move and went to take her hand. "Upset? No. It is only...how did you...?"

"Mrs Reynolds," she finished for him, a sheepish look on her face. "I came up with the idea, and she told me you used to come here before with your mother and father and sister. I sent away to London for us so we could..." Here she procured from the ground just behind her two boxes. She lifted the lid of the uppermost one and revealed, ensconced in a cloud of tissue paper, what looked like a pair of riding boots with a slim blade attached to the soles.

He realized that this was what she must have gone back to get after blindfolding him back at the house.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth studied him from beneath her lashes as he stared into the box. "I thought it was a wonderful plan at the start, but lately, I began to think maybe it was not my place to—mph!"

She was unceremoniously cut off as Darcy swept down to kiss her firmly on the mouth, effectively quieting her doubts along with the remainder of her sentence.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," he said when he had pulled away, still holding her to him.

Her eyes shone as she smiled up at him, reassured and thrilled that he was happy with her gift.

"Come!" she cried as she pivoted to step out of her shoes and into the skates, tying the laces tightly. That teasing tone he loved so much to hear was creeping back into her voice as she treded her way onto the ice. "Are you ready to show me how this is done?"

"Am I ready, after years of being out of practice, to try and hold my balance on ice only to result in looking like an infant taking its first steps?" He grinned. "Only if you do it with me."

Elizabeth's laughter rang out like a bell, loud and lighthearted throughout the clearing, and infectious as Darcy joined in while he bent over to don his own skates and meet her out on the ice.

She never heard the sharp crack of the ice, and ignorant of that warning, suddenly found herself being plunged into the icy black water of the pond.
There are all kinds of surprises.

And in a span of less than ten seconds, Darcy experienced them all.
That Which Makes the Heart Freeze Over

Elizabeth opened her mouth to scream as the thin ice broke way beneath her.

It was an impulse forced from her in panic, and one she instantly wished she had been able to hold back. From under the frigid, swirling waters, no sound left her, but water rushed in between her parted lips, making her gag and sputter while she kicked furiously to resurface. It was so cold; the icy water seemed to be biting her very bones.

Rising blindly and clumsily, she inched her way in the direction of the dim light that reached her stinging eyes. It felt as though her heart was hammering its rapid beat violently against her chest. Stretching out her hands above her head, she prepared herself to beckon Darcy and grab hold of the broken edge of the ice.

A thick sheet of solid frost was all that met her fingertips.

Elizabeth scrabbled at the ceiling of ice, desperately feeling for the opening through which she had dropped, but it was not there. She must have swum to an entirely different side of the pond.

She was trapped.

Darcy found it impossible to move.

Then his wits caught up with him. He charged out onto the frozen pond, heedless of the ominous shifting of the ice beneath his feet as he did, slipping heavily onto his hands and knees several times before he made it over to the gaping hole in the ice.

She was not there. He could not see her.

"Elizabeth!" Darcy yelled into the water's still surface.

He heard it then, a faint scratching noise from under the ice, and nearby.

Bless the brilliant girl! She would lead him to her, his clever, brave wife.

Forgetting about wasting time to regain his feet, Darcy crawled towards the sound and started brushing away the opaque film of frost from the ice to see more clearly underneath it.

His labored breathing was coming in short pants that hung on the air as small, misted puffs. He would find her, he would find her.

The scuffing sound stopped.

Elizabeth drifted languidly in the water's current.

She was tired, so tired, and just could not make it back up again. Her lungs were burning badly now, and whereas before her heart had seemed to be performing an Italian opera overture, it had since slowed down to an idle sort of waltz. Soon, the self-preservation instincts of her body would override rational thought and make her mouth open, indifferent to the fact that water, not air, would surge into her.
Her arms and legs were becoming harder and harder to move as the cold penetrated deep into her muscles, making her body go rigid. Her dress and petticoats, absolutely soaked through, were becoming like sandbags and slowly dragging her down to the pond bed.

"Elizabeth!"

Darcy's voice reached her, muffled and distorted. He was calling her, and she wanted to call back, but she could not.

"Elizabeth!"

She forced her eyes open. She could do something; she had to do something.

Slowly, painfully, Elizabeth kicked and paddled and used every ounce of strength she had left in her to propel herself back up to the ice, trying for the gauzy shadow that stained it, thinking maybe it was Darcy. The exertion drained her, but she was able to pound her fists against the top of her frozen cage one last time before her sight went dark.

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No, no, no, she has not stopped, Darcy thought wildly as he continued on his hands and knees for any sign of her. She has not given up, I just do not hear her. Do not dare give up on me, Elizabeth.

The soft thud that came from right under him made his heart jump into his throat. He used his entire arm to swipe clean the surface of the patch of ice below him and pressed his face up against it to peer through.

A flash of red.

Her gloves were red.

He rubbed and slammed relentlessly on the ice to crack it. It must have already been a little weaker in that spot because at last a tinkling shatter erupted as his balled hand drove into the ice again.

Without a second's hesitation, he thrust his arm up to the shoulder into the water and strained to feel her. The piercing cold sent a jolt through his body, making Darcy even more frenzied: Elizabeth's entire body had been submerged in here for almost a minute.

Finally, he made contact with something soft, and hoping against hope it was her, grasped it tightly as he wrenched it to him. It was her wrap that he had managed to seize hold of, and heaving, he brought Elizabeth out of the water and to him. With her safely enclosed in his arms, he rolled them over the little way back to the shore for solid ground.

Darcy came to a halt with Elizabeth beneath him. Her face, lying limp to one side, was deathly white and almost exactly matched the snow framing her, all except the bluish hue tinting her still lips. She had lost her bonnet, and her hair was beginning to frost in the air already, an unforgiving wind picking up and whistling through the trees.

"Elizabeth, you are safe now, you are fine. Please. Please wake up," he begged hoarsely, grasping her chin in his hand to turn her face towards him. But she was far from either.

The bitter wind whipped around them, if possible stealing even more color from her stark cheeks while making his red and raw. She was not shivering as he was, and that terrified him. Biting the index finger of his glove and yanking it off with his teeth, Darcy brought a shaking, bare hand up to her mouth to feel the exhale of her breath. But the damned wind was toying with him now,
making him madly question whether its cutting nip tickled his palm, or her breathing. Fumbling for her wrist, he groped to feel a pulse.

He stared into Elizabeth's face as he waited to feel the throb against his thumb. It should not be taking this long…it should not…it was sluggish, and terribly faint, but there! Darcy almost wept in gratitude at the sensation.

He had to get her back to Pemberley.

Tearing off his own overcoat, he gently enveloped Elizabeth inside and carefully lifted her into his arms, remembering that he once heard you were not to jostle victims of hypothermia. He saw that the tips of her ears were the same shade of blue as her lips. He ripped the scarf from his throat and swathed her head in it.

Darcy took off at a run.

Branches Elizabeth had before nimbly evaded, he ran straight through, their ice-glazed, prodding sharpness clawing his face in his recklessness. He shielded Elizabeth from the glances the way he held her, turning her face into his chest while the rest of her remained bundled up in his coat.

The hush rendered by the snow that had only minutes ago seemed magical was now converted into something sinister, making Darcy feel eerily isolated and sparking a smothering panic in him about just how far from the house they had strayed. The watery, fleeting sunlight of winter was already starting to fade as his stomping footfalls echoed through the trees, crushing hardened snow and ice underfoot, and he never slowed down, not once.

After what seemed like an eternity, he glimpsed torch lights winking at him from a distance among the trees. The stitch in his side panged dully as he sprinted up the walkway beside the brook that lay in front of Pemberley. Darcy staggered up the front steps leading to the oak doors, using his weight to shove them open with a bang.

"Help! For God's sake, help!"

Instantly, the house was in uproar.

Garbled shouts rang through the halls, and the thunderous approach of running feet rumbled as the servants sprang into action at their master's cries. They flooded the entrance hall, crowding around to see what had happened. When they saw Darcy's wife draped motionlessly in his arms with water dripping onto the rug from her hair and clothing, half the women covered their mouths and gasped.

Mrs Reynolds came bustling out from among the throng, and the moment she saw the state of her master and mistress, took full command of the situation.

"Where is James?" she asked in an authoritative tone as her eyes roved about to catch sight of the groomsman.

A lad with bright red hair squeezed between the gardener and a valet in order to reach her.

"Saddle up the fastest horse—Aeolus will do—and ride him into the village to fetch Dr Neil. Be quick about it, boy! Off with you, go, go!"

James went scampering in the direction of the stables.
"The rest of you: men, go arrange fires in every room of the house, and if there is not wood enough for the job, gather some more to sustain us through the night. Ladies, I want you to make sure every window and door is shut tight, and to go collect blankets, towels, anything warm—except you, Lily," she said in an undertone, detaining Elizabeth's lady's maid with a touch on the arm while the assembly dispersed haphazardly. "I shall need you to come help me attend to Mrs Darcy."

The housekeeper turned to look at Darcy directly for the first time as the others went running off to do as they were told. He had stood there clutching Elizabeth in a kind of numb trance as she mandated orders to the staff.

"Mr Darcy," she spoke to him gently, "if you could carry her up to your bedchamber so that we may take her out of those wet things."

Darcy's eyes seemed lost as he met her gaze, but they also looked immensely thankful for a moment before he tightened his hold on Elizabeth and started climbing the stairs two at a time.

"Annette!" Mrs Reynolds said in a sharp hiss to one of the maids who had begun to blubber noisily once Darcy's back was turned to her. "Stop that whimpering this instant, or, mark me, I shall be sending you off to work in the kitchens for the rest of the week."

That was the last thing Darcy needed to see.

She turned on her heel to go up the staircase after him, Lily in her wake.

Darcy kicked open the door to their bedroom and crossed the floor to the bed. Softly, he placed Elizabeth on the lace coverlet, took his coat and scarf off of her, and set to removing her sodden clothes. She had not so much as stirred since he pulled her from the pond, and her face still bore that colorless complexion, save for the blue lips.

His fingers shook uncontrollably as he stripped her of her wrap, scarf, and gloves, even more so as he lifted her back up to slip off her dress. Her head drooped lifelessly before he brought it rest on his chest. His already ragged breath caught; Elizabeth's cheek was like ice, even through the fabric of his shirt.

By the time he had begun to pick at the strings of her corset and slip, Mrs Reynolds entered the room. Lily stood right behind her and blushed crimson when she saw Darcy hanging over Elizabeth in that state of undress, but he did not care a whit.

"We shall manage Mrs Darcy from here, Mr Darcy," Mrs Reynolds told him, guiding him towards the door. "You should be tending to yourself, before you catch your d—" she stuttered to a halt, catching herself before the word passed her lips. She clumsily contrived to cover her blunder. "Dr Neil should be getting here any moment, and you shall be wanting to get ready to receive him."

He nodded mutely, hardly aware of what he was agreeing to.

Glancing back before the door blocked her from him entirely, Darcy felt his chest constrict tightly at the sight of his independent, resilient Elizabeth lying insensible and vulnerable on the bed.
The Dread of Uncertainty

He finished dressing just as the doctor came.

Dr Neil was a slight sort of man with a head of sandy blond hair and the kindest eyes imaginable, not to mention a good friend of Darcy's. As he went at a near sprint down the upper corridor of Pemberley, he ran into Darcy, who had come bolting out of a door along the hall looking crazed.

"Darcy! Anything you could tell me—"

Darcy was off, explaining in as much detail as he could remember about what had happened, how long Elizabeth had been in the water, the amount of time she had been exposed to the air afterwards.

It was painful for him to talk about, everything still much too fresh as he relived it, and a few times he had difficulty proceeding, but Neil spared him after a certain point and rushed away to enter the bedchamber where Elizabeth was. Mrs Reynolds and Lily left the room and headed back downstairs, but Darcy hovered just outside the door, pacing nervously.

A quarter of an hour wasted in fearful silence.

"Fitzwilliam!"

He whirled to face the person who had called to him.

It was Georgiana, hiking her skirt up above her ankles in bunches while she darted up the stairs, a terrified look on her face. "I only just came back from town. Mrs Reynolds told me there was an accident," she blurted breathlessly. "How is Elizabeth?"

A hard lump rose in Darcy's throat, and he did not know if it was the sight of Georgiana's face etched with genuine, sisterly concern, or the fact that he could not answer her question that caused it, rendering speech impossible and reducing him to shake his head inadequately. He struggled to choke back the horrifying urge to weep in front of his sister. As her elder brother, it was his job to stay strong and protect her; to cry now would only scare her more.

Georgiana must have read something in his expression, though. She stepped forward and wound her arms around him, Darcy returning the embrace at once.

"It will be all right," she murmured with childlike certainty. "You shall see."

He was finding it even harder than before not to break down completely.

The rattle of the doorknob brought him lurching back, and letting go of Georgiana, he faced the door in horrible suspense. Neil stepped out of the room and shut the door quietly behind him. There was a grave look on his face that made Darcy feel as though the bottom of his stomach had dropped out.

"Neil? Good God, man, out with it!"

"Darcy, she has entered the most critical stage of hypothermia. I fear her organs are at risk—"

Darcy felt the blood drain from his face.

"—her abdomen is even still cold to the touch. I have injected a serum to help get her blood
reheated as it circulates through her veins and back into her heart. The heartbeat is very erratic, but there is nothing more I can do to treat that at this point. Take care not to jar her or it will send her into cardiac arrest. The only thing we can do now is keep Elizabeth as warm as possible. So long as her blood does not remain chilled as it reenters her heart, it should go fine. I am still very hopeful…”

Neil's voice was fading from his hearing. Even his sister's presence could not stop it now, and Darcy felt himself sinking under his own weight. Neil actually had to throw out his arm to support him.

"Georgiana, can you be a dear and fetch your brother a glass of brandy?"

A scuffle of feet was heard flying down the staircase.

Grunting with the effort, Neil carted Darcy around the corner and into his study, lowering him into an armchair. Once there, Darcy dropped his head into his hands, sapped of his energy and the ability to put on any appearance of it.

"It's not as bad as all that, Darcy. She could still make a full recovery."

Darcy made no reply. He was in denial. This could not possibly be happening, not now, not after everything they had gone through simply to be together.

Minutes, or possibly hours, later, the study door opened to reveal Georgiana carrying the drink Neil had requested. As quickly as she came, she was gone, and Darcy was glad of it, not because her presence bothered him, but because he needed time to be selfish, and he could not do that with her staring at him in all doe-eyed innocence and optimism.

He felt Neil forcing the brandy into his hand, tipped it back, and downed glass's contents in one swallow, the amber liquid searing his throat all the way down and making his vision marginally sharper. The burning that bloomed in his chest, however, was not enough to chase away the icy numbness that gripped him. It was as if he had fallen in that pond with Elizabeth.

They did not speak. Darcy could not if he tried, and Neil held his tongue out of respect to his friend's distress as long as he was able. Without even telling Darcy what he was about, the doctor moved to take the empty tumbler from his friend's limp hand and rolled up the right sleeve of Darcy's shirt to examine his arm for any evidence of frostbite since he had immersed it in the water. Assured that the limb was sound after checking for abnormalities in the skin pigmentation and finding none, Neil righted the sleeve. He reached to refasten the cufflink when he realized he had never removed one at all. Darcy had forsaken them in his haste to meet him. Through the whole of Neil's maneuvering, Darcy did not react.

"Darcy? Darcy, I have some appointments in the village, but I will come back and check on Elizabeth in a few hours."

He did not get a response, not that he was expecting one.

Neil heavily made his way to the door, stopping in the frame before he left. "Do not throw yourself into the pit yet. She is still with us, and that is something in itself."

Darcy was standing outside of their bedroom again, staring at the door like it had done him a great personal wrong.
Somehow, he could not bring himself to go and see what lay inside. Others, Mrs Reynolds and Lily among them, had been flitting in and out of the room for the past hour, checking on and tending to Elizabeth, carrying out her all but ruined garments, filling warming pans with hot coals to place under the mattress, but he had not yet gone in.

He was afraid.

Afraid to see her and imagine the possibility that he would not see her awake again, or be able to see her smile or hear her laugh, or never again look into her expressive, fine eyes. Was the kiss he had given her in the wood to be the last they shared? Beastly considerations like these nearly made him prostrate. Neil had told him not to act as though the worst had already happened, but he could not help it. What if it did happen?

Darcy shook his head like a dog trying to rid itself of fleas. He had to pull himself together. Steeling himself, he grasped the door handle and went inside.

Despite the dusk that had fallen outside, the room was brightly lit, every shadow dispelled by the fire roaring in the grate. The bed was piled high with quilts and down comforters, and in the midst of it all lay Elizabeth, looking frail and small. Her hair was spread about her shoulders like a cloud, but the darkness of it contrasted sharply with her white skin. She hardly seemed to be breathing.

He approached the bed with a slight sway in his step. Darcy looked down at Elizabeth while a venomous feeling of helplessness seized him, spreading through him like poison. He wished with all his might that it was him in her place.

What kind of husband was he to let something like this befall her? He was supposed to keep her safe. He should have gone first. He should have tried the ice to make sure it was secure for her. He should have been the one to fall in and be fighting to stay alive right now, not her! She did not deserve this.

Desperate to do something useful, he took up the poker to stoke the already blazing flames in the fireplace, piling on more logs. He strode back to the bed. Reaching almost hesitantly, he stroked the dark locks of her hair that lay in curls on her pillow. They felt a bit damp to the touch. Casting his eyes around the room, Darcy saw a towel hanging on the fireplace screen and rose to get it. The towel was warm after being so close to the fire, and he used it to tenderly rub at her tresses until they were completely dry.

With nothing left to busy himself with, he dragged a chair to the bedside and eased himself into it. For hours that trailed on like days, he looked upon Elizabeth's peaceful face, thoughts born of fear and self-blame plaguing his mind. Around one o'clock in the morning, Neil returned as promised. He did not have much to tell Darcy as he came out into the corridor to let him back into the bedchamber.

"There has been no material change in her condition."

"What does that mean? Does it indicate favorable progress?"

"It means her situation has not altered."

"Neil, this is maddening! Can you tell me nothing more definitely?" Darcy challenged.

"That is the only diagnosis I can give for now. I will be back again this afternoon. Get some rest."
In spite of Neil's advice, Darcy could not bring himself to sleep.

He passed the night in a constant state of tension, imagining he saw Elizabeth rouse when she did not and rising to feel her breath practically every twirl of the clock's hand. By the time the first streaks of morning light peeked over the horizon, his face was nearly as pale as his wife's.

It was ten o'clock when a loud rap at the door made him jerk upright. The door came forward to reveal Mrs Reynolds.

"Excuse me, Mr Darcy, but Mr and Mrs Bingley have just arrived."

Darcy only looked at the housekeeper bewilderedly for a moment. Then he recalled information he knew only a day ago like it had happened years past. He and Elizabeth had invited Bingley and Jane almost a month ago to spend the Christmas holidays at Pemberley, and this was the day they had set on for them to come. He had utterly forgotten, the past seventeen hellish hours erasing everything from his mind.

"Lord," he muttered half-delirious, getting to his feet. "I completely… oh, Lord, her sister… I did not think to write… what am I to…" Covering his mouth, he looked back at Elizabeth as if she would come around for the announcement of Jane's presence. "Mrs Reynolds, have you told them?"

"No, sir. I overheard Peter receiving them and came here at once to inform you. None of the servants have said a word, I am sure of it."

Darcy was already running for the door.

He dashed down the stairs at a breakneck pace and headed for the parlor where they were sure to be waiting. There was an instant where he saw them before they saw him, and in that brief time, his urgency fled him and he felt the anguish and unwillingness of the whole situation in all its suffocating misery. Bingley was admiring some ornament adorning the wall, and Jane was at his side, smiling softly at something he was saying for her alone to hear. It killed Darcy to have to go in and destroy that ignorant happiness, even more that he could not be in there with Elizabeth to share in it.

Taking a breath to steady himself as well as he could, he entered the room.

"Darcy!" Bingley cheerily said in greeting as he stepped across the threshold. Darcy saw his smile falter a bit and he could only imagine the state of his appearance. "You look a sight, old man. Whatever is the matter?"

Jane, holding onto her husband's arm, looked at him as well, a hint of unease clouding her countenance. "Where is Lizzy?" Her eyes flicked past Darcy as though Elizabeth might be just behind him. "Is my sister well?"

In that moment, Darcy had to turn away to maintain his hold on the small amount of self-possession he had left in him. How he wished he could answer yes to that question.

By the time he was able to face them again, the Bingleys were watching him in considerable alarm. They knew him too well to think anything less than disastrous could have this effect on him.

"My God. What has happened?" whispered Jane.

"Jane, perhaps… perhaps you ought to sit down," he said throatily.
With Bingley's assistance, she settled on the settee, her eyes never leaving Darcy.

He was not certain how he managed to say it, nor in how many words he did, but he told them of what had passed yesterday and the condition which Elizabeth was now in because of it. He saw Jane shut her eyes as if some terrible blow had struck her and left her winded while Bingley looked dumbstruck.

"Are we—" Jane started, but could not carry on. Her plight restored Bingley somewhat as he attended to her, clutching her hand while his eyes raked her over with palpable concern. She at last found her voice. "Are we able to see her?"

"Of course."

Darcy led them both to his chamber, opening the door and then standing aside to let Jane enter before him. She went over to the bed with a light step and gazed at her sister, sweeping some loose curls from Elizabeth's forehead as she did.

In the first instants of this interaction, the two men remained frozen side by side in the doorframe, feeling as though they were intruding on some intimately raw moment of sisterly affection which they should leave to happen in private, not gawk at like an open spectacle.

Jane glanced up at them, and the spell was broken then. Darcy started to go in after her when Bingley arrested him by the arm.

"What has the doctor to say?" he asked quietly so that his wife might not hear.

"Neil will tell me nothing. He is all ambiguity."

"But her constitution? It is strong, is it not? She can overcome this yet."

Darcy did not dare attempt an answer.

"You rescued her," was heard suddenly from Jane.

He turned to face his sister-in-law.

"Elizabeth survived because of your swift thinking and courageous actions. I do not know how I can ever thank you enough for restoring my sister to our family. I am forever indebted to you, Darcy."

"Do not—" it was impossible for Darcy to go on.

He wanted to tell her how he would have readily, no, gladly, taken his wife's place if he had only known or could somehow make the exchange.

The guilt that had been tormenting him over his failure to prevent this misfortune from befalling Elizabeth was crippling, and he could not bear to tell her sister that she was too effusive—a wickedly merciless voice in his head added and premature—with her thanks and that he did not deserve them.
Noon brought Neil to Pemberley, and he found Darcy and the Bingleys huddled in the bedroom where Elizabeth was.

Bingley and Jane immediately consented to take leave when the doctor asked for a moment of privacy for his patient, but Darcy would not go so easily this time around.

"I really think it would be best if you waited outside—"

"I am her husband, Neil," Darcy overrode him imperiously, channeling every ounce of the generations of noble blood that ran through his veins. "I think it is best I stay. I have every right to be here."

"It is not a question of rights, but of your peace of mind," Neil retorted exasperatedly. He would not back down from his friend's tone; he had known him far too long for that.

They continued on this way for some time before Neil finally conceded with a sigh, and Darcy was allowed to stay as he looked Elizabeth over for any signs of change in her condition, good or bad. Darcy was on his feet for most of it, lingering over the bed as he took in with bloodshot eyes every half-twitch of Neil's lips into a frown and furrow of his brow as he inspected her vitals.

Neil straightened up and looked to Darcy. "Her pulse is not as strong as I would like it to be, but she has not worsened."

"Is she out of danger then?" Darcy demanded.

"Well, it is possible—"

"Is she out of danger?" he repeatedly more insistently.

Neil studied him conscientiously, before giving his answer in a slow voice. "I am afraid she is not entirely in the clear. As I said, she has not worsened, but she has not improved enough for me to be absolutely certain. Her lips still retain that blue tinge to them, which..." He trailed off seeing Darcy's face, and put his hand on his shoulder. "This sort of thing takes time, and recovery is different for everyone. She could stay like this for quite some time—"

"Do not say that," he shuddered, shrugging Neil's hand off and taking a step back from him.

"—but a week from now be as healthy as she was before the accident ever happened. Darcy, you have to get a hold of yourself. For her sake."

"Neil, I am trying," Darcy answered with demented air, running his fingers through his hair. "You have no idea how damned hard I am trying."

"Have a little faith. Elizabeth will not give up so easily."

Darcy nodded distractedly, and Neil walked towards the door to take his leave after promising to call again to-morrow evening.

"Thank you, Neil."
When the dinner hour came, Mrs Reynolds called the gentlemen and ladies to the dining room.

The four of them had crowded into the bedchamber to be together, though whether they stayed more for Mr or Mrs Darcy was difficult to say. Georgiana put aside the novel she had not really been perusing and trifled with the chain around her neck as she awaited the others. Bingley took Jane's hand to help her from her seat.

Though Darcy thought he was past feeling shock any longer, he perceived something in that moment that triggered the very sentiment, and his senses experienced what must have been akin to being struck by lightning.

As Bingley lifted Jane to her feet, moving her after sitting for so long in one attitude, her shawl fell away from her shoulders. It was then that Darcy, watching them, took in the distinct curve of her belly protruding from her slender figure.

Jane was with child.

His mind went reeling. To his staggered psyche, snatches of images surfaced in a churning sea of memories. Disconnected scenes that had meant nothing to him in the nerve-wracking hours he spent with his sister, friend, and sister-in-law while holding watch over Elizabeth suddenly melded to form a cohesive truth: Bingley's particular attentiveness to his wife; Jane's hand perpetually resting on her stomach protectively; her fastidiousness to ensure her shawl was always securely covering her.

They must have intended to share their joyous news with him and Elizabeth in person during this visit, but things being what they were, had decided not to say a word on the subject until a time when Elizabeth was well and able to revel with them in their felicity. Between her shawl and the high-waisted style of her dress, if Jane had not risen in exactly the manner she had, Darcy might never have been the wiser.

Bingley and Jane were already half out the door when the former noticed that he had not moved.

"Darcy, are you not coming?"

"No," his voice was rather tight. "I have not the least bit of an appetite. I am sorry to be such a poor host, but Georgiana will be much better company. Go on."

Jane opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it again without a word. Georgiana was earnestly scrutinizing his face. In her devoted attention to her brother, it had not escaped her that his complexion had grown pale, and she had yet to move far from her place by the fire. Darcy just wanted them to quit the room without launching an attempt to convince him to go as well. The three of them sensed his determination, and in a moment, they followed the housekeeper out.

He had not planned to join them at dinner in the first place, for what he said was true, but his resolve was cemented by the discovery he had just made.

Unbidden imaginings of Elizabeth's fate and their future bedeviled Darcy, and despite her being within arm's length, loneliness crushed him. He sat on the edge of the bed, stroking her white cheek.

His heart-wrenching line of thought induced him to submit to the question he had been wondering since seeing Jane: Would Elizabeth live to bear their children?

Even thinking about the cruelty of a reality void of that happiness caused him pain more excruciating than any other he had ever known.
The Bingleys returned to the room once again before retiring for the night. They resumed their silent vigil for the rest of that evening.

Mrs Reynolds showed Jane and Bingley to their quarters, and as he watched the couple's retreating forms, Darcy felt a wretched twinge of envy at their ability to seek solace in one another.

Sometime in the twilight hour, it had begun to snow.

At first, only a few feathery flakes drifted across the sky, but when the sun rose, the snow was still coming, and the entire sky was white like a blank canvas. By the afternoon, it was falling thick and fast, coating the roads and filling the windowpanes on top of the already present layers of dwindling ice that had been resting there.

Darcy, sleep once again eluding him, observed this all from the bedchamber window.

Early in the day, Jane and Bingley came to try and coax him into leaving the room to stretch his legs, clear his head, or take something to eat, but Darcy still adamantly refused any meals and their offers to stay with Elizabeth in his place for even a little while, choosing instead to stay holed up with her as he had been since the night before last.

Jane, all demureness and compassion, would not relent. "I will take very good care of my sister, you need not worry."

He shook his head at her from where he stood. "Thank you, but no."

When they continued to argue, his stress bested him and he lashed out at the Bingleys.

"Jane is right. It does neither you nor Elizabeth any good to have you wasting away in here, no good at all," Bingley was importuning. "Take a turn about the house, Darcy, or at the very least—"

"Dear God!" Darcy finally interrupted with a violently fierce tenor. "Do neither of you understand what she is to me? How can you think I could possibly leave her?"

He swiveled around to face Bingley directly, his eyes blazing. Bingley was shrinking back and looking like he feared for his friend's sanity while Jane, in the chair near Elizabeth's bed, seemed stricken.

"After all the time you have known me, do you truly believe me capable? Would you abandon Jane, if you were in my place and she in Elizabeth's? Whether I am to stay here another hour or one thousand, I will not go. I cannot! If you won't comprehend that, then I ask you both to go and leave us in peace."

At the end of his outburst, the room was filled with an oppressive silence. Darcy felt like a scoundrel for the manner in which he had spoken to them. He realized they only wanted to ensure his well-being, but he meant every word of what he said.

Eyes downcast, he began, "I apologize—"

Bingley cut through him. "There is no need for it, Darcy."

Ever forgiving, Jane's eyes seemed to echo her husband's sentiments. Nothing more needed to be said on the matter, and nothing was.
Afterwards, Georgiana came to sit with him for a time. Unaware of what had passed with Bingley and Jane, she too tried to convince him to leave Elizabeth's side, and Darcy was at great pains not to lose his temper again. Brother and sister stayed together, watching Elizabeth for nearly an hour. By afternoon tea, seeing that she could not persuade him, Georgiana left in forlorn spirits.

At half past three that afternoon, there was a knock at the door. Mrs Reynolds entered, in her hands a silver tray laden with a steaming china cup of tea, buttered toast, fruit, and an assortment of other foods. Apparently, she would bring him something despite his protestations. Setting the tray down on a small side table, the housekeeper watched the brooding figure of her master as he stood alone at the window, looking blindly outside with his hands clasped behind his back.

"I do not think Dr Neil will be able to make the journey here, Mr Darcy. The roads are in too terrible a condition for walking, or even to come on horseback."

"I do not think so either, Mrs Reynolds," he agreed lowly.

Evening had come and gone.

There was no sign of Neil coming up to Pemberley, and Darcy knew it was foolish of him to think it would be otherwise. The weather was downright dangerous to head out into, eddies of snow making it difficult to see anything beyond the end of your own nose.

But he could not help but be undone at this further turn of events. What if there was some sort of emergency and Elizabeth needed medical attention in the middle of this blasted storm? No one would be here to help, and the realization of it made him turn cold.

Every so often, anger, hot and irrational, would flare up in him. Why was she not waking up? She should have made a sound, moved a finger, done something by now. Yet all she did was lie there hour after hour in an unendurable charade of eternal sleep. Did Elizabeth not understand what she was doing to him with this agonizing waiting, what a horrific wreck his life would become if...if he lost her?

When his tangled thoughts reached this point, always Darcy's hold on his ire would slip away to be replaced with shame and despair. It was not her fault, he knew. Elizabeth was fighting for her life and he was raging senselessly.

The constant fluctuations of his emotions on top of his sleep deprivation infused him with a deep-seated weariness.

Without Darcy realizing it, sleep overtook him.

A tremulous breath was drawn in, her breast rising high as she inhaled deeply.

After a while, her eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the light. Elizabeth's body felt clumsy and stiff as she tried to raise herself up. She only vaguely remembered in snippets what had happened after she fell into the pond, like it was some waterlogged nightmare.

When her eyes finally became accustomed to the flickering flames in the grate, she turned her neck with difficulty, her head heavy and throbbing.

Fitzwilliam. Her heart skipped a beat.
Darcy was slumped in a chair by the window, fast asleep with a troubled frown twisting his lips.

He must have pulled her out.

How long had she been insensate? She tried to see out the window behind him, noticing the heavy downfall of snow, but was unable to judge the time. Her eyes went back to her husband and her heart ached thinking of the worry he must have suffered.

Elizabeth cast the heavy covers off from on top of her and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. The whisper of her bare feet on the floor was the only sound in the room apart from the occasional pop of the fire as she crept over to him. Only centimeters away from him, she could see how exhausted Darcy looked even in sleep, with dark shadows under his eyes and unshaven cheeks.

She lightly caressed his face. He stirred before his eyes blinked open, and even then they took a moment to clear and for understanding to dawn in them.

"Elizabeth," he breathed.

Relief flushing his face, Darcy swept Elizabeth off her feet and into his lap, having to forcibly stop himself from absolutely crushing her to him. He started to kiss her, his lips tender and hot on her face, her throat, her lips. He acted like a man given a second chance at something he thought he would never have again, and in a way he knew he was. Feverishly, he nipped at her skin and laced his fingers at her waist, not roughly, but frantically all the same, wanting to be sure what he had in his arms was real and not a dream that had come only to taunt him. Elizabeth let him ravish her, stroking his face and neck soothingly as she returned his hungry kisses.

He drew away to press his lips to her hair, and as she leaned into the comfort of his chest, she felt him quaking. Looking up at his countenance, she saw tears pooling in Darcy's eyes, and even as she watched, a few of them slipped from his lashes.

She took his face in her hands and brushed away the stray tears with the tips of her fingers, murmuring to him, "Shh, my love, shh. All is well."

"Do not ever frighten me like that again," Darcy half-sobbed, struggling to regain his composure.

"No, Fitzwilliam. Never again."

"I am so sorry, Elizabeth," broke from him in a quavering whisper.

"What have you to be sorry for?" she said, her eyebrows rising. Her wide eyes searched his dear face.

He seemed incoherent and unable to string together his thoughts. "Your life is more important to me than…it is my duty…I should have—"

"Hush." Elizabeth brought up her fingers to strain against his lips, divining what he could not bring himself to say. "It was an accident. No one is to blame, least of all you. You, Fitzwilliam, saved me."

Darcy gripped her convulsively. She slid her hand away from his mouth and tilted her face up to kiss him very softly. With a contented sigh, she rested her head in the crook of his neck. They sat thus entwined while the snow on the windowsill continued to swell higher and higher. Elizabeth shivered.

At once, he got to his feet with her cradled to him. "You should not be out of bed. You need to stay
warm. I do not know what I was thinking letting you stay exposed like this."

Striding over to the bed, he placed her on the sheets and pulled up the layers of quilts to her very chin.

"And where are you going?"

He had begun to withdraw to his chair instead of sharing the bed with her, as if she were too fragile for any such thing, when Elizabeth asked him the question with incredulity in her voice.

Her eyes told him to join her, and he longed to comply.

Walking over, he pulled away the covers he had neatly tucked about her and crawled in beside her, throwing the comforters back over them both. Elizabeth shifted under the blankets to be nearer to him, and Darcy took her in his arms and pressed her body close to his, resting his chin on top of her head.

Outside, the snowfall at last began to wane.

Wrapped in the comfort of one another, Darcy and Elizabeth drifted off to sleep.

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