**Of Family**

by **theredrobin**

**Summary**

At a time when the eldest Bennet sisters should begin families of their own, life perhaps holds other things in mind along the way.
A Joy and a Fear

It was an afternoon heralded by April rains in the Nottinghamshire countryside. The drizzle fell over the grass and trees in a light, refreshing shower that seemed to revive the deep jades and gingers of nature. Far from going into hiding away from the water droplets, robins called to one another as the flitted across the overcast sky. It was on this day that Charles Bingley II made his debut into the world.

At the moment, baby Charlie was wailing with all the volume his newborn lungs would allow for as the midwife wrapped him in a blanket. “He is a fine boy, miss. Healthy and strong.”

Jane’s brow was still gleaming with perspiration from her exertions, but her face had utterly transported, the pain she had endured all but forgotten, the instant she laid eyes on her son. Elizabeth used a cool handkerchief to daub Jane’s forehead and cheeks as she had been all throughout the labor. She could scarcely believe it: her sister was a mother.

The midwife approached the bedside and gently placed the baby in the waiting arms of his mother. Jane was enraptured by the tiny face of her boy. After a few moments of being rocked, Charlie’s cries quieted and he nuzzled into her, pacified by her scent.

“Is he not handsome, Lizzy?” Jane asked in awe of what she held, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The handsomest baby I ever saw, Jane. I am so very happy for you,” Elizabeth beamed. Lowering her glance at the small bundle gathered to Jane’s breast, she spoke in a low coo, “Hello, Charlie. I am your Aunt Elizabeth, and I love you very much already.”

The two sisters remained transfixed by this newest addition to their family a minute more.

“Could you bring Charles?”

Elizabeth gave a kiss to Jane’s temple. “I shall send him up that way the three of you may be alone together.”

She went from the room and started to make her way on, hastening her step with every passing second as she considered the nervous condition her brother-in-law was still gripped with since he did not know it was over.

Elizabeth navigated her path through the corridors of Verburry with a much surer step than she had the week before when she first arrived to be with Jane for the birth. Charles and Jane moved to the estate in Nottinghamshire not two months past. They had come to realize that being so close to everyone in Hertfordshire was perhaps too much even for their gentle dispositions, and consequently had taken up a manor in the county bordering the east of Derbyshire, much to the sisters’ shared happiness at being so near to each other once again. One week ago when Jane’s time had all but arrived, Elizabeth and Darcy left Pemberley for the short travel to Verburry.

The Darcys, however, were not the only ones who had come for the occasion. Elizabeth unfastened the drawing room door to find every head turn in her direction. Louisa Hurst was sitting on the sofa with her sewing in her lap, while Mr Hurst was involved in his usual strenuous activity of napping on every conceivable surface that was not a bed. At the moment, he snored in a slouched huddle beside his wife, and he alone had not looked to Elizabeth for news of Jane when she entered. Georgiana sat a little way from everyone, perched at the piano bench in the corner, though the lid still covered the keys.
Caroline Bingley stood before an occupied armchair. She glanced carelessly over her shoulder and her face visibly darkened at the sight of Elizabeth. The figure in the armchair Caroline lingered over was Darcy, who had a vexed expression on his own countenance before he turned to his wife. Elizabeth met his gaze but soon was forced to direct her attentions to another.

Charles had leapt to his feet when the door opened to reveal Elizabeth there, and her brother-in-law now stood perilously close to her as his eyes communicated the barrage of questions his lips could not quite seem to frame.

She took up his hand between her steady ones. “Jane is asking for you. She would like to introduce you to someone.”

A half-mad grin split his face, and Charles scampered out of the room at an undignified gait that became no one but an anxious husband and expectant new father.

Elizabeth looked to the others and announced, “It is a boy. We can now call ourselves the aunts and uncles of little Charlie Bingley.”

The reaction in the room was altogether tepid. With a bob of her head, Mrs Hurst resumed her needlework and Mr Hurst slumbered on. Caroline merely looked as if she had been told it was still raining.

Darcy, on the other hand, rose and came to Elizabeth; the sour look on Caroline’s face intensified. “How fares your sister?”

“Jane does well. She is beside herself for joy.”

“I am glad of it. Bingley was beginning to go out of his wits. I had to ply him with a glass of port before his nerves bested him.” Darcy surreptitiously took her hand in his and brushed his thumb over the inside of her palm, adding in a softer tone, “And you?”

Elizabeth smiled at him reassuringly and curled her little finger around his. He had become excessively protective of her ever since the accident at the pond four months ago, very often to the point of rendering it absurd, but she had not the heart to scold him for it. In a manner of speaking, he had been the one to sustain the greater injury from that ordeal. “Tired, but happy.” After a moment’s thought she said, “A little hungry too.”

“As are we all, I dare say. I shall go see the cook about fixing something since Bingley will in all likelihood not be down for some time.”

“I had better send word to Mama and Papa about Jane. They will want to know as soon as possible, and if I can get the letter ready for the post-chaise it will reach them by to-morrow morning.” The corners of Elizabeth’s mouth twitched, “Papa writes that my mother is still lamenting that she could not be here herself and shall settle for nothing less than a moment by moment account of her first grandchild. For the sake of her nerves.”

Darcy’s eyes flashed with a laughter he did not feel proper to voice in company, but she read it as well as if he had. With the slightest tightening of his hold on her hand, he released it, the only sign of affection he would allow himself to show in a room full of people though he would have liked nothing more than to kiss her.

As he left, Elizabeth sat down at the davenport desk situated at the far end of the room and drew out a sheaf of paper to begin her letter. Before she could do more than dip her pen in the inkwell, a shadow was cast over the parchment. Caroline was standing over her.
“Miss Bennet—”

Elizabeth grimly smiled to herself. Though she had become Mrs Darcy over a year ago, Caroline continued to call her ‘Miss Bennet,’ and she very much suspected Bingley’s sister would do so until her dying breath. It was the last means she had left to refuse acknowledging Elizabeth as her equal or worthy of being Darcy’s wife. To the credit of Caroline’s cunning, she refrained from ever addressing Elizabeth nominally in Darcy’s presence. For her part, Elizabeth did not tell him of the slight because it was just that—slight. She married the man she loved with her whole heart and knew he loved her in return. Caroline’s feeble attempts to offend her were more likely to invoke pity than anger.

“—to whom do you write?”

“To my parents, Miss Bingley.”

“Ah,” Caroline said, barely hiding her contempt for the named relations. “Tell me, Miss Eliza, does baby Charles look more inclined to resemble the Bingley or the Bennet line?”

“I hardly know,” Elizabeth responded, carefully keeping herself in check. “Is it not too early to tell such a thing?”

“Not at all! The Bingles have a very distinct look to them that is pronounced even at birth. If you did not notice it, then I am afraid Charles will have more claim on his mother’s family than our own.”

The provocation was clear. So, Caroline would carry her resentment of the Bennet sisters on to their children and show disdain for a very baby, her own brother’s child? Elizabeth did not allow herself to retort, and putting her pen to paper, started to scratch out the good tidings.

After a few minutes of stiff silence, Caroline had not gone. Moving closer still to Elizabeth, she murmured in an altogether different tone, “Well, at least Charles has been given an heir. Now he can give up this whole business of having children to carry on the family name and inherit his estate.”

Elizabeth was again torn between being angered by the insult to her sister and feeling sorry for Caroline. If she discussed having children with such cold indifference, as if it were truly a matter of ‘business,’ it was because she did not understand what it could be to experience it with a loving husband.

“Darcy, on the other hand…” Caroline continued in a silky voice. Now Elizabeth stopped writing altogether to meet her gaze. “…well, he has yet to be so blessed.” Her emphasis of the final word gave the impression of it being a curse that crossed her sweetly upturned lips. “Tell me, Miss Bennet, your mother seemed in no danger of such blight, but is barrenness common among any members of your kin?”

Elizabeth found she could not speak.

“Miss Bingley,” came an abrupt call.

Caroline turned with a fleeting look of alarm passing over her features only to discover Georgiana behind her.

“I was wondering if you would accompany me in a duet piece I have been eager to practice.”

Seeing danger averted, a syrupy smile glued itself to Caroline’s face. “Certainly.”

Elizabeth glanced at Georgiana and knew at once she had overheard something of the conversation.
She never spoke to Miss Bingley if she could help it without being impolite, their natures being so
different. She was getting Caroline away from her intentionally. Miss Bingley, as it were, was
unconscious of the true motive of Miss Darcy’s invitation and sauntered over to the pianoforte with a
self-gratified air. Grateful as she was to Darcy’s sister, Elizabeth scarcely found it in her power to
convey her thanks with a simple nod. It was difficult for her to maintain her composure, let alone
resume her correspondence. Be that as it may, she attempted both.

When Darcy came back into the drawing room, he found her sitting at the desk with the finished and
sealed letter laying before her as she fixed a blank stare upon it.

“Elizabeth?” his deep voice was concerned.

She roused herself. “I must get this into the housekeeper’s hands,” she said affectedly, getting up
with the letter in her white-knuckled grasp just as Darcy stooped over her.

She all but fled from the room.

*.

Dinner was a somber affair despite the cheerfulness the occasion warranted.

As Darcy had predicted, Charles stayed to the room with his wife and child after briefly ensuring that
his houseguests were being tended to. The circumstance was perfectly acceptable, even endearing.
Caroline, however, objected in a long-suffering tone to Mrs Hurst how negligent their brother was
being when they had come all this way to bear him company.

Now, the Darcys, the Hursts, and Miss Bingley were gathered at the table.

Elizabeth ate little despite her earlier assertion of having an appetite, and Darcy did not fail to notice
it. Georgiana too would peek up from her plate now and again to study her before she caught her
brother looking her way. Whenever that happened, Georgiana quickly pretended to be thoroughly
absorbed with her bowl of l’oille.

It grew late and the party finally retired. Darcy naturally went to their bedroom, but Elizabeth headed
for Jane.

She gave a low tap at the door and was beckoned by a faint ‘come in.’ As quietly as she could,
Elizabeth went inside. Jane was resting comfortably on the bed, propped up by pillows. Charlie was
sound asleep in a bassinet in the nearest corner of the room where his father hovered close by,
admiring his son.

“How are you feeling?”

Jane’s eyes were bright as they came to focus on her sister. “Wonderful. I never dreamed I could
love anyone as much as I do Charles, but Charlie…”

Elizabeth smiled at her. And yet, another feeling was stirring in her breast besides content for her
sister. Was it…wistfulness?

“Is there something the matter, Lizzy?”

“No,” she lied at once, censuring herself for betraying any sign of her inner turmoil in the midst of
the happiest day of Jane’s life.

“You seem…sad.” As usual, Jane’s selfless heart had interpreted her sister to the quick.
“Jane, I expect anyone would when compared to yourself in this moment,” Elizabeth parried the remark and forced herself to maintain her smile. “I shall leave you to your rest. Good night.”

“Good night,” Charles mouthed from his place by the bassinet.

“Good night,” Jane returned, looking after her unsurely.

Elizabeth slipped into her bedroom quietly though she knew Darcy would not yet be asleep. Just as she thought, he was sitting up in wait for her.

She prepared for bed wordlessly by the light of the fire. When she climbed between the welcome sheets, Elizabeth felt Darcy seek her under the covers so that he might pull her to him. She allowed herself to at least find comfort in his embrace, kissing his hand before replacing it at her waist.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Is there anything you wish to tell me?”

In spite of the semidarkness, she knew he was looking at her as if to read in her countenance what she had to say.

“No, nothing.”

Even in the shelter of his arms, Elizabeth could not bring herself to tell Darcy what was disturbing her mind. He did not press her, and soon the slow, steady sounds of his breathing came from beside her.

She could not find sleep so easily. Every time she shut her eyes, Caroline Bingley’s sneering face materialized and her words rang loudly in her ears. She had watched Elizabeth with a gleam of triumph in her eyes for the rest of the night, and they both knew Caroline had indeed won something in the exchange they had earlier: she had finally succeeded in striking fear into Elizabeth’s heart that she would not be enough for Darcy.
A carriage rumbled over the dirt roads of Derbyshire, lightly jostling its passengers.

Elizabeth gazed distantly out the window at the setting sun, Darcy beside her and Georgiana seated across from them. The group was uncommonly silent, a much altered circumstance than when they had been traveling to Verburry. On that journey, Elizabeth had been the crux of a lively conversation and the cause of countless bursts of laughter which made the trip seem to take but half the time it in fact had. Now, she was all but mute as they made their way back to Pemberley nearly three weeks later.

Something had happened, and Darcy was at a loss.

They had stayed with Bingley and Jane so Elizabeth could lend a hand to her sister with the baby in the beginning. Consequently, Darcy saw very little of her, but when he did, he knew there was something wrong. There were moments in that time when his wife seemed like herself…seemed to be, because he knew the difference. Her confidence had given way to reserve, her playfulness forced.

Then there were the instances when she believed no one was watching, and her face would take on a profound sadness beyond expression.

He tried to ask her about it, countless times, but she had been avoiding him at all costs. Whenever he mentioned anything to do with it, Jane was waiting on her, or the housekeeper had to be informed of a change to the menu on Bingley’s behalf, or one of a thousand other things seemed to need her immediate attention. It was in this way that a fortnight had passed and Darcy still did not understand what was distressing her.

As dusk settled over them, Pemberley loomed just ahead, and a very few minutes saw the trio from the carriage and through the familiar oak doors of their home.

“Welcome back, Mr and Mrs Darcy, Miss Darcy,” greeted Mrs Reynolds in the entrance hall. “How did you leave Mrs Bingley and the little one?”

“Well and thriving, thank you,” Elizabeth answered.

“Bless them both,” the housekeeper said warmly; she thought Jane a sweet girl even from their limited association. “Dinner shall be ready in a quarter of an hour, if it pleases you.”

Darcy nodded. “Yes, thank you, Mrs Reynolds.”

She left to arrange matters with the cook while the Darcys went upstairs to their chambers to change out of their travelling attire for dinner.

In their bedroom, Darcy put on his waistcoat absentmindedly.

“Fitzwilliam? Could you help me with these buttons?” Elizabeth stood by her wardrobe, her gown open at the back.
Walking behind her, he began to do up the small pearl-like drops that secured her dress. He always felt ridiculously contented when she asked him to do this for her instead of calling on her lady’s maid; Darcy saw it as his right and privilege, and rather possessively so, not something to be passed on to any servant.

Elizabeth was holding up a few curls that fell from her hair so they would not catch in the buttons when he was seized with the longing to kiss her. Finishing with the final one, Darcy dropped his lips to the dip where her neck swept down to her shoulder and brushed them against the skin there. He felt her start of surprise, heard her gasp, but knew that her reaction did not arise from her thinking him untoward. It was quite the contrary; he had become aware very early on in their engagement that she took a great deal of pleasure in impulsive attentions from him. Twirling her about to face him, he caught her lips with his own, running his fingers along her jaw and feeling her press into him.

Darcy drew her closer still. As he held her, he wondered if perhaps her low spirits had passed. Or was it possible he had made too much of her tiredness and taken it for melancholy in err? He had to own that he had been almost overly watchful of Elizabeth ever since she woke from her hypothermic coma. Every day since then, he felt as if he were only waiting for when something would go wrong, not if.

And then all at once, where she had been there was only empty space. Opening his eyes, he found Elizabeth was turning away from him and making for the door, but not before he saw her dash away an inexplicable tear that glinted on her cheek.

That was certainly no figment of his imagination.

“Elizabeth—?”

“Georgiana will be waiting,” was all she choked out before she was gone.

With the dinner attendants continually circling the dining room to serve the new courses and clear away the preceding ones, Darcy did not dare confront Elizabeth about her startling retreat. He would have to wait.

But he could scarcely stand it. Why in God’s name would she recoil from him, and in tears? Just what was it that could be weighing on her so unbearably? It was unlike Elizabeth to repress anything or torment herself without seeking his confidence, she who always spoke her mind. Was it that he was the source of her unhappiness? Throughout dinner, Elizabeth would not even meet his eye. Dessert seemed to last an eternity. When the meal was finally over, he rose from his chair determined that this evening he would find out once and for all what this was about. He gestured to Georgiana: he needed to ask her if, for to-night, she could refrain from going to the library, where they usually gathered after dinner, so he could speak with Elizabeth in private.

Before he could say anything of the sort to his sister, however, Elizabeth spoke at large, “I am quite weary from the journey; I think I shall go to bed. Good night.”

Damnation, there she went again. But Darcy would not allow her to evade this any longer. He knew she would not be detained by him if that is what she decided, so he quickly devised a means to overcome that difficulty. He hated to deceive her, but what other choice was left to him? Touching his sister’s shoulder, he bent to whisper to her, “Georgiana, you must do something for me. Have Elizabeth come to the library. Draw on any reason you can come up with to induce her to
follow.”

To his surprise, Georgiana did not contest his odd request, but merely nodded before going after Elizabeth, who had already disappeared. For his part, Darcy went to the library to await them.

Elizabeth entered shortly after without realizing he was in the room. She headed directly for one of the shelves lining the back wall, no doubt to assist Georgiana with whatever fabricated motive she had invented to get her to come.

“Here it is, Georgiana,” she said, studying the cover. Darcy recognized it as one of the books Elizabeth had brought with her from Longbourn. “You may want to be gentle with it as many of the pages are loose from age, but…” she trailed off at the sound of a metallic click.

Georgiana had shut the door and put her back to it, and now Elizabeth saw Darcy. She had the distinct look of a person entrapped.

Darcy began in a gentle voice. “Elizabeth…”

“Can we speak to-morrow?” she quickly interrupted. “I really am fatigued.”

Without waiting for his answer, she strode over to the door. Georgiana was still standing before the exit and did not step aside.

Elizabeth quietly considered her sister-in-law’s face before saying in a low voice, “Georgiana, may I pass?”

In all the time Darcy had known his sister, that is to say her entire seventeen years of life, not once had he seen her speak or act contradictorily to a soul she encountered, many a time at no small expense to herself. Neither a word in direct opposition nor refusal of an entreaty had passed her lips to his knowledge. So it was with no small degree of astonishment that Darcy watched Georgiana defiantly raise her chin to Elizabeth, look at her waveringly as if experiencing some mortal struggle, and reply with but one word.

“No.”

Elizabeth’s face registered shock as well, but it was quickly overcome by dread.

Darcy decided that although his sister was in the room, he had to begin. Georgiana was his ally in this cause at any rate, that much she had made clear. Perhaps her presence would do more good than harm.

“Elizabeth, please,” he started again, making sure to keep his voice measured, “tell me what has happened.” She would not turn to him and instead still faced in the direction of his sister, though assuredly she was not looking Georgiana in the face either. “I am growing frantic, and in truth I cannot account for it. You can confide in me, you know you can.”

“Fitzwilliam, don’t,” Elizabeth begged in a desperate whisper.

Her accent tore at him, making his voice rise in a passion. “So now you do not deny it, but still will not unburden yourself to your own husband? Have I done something? For God’s sake, if I have—”

“It is nothing you have done!” burst from her as she suddenly whipped around. In that instant, he identified a flicker of guilt in Elizabeth’s countenance. “It is what I have…what I have not…”

“For that?”
Both of them whirled to face Georgiana as she exclaimed. Darcy’s sister had a mien on her face that looked at once comprehending and angry, flushed with her newfound daring. “For that?” she repeated. “For her you have been breaking your heart and my brother’s along with it?”

Darcy was stunned. What did Georgiana know that he did not?

A heated blush crept over Elizabeth’s face. “I had hoped you did not hear everything.”

“Well I did. Miss Bingley did not trouble herself to keep her voice lowered. I heard it all. When you would not allow yourself to be wounded by her first approach, she took up another—and she succeeded! I did not think you would let her, but if you dwell on her words even now…”

“Miss Bingley? What has she to do with any of this?” Darcy demanded, looking between them.

“Everything,” Georgiana said simply. She looked at Elizabeth, who was still crimson-cheeked, and then again to Darcy. “I have said more than is my place already and shall leave you to discuss matters over. Good night.” She turned on her heel and opened the door, but half curved back to look at Elizabeth from the corner of her eye.

“Elizabeth, I am not sorry that I spoke out of turn. My brother deserves to know. I am sorry for the pain she has caused you.”

And Georgiana left, closing the door behind her.

Darcy remained where he was for a full minute after his sister had gone; Elizabeth did not move either. He stood undecided, not knowing whether to approach her or wait for her to come to him. All he did know was that if Caroline Bingley was somehow involved in this matter, she must have said something truly terrible because Elizabeth was rarely upset by idle gossip or slander.

Finally, she turned. The expression on her face was unreadable, but her lips were trembling. “Charles’s sister conveyed to me a truth on the day of Charlie’s birth that I cannot disregard. Everything you are in name, standing, fortune, and legacy depends upon me producing an heir for Pemberley. If I do not—” Her face suddenly broke its eerie calm and with no volition of her own, hot tears gushed forth. It was not gentle crying either, but the kind that was so forceful, it made her inarticulate. Still, she attempted to continue. “—I disgrace you…she was right…find another who can…” She covered her face.

Darcy was disturbed on all hands. What could she be thinking? He went to her at once and tugged at her to be seated on the divan where she blindly followed. Sitting very close to her, he waited until she was more composed.

“Elizabeth?” he pleaded softly.

Her eyes, glassy and swollen, met his. “If I cannot give you children, will you regret taking me as your wife?”

The wrench Darcy felt on hearing her say those words to him was terrible. For this she had retreated into herself? Caroline had no idea how deeply her words would cut Elizabeth—no, she probably did, and that was why he reviled the woman, coldhearted, arrogant simpleton that she was.

“If you can think that of me, then you do not realize what you are to me.” His breathing was uneven. “If I spend the rest of my life with you, and only you, it is enough. More than enough—more than I ever dreamed I would have.” Darcy grabbed up both her hands and waited until he held her gaze again. “Elizabeth, you are everything I have and am in life now. To have children with you—I say with you, not by you—would be a glorious thing, but if it cannot happen with you alone, then I want
it with no one else. I am not a man who seeks to secure his line at any costs and regards his wife as
only a means to that end, or believes she is disposable if she cannot. Do you understand? I love you,
whatever may come. I love you above all other things, societal obligations be damned! I love you.”

Far from being quelled, Elizabeth’s tears had returned in full and her cheeks were shining by the
tracks they made. Darcy suddenly found her gathered in his lap with her arms thrown about his neck.
He embraced her tightly and let her go on crying until her sobs diminished of their own.

“I was afraid I would lose you,” escaped Elizabeth like a shamed confession while her cheek was
pressed to his.

“Never,” he told her firmly. Venturing to tease, he added, “Do not tell me so again, or you will give
me no choice but to say something belittling of your common sense.”

She gave a hiccupping laugh, pulling back to wipe away the salty tears from her own face and the
traces she had left on his.

Darcy watched her seriously as she did. “Elizabeth, what possessed you to pay any mind to Miss
Bingley’s words when you know every one is intentionally laced with malice?”

“I…,” her voice went very faint, “I would not have had I not already been troubled by similar
thoughts.”

He was taken aback and began again frantically, “You must know I could never leave you—surely,
you must?”

“I do,” Elizabeth said, placing a hand on his chest just over his heart as if to steady him. “I do,
Fitzwilliam. Even so, I would be lying if I said the worry had not been hiding in the back of my
mind. But I dismissed it. Then it was as if she knew exactly where to find it and inflame it until it
took on a life of its own. Hearing those thoughts voiced by another reawakened what I had buried.”
She bit her lip before continuing. “It is just, Jane and Charles have been married for the same length
of time we have, yet she already has given him a son. I cannot help but wonder why I…”

Her eyes pricked with tears again. “I began to fear that if I continue on this way and in time we
discover I cannot bear children…you would resent me for it. Having you feel that I deceived you in
some way or harbor bitterness towards me was what I feared most of all. Losing your regard would
almost be worse than losing you altogether to someone else who could possibly give you what I may
not be able to.”

“Enough, Elizabeth,” Darcy gently chided her into silence. “You shall never lose me in any respect,
of that you can be certain. I want to hear no more of it.”

She curled against his chest, and for a while neither of them spoke.

“I feel as though I should go apologize to Georgiana. Or thank her,” Elizabeth mused aloud.

Darcy laughed a little at that. “I have never seen her so bold. It is from your influence, I have no
doubt.” Elizabeth pretended to take offense before he went on. “If you wish to do either, leave it until
to-morrow. It is rather late, and I think bed a much more suitable destination.”

Elizabeth nodded her agreement and began to extricate herself from Darcy’s lap. They went upstairs
together, hand in hand.
If anyone is curious, I don't think Pemberley would be entailed like Longbourn was and passed into the hands of distant relatives if Elizabeth and Darcy don't have sons or any children at all. I believe the estate goes so far back historically with the bloodline that it is bound to it and subject to the present possessor's will. The reason Elizabeth is so upset is because it is one of the foremost duties of a wife to bear children. It would be considered a huge failing on her part if she does not, especially among these ancient families; husbands were, of course, regarded as blameless. I will only say that even sensible young women have moments of insecurity.

And she really wants a baby.
Mr and Mrs Darcy deviated from what was wonted of them as civilized English gentry in a number of ways.

For one, their union defied the expectations society placed upon them. In coming together, they had crossed the invisible, yet no less substantial, barriers dividing the castes that should have kept them apart. This noncompliance was all in good thanks to another singular circumstance: they, unlike so many before them and so many to come yet after them, had married for true affection. In a world where the most prominent reason such alliances were established was out of a sense of obligation to marry or to garner the status marriage entailed—one could not help but think of Charlotte Lucas—, love was considered a rather frivolous luxury, not a necessity.

There were naturally many other distinctions besides, but perhaps one of the most scandalous to the delicate sensibilities of the propriety-laden aristocracy—that is, if it were ever to be made known to them—was that Elizabeth and Darcy shared a bed. Permanently.

In the short months of preparation leading up to the wedding, Darcy had arranged for his new bride to have her own chamber at Pemberley. Though he cared little for the idea, he believed it would contribute to her comfort, so of course he was willing for it to be done. Had he the only say in the matter, they would have gone on in that manner, his own wishes having no consequence.

It was Elizabeth, on the fifth night in her new home, who had proven to him he was not alone in practically despising ‘her’ room.

She had said not a word when Mrs Reynolds indicated the designated chamber on her second, more intimate tour of the house as the new mistress. On the first night it appeared she was to spend alone since coming to Derbyshire, she had even gone so far as to allow herself to be tended to by her lady’s maid, Lily, in that room. However, sometime in the early hours of the next morning, Elizabeth realized she had not slept at all. The swans’-down pillows were exceptionally comfortable, and the fire roaring in the grate warded away the chill, but she could not sleep. The timepiece on the mantel was chiming four o’clock when she was simply unable to bear it any longer. Elizabeth stole out from the covers and tiptoed through the inner-door that adjoined her room to Darcy’s.

Darcy had been wide awake at the time as well, laying sullenly on his bed like a child robbed of their favorite plaything in punishment for some misdeed. Upon seeing his wife determinedly cross the threshold dividing the gulf between their rooms, his face lit up. Without a single word, Elizabeth took up the space beside him, tangled her fingers in his nightshirt, and promptly fell asleep.

The mistress’ chamber, for all its fashionable floral wallpaper and tastefully upholstered divans, stood abandoned. It was converted into a parlor of sorts the week after, neither of them even willing to maintain the appearance that it was being otherwise employed.

So it was that on this brilliant June morning, Elizabeth contemplated the fine contours and chiseled features of her husband as he lay in deep sleep. She was an early riser; at least, in comparison to Darcy she was. It was a rare occasion indeed to find him gone from their bed and she still in it. Because of their complementary sleeping tendencies, it had almost become part of her regime to consider him in this vulnerable state before getting up to begin the day. She cherished that she alone knew the serene, boyish look he had about him lying there with his chest rising and falling in steady accord with his breath.

Sunlight was already peeking in through the chink in the drapes, bringing with it the promise of a
lovely day. Elizabeth smiled. Taking her forefinger, she lightly traced it along the length of his brow, down the bridge of his nose, and across his lips to the cleft in his chin. His face twitched. Stifling a laugh, Elizabeth repeated herself.

As she let her finger trail over its self-made path again, a hand suddenly sprang out to arrest her wrist, Darcy’s eyes flying open in the same instant. “You know very well that is not how I wish to be awoken.”

“Forgive me,” Elizabeth answered, smiling all the more broadly. “I do not recall us establishing another means.”

“Is that so? Let me help you recollect.” His eyes flickered mischievously, and without further ado, he softly joined their lips.

As the day wore on, the weather proved very fine indeed, so much so that Elizabeth decided a picnic out of doors for the midday meal was in order.

Her spontaneity over the matter threw the kitchen staff into somewhat of a disarray, though they were getting accustomed to the free-spirited whims of their mistress. In the end, everything was settled satisfactorily after Elizabeth insisted that nothing elaborate was necessary and eventually took to the cook’s pantry herself to fill a basket with her hand-picked selections, excusing her disruption of their routine with an ingenuous smile as she exited.

By noon, she and Darcy were off to the far east side of Pemberley’s grounds. Georgiana had been invited along on the excursion as well, but as they had caught her in the middle of one of her piano playing sessions under Mrs Annesley’s tutelage, she agreed to accompany them only belatedly.

They chose a grassy knoll hugged on one side by a brook that ran through the park and the wood on the other. There, the two spent a very pleasant hour talking and leisurely polishing off the cold dishes of game, cheeses, and wine Elizabeth had packed. Whether it was owing to the fresh air rallying their appetites or that the flawless weather only gave it the impression of being so, everything seemed more delicious. Ridiculous notion as it was that a loaf of bread taken out of the confines of four walls could actually taste better, their senses were surely telling them it was so. Best and brought out last of all were the peaches, freshly picked from Pemberley’s orchard with their tart, juicy hints of summer. As Elizabeth and Darcy’s teeth broke the fuzzy skin of the fruits, it occurred to her, not for the first time, just how very fortunate a path was the one her life had taken—and how truly happy she was.

The sun was warm on her neck and her husband’s head lay in her lap, his eyes closed and he so very still that she could well believe he had dropped off. The babbling water and the gentle rustle of the leaves being tossed by the breeze were the only sounds to be heard. Elizabeth dangled her fingers to let them play in the cool stream and watched two birds circle one another playfully in the distance.

“There was a time when I believed that a day like this was nothing short of impossible.”

She glanced down to face Darcy, whose eyes were now open and fixed on her, at his words. Choosing to purposely misinterpret what she thought he might be saying, she replied, “I know the rainy climate lingered for longer than is usual, but I hardly thought it was so protracted as to make you fear you would never set eyes on the sun again.”

Undeterred, he pressed on. “There are still days I can hardly believe are not just something out of my imaginings and I will wake to find it was all only a dream.”
“Shall I pinch you then?”

“Thank God you accepted my hand the second time, Elizabeth, or I swear I do not know what I would have done with myself.”

“Exceedingly puzzle any other companions you might have had with inexplicable turns of disposition, undoubtedly,” Elizabeth told him. Darcy seldom divulged his introspections so liberally, at least not without some prodding on her part. Disconcerted by his behavior, she relented a little, “Fitzwilliam, why do you dwell on that now?”

“I was thinking of how happy I am—”

“And you check your happiness with undue morbidity?” she interrupted.

“—and what my life would have been had things transpired differently. A number of things. If I had not resisted Aunt Catherine’s wishes. If you had continued to despise me. If the accident at the pond had…had…” He faltered, and then the remainder of his sentence came rushing out. “Had any of it left me without you.”

For a moment after this frank confession, Elizabeth did not speak.

“Well,” she eventually said softly, “I can tell you how it would have been for me. I should have cursed myself the greatest fool in all of England had I refused you again. It would have caused us both pain—deserved on my side, but hardly on yours—and I would have regretted it as long as I lived. Not only that, but if after learning the truth of all that once made me think you arrogant I could still turn you away despite my loving you so deeply at that point, I would have been unworthy of you when so blinded by unfounded prejudice.”

“It was not so very unfounded,” Darcy murmured ashamedly.

“What was not unfounded was easily forgiven by someone of lesser vanity and reasonable nature,” she declared decidedly. “As for the rest of it, there is no sense in you distressing over what could have been. You shall never find any peace in that.”

He said nothing.

Elizabeth looked upon him carefully. Bringing her hand up, she stroked his face in a gesture of comfort. Then, she took his cheek between her thumb and forefinger and gave it a hard tweak. Darcy gave a rather ungainly yelp and lurched out of her lap, turning to look back at her with startled eyes.

She was all innocence as she returned his gaze. “So you can be sure you are not dreaming.”

His lips twitched into a smile. “I see.”

He was inching his way closer towards her, attempting to do so without bringing her attention to it as a predator would sneak upon its prey. But she saw he was ready to return her favor in kind. Gathering her skirt in her hands, she pitched away just in time to miss being caught. Elizabeth dashed up the small hill and among the copse of trees nearby, Darcy just behind her, both laughing like school children. She darted between the trees and brush as he gave pursuit, but maneuvering through the close-growing thicket was a feat far easier for her small frame, and she escaped his reach more than once with the trees to shield her.

At last he did catch her. Darcy brought Elizabeth up against the trunk of elm, each of them breathless and staring with bright eyes and glowing cheeks that were owing to more than just their run. The cover of the grove was thick enough to guard them from any prying eyes of passersby. Bracing his
hands on either side of her head on the tree where he pinned her, Darcy leaned in and kissed
Elizabeth with a fervor that stirred both their bloods. Her hands went seeking under his coat with a
provocative, teasing touch of exploration that made his chest burn even through the linen of his shirt.
Feverishly, she loosed his cravat and stroked the exposed skin of his throat with her fingertips. He
broke from her lips with a half-groan before voraciously moving on to her neck, eliciting from her a
sharp gasp, her shallow breathing hot against his cheek.

“Fitzwilliam! Elizabeth!”

The pair tore apart, entirely without breath, hearing themselves called from no great distance. They
passed a look somewhat guiltily between them as if they were two reckless youths stealing caresses
instead of man and wife.

Elizabeth was the sooner to compose herself and walked out from the trees to see if she could
discover their seeker. “Georgiana! Here we are, this way!”

Darcy came up behind Elizabeth just as Georgiana joined them. “It really is wonderful out. This was
a marvelous idea, Elizabeth.”

“Come have something to eat, you must be half-starved.” And so saying, Elizabeth shooed her sister-
in-law towards the basket, scrounging up a plate for her.

When she was sure Georgiana had food in hand, she settled back down and Darcy sidled up beside
her. Much more unguarded about demonstrating these sorts of things in front of his sister, he knotted
his fingers with Elizabeth’s, coaxing her into leaning her head on his shoulder. They three sat in
amiable silence, simply basking in the splendor of the day.

After Georgiana had eaten her fill and she too was reclining on the grass, a yellow duckling came
waddling out from seemingly nowhere.

Elizabeth laughed, the first to spot their miniature caller. “Hello, little one. Are you hungry?”

At her voice, though spoken gently, the duckling seemed about to flee, but Elizabeth plucked out a
wedge of bread from the picnic basket, tore off a small piece, and tossed it over to him. Hesitantly,
the tiny fellow approached her offering and, finding it edible, gobbled it down directly. Georgiana
giggled as he instantly forgot his trepidation and turned to the three of them expectantly.

Elizabeth, a little apart from Darcy at this point with her legs folded beneath her, continued to feed
the duck with whatever leftovers she could find, but it was not long until the creature was pecking at
the final morsel straight from the palm of his benefactress’ hand. Still unsatisfied, the fluffy beggar
eyed her.

“That was the last of it,” she told him apologetically.

Georgiana very nearly snorted, and she put out a finger to stroke his back, but he nosed open her
closed fist to see if she held anything of interest. Judging that she did not, his response was to let out
a warbling chirp and flap his wings most disapprovingly.

“I am sorry you feel that way,” Elizabeth continued speaking in mock seriousness as if in earnest
conversation, “but what would your mother have to say about that kind of behavior?”

As if on cue, a larger duck rounded the hill at that exact moment with two other ducklings trailing
behind. In his indignation at the discontinuation of his food supply, the duckling wanderer who had
been eluding his mother for the better part of an hour revealed his whereabouts quite noisily.
“Why, you greedy little charlatan!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “You would not even share with your sisters?”

The sight of one of her hatchlings so close to humans gave cause for the mother duck to emit a piercing quack. Summoned to her side, the duckling rejoined his family as they made their way back to the other side of the knoll, his feathery tail wagging cheekily all the way.

“What makes you think it was a boy who was the wayward one, while the two who remained were girls?” Darcy asked amusedly as they disappeared.

“Experience,” Elizabeth replied with a grin. “Boys get into mischief even when they do not intend it. And name one mother’s daughter you can think of who did not do anything and everything her mother told her, no matter how absurd.”

After a moment, Darcy said just loud enough for her alone to hear, “I believe I may be looking at the only one I know of.”

Not expecting an answer, she looked to him, thinking about her mother’s insistence that she marry Mr Collins just as surely as he did. She had told Darcy of that not long after they themselves had been betrothed, and his reaction to the account had been an interesting jumble of shock, relief, and pride—the latter two solely in regard to how she had handled the situation, namely her refusal.

That, of course, among other things.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam!” Georgiana’s voice cut into their unified reflections. “I almost forgot. Mrs Reynolds asked me to bring you this. A letter came just after you left.”

“Thank you, Georgiana.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed somewhat as he took the letter, and Elizabeth watched him break the seal with a sense of foreboding that was not wholly unwarranted; it was peculiar for a letter to arrive so late in the day. The post was regularly delivered at seven o’clock sharp, just before Darcy conducted his business, and therefore long before they had departed Pemberley. She kept careful watch as his eyes skimmed down along the writing, and his mouth drew tighter and grimmer all the while. Both women could see he did not like what its contents disclosed.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked when he lifted his gaze from the page.

“I have to go to London.”

“Some time in the coming week then? Let me know precisely when that way I may—”

“I must leave this very moment.”

She was all astonishment. “What business could warrant the solicitors needing you so suddenly?”

“It is not the solicitors,” he said, starting to rise to his feet, “there has been a fire at the townhouse.”

Georgiana let out a low cry.

“Has anyone been hurt?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, the staff stationed there is unharmed, but the same cannot be said of the property, and they require that I assess the damage before they can proceed.”

“Thank goodness no one was injured,” Georgiana murmured. “But how terrible. A fire! Does the
letter say the extent of the ruin?”

“No,” Darcy shook his head, “but I shall send word of it myself once I get there.” Already he was striding up the hill and away.

Elizabeth took up the picnic basket and started after him, Georgiana at her heels. Although acting with dispatch, Darcy was already far ahead of them and they never matched his gait crossing the grounds. Elizabeth finally caught up to him in their bedroom where he was directing his valet to pack a few belongings into a trunk.

“Fitzwilliam, allow me a few minutes to change and pack, and I shall be ready as well.”

Darcy turned to look at Elizabeth when she spoke as though only just noticing she was in the room. “Ready?” he echoed blankly.

“To leave,” she said briskly, already fetching a few sensible gowns from her wardrobe to have packed.

“Elizabeth…” Darcy began, but glimpsed his valet and addressed him instead, “That will do for the present, Thomas. Just have them corded and sent after me.”

“Yes, sir,” and heaving the trunk onto his shoulder, Thomas left his master and mistress.

Elizabeth was, by this time, bundling her own essential possessions into a trunk, forgoing the servants’ assistance in her haste.

“I would rather you did not come.”

She stopped mid-motion. “Oh?”

It had always been Elizabeth’s inclination, and his, to accompany him on his travels. She always had done so, and he never had the least objection. Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at him now, utterly bewildered.

“For practicality,” he muttered, nearly turning crimson as he uttered that falsehood under her gaze.

“Practicality,” she repeated disbelievingly. “It is impractical for you to wait but five minutes more for me to ready myself? I am conscious a fire is no trifling matter, but surely a few moments shall make no difference to what condition we will find the townhouse in?”

“I simply think it would be best if you stayed at Pemberley.”

“So I have gathered, but I fail to see why.”

He mumbled something unintelligible.

“What was that?”

“For your health, I say it for your health!” Darcy practically flushed at having to come out and admit his true motive.

Elizabeth stared. Seeing that he was truly overwrought, she willed herself not to laugh, but it was managed only with difficulty. “Unless you know something I do not, my health is as sound as yours.”

“You know of what I speak. I of course could not keep you from your sister, and fortunately that
was scarcely half a day’s ride, but a journey to London is entirely another matter. Do you think I want to risk—?"

“For pity’s sake, what do you risk?” Elizabeth rejoined, becoming a bit impatient. “Fitzwilliam, it has been six months. *Six months.* The way you carry on, it is as if I was bedridden yesterday. How much time must pass before you overcome this irrational fear of my falling ill?”

“You act as if succumbing to a relapse is unheard of. I do not know how long it shall be until I cease worrying—until this dreadful gnawing in my stomach does not plague me. I only know it has not yet. Can you not do as I ask until then? Do not make me beg.”

She studied him as he fidgeted restlessly, wringing his hands in what she often likened to a very Mrs Bennet-like fashion. He was being preposterous, no question of it, but while he was worked into such a state, she could not bring herself to cause him further anxiety, even if it was unreasonable.

“I shall stay because you will clearly have no tranquility otherwise. I will, however, come and go as I please when next the occasion arises,” she compromised. “If I wait until you stop your fretting, I fear I shall never cross the threshold again. Are we in agreement, Fitzwilliam?”

“We are,” he sighed, quite obviously relieved that he had won this battle at least and prolonged the time until she would exert herself.

“Good. Now come bid me a proper good-bye.”

Darcy had departed hours ago.

The sun was just setting, and Elizabeth watched as it slowly sank behind pink and indigo clouds from the library where she was sitting with Georgiana.

The two of them had decided to try their hands at painting screens some weeks back, and they were working on their individual undertakings at the moment. Rather, it was more accurate to say Georgiana was still working on hers. Elizabeth’s sat neglected on her lap for some time. Her sister-in-law invariably did have more patience than she. Then again, Elizabeth had always been of the opinion that her allotted share of that particular virtue had forsaken her and been doubly bestowed upon Jane instead; it would certainly explain a number of things.

“I have nearly done,” Georgiana announced at length, holding her piece aloft to inspect it more carefully by the dying light.

Elizabeth glanced at her to see the progress she had made for herself. The canvas displayed a beautiful rustic scene, complete with willow branches, dragonflies, and all.

“You have put me to shame,” Elizabeth said with no little chagrin. “All the more so, I fear, for not only is yours vastly better, you are almost finished whereas mine has been but half-complete for days.”

Georgiana laughed as she set her work aside to dry. “It is only since I have little else to occupy my time in the evenings.”

“And unfailing modesty besides,” Elizabeth teased. “If I did not know better, I would swear you and Jane were the true blood sisters, not she and I.”

Her sister-in-law laughed again, but it was punctuated by a stifled yawn. “I think I shall retire early
to-night. Do you plan on remaining much longer?”

“No,” Elizabeth told her, pushing her screen from her lap and onto the divan, “I should have gone up myself in a moment had you not.”

This was, in fact, not true. Contemptible as it would sound aloud, Elizabeth was not looking forward to sleeping without her husband beside her. She was far too used to having a companion in her bed and had scarcely ever been tried in going without one since marrying. In the six months since what passed at the pond, Darcy had done his utmost to conduct business short of leaving Pemberley—and her—without her even realizing it until that afternoon. Now, his absence left her strikingly bereft. Elizabeth’s plan had been to remain out of their bedchamber for as long as possible in the hope that deferring that inevitability would stave off any sense of loneliness.

Yet up to bed the pair headed, parting after they mounted the stairs to go their separate ways. Once Lily had helped Elizabeth change, she dismissed her and wished her a good night. Before the vanity, she sat brushing out her hair for longer than usual. Finally, there was nothing for it. Rising from the backstool, she looked over to the bed. It seemed awfully large in her solitude.

Elizabeth took but two steps when she began to feel decidedly strange. Her sight became glaringly overbright and vague, sending the room into an indistinct haze. She felt as though she needed to sit back down, and she made for the recently vacated stool when her vision conversely grew so dim, she could hardly see at all. There was a moment’s more fumbling and then she collapsed.

It must have been that a few hours passed by the time Elizabeth returned to her senses alone in the shadowy bedroom. Evidently no one had discovered the mistress of Pemberley prostrate because she awoke on the floor, but she was glad of it; there was no use in alarming the entire household over a spell of lightheadedness. Upon trying to raise herself, she discovered that she had injured her right arm, not enough to make it continually painful, but it was tender to use. Once she was upright again, Elizabeth felt no worse for her tumble save her arm. She decided that the heat of the day must have affected her more than she realized and was to blame, nothing a good night’s rest could not set right. In order to allay any other vestiges of overheat, she splashed her face at the basin and took a long drink from the pitcher beside it.

As she rested her cheek on the pillow and faced Darcy’s empty side of the bed, she could not help but find solace in at least one respect that she had not gone with him: it saved Darcy from agonizing for a trifle.
Charred wood and broken glass were trod underfoot as Darcy walked through where the fire had ravaged the townhouse.

Upon his first inspection, he had determined that the damage was not nearly as extensive as it could have been. He found out from the housekeeper that a resourceful stablehand had managed to contain the flames in the kitchens from whence they had started. As far as they could tell, a few embers—unknown to still be hot and thus unattended—had been rekindled and blown from the grate by a gale driving down the chimney. From there, the blaze ignited.

On this morning, his third in London, Darcy surveyed and assisted with the ongoing clean-up of the wreckage. Everything beyond salvaging was being cleared away, leaving the crumbling ruin of a room bare. It was fortunate that the kitchens were along the outer portion of the house for everything else remained virtually untouched and all the other beams and walls remained sturdy as ever, a real stroke of luck in light of what could have happened.

The necessary documentation with his solicitors over the expenditures that would be applied for reparations had been sorted, signed, and processed. All that remained to be done was to hire a contractor and mason to reconstruct the kitchens. Once the rebuilding was underway, Darcy fully intended to leave the affair in the hands of his steward, who was more than capable of seeing it through. As for him, he was eager to get back to Elizabeth because he had already been away longer than he had anticipated.

With the toe of his boot, he turned over a mangled lump of spindly brass that he could only assume had once been a candelabrum. Darcy took another sweeping look around him as a blackened slab of plaster dropped from the ceiling and splintered among the rubble. Yes, this could have been much worse. Besides, it was only a property. It could be restored, unlike some things.

After a morning of visiting with tenants, Elizabeth was perusing the letter she had received from Darcy for more or less the twentieth time. Its arrival had been a bit of a disappointment, for after five days of absence she had expected her husband to come through the front doors of Pemberley, not just a piece of correspondence bearing his name.

The letter, addressed to both her and Georgiana, explained the state of the house and his need to remain in town for a few days longer. At the bottom of the page, scrawled in an untidier hand than the body of the letter had been in—very much seeming like he had resolved on including it just before posting it—he had written a quick line for Elizabeth alone.

I love you, always.

Silly as it would seem for a wife of a year and some months to do, Elizabeth felt a wonderful rush of warmth infuse her cheeks at the words every time she took them in.

A lilting strain of notes danced in the air as Georgiana played. Elizabeth smiled at the sound as she crossed the entrance hall and was just folding up her letter when a knock resounded at the front doors. So close herself, Elizabeth did not bother waiting for one of the servants to answer and stepped up briskly to greet their callers herself.

How very much she came to regret that decision.
Standing before her were none other than two of the last people she ever expected to darken Pemberley’s doorway: Mr and Mrs Wickham.

Miserable, driving rain had besieged London, making everything gray and bleak.

The drum of rainfall pattering against the casements and shingles was usually lulling for Darcy, but not to-day. He glowered out the window of the townhouse study, watching the drops of water course down across the panes in miniature rivulets.

It was as if the rain had followed him from Derbyshire, and it was putting him out in two regards. First, a contractor could not come by to appraise the fire damage and proffer an estimate in this weather, further protracting his stay in town. The second was that even though Darcy was of a mind to leave the entire matter of the reconstruction to his steward when his rashness got the better of him, the roads were in no condition for him to travel, effectively stranding him in London.

Looking away from the sight of the dreary wet and cold, Darcy turned to the fire and gazed into the brightness. In this, his moment of weakness, he wondered if he ought not to have stopped Elizabeth from joining him. If she was here beside him, he knew very well he would not be so impatient to go, nor quite so willing to saddle his horse and ride in the torrential downpour outside.

There were very few times in her life when Elizabeth found herself speechless, but this was one of them.

“Lizzy!” squealed Lydia. “Are you not absolutely shocked to see me here? Good Lord, I should say you are. If you were any more astounded we should be picking you up from a swoon!”

Though words were still just beyond her power, Elizabeth’s mind churned, one idea recurring over and again. Thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia!

“Are you not going to invite us inside for some refreshment? We have come travelling all the way from London, and I am parched.”

“London?” was the first thing she heard herself say. “What were you doing in London?”

“Oh, we took a house there ages ago,” Lydia prattled on. “It is a little out of George’s income with the militia, but he does spoil me so!” She aimed a besotted simper in the direction of said spoiler as she spoke, never realizing that his reciprocating smile did not reach his eyes. “Which puts me in mind, Lizzy, could we borrow a bit of money for a few expenses? The same amount as last time would do very well for us.”

Elizabeth stared. She should have known providing Lydia with money would never have been a single occurrence. Still, what else could she have done when her own sister wrote that they had already exceeded the living Darcy had given them but offer what she could from her own private savings, small though they were, to sustain them?

“We heard about the fire at your townhouse. The ton is buzzing with it,” Wickham said, breaking his silence. Even when he was not smiling, the man seemed to be sneering. “Dreadful, simply dreadful. When we were made aware, Lydia and I thought to visit for a night or two to see how you bear it.”

Her eyes riveted to his face. Of course. That was why he and her sister dared show themselves here. They knew Darcy had gone to London for the fire. It was too good of an opportunity to miss
imposing and begging for more funds while at it. Elizabeth straightened up. Well, whatever they believed would happen while Darcy was away was wrong. She had, throughout this entire exchange, barred passage by standing before the entryway to make it plain they were not to come inside. If Lydia had been alone, she would have, but as her husband had come along, Elizabeth would not allow it. She was suddenly aware that the piano music had died away; her purchase on the door handle tightened subconsciously.

Some of these thoughts must have been conveyed on Elizabeth’s face because Lydia’s smile shrank ever so slightly in the ensuing silence.

Wickham’s eyes, however, far from suggesting discomfiture, glinted with wicked intent. “Lydia, I think our dear sister is still too overcome by our sudden appearance. Let us help her to the parlor and see her seated before a swooning fit does indeed become possible.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, he reached out and shoved the door wide open, overpowering Elizabeth’s attempts to shut them out with her injured arm. She stumbled backwards slightly from the force of his thrust.

“Mr Wickham—!” she began indignantly.

“Now, Lizzy,” Lydia interjected as she walked in behind him, beginning to untie her bonnet, “whatever are you addressing my George like that for? He is family.”

“Too right. Please, Elizabeth, give me my Christian name,” he drew nearer.

“Not another step!” Elizabeth practically snarled. Lydia might be oblivious, but Wickham knew what he did in coming and she was incensed by his audacity. “You are not welcome here.”

It was at that moment that Georgiana, heading for the main staircase and quite unaware of what was taking place, happened upon the little group. Her eyes perched on Elizabeth first, then shifted to Lydia unsurely. They finally landed on Wickham, and Elizabeth was certain that Darcy’s sister would crumple on the spot.

The poor girl gave a harsh intake of breath, her face turning a horrible ashen pallor while her hands took to quaking.

“Hello, Georgiana,” Wickham said, low and smooth.

She had not imagined it to be possible, but Georgiana looked more stricken. All the confidence Elizabeth had watched her come into utterly abandoned her, leaving behind a waif of a child who could but just support herself.

“How dare you speak to her?” Elizabeth shouted, fairly trembling with fury as she stood her ground between Georgiana and Wickham. “You have no right to be here! Depart from this house at once, or I will have you removed. I shall not ask again!”

Alerted by the raised tone of their mistress, several of the servants had rendered Elizabeth’s threat unnecessary, gathering in the entrance hall to see what stranger had the impudence to come cause trouble for the lady of the house while the master was away. Some of the older hands recognized Wickham, and a flurried outbreak of whispering spread among them like wildfire.

Wickham, noticing in particular James the groomsmen and a very brawny gardener, retreated a step. A moment’s more contemplation told him how useless it would be to continue an attempt of forced entry. “Very well, I shall take my leave. Good day to you,” and with a mocking bow of respect to Elizabeth, he marched out the door.
Lydia hovered yet, looking as if she had rather her husband had fought the impromptu defenders if it meant she could stay and revel in the glories of Pemberley. Elizabeth raised her chin and fixed her with a look that could in no way be misinterpreted: bring Wickham to this house again and all communications between them would be severed. Lydia turned on her heel and went sulking after him.

Once the door shut them from out of sight, Georgiana sank onto the bottommost stair.

“James, please ensure that they find their way off the grounds.” Elizabeth did not think it beyond Wickham to try something again. Once the groomsmen had done as she bid, she hurried to Georgiana’s side. “Georgiana! Georgiana, I am so sorry. I tried to stop them, but he was stronger. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am fine,” she answered in a voice that was rather higher than usual. “I just did not expect to…oh!” Georgiana ended by burying her face in her hands.

Elizabeth sat rubbing her sister-in-law’s back as the poor girl endeavored to overcome her mortification. Such a tumultuous upheaval was only to be expected after a confrontation with the man who had once attempted to seduce and ruin her all for the sake of obtaining her fortune and exacting revenge on her brother.

*. *

It was another three days before Darcy could at last quit London for home, making it a full week that he had been gone.

Tired and chilled through from the mist that hung on the air for the better part of his ride, he wanted nothing so much as to be in front of a fire with his family. Weary though he was, Darcy felt a smile pull at the corners of his mouth as Pemberley came into his sights, and it was not long after that his horse’s shoes clopped over the stones and dirt along the drive. He dismounted and James led the animal, whose flanks were heaving, to the stables.

The house was dark and quiet as he entered. He had sent no word ahead of his coming because his departure from London had been a sudden release, but by no means an undesirable one. Darcy headed upstairs to his room directly to get into clean, dry garments, coming upon neither Georgiana nor Elizabeth along the way. That accomplished, he descended once more and went straight for the library. It was after the dinner hour and surely where they both must be.

As he approached the door, which definitely had the light of a blazing fire flickering from within, he caught his wife’s voice.

“…you need not say anything to him, Georgiana. I shall tell Fitzwilliam of it just as soon as…well I suppose he will not take the news calmly in any circumstance, but certainly not just after he returns.”

He pushed open the door to see Elizabeth and his sister huddled together on the divan. The words he overheard put him on his guard. Georgiana was looking somewhat troubled, but it was clear she drew comfort from Elizabeth’s hold on her hand. What had happened?

“Fitzwilliam!”

Elizabeth glanced up from Georgiana to find Darcy. Her fine eyes alight, she left her seat and approached him with what would be considered by most a very unladylike pace. Darcy was not among those. He took her in his arms and kissed her, shorter than he would have liked because of Georgiana’s presence, but then he had been deprived of her touch for what he deemed far too long.
so even that fleeting instant was enough. Georgiana too was very pleased to see her brother returned and her face was cleared of all discomposure as he kissed her on her cheek in greeting.

Seated between them, Georgiana at his left and Elizabeth on his right with her fingers firmly weaved with his, Darcy knew without question that the next time Elizabeth insisted on resuming her custom of accompanying him on business, he would not refuse her again.

Indeed so happy was he that their separation had come to an end, all contemplation of the mysterious tête-à-tête fled his thoughts.

It was not until the next morning that any recollection of Elizabeth’s words revisited Darcy at all.

As he was breakfasting with her and his sister, he found Georgiana peering at him more than once with a look on her countenance that suggested she was attempting to divine something from him. Only then did it strike him that he had not asked about the conversation he had overheard when he arrived. He intended to remedy that immediately.

Once they had all finished and Georgiana removed to her pianoforte, Darcy gave a few instructions to one of the servants about setting aside business that required his immediate attention in the study for the time being. He then sought after Elizabeth, who had headed in the direction of the garden.

The tempests of the past week had been succeeded by an almost unseasonably warm reprieve this morning. Elizabeth was engaged by an untamed bed of poppies, jonquils, and lilies with a pair of scissors in her left hand. It was not that the flowers went untended that they grew tangled together, far from it. Elizabeth had grown them intertwined because she said they looked better that way, as nature intended. When she first told Darcy so, he could not help but smile at how very well they fit together: he was of the same mind, and the wild beauty of Pemberley mirrored it.

Darcy came to where she was, but did not alert her to his presence just yet. Above a year of marriage had done nothing to temper his adoration of his wife; indeed each day seemed to find it more fervent than the last. A few sunbeams had caught her at such an angle that they made Elizabeth appear to glow with sheer self-sustained vibrancy. As she worked, she hummed. It was no melody Darcy could recognize, and being as well-versed in music as he was, he could only suppose it was a composition of her own design. It sounded like Elizabeth. He reached out to touch her shoulder almost reverently.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam, I did not see you there! Have you come to seek an escape from the mountains of estate papers that need tending?” Her cheek dimpled as she smiled. “I cannot say I blame you for your negligence in the least. It is too beautiful a day to be confined indoors.”

“Actually, I came to inquire something of you.”

She tilted her head in anticipation. Briefly, he related the fragment of the exchange between her and Georgiana he had stumbled upon on accident. Elizabeth’s eyebrows rose slightly as he asked her the meaning of it.

“I had not expected…this is not the time I would have chosen to…” she stumbled over her words, something not typical of her. It was Darcy who became tongue-tied oftener, one of the reasons he was so reserved with strangers.

“If it concerns Georgiana, I must know,” he persisted.

Elizabeth nodded as if to assure herself, her face growing less clouded. “Of course you must.”
With that, she explained to him of the Wickhams’ appearance and intrusion. As he listened, Darcy grew furious, which was only evident from the manner in which his eyes flashed. When Elizabeth told him Georgiana had not only seen her abductor, but that Wickham had spoken to her, he nearly uttered a profanity right then and there.

“Villainous scoundrel!” he spat when he at last trusted himself to speak. “Does his depravity know no bounds?”

“Georgiana was shaken at first, but she recovered her spirits quickly. Her only concern afterwards was for what you might think.”

“I think I should have liked to see him dare show his face when I was here,” growled Darcy through gritted teeth.

“There was no danger of that,” Elizabeth said shaking her head. “Wickham contrived to come purposely while you were away in London, he said as much.”

The admission did nothing to improve Darcy’s temper. For a long while, he stood his ground in stony silence, letting his anger lap at him. It was a good while that passed before he could finally begin to feel it ebb away. No lasting harm had come of Wickham’s scheme due to Elizabeth’s quick thinking, and he was grateful for it.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth had gone back to cutting flowers to let him have time to deal with his emotions. As she snipped the stems, she gathered her pickings clumsily by the same hand that employed the shears to deposit them in the basket by her feet. It suddenly struck Darcy as rather odd: Elizabeth was right-handed, yet her more dexterous arm was hanging idle by her side. He watched her carry on that way for a few moments more, and just when he was on the verge of asking her about it, she stooped to lift her load and started walking back inside. He fell into step with her and she broke the silence between them.

“Something of this sort was always bound to happen, nor can we prevent them from trying again. All we can do is stand firm when it does. But I must confess…” Elizabeth bit her lip for a bare second before plunging on, “…some of the blame falls to me.”

Darcy stopped in his tracks and she with him, turning to look at him fully. “A few months past, Lydia wrote to me that she was in need of money. I did not know of her situation, if she was being kept fed and warm with such a selfish, unfeeling husband scarcely able to retain substantial means for bare necessities. I sent what she asked. I imagine they supposed I would be just as accommodating with anything else they wished in taking such a liberty to come here.” He saw she was looking a little strained as she continued. “I did not mean to keep it from you, but I never found the right time to tell you. You must know that the amount was taken from my own pin money. I would never ask you to hand over any more of your own wealth to that man, indirectly or otherwise, but she is my sister.” A challenging gleam shone through Elizabeth’s eyes despite the regret she felt. “I will not stand by as she sinks into degradation and poverty while it is in my power to save her from it. Lydia is too young to—”

“Elizabeth, you need not explain yourself.”

She fell silent.

Darcy looked at her solemnly, but not in anger. “There is no question of you helping your sister. I am only sorry you thought you could not ask for my assistance. If Georgiana were in her stead, do you not think I would have done anything to make her life more comfortable?”
“Of course,” Elizabeth responded very softly, her gaze on him equally so.

“Well then…” Darcy loosened the basket’s handle from her hold. “Come, the sun is scorching now,” and taking her arm with his free one, they walked on.

Elizabeth led the way into the library, where several empty vases sat on the table by the window, and began arranging the jonquils, lilies, and poppies among them. While she did, Darcy occupied himself with the newspaper and sat to read it in his armchair. Turning the page some time later, he looked up and gave pause. Once more, Elizabeth was favoring her right arm. Whenever she would raise it, and that was sparingly, he could see her give a barely perceptible wince. She gave up its use entirely soon enough and compensated the deficiency by making liberal use of her left hand, though it was obviously an awkward application.

“Are you injured?”

Elizabeth glanced at him from over the petals and leaves. “Not at all.”

It was an indirect answer, Darcy came to realize some moments after being unable to concentrate on the newsprint before him. She did not say ‘no’ outright; her reply was open to be interpreted that something could have in fact occasioned her being injured—she only denied it had. He was at the point of opening his mouth to question her again when a crash of shattering glass caused him to abandon his paper with a start.

Darcy twisted around in his chair to discover its source. It was Elizabeth; one of the vases had slipped from her grasp as she crossed the room to place it on an end table. What’s more was that when he looked away from the broken crystal, water, and flowers littering the floor at her feet to Elizabeth, her face was a shade of white he had seen it take on only once before.

“Elizabeth?” his voice sounded unnerved even to his own ears. Her gaze seemed unfocused as she turned to him, the mere pivot of her head looking as if it had rendered her giddy.

He was on his feet and at her side before he knew how it had come to pass, and still it was not a moment too soon. Elizabeth’s legs gave way beneath her and she fell in a dead faint. Darcy threw his arms out just in time to catch her and save her from dashing against the sharp shards scattered below.

With two graceless maneuverings, he managed to evade stepping on what remained of the vase and brought her over to the divan, stretching her out upon it. He had no more than assured she was breathing properly and begun to suffer the initial stages of a definite panic when her eyes drifted open.

“Elizabeth?” he said urgently. “Elizabeth, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

Her assertion held much more self-possession than he expected, and to his alarm he saw she was attempting to raise herself up.

“Be still a moment,” he held down her shoulder to impress his seriousness. “You fainted.”

Elizabeth resisted his restraint as she replied, “Yes, yes, it is the heat.” She seemed exasperated; it was not he she directed it towards, however. “I was only overly warm. I shall be all right in a moment.”

But now Darcy was on the alert, his paranoia consuming him anew. “How did you hurt your arm, Elizabeth?” he asked again suddenly.
She, tentatively sitting upright, looked for all the world as if she wished she did not have to answer. “Do not make yourself uneasy, but this...this happened once before, just after you left for London. I must have landed badly on my arm because the fall left it a little weak.” Darcy’s eyes widened and she rushed to head off the horror rising up inside him. “It is not what you think. That spell was brought on by fatigue from the sun as well. Do you not remember we spent the entire afternoon in the day’s heat? I was simply unequal to it.”

“Were you not going to tell me of it?”

“That I succumbed to a spell? No, of course not. It was nothing—it is nothing.”

Darcy stared at her. There was an indistinct ringing in his ears. His wife had never before been one for fainting; something was wrong. *Something was wrong.* Then he took leave of the room without another word.

He made his way to the servants’ quarters in the lower chambers of the house, finally coming across the person whom he sought. “Mrs Reynolds,” he called. The housekeeper was speaking with one of the newly hired maids in the corridor. The girl curtsied in his direction and lowered her eyes to the floor. “Please have one of the servants fetch Dr Neil. Mrs Darcy has taken ill.”

“Yes, at once, sir. It is nothing serious, I hope,” said Mrs Reynolds, studying her young master with concern for a moment before she bustled to do as he bid.

The maid raised her eyes to Darcy, taking in his calm demeanor. Both his countenance and his tone were detached and steady. It made her skeptical that anything could be terribly wrong with the mistress. Or perhaps he merely did not much care.

“I will only be sure of that once Dr Neil has come and had his say.”

When Darcy left them and entered the library again, Elizabeth was yet on the divan and her complexion was still paler than was usual, but he was granted some small measure of relief in seeing that a bit of her color was indeed returning.

“Where—?”

“I have sent for Neil.”

Elizabeth protested at once. “Fitzwilliam, it is not neces—”

“It is necessary. For my own peace of mind,” he disrupted, looking at his hands as he spoke. “Please, grant me that.”

He was conscious that his voice had wavered with his plea, but it was not to be helped. Before Mrs Reynolds and the maid he had raised his usual veneer to veil the truth of his emotions, but even that had been on the verge of crumbling, so panic-stricken was he. With Elizabeth, he let his anxiety be known without trying to conceal anything. At this instant, all he could think of was how desperately he hoped she was not having some sort of relapse or that this was not the beginning of some terrible residual effect from her fall in the pond taking its toll. He had asked her to stay at Pemberley explicitly to prevent harm from coming to her, and what good had it done? God, how he wished his apprehension all this time had been in vain.

Slender fingers softly brushed Darcy’s cheek and he met Elizabeth’s gaze. She looked as concerned for him as he felt for her.

“If that is what you wish.”
Neil had been with Elizabeth for nearly an hour, and still Darcy had not been sent for.

At the moment, he was in his study. He had meant to apply himself to some business matters for the sake of distraction, but his tension was too encompassing to allow any such relief. The most he could do was keep from pacing outside the bedroom door where Neil was examining her. Darcy convinced himself not to do so more because it would have brought back too many painful recollections than out of any sense of pride that compelled him to seem more at ease than he was.

A rap at the door broke into this spiraling train of thought. Neil let himself in and looked at Darcy with an expression he could read nothing of in his present state.

“Neil…?”

“Go to her,” Neil cut across him bluntly. “At once. I shall be here when I am required.”

He did not know what to make of such an order, but he wasted no time in doing as he was told and practically ran around the corner and down the corridor. He burst inside their bedroom.

Elizabeth was supporting herself with her back against one of the posters at the foot of the bed, her hands clutching it from behind. Her face was flushed, agitated even, and when she noticed him enter, that impression only intensified. It was all Darcy could do to approach her. Taking her hands—which felt feverish—in his, his eyes bore into hers. He could not speak, could not bring himself to ask the words upon which everything hung. He could but wait.

“Fitzwilliam—” Elizabeth tried in a bare whisper.

She did not quite seem master of her own voice either, and he was almost shaking when he saw tears sparkling in the corners of her lashes. Darcy convulsively clenched her hands more tightly to his chest.

Trying once more, Elizabeth released an unsteady breath.

“I am with child.”

He heard, but he did not comprehend. Slowly, it began to dawn on Darcy what his wife had said, that she was beaming through her tears, that her appearance was one of exhilaration not distress, that coming was a day in the not-so-distant future when he would become—

Darcy fell to his knees before her and wrapped his arms about her waist, resting his forehead against her. The rapid revolution four small words had on his emotions was profoundly disorienting. Absolute wretchedness to absolute ecstasy.

“Elizabeth,” he gasped, her name all he could manage between hitched breaths. “Oh, Elizabeth.”

He felt her hands bury in his hair as her laughs, punctuated by a sob, came bubbling from just above him, and his own exultant laughter mingled with hers even as he shed a few stray tears. It was as if their bodies were incapable of processing such intense sentiments. Seized by the urge in his throes of happiness, Darcy tenderly pressed his lips to Elizabeth’s abdomen. An altogether new sensation sent a shiver up her spine and he heard her breath catch. He tilted his head upwards to gaze into her eyes.

“I love you.”

Elizabeth made to help him stand. When he was on his feet again, she encircled her arms around his
neck to pull Darcy into a kiss of blissful passion only he could match.
Georgiana, upon being enlightened that very evening she was to become an aunt, was thrilled. She threw herself into her brother’s arms, and Darcy’s laughter at her delight rumbled from deep within his chest as he held her.

When Georgiana at last released him, she turned to Elizabeth to no doubt bestow a like gesture, but abruptly stopped just before reaching her. She cast an anxious glance at Elizabeth’s abdomen.

“I do not wish to injure—”

Elizabeth did not allow her to finish before pulling her into an embrace. “None of that now,” she reproved gently. “I am not feeble.”

Georgiana smiled, winding her arms around her in return. “I am so very happy for you both.”

“As are we,” Elizabeth told her, looking just past her shoulder to Darcy, whose eyes were shining as surely as her own.

While she was still of a mind to recall it, Elizabeth let it be made known to Georgiana that Darcy was conscious of what had passed at Pemberley during his absence. He himself then spoke with her on the matter in private until he was assured that his sister was truly undaunted by Wickham’s blatant disregard of respect and delicacy.

She was.

With that predicament in hand, Mr and Mrs Darcy made themselves free to engage their attentions with a matter which was so much more agreeable.

Elizabeth’s pregnancy was well into its second month by the time Neil made the revelation.

“How did I not realize?” Elizabeth had taken to repeating in utter bewilderment of her ignorance.

“Did you…did you have no indication?” Darcy once asked her with his cheeks tinged pink and his eyes everywhere but on her, his meaning all the more comprehensible for its careful indirectness.

She had wanted to laugh at him, but soon discovered her answering blush rendered that impossible. “I did not regard…that symptom…with much import,” Elizabeth haltingly strung together. Over a year of marital intimacies still did not seem to have removed all embarrassment from such a conversation, but she forced herself to speak. “I had believed all ladies to experience…indisposition in connection to such a consideration. I have not.” It became easier to articulate herself as she went on. “Jane told me she was unwell a full three months for Charlie.”

“Something else to be thankful for then,” he murmured as his fingertips continued tracing their path up and down her forearm.

She replied with a distracted ‘mmmm.’ At length, she voiced a thought that had been recurring to her for some time. “Had I been more discerning, I might have saved us both a good bit of grief…”

“Never mind that,” Darcy shook his head at her. “Besides,” he went on to say, playfulness creeping into his tone, “this was but your first attempt to decipher such symptoms. I am certain you shall be
much more perceptive for the second instance. And the third. And the fourth…”

Elizabeth’s jubilant laughter rang out, only silenced when Darcy covered her mouth with his own.

Consequently, it was not long until Elizabeth’s condition began to make itself more conspicuous.

In the weeks following, both she and Darcy came to notice how her belly grew firm. Under closer scrutiny, they saw too how her figure was giving way to an unmistakable roundness.

It was at this point that Darcy was prepared to remove himself into another bedroom to prevent inadvertently bringing harm to their unborn child, but Elizabeth would have none of it.

“We have met with this trial once before, if you recall,” she told him pointedly when he had disclosed his intentions. “I shall follow you wherever in the house you go—bear that in mind before you come to any resolution and we make a spectacle of ourselves as the disenchanted husband and chasing wife before the servants.” Her eyes were at once serious and mischievous as she told him so.

With a reluctance that was quickly overcome, Darcy acquiesced to continue in their shared bed.

Though Elizabeth remained unaffected by the dreadful indisposition which afflicted most of her sex during the beginning of expectancy, she was not wholly spared from curious side-effects.

One afternoon when she, Darcy, and Georgiana sat down to the midday meal, no sooner had a plate of herring been placed before her than Elizabeth unaccountably deserted her chair. Brother and sister looked at one another across the table in confusion as they distinguished the clatter of the front door being unbolted. In alarm, Darcy pursued her outside, where he found her drawing in the fresh air rather erratically. When Elizabeth was once again in reasonable control of her faculties and able to speak, she apologized and said that a sudden feeling of sickness had come over her.

From that moment on, it was evident that she had developed an unprecedented aversion to herring. The very sight of them she could not stand, and if she were unfortunate enough to have any of her other senses assaulted by the dish, the danger of her being ill became a very real possibility. Because of this, Mr Darcy ordered that all herring present on the estate be done away with until a time they did not disagree with Mrs Darcy.

As for communicating their news to the rest of the family, Elizabeth found herself presented with the opportunity to amuse herself immensely in breaking such tidings with a variety of alternatives.

To Jane, she wrote in a style quite unused by her before, hemming and hawing over inconsequential goings-on that one usually reserved for polite conversation with an insipid acquaintance for two full pages, including some variation of the word ‘expecting’ in every other sentence—‘I expect the good weather to hold. I am expecting a letter from our Aunt Gardiner.’—before finally coming out and telling her she was with child in the final line of the letter, just before her signature.

In the case of her parents, Elizabeth penned with the easy humor she knew her father dearly loved to take part in a request that he begin to make room in his heart for a second grandchild so soon after his first, leaving it to him how he would announce the letter’s substance to Mary, Kitty, and her mother’s nerves.

Charlotte received a missive that was no less high-spirited in the news it bore than it was apologetic for the rancor poor Mrs Collins would be subjected to once Lady Catherine de Bourgh learned how much further the shades of Pemberley were to be polluted.
Delivered to Mr and Mrs Gardiner was a thick envelope whose contents imparted great elation to its recipients as they read the lighthearted hand of one of their favorite nieces.

Elizabeth disputed with herself before eventually scrawling a quick note to Lydia.

Jane replied with all the warmth and delight that sisterly affection could ever desire, and Mr Bennet likewise wrote on behalf of himself and the other occupants of Longbourn of their happiness. Charlotte was effusive in her congratulations as well; additionally, she divulged an unconfirmed suspicion that she too might be in a similar condition.

However, it was her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner’s enthusiastic response which arrived sometime in early August that inspired Elizabeth’s intent of being the means of bringing about more cheer.

Upon their engagement, she and Darcy had all but invited the Gardiners to winter with them at Pemberley and spend Christmas there. It was twice now that they had been forced to delay this promise. The first time, the newly-wed Mr and Mrs Darcy had still been on their honeymoon. The second was the year of Elizabeth’s accident, and the Gardiners had broken off their plans to allow her time to recover, mindful that four rambunctious children were hardly conducive to the quiet rest she required.

This year, Elizabeth decided, was the perfect time to renew their invitation. Not only that, she was determined to make a true celebration out of it: why not have the entire family at Pemberley for Christmas? She would even endure Mr Collins’s alternating lectures and approbation—the clergyman was yet genuinely mired in bafflement whether to esteem or rebuke his elevated cousin—to see her dear friend again.

She headed to the study with the Gardiners’ letter to see what her husband judged of her design.

*. *

Darcy was at his desk poring over an assortment of documents having to do with his tenants. He looked up at Elizabeth’s knock, and his stern frown—she could not help but think it very much reminiscent of the countenance he wore one night years ago in Meryton—melted away at the sight of her.

“Should I return later?”

“No,” he told her decidedly, throwing down his quill and rubbing his weary eyes, “I can spare a few minutes for my wife.”

Elizabeth closed the door behind her and walked to be on the opposite side of his desk. “I shall only take a moment. I wondered what you might think of inviting not only my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner this year for Christmas, but all—Papa, Mama, my sisters, Jane and Charles, Charlotte. We could even invite Colonel Fitzwilliam if you wished.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed and he answered her slowly. “Do you not think it unwise to choose this year? Elizabeth, you will be quite far along by December. The strain of being hostess to such a large party would prove very trying for you.”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth countered. “It is the perfect occasion. After all, we really must make up for disappointing my aunt and uncle twice now—”

Darcy visibly flinched as he thought of why they had to be disappointed the second time.

“—and it has been so long since we have all been together.”
They had gone visiting in Hertfordshire and to Gracechurch Street several times since marrying, but it was true that her entire family had not been united together in some time. He could see how excited she was at the prospect, her eyes hopeful that he would consider the idea more favorably. Which is why, against his misgivings, he relented. Giving him a quick kiss across the desk, she left the room to secure Georgiana’s approval, and in next to no time had returned again to write her invitations that very hour.

Darcy found himself very much distracted by the lovely view his wife provided him with as she sat at her personal davenport by the fireplace. Her figure from behind, the bared curve of her neck, and her glossy, tumbling curls earned his attention far more faithfully than the terms in the contract of lease he was supposed to be examining. Darcy watched as she unlocked the desktop and lifted it to retrieve her writing materials. It was he who noticed when a letter fell from among them to the floor when she did not.

He walked over to pick it up for her, giving an offhand glance at the address as he bent over. Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy felt the blood freeze in his veins. He knew that hand, knew it all too well—it was his own.

He stared at the parchment. It could not be that letter. For what possible reason would she still have it in her possession? He had written her others during the course of their betrothal, letters of proper courtship long overdue, letters that she deserved. But there was something in the rigid style of the lettering, as if it were the first time he had ever allowed the name to flow from his pen, which persuaded him to think it was not any of those he had sent as her intended.

…and yet, he had to be certain.

Turning towards the empty grate, he unfolded the letter, carefully, for the parchment was so worn from repeated perusal that it was nearly torn at the creases. It was also singed at one corner, but the writing itself was untouched. He then read the opening line which confirmed his fears.

Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you.

Darcy felt horrible heat rise into his face at the sight of the haughty words staring back at him unapologetically. Memories at once cruel and mortifying to recollect clamored tumultuously in his mind.

Elizabeth, only just sensing his presence behind her, turned with smile which promptly faded once she glimpsed his expression. “Fitzwilliam?” she said with disquiet, rising from her seat.

Darcy directed his pained eyes to her. “What is the meaning of this?” He shook the letter in his hand a little.

She shifted her gaze to the epistle he grasped and stepped closer to read it. He could see the moment recognition flickered across her features. Elizabeth colored, bringing her eyes back to his, but said nothing.

“I bid you destroy it!” he heard himself say as his anger bested him. “How is it possible that this has survived two years?”

“I could not bear to see it burnt!” Elizabeth had found her voice at last and her eyes flared with defiance. “I meant to do as you asked—it had all but happened, but I snatched it from the flames at the last moment.”
He gazed at her intently and asked in a much quieter tone, “Why?”

“Because,” Elizabeth’s blush rose higher, and she focused on the letter rather than him, “I wanted to keep it to remember. It was what taught me the truth of your character, of how things stood…and it was the first time you sought my confidence.” Darcy started. “It was to defend yourself against my accusations of course, but just the same it was all that was left to me after I treated you so shamefully. After all that passed at Rosings, you cannot imagine how often I read and reread your letter. I was determined to let its contents daily serve to remind me how I had played the part of the presumptuous blunderer.

“You know well by now your letter’s effect on me was beyond that initial intention. By it I came to perceive just how you bore my unjust prejudice and held regard for me in spite of it. It proved to me what your character was truly like, and it was the means of making me realize I could and did return those affections.

“When you asked me to burn it all those months later, I had become too attached to do away with it forever.”

By the time she had finished, Darcy could see her contemplating the letter almost forlornly. For his part, he began to feel chagrin for the condemning fashion with which he had charged her in retaining it. He still could not fully comprehend how she held tender associations with the abhorrent manner in which he had addressed her, but it was evident she had and did. Deliberately, he folded the letter and held it out to her.

Elizabeth reached out one hand to take it and pressed it to her breast possessively, all the while staring at her husband.

“I have behaved disgracefully. Unlike you, I cannot consider that letter as anything but a painful reminder of the state of mind that induced me to write…in so ungentlemanlike a manner.” His choice of words did not escape Elizabeth’s notice. “But it is yours to do with as you choose, and if keeping it gives you pleasure, I will not insist you destroy it. Can you forgive me?”

She shook her head. “I should not have led you to believe I was rid of the letter. We have the both of us done wrong. But then, has that not always been the case?”

He closed his eyes and gave a low laugh. When Darcy let his lids rise again, it was to find Elizabeth standing before him, so close he could count every one of her lashes if he so chose, and see every iridescent fleck of color in her fine dark eyes.

“Thank you for understanding, my love.”

Laying her free hand on his chest, she kissed him softly, and it was not long until he pulled her closer with one hand at her waist and the other twisting in her hair.

*.

Some weeks later, Elizabeth was sitting in the music room with Georgiana. Darcy’s sister was at the pianoforte arduously practicing a particularly complex composition. Elizabeth was there to bear her company and listen as she worked on adorning a bonnet for her. She had chosen and purchased at one of the town shops a marvelous pale blue ribbon that would compliment Georgiana’s fair coloring remarkably well.

Darcy was out surveying a few of the properties around Derbyshire and had been away the whole of the afternoon, while the girls had been occupied by the very activities they were at work on now for
the same length of time. Staying so long in one attitude never did well for Elizabeth, but in this, the fourth month of her expectancy, an indefatigable restiveness had come over her. Presently, she was practically vibrating with an excess of energy.

Rashly did she fling the completed bonnet from her and onto the window-seat. “I must go walking,” Elizabeth finally declared. “Georgiana, can I tempt you to join me?” She smiled to herself even as the question passed her lips; she knew that her sister-in-law was determined to master the piece she was working on and would not stir from the bench until it had been accomplished.

So it was that in a very few minutes, Elizabeth was swiftly stepping out into the breezy dusk air, unaccompanied.

Pemberley’s grounds were so vast and varying that although Elizabeth had long ago marked her favorite haunt, its charm never grew stale for her. How she reveled in weaving among the towering alder trees, letting her fingers graze the craggy, knotted bark and over the vines of ivy twisted around them as she passed. She drank in deeply of the air, and once the woods left the house out of sight, she loosed her shawl.

Her stomach had swelled considerably, not large enough yet to be beyond concealing with attentive mindfulness, but not far from it. Now, however, she threw propriety to the wind and exposed the curved bulge of her abdomen, splaying both her hands over the place where her child grew.

Never had Elizabeth truly realized how very much she longed for a baby until she learned she carried hers and Darcy’s; she had never allowed herself to entertain the desire with any depth when month after month it came to nothing. But now…now she was free to let the euphoria surge unfettered through her, safe in the knowledge that in a few months’ time, she would at long last be able to hold their child in her arms. Would her son or daughter be fond of walking as she was? Would they have Darcy’s tall build or her nose? What kind of person would they become? She loved them more than she could say without yet having even seen them, that much she knew.

She became lost in sweet contemplations as night fell around her.

Elizabeth had ventured some stretch by this time, but the rising moon was full and the stars glittered brightly, so she did not feel afraid. Just the same, she turned around to make her way back, the fitfulness in her limbs finally tamed for to-night. She treaded with care so gnarled tree roots and leaves dewy with the cooling temperature would not lead her to stumble.

When she had recovered about half the distance to Pemberley, a sudden noise arrested her. Elizabeth checked her step, tense and listening. It sounded much too loud to be taken for the tree branches swaying in the wind, too large for an animal by the way it moved, but that left only human to be the creature trespassing on her solitary amblings. She would have much preferred it to be a fox or an owl. A nervous notion took her. What sort of person would be wandering the grounds at this hour? Though a little frightened now, at that she nearly laughed aloud: she would.

Whoever it was came very close now, far too near for her to consider stealing deeper into the wood to avoid notice. The rapid footfalls came rounding the cedar tree at the end of the lane.

It was Darcy.

She sighed in relief. He was breathing rather hard, as if he had run part of the way, and when he happened upon Elizabeth standing just before him on the path, he broke off his purposeful gait.

For a moment, they looked at one another, then, “Have you taken absolute leave of your senses?” His voice was low, strained.
Elizabeth considered him, from his flushed cheeks to his flashing eyes, and hazarded a guess that was not in fact a question. “You are upset?”

“Can you conceive what I felt to find you gone from the house only to hear from my sister that you had left to go walking hours earlier?” he demanded. “I am convinced you delight in tormenting me.”

“Fitzwilliam, you are conscious that I go rambling through the park as readily as I draw breath. I thought I should have gone mad if I had remained confined indoors for another minute.”

Darcy raked his fingers through his hair in muted frustration. “That wanderlust was all very well at one time, but now you must take care not to exert yourself in your condition.”

“My condition,” Elizabeth replied emphatically, “does not preclude a beneficial walk now and again.”

“It does require that you not endanger yourself in the dead of night!” he retorted passionately. A number of birds went fleeing from their perches and into the night at the boom of his voice. “What if you had fallen? What if it was not I who came across you utterly alone in the middle of the wood? Do you consider before you act with such reckless abandon?”

Elizabeth was quiet. His overprotective nature was driving him to the edge of reason, and she knew that if she did not attempt to pull him back from the precipice now, there would be nothing for it.

“You seem to be increasingly angry with me of late, Fitzwilliam.”

At that, Darcy closed the space between them and drew her in sharp relief against him. As he buried his face into her neck, she circled her arms around him instinctively, wanting to soothe where she had wounded even if it had been without deliberation.

“I am not angry,” she heard him say after a time. “I only wish to keep you safe.”

For a moment, she only ran her fingers through the hair at the back of his head with cosseting strokes. Then, pressing lightly against his shoulders, she forced him to take a step back so she could see his face.

“I will own I should not have strayed so far as this in the dark, but it is more than that, as we both know.”

It was Darcy’s turn to remain silent

“You have let yourself be consumed by a fearful dread ever since that day.” He knew even without her naming ‘that day’ precisely what she spoke of. “You cling to it, and it courses through you like a poison. It hurts me to see you so.” She searched his face in earnest, willing him to heed her words. He met her eyes, gazing into them for what felt like an eternity. “Let it go, Fitzwilliam.”

“I shall try,” Darcy shuddered, brushing back a stray curl at her temple as he did.

Elizabeth grabbed hold of that hand and softly kissed his palm before twining it with her arm. With a gentle nudge, she began the rest of their walk home, leaning on her husband out of the desire to stay close rather than any real fatigue.
Caught Unawares

“Why this room?”

Elizabeth tilted her head at him in bemusement. “You said I may choose any one I wished. Is this an exception?”

Darcy shook his head yet remained in the corridor as he looked at his wife poised in the center of the empty apartment that had been locked shut many years ago. “But how did you come to decide on this one?” He knew his voice sounded peculiar, but there was little to be done for it.

He watched as she slowly circled about, taking in the faded wallpaper by the dusty light that pierced through rifts from the shuttered windows. “Something about it…just feels right. Do you not think so? …what is wrong?”

She saw he did not join her and so she moved towards him. Darcy knew the expression in his eyes would be no secret. Not from her.

“This was where my mother had my old nursery. And Georgiana’s.”

Elizabeth’s eyes went wide and soft. “Oh, Fitzwilliam.” There was a pang of sorrow in her tone. “Another room shall do. It was but a whim that led me to—”

He shook his head again. “No. No, do not. I only wonder that both of you were drawn here for the same purpose.”

Taking a breath, he stepped inside. He could still remember seeing his mother rock Georgiana to sleep in her chair by the window, could still hear her singing lullabies to his sister as he listened from the doorway, though only faintly now, like a dream half-forgotten on waking. Darcy felt a small, warm hand take up one of his.

“Are you certain?” Elizabeth was gazing at him as though she longed to brush the curls from his forehead and comfort him.

“I am,” he told her, bringing up the hand in his grasp and gently pressing his lips to the back of it. “Our child belongs here. And I believe she would have wanted it this way.”

Elizabeth was in her fifth month when the furnishings she had ordered from town for the nursery arrived.

The morning the crates were delivered, she had a few of the able-bodied footmen bring them up the main staircase and into the room she had chosen for the baby just across the corridor from her and Darcy’s own bedchamber.

Only the week before, she had gone to the shops of Lambton in search of material to repaper the walls afresh. In one of the smaller establishments hidden away from the main street, she had unexpectedly discovered wallpaper of the exact pattern that presently covered nursery, now worn and discolored with age. Before she even knew what she was about, Elizabeth purchased enough for the room, and as the elderly shopkeeper readied the sale and added it to her account, she could not rid herself of the strange feeling that had come over her, the one that somehow told her that Lady Anne Darcy had also chanced upon this little unassuming place of trade the same as she had.
She had the nursery wallpaper redone the following day, and with the wood floors polished, the room already had gained a cozy, inviting feel about it. Elizabeth stood by the corner along the same wall as the door and admired the reviving effect these small restorations had rendered. She had been that way for no more than a minute when someone came in from the corridor.

Darcy wandered trancelike into the room, quiet and staring around him almost hungrily. He did not see Elizabeth in her place against the back corner, and she watched him step over to the opposite wall feeling very much as though she was intruding on something earth-shattering. She thought the furious beating of her heart would give her away as he dazedly brought his hand up to trace the well-known design of the wallpaper.

With sudden terrible clarity, a realization crashed upon her: the familiarity of the room’s appearance might be too much for him. Should she have asked before decorating with the very material his mother had chosen? The memories this place held for him could not all be dire, but was the good enough to eclipse the bad?

The instant Darcy caught sight of her, however, her presentiments vanished.

He was not smiling, but his eyes—his eyes were bright with things beyond words, things she could not put expression to, and nor would she attempt it. But from that moment on, she knew pain was the last sensation bearing down upon her husband when he was here, and what little of the past that lingered was transposed with the promise of what was to come.

Once the crates were settled in the room, Elizabeth, Lily, and Mrs Reynolds set to arranging the last odds and ends that needed doing before the furnishings could be seen to.

“Ah, how I have missed having little ones about,” Mrs Reynolds said fondly as she hemmed the lace curtains intended for the nursery windows. “It shall be such a joy to see a child in Pemberley once again.”

Elizabeth glanced up from where she and Lily were folding linens. “I should imagine it was much more lively about when your charges were young, and the difference you must feel since they have been grown for all these years.”

“Yes, Elizabeth thought to herself, at last.

Darcy was in his study holding conference with a new tenant farmer all the while she was preparing the room. At noon, she left a few stableboys who were good with their hands to fashion together the furnishings while she went to order the midday meal for him and their company to be brought on a tray in the event his negotiations prevented his coming down.

As she returned from the kitchens, she was surprised to see all three stableboys on their way down the main staircase.

“Do you require any tools that have not been provided?” she asked them.

“No, ma’am. Begging your pardon, but Mr Darcy dismissed the lot of us to our usual chores.”

“Oh…did he? Very well then.”

Feeling all the more than usual curiousness as to why her husband had sent them away, she ascended the stairs once more and set off along the corridor to question him of it. Her initial end had been his
study, but movement from the nursery caught her attention as she passed and she paused to peer into
the partly open doorway.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley worth ten-thousand pounds per annum, was kneeling upon
the floor amid several frames of a mahogany cradle. He had removed his coat, which now lay
offhandedly discarded by the empty crate’s lid, and turned up the sleeves of his shirt to work on
assembling the pieces of the pannier intended for his first-born child. Elizabeth thought she had never
before beheld a sight so likely to make her heart brim over with pride and adoration as this.

As Elizabeth and Georgiana were breaking their fast the next morning, one of the servants entered
the dining room and proffered a letter borne upon a silver tray to the mistress.

It was an invitation from Jane and Charles to come celebrate Michaelmas with them at Verberry in
two weeks’ time. Though she had fully planned to spend a quiet dinner at home with Darcy and
Georgiana in intimate celebration as the year before, Elizabeth was far from opposed to the idea. She
was eager to see her sister, and baby Charlie moreover.

Darcy was not in the house, but had gone out to see to any provisions needed by their tenants for the
harvest. She would have to wait to tell him of it when he returned.

It was a crisp, beautiful autumn day, and very likely one of the last fine spells of weather to be had of
the season, so Elizabeth determined that she should make the most of it. Fetching a novel she was in
the course of reading and tucking Jane’s letter inside, she rambled out into the grounds. She did not
venture a long way from the house, settling on an expanse of shade cast by an ancient whitebeam
tree. Elizabeth curled on her side in the long grass and heather, and proceeded to lose herself in her
book from the library.

Generations of Darcys had built the tremendous library of Pemberley. It was an undertaking Darcy
devoted himself to with honor and commitment, just like his father before him, and Elizabeth knew
what it meant to him. After returning from their honeymoon to Pemberley, the majority of the
belongings she had brought with her from Longbourn had already been unpacked and arranged in
their new situations by the servants, but there was a single trunk containing her dearest possessions
that she wished to see to herself. Among this trunk were a small, delicately carved wooden chest of
letters, and less than half a dozen books, every one threadbare but all the more dear to her for it. The
letter chest she soon consigned to the personal davenport Darcy had purchased for her.

As for the books, she stacked them atop a narrow chiffonier in the mistress’ chamber to be all but
forgotten in the interim. However, around the time that room had been refurbished into a parlor,
Elizabeth returned for one of her books only to find they were not there. In fact, they were not in the
room at all. She questioned Mrs Reynolds if she had seen what had become of them during the
alteration of her accommodations, but the housekeeper could not account for them. Resigned to not
recovering them in time for the brief hour of leisure reading she wanted before dinner, Elizabeth
went to the library to choose among those volumes instead.

As she was running her fingers across the spines of the shelves upon shelves of books, one in
particular caught her notice. The reason for her attention was not difficult to understand: the book
was smaller and shabbier looking than those immaculate tomes that flanked either side of it. Intrigued
by the misfit, she plucked it out—only to find it was one of her missing books. Who had brought it
down here? Struck by a suspicion, she combed the library for the rest of her missing novels to indeed
find they were there and waiting, sorted by subject and author as if that had always been their place
to begin with. There was no doubt as to who the guilty party was in her mind now.
At the dinner hour, Elizabeth relieved Mrs Reynolds from calling Darcy to the dining room and went herself. Knocking lightly on his door, she entered to find him finishing some business correspondence. He left the fresh ink to dry and came to welcome her in the manner he could now liberally partake of as her husband. It had been at least two hours since he had last kissed her after all.

When both had sated themselves so at least their need was not so exceedingly urgent, Elizabeth leaned back and said to him, “I had been searching for a few of my books and found that they have somehow integrated themselves into the library. Your doing?”

Darcy only nodded, far too interested in recapturing her lips to pay mind to the strange quality of her voice.

When they parted again, she asked as if to be indifferent, “So am I to understand my artless preference in books to be part of that impressive collection?”

Now he did listen. “Of course. Those and any others you like. Your taste in literature is far from artless; it will enhance Pemberley’s library. I wish you to add to it as you choose.” He ran his fingers over her lips, clearly relishing the next words he spoke. “You are a Darcy, Elizabeth; you have as much right to that as I.”

It sounded like a matter of little significance, but knowing what the library was to him, the history behind it, she could not be insensible to the meaning of it. Darcy’s gesture was another step in taking their two lives, once disconnected, and melding them further together—and how she loved him for it. Ever since, Elizabeth had taken a great deal of pride in contributing to their library. The leather-bound book she was reading under the whitebeam tree, even as she carried the creation of their ultimate act of unity, was her latest acquisition. It was a French fantasy tale called *La Belle et la Bête*, and Madame de Villeneuve had achieved in engaging Elizabeth’s imagination quite fully.

Despite her fascination in the plot, the soothing aura afforded by the light wind at her cheeks and her bed of meadow very soon found her dozing. Her head pillowed in the crook of her arm as her book fell open on the ground with its pages fluttering back and forth in the breeze now and again, Elizabeth sank into vivid dreams of enchantments, castles, and magic mirrors.

Darcy made his way to Pemberley on horseback just as the sun had reached its zenith.

It seemed summer was giving a final splendorous bow before relinquishing its golden reign over the world and conceding to pass its crown on to autumn. Was Darcy not so impatient to see Elizabeth since he had spoken scarcely two words to her this morning before business forced him to leave, he might have tarried to savor it. As it were, he kept a steady canter pointed home.

He was not far from Pemberley, no more than half a mile, when he spied a glance of something white by the old whitebeam among the field of grass as it rippled in the wind. His curiosity was piqued, but he had been riding a long while on his horse and knew the journey had tired the poor stallion, and he wanted to see him to stable to be unsaddled and rubbed down. The moment he left the animal in James’s care, he turned back towards the tree on foot.

The tall grass kept him from finding what he sought right away, but a dimple in the expanse soon betrayed its whereabouts.

Wearing a white muslin frock, a sapphire blue shawl slipping from off her shoulders, was Elizabeth, slumbering half in the shadow of the tree and half in the light of the sun. A loose strand of hair
played across her face as it caught in the breeze. Darcy was only just aware of the bright, tender smile that broke across his face. A warmth quite separate from the sun’s influence had kindled inside of him. He was grateful he had not come on horseback now, and treading softly, he made his way to her. He knelt at her side, and whether it was because she sensed something approach or she was only stirring in her sleep, Elizabeth shifted onto her back, her face falling back to one side and leaving much of her neck exposed. Darcy could not resist.

He leaned over her and began to kiss her neck, hardly more than whispers of his lips against her skin, until she hummed faintly and turned her face towards him with her eyes still closed. Taking full advantage of this change in her stance, Darcy took up her lips, gently at first, but slowly with increasing pressure and insistence until he at last felt her returning his kisses with equal fervency. It was a long while before he could find himself able to pull away, and even then only a fraction so that he could see her but still have their noses touching.

Elizabeth’s eyes were open now, though half-lidded and dark with passion. “You were right. That is a much more agreeable way to be woken up.”

Darcy laughed low in his throat and bowed his head to bestow a few more kisses across her sun-warmed cheeks and eyelids, giving her a lingering one on her mouth before rolling onto his side. She nestled into him all along the length of his body, and he brought one hand to cup the roundness of her abdomen.

They said nothing for a while, content to only lay there in each other’s arms hidden away from the rest of the world. Their forms were dappled in sunlight under the leafy canopy which had already begun to dye orange, red, and gold, and the breeze dusted a gentle shower of leaves and white flower petals that fell swirling around them.

“We have had a letter from Jane and Charles.”

“Oh?” he replied lethargically. Darcy could feel his eyes becoming heavy and drifting shut as he drew Elizabeth closer. “All well?”

He felt her nod against him. “They have asked us to Verburry for Michaelmas.”

All traces of drowsiness deserted him, and he could not help his body from tensing ever so slightly at this. He knew she felt the change in him though she went on as if she had not, her voice taking on a barely perceptible mildness to it as if she were speaking with a child.

“I would very much like to accept the invitation. I think it only reasonable to go and see them again before Christmas.” She extracted a letter from the folds of the book beside her and handed it to him. Then she paused, waiting.

So here it was, his first true trial since Elizabeth had asked him to let go of the fear he had been living with for…could it have been almost nine months already? He fought to control the outrageous desire that had risen up inside him to simply disregard her words that night and refuse to go. Darcy let his eyes wander from Jane’s even hand and down to Elizabeth’s face to find her watching him with an expression that made him conscious she could see the fierce struggle he was locked in and that she understood.

“Upon my word,” he finally said, “you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person.” The corners of his lips twitched.
Elizabeth burst out laughing at his answer.

That was the moment they both knew Darcy was on his way to mending.

“Come to your Aunt Elizabeth, Charlie,” smiled Elizabeth as she reached out to take her nephew from his mother and into her own arms. “Oh, how much he has grown, Jane! He looks ready to run about the garden.”

“Very nearly,” Bingley beamed proudly, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

The Darcys had only just arrived at Verburry and were yet gathered in the entrance hall where Mr and Mrs Bingley, along with their son, had come to greet them.

Jane, looking as fresh and lovely as ever, stood close to her sister after their reunion embrace and almost immediately was implored to hand the baby over to his eager aunt. “Careful now, Lizzy,” she told her with a hint of solicitude through her own docile smile, “you must be cautious of not exerting yourself with him in your condition.”

“Oh, Jane, not you too!” Elizabeth laughed hopelessly.

Hearing her mirth, Charlie gave a squeal of giggles of his own as if he were in on the joke with his aunt, causing everyone to laugh.

“You see? He thinks you silly to fret as well,” Elizabeth grinned, pressing a kiss to his plump cheek.

In the meanwhile, the stately housekeeper, Mrs Thiston, was busy flitting among the newly-arrived guests with a footman to assist them in shedding their greatcoats and pelisses and whisking the attire away. The small group was still exchanging their hellos and speaking animatedly with one another when one of the interior doors opened to reveal Miss Bingley, who bared her teeth in a barbed smirk.

“Ahh, you are come then,” she said.

Jane moved aside so she would not be impolite and block Georgiana and Elizabeth from Caroline’s view.

It so happened that Caroline had been seeking Elizabeth in the throng with a malevolent spark in her eye, irrefutably recalling the last time they had met and depending on taking up the application of her maleficent nature to the best of her abilities once again. She opened her mouth to speak just as she caught sight of her, and Elizabeth could see whatever clever remark Caroline had been about to say die on her tongue as she took in the curve of her form. Her posture went rigid at the same time her wide eyes openly gawked at the place just below Charlie’s dangling, chubby legs.

Evidently, Jane had not prepared Miss Bingley or the Hursts for Elizabeth and Darcy’s news.

“There, I told you there would be a surprise, Caroline!” Bingley declared as if he took his sister’s stupefaction as an initial shock that would give way to delight.

That was hardly the case. Silence, utter dead silence, fell heavily upon them all. For a single minute that lapsed like a year, all remained frozen in a perverse tableau: Caroline’s attention remained affixed on Elizabeth’s abdomen while every other eye was contrarily turned on Caroline. Each of their expressions, however, was of different origins, with emotions ranging from mystification to veiled antipathy.
“Shall we move to the parlor?” Jane gracefully posed to bring that year to an end.

“Er…yes, of course!” Bingley fumbled to recover from the awkwardness with a sang-froid to equal his wife’s and not quite achieving it. “Georgiana, if you would allow me.” Darcy’s sister on his arm, he led the way out of the foyer.

Caroline, her features distorted and livid, spun on her heel and stalked out just behind him. Jane glanced to Elizabeth for a moment with bewilderment before heading in the direction Mrs Thiston had gone to see about refreshments.

Elizabeth stood motionless a moment, still cradling Charlie close. A warm hand at the small of her back told her Darcy had reached her side, and she turned to see him with his jaw set so severely, a muscle in it was jumping.

Michaelmas day came and was celebrated with all the customary traditions. The main course of the dinner was a succulently roasted goose glazed with sauced blackberries. Everyone complimented Jane on the table she kept, and she graciously accepted their favorable remarks but delegated the credit to her cook.

They had a cheerful time of it. Georgiana was persuaded to rise above her shyness and play at the pianoforte while half of the party played several hands of vingt-un, the special favorite of both Mr and Mrs Bingley.

Elizabeth, soundly beaten after two rounds, withdrew to find another occupation to entertain herself. She stood by the instrument where Georgiana was yet installed and listened to the music for a time. Then she wandered to the far side of the room in search of a book. Had she realized that corner was already engaged, she might have refrained from it.

“…such an exhibition. That Eliza Bennet came here at all evinces a total want of propriety,” she heard Caroline sneer contemptuously.

Miss Bingley was reclining on a chaise lounge just opposite of the bookshelf Elizabeth had been browsing, speaking in an acrimonious tone to Louisa. “What can she mean by it? Does she consider herself so far out of the common way that she may blatantly flout the demands of modesty? If she had any decency, she would have remained concealed at Pemberley in that state; Darcy and his sister could have come in any case.”

Indignation and satisfaction vied for dominance within Elizabeth. Anger instinctively flared, but she could not deny the vindication Caroline’s speech offered, even if Jane would say it was wicked of her to derive gratification from the discontent of another of God’s creatures. She had promised herself long ago that she would remain cordial towards Caroline for Jane’s sake, but Charles’s sister had never made that resolution an easy one. Nor would she hear herself spoken of so demeaningly without defense.

“No doubt her spawn shall inherit that self-same impertinence—”

No more. No more. She stepped out into view.

Louisa’s eyes bulged. “Ah, Mrs Darcy!” she hastily said with a nod as if to greet her, but Elizabeth knew full well it was in warning to her sister, whose back was to Elizabeth, to curtail her next sentence.

Caroline grudgingly turned but did nothing to disguise her disgust at the intrusion, regarding
Elizabeth with singular condescension.

“Yes?” she said tersely, earning a cautionary look from Louisa. But it seemed that Caroline was past caring.

“I came to say only this: if you insist upon disparaging my name and character, by all means. It is of no consequence to me.” Elizabeth’s voice lowered until it was barely capable of being heard, “However, if I hear you frame another word against my child, I shall not remain so discreet.”

She looked between them deliberately, letting the import of her words sink in. Mrs Hurst recoiled as if physically struck, but Caroline scowled.

“I hope we understand each other.”

With that, Elizabeth turned and left.

Darcy applauded along with the others as Georgiana ended on a crescendo. He watched as she left the instrument and went to speak with Jane, who at once started to praise her playing with an admiration that left his sister lightly blushing at the effusiveness of her compliments.

Seeing Georgiana at ease, he let his eyes stray to the rest of the party. Hurst was sprawled in an armchair, mouth agape as he snored, while Mrs Hurst sat close by with a book in her hands. Darcy noticed that she occasionally flicked the pages without so much as looking at them, for she was far more absorbed in shooting furtive glances at her sister. Caroline had spent the better part of the evening stationed by the refreshment table, having her glass filled with champagne and consuming it at a regular pace.

Darcy saw he was not alone in observing the room. Bingley was looking uncharacteristically solemn as he watched each of his sisters in turn from his place by the fire, and Darcy wondered what was the matter with his friend. Leaving his seat, he went to the mantel to attend Bingley where he stood.

“All right there, Bingley?” he said quietly.

Bingley’s head shot to him at the address. “What? Oh…oh yes.”

Darcy nodded, not pressing him but remaining by his side and turning away to watch the others in a companionable silence. All the time he had known Bingley taught him that reticence would persuade his friend to confide in him more ably than words.

“It is only—”

Darcy had to fight the twitching corners of his lips.

“—Caroline and Louisa seem to have not the least bit of interest in spending time with Charlie.”

No longer did a smile threaten Darcy. He knew well why Bingley’s sisters were eschewing their nephew. After confessing the trouble Caroline Bingley had given rise to on their last visit to Verburry, Elizabeth also charged to his trust the avowal Miss Bingley had made to her about snubbing the child of a Bennet. Between them they had agreed to breathe not a word of it to either Bingley or Jane to spare them from being aggrieved. It seemed, however, that neither of Bingley’s sisters was even going to make a show of attention to their brother’s son.

“You see Elizabeth with him,” Bingley continued, rather upset by this point.
Both of them were drawn to look at the settee a little apart from everyone else where Elizabeth was playing with Charlie, as she had been for above half of the day. The baby was sitting up propped by cushions while at the other end she sat before him, covering her face with her hands only to bare it suddenly with a smile, something which Charlie found no end of delight in as his gleeful shrieks carried across the room.

The scene produced such an intense happiness that pervaded Darcy in a way that made him long for the approaching day when that would be their child.

“As an aunt ought to be….”

Darcy forced himself to say something to raise his friend’s spirits. “Of unsatisfactory aunts, you know I am well familiar, Bingley. If your sisters disregard their nephew, the loss is entirely theirs.”

His words seemed to impart some measure of solace. Wanting to divert him from further melancholy, Darcy breached the subject of how he was enjoying his new residence in the Nottinghamshire countryside so that Bingley was soon buoyed up to his naturally cheerful disposition as he waxed elegant on the charms of Verburry.

While the two spoke, Darcy saw from the corner of his eye Jane excusing herself to Georgiana and then advancing over to where Elizabeth was situated, and Bingley too turned to watch them, pausing in his enthusiasm over the prospects he had seen horseback riding. They looked on as the sisters spoke together with luminous smiles upon both their faces, one all vivaciousness and the other emanating a subtle, but no less genuine, happiness.

Bingley broke into Darcy’s reverie. “Lucky sods, are we not?”

He did not reply aloud, but he knew in his heart that no greater truth had ever been spoken.

Eventually, Elizabeth relinquished Charlie to his mother. Jane then left her sister alone on the settee to put the child down for the night as it was growing rather late. Straight away so there could be no doubts of his motive or destination, Bingley took his leave of Darcy and proceeded after Jane.

Darcy followed Elizabeth with his eyes as she rose and approached towards Georgiana, passing the refreshment table. He moved to join her and was still watching when Caroline Bingley became alert that Elizabeth was in close proximity and sidestepped to block her path. Darcy was halfway across the room yet as they exchanged words, so he could not make out what they might be. He drew closer more quickly.

Miss Bingley, wholly unaware that a third party was soon to be witness to her diatribe, carried forward recklessly, and whether excess of drink or bitterness made her more injudicious in her behavior towards Elizabeth was difficult to determine, but certainly both contributed.

“…surely traipsing through the wood is below someone of your station?” she bit scornfully. “I say, Miss Bennet, your fondness for walking surpasses all obligations of respectability you must feel.”

Darcy had reached the pair quite in time to hear this abuse of his wife. However, the substance of her invective paled in comparison to another detail within it.

“I beg your pardon,” rang out coldly.

Elizabeth and Caroline whipped to face Darcy as he uttered those words, the latter nearly slopping the dregs of her champagne down the front of her dress, so great was her alarm. From the look on Darcy’s face, it was clear he in fact begged nothing of the kind, but to the casual observer, his heightened complexion was the only indicator of the rage that was nearly blinding him.
“I could not help but overhear.” All the blood drained from Caroline Bingley’s face, no mean feat when one considered the ruddy color drink had lent it. “I was under the impression that neither Miss Mary Bennet nor Miss Kitty Bennet was very partial to walking. To which did you refer?”

Elizabeth caught his eye and he knew she realized he had not misinterpreted that Miss Bingley had called her ‘Miss Bennet.’

“I—Miss—,” Caroline stuttered in her confusion.

“Can I escort you to a seat, Mrs Darcy?” he said offering his arm. Darcy would not wait to hear Miss Bingley perjure herself, for he was already struggling to remain civil in her presence. That she was Bingley’s sister, and that alone, kept him from cutting her entirely.

As Elizabeth took his arm, Darcy felt her fingers tightly grip him through the fabric of his coat in mute gratitude. Her touch, if he was not mistaken, also seemed to be trying to lend him support to contain the ire that he burned to give release to.

A few days after Michaelmas, the Darcys stood ready to depart for home.

The last of their trunks were being corded to the carriage by their footman while the team of palominos danced in a skittish fashion, nervously tossing their heads from side to side as they nickered, clearly eager to be off.

“We shall see you at Pemberley for Christmas then,” Bingley said as he shook Darcy’s hand.

Elizabeth gave a parting kiss to her sister and nephew, and Darcy attentively handed her into the carriage after Georgiana.

The journey back to Derbyshire was a peaceful one, if quiet. After dinner that night, all three retired directly because of the fatigue of travelling. Darcy, his chest pressed to Elizabeth’s back, was fast asleep moments after his head rested on the pillow.

Despite being tired, sleep eluded Elizabeth as she considered the events of the past days. Caroline and the Hursts had left Verburry early the morning after Michaelmas, and Elizabeth did not feel that she presumed too much when she thought that Caroline had everything to do with their sudden departure almost a week earlier than they had intended.

Darcy had been incensed to learn that Miss Bingley had been addressing her as ‘Miss Bennet’ since marrying him, though Elizabeth only admitted it after he vehemently demanded to know for how long that slight had been occurring. She did not keep it from him to protect Caroline, but to keep from upsetting her husband any more if she could, and she still felt she had been in the right to do so; he seemed to take more offense to the insult than she ever did.

Needless to say, the second half of their visit passed much more pleasantly once liberated from Bingley’s sisters.

Elizabeth felt herself finally drifting to sleep when something happened that flung all thoughts of sleep far and away.

“Oh!”

She wrenched up in the bed, both of her hands coming to clutch her abdomen at the same instant. Her child was kicking inside of her. She could feel them, and it was the most astonishing, most
wonderful sensation. It was scarcely to be described; like a gentle fluttering of wings, or faint heartbeat. Neil had told her what to expect during the quickening, but this…

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered breathlessly. She shook him softly.

Darcy’s eyes blearily cracked open as he roused. Suddenly struck by the full implications of the situation, he jerked upwards, jarring awake at once. “What is it, Elizabeth?”

Before she could attempt a reply, he turned from her to the bedside table and in a moment had a candle lit. It illuminated the room with its hushed rays, casting flickering shadows on the canopy above them. By its light, he could now see that she was clasping her stomach, and she in turn saw the fear flare to life in his eyes.

“Are you in pain?” he asked hoarsely. “Do you need a doctor?”

He was already on the verge of leaping to his feet, when Elizabeth caught his wrist. She could feel his pulse racing beneath her fingertips. “No, Fitzwilliam, I am well. I need no doctor. I am sorry, I did not mean to frighten you.”

Darcy closed his eyes a moment as if recovering from a blow. When he opened them again, there was still uncertainty reflected in their depths. “But then—?”

His wrist was still in her hold, and conscious that having him experience it himself would do more than words, she drew his hand towards her and lay his palm flat against the spot she had felt the little persistent taps. The kicking had broken off as Darcy was gripped in his panic, but she waited, bearing down his hand steadily in place.

They did not speak for a minute as they sat there waiting, she with sparkling expectation and he with mounting conviction that his wife was distracted, possibly addled, and was in need of a doctor after all.

And then, Darcy started as he felt the gossamer pulse of pressure come against his palm. He looked down at his hand in bewilderment and then swiftly to Elizabeth, who was watching him with a happiness that seemed to light the room far better than the candle ever could dare hope to.

“Is that…?” his voice had diminished to a whisper.

He knew it was, of course, but the shock of it jolted him to his very core. All the same, she nodded feverishly, too overcome for words by now.

Elizabeth and Darcy were both unwilling to draw their hands from the place where their child was continuing to reach out to them. They fell asleep leaning on the headboard, her head tucked under his chin and a smile on their lips as their fingers lay entwined over Elizabeth’s stomach.
God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

With a ragged intake of breath, Darcy awoke. He was drenched in an icy sweat and his heart was thundering in his chest as he sat up in his bed and wildly turned to his left.

Elizabeth slept soundly beside him. She was facing towards him so that he could just make out her dark, thick lashes against her cheek by the light of the fire. One of her hands lay just beside her head on the pillow with its fingers half-curled.

The sight of her serene, of her chest rhythmically rising and falling, acted to drive away the worst vestiges of Darcy’s nightmare, but not entirely. Gently, so as not to wake her, he drew her into his arms and held her like she was his last and only hope for salvation. Elizabeth stirred, instinctively burrowing into the warmth of his body, and Darcy dropped his lips to her hair, hardly able to suppress his own violent trembling.

If he dreamed again that night, he did not remember.

December was upon England.

With Christmas rapidly approaching, Elizabeth found herself increasingly occupied with preparations for the arrival of their guests. There were not to be so many as she initially intended. Charlotte sent her sincerest regrets at being unable to accept, for she and Mr Collins already had fixed designs to visit at Lucas Lodge. While this was undoubtedly true, Elizabeth suspected her cousin was counting himself very fortunate indeed to have avoided even the possibility of incurring the displeasure of his noble patroness by coming to the household she no longer recognized as blood.

Elizabeth’s Uncle and Aunt Philips had also declined, but their loss was not felt so keenly as that of her friend. She would, of course, have been gracious in her duty to receive them at Pemberley, but secretly, Elizabeth was disposed to think that together her mother and Aunt Philips would have made quite the spectacle of themselves rhapsodizing over everything from the grounds to the linens—she could not expect them to remain in silent awe forever. As it was, her mother had already written that her Aunt Philips was most seriously put out with her husband for allowing business matters to supplant a trip to Derbyshire, but he would not be moved. Naturally, Mrs Bennet was only too willing to offer her miserable sister any means of comfort she could and promised to relate every single detail upon her return to Hertfordshire, a solution that would at once satiate Mrs Philip’s curiosity and Mrs Bennet’s affinity for boasting.

On this particular morning, Elizabeth arranged to meet with Mrs Reynolds and the cook in her morning room to plan the menu.

She sauntered into the morning room a little earlier than the decided time. Now eight months along, Elizabeth had taken to preemptively mitigating the slower pace she moved with by setting out for her destinations rather earlier than she once would have. Sinking onto the cushions of the divan, she gazed out the garden-facing window to await the others. A light snow had begun last evening and it persisted still, frosting the grounds.

When the door opened shortly after, it was yet too early, but Elizabeth thought nothing of it and expected to see either the housekeeper or the cook. Instead, Darcy strode inside the room.

“So here you are.”
She smiled at him before teasing, “Yes, and I thought I would not be found out. I am awaiting Mrs Reynolds to devise the courses to be served for Christmas.”

Darcy only nodded.

“How have you any special requests for the dinner?”

“No.” He said nothing further, but he did not go. Shutting the door behind him first, he walked over to her and sat down.

It was not unusual for Darcy to seek Elizabeth out every so often during the day for no reason other than to see her for a moment or share a kiss, but he nearly always had to rush back to his study and resume any business he had unceremoniously abandoned. To-day he seemed to have no intention at all of leaving. Although Elizabeth was far from objecting to his staying, she could not help but wonder how he found himself at liberty when just yesterday he had scarcely taken two paces from his desk. She turned to find him watching her conscientiously.

“Is everything all right, Fitzwilliam?” she asked as she reached for his hand. She did not like the look of distraction bordering on despondency about his eyes.

Darcy did not seem to have a reply in his power, but even if he had been of the inclination, a knock at the door suspended their privacy and Mrs Reynolds swept in with the cook in her wake.

Soon, matters of roasted mutton and custards demanded Elizabeth’s attention, but they could not retain it undividedly. From time to time, she would let her eyes drift to Darcy while the cook noted her directions. He remained for the entire discussion, though it lasted above an hour. If Mrs Reynolds found it strange that her master was in attendance, she made no show of it and her solicited input was delivered with her habitually unruffled deportment.

When the finishing details were finally agreed upon, the housekeeper and the cook took their leave.

But Elizabeth was by no means done for the day and still had much to do in the way of delegating tasks and managing the household staff. Touching her husband on the arm, she started, “I am needed elsewhere.”

Darcy stood at once. He offered his hand to help her to her feet, an act she was becoming ever more grateful to as rising from any seat began to be a challenge. She let him lead her up the staircase and assumed he would part with her there to return to his study, but he hesitated. Elizabeth looked up into his face to press him if there was something wrong, but he would not meet her eye. He was behaving much more like the staid, severe Darcy she had known in Hertfordshire than the one she had married, and the change was troublesome to her.

“Mrs Darcy?”

She was forced to direct her contemplations away from him and to the servant who had abruptly appeared before them. “Yes, Annette?”

“Were you wanting the blue room in the east wing prepared as well, ma’am?”

Elizabeth considered. “I believe so.” She turned to address Darcy. “Would the Colonel be comfortable there?”

Darcy started as though his thoughts had been far from tending to the conversation, but he leveled his gaze with his wife’s. “Richard ordinarily inhabits that room during his visits, so those accommodations will be more than acceptable to him.” He gave a ghost of a grin, but it did not reach
his eyes, and his lips soon gave up trying to maintain it as well.

“Excuse me,” he said unexpectedly, and took off past the maid in the direction of his study.

For a moment, Elizabeth stared after him. Then, recalled to the presence of the maid, she sent Annette to ready the blue room. The chief of the afternoon passed in a similar manner. Elizabeth presided over the servants as they aired the various chambers, restocked wood for the fireplaces and coals for the warming pans, and executed any other odds and ends she thought of as she walked the corridors to check on the progress being made.

Several times throughout the day, a peculiar thing happened. Elizabeth found a number of the servants she was speaking with invariably had their attention diverted somewhere over her shoulder before returning to her with a curious expression. On the third instance, she turned herself to see what was provoking such response.

Darcy was leaning in the doorframe looking very subdued.

Had he been shadowing her all along? If so, he had certainly been as unobtrusive as one. Elizabeth finished giving the footman orders to bring a large trunk occupying a room in the west wing to this one, a charge which she could not remember if she had said already in her preoccupation and so in all likelihood had iterated twice. When she turned again, the doorway was vacant.

Late afternoon was giving over to evening, and Elizabeth’s tasks for the day had been concluded one by one. After making sure Mrs Reynolds had arranged for someone to hand out the gifts to the tenants, she headed for her bedroom to change for dinner. Darcy was already within, arranging his neckcloth. As she slipped on a dress, he waited on the edge of the bed, coming over to tie her sash without being asked. Elizabeth took this opportunity to study his frame of mind, but could determine nothing; for every careful question she posed, he just as carefully deflected.

Dinner passed quietly enough, and Elizabeth could not help but notice that Darcy would not suffer her to stray far from his side, even if it was only to the other side of the library. Georgiana, looking between them, sensed something was amiss, but said nothing.

When they retired for the night, Darcy took her in his arms in bed. That in itself was not unusual, but the fierce neediness with which he held her was worrisome. Elizabeth was not formed to brook melancholy, and in an attempt to coax her husband into confiding in her, she spoke to engage him in any conversation she could.

She said the first thing she could think of. “The winter has been much milder than it was this time last year, do you not think so?”

In a strangled voice, Darcy made some incomprehensible exclamation.

Shocked that so innocuous a comment could elicit such a reaction from him, she pulled back and struggled to bring herself into a sitting position so she could see him. Elizabeth was more than disturbed to find a piercing look of agitation evident on every feature of his face.

“How could a simple remark of the climate last season—

Oh. Oh no.

She thought back, exerting herself to recollect if the idea that had just occurred to her could be so, and she found it could indeed. Descending on him with protective urgency, she gathered his head to
her breast and pressed him to her heart.

Only now, when the day was almost at its end, did Elizabeth realize its significance. One year ago exactly, she had fallen in the frozen pond in the woods of Pemberley, and Darcy had been forced to endure the possibility of her death. It was the anniversary of that confrontation that had reduced Darcy to such a state, even so far as to weigh on his dreams and torment him with scenes of what could have been. Her memory of that day may have been ambiguous, but his was most certainly not. All this Elizabeth realized, but too late.

“Oh, my love,” she murmured over and again in his ear as she stroked his hair. “All is well, all is well.”

Darcy clutched at Elizabeth while she continued her belated undertaking to console him.

“Why did you not tell me?”

“I will not burden you with fears that do not afflict you,” he told her in a voice thick with emotion. “By all accounts I have no right to feel this so deeply—you do, and yet your courage does not allow it. I am a far weaker creature than you, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief. “You are wrong. What upsets you, upsets me all the more. You have more right than anyone to be so affected, more so than I who was insensible to everything that passed.” Saying so, she softly kissed his brow. “Do not keep such anxieties from me, Fitzwilliam. I only ever wanted you to be free of them, not to withhold them.”

He did not reply.

“I am here and well, you are here and well, and very soon there shall be another for us to share the rest of our lives with for a long time to come.”

Elizabeth let a silence fall before she went on.

“I have been thinking, you know, of names. I find it to be quite possibly one of the most daunting decisions I have ever been faced with.”

Darcy gave a sound that was caught between a sigh and a laugh.

“I speak in earnest. Consider: a name tells a great deal about a person. We must select a name we like, but what if the baby absolutely detests our choice when they are old enough to understand? This dilemma, of course, led me to consider other misfortunes—what if our child inherits my unruly hair?”

He definitely laughed now. “Your hair is not unruly. I would hope for any child we have to look exactly as you do, boy or girl.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to laugh. “Any son of ours would hardly thank you for such a wish.”

She continued caressing Darcy’s cheek and talking to him of the happy future that was theirs until she could feel the tension leave his body and his breathing become even and slow.

“Lord preserve us! Have you ever seen anything half so fine, Mr Bennet?”

“No, my dear, but I am certain you would not give me the least credence even if I said I had.”

Elizabeth beamed widely. “Papa!”
With an excitement she could barely contain, she crossed to the open doors where her mother and father were busy admiring Pemberley’s front. Mr Bennet quickly cast aside the masonry-work that had secured the laurels of his wife in favor of his daughter and walked forward to meet her.

“Lizzy, my child!” he said as he embraced her with all the gratification a father was entitled to. In time, he released his hold only to seize her by the shoulders and pull her back from him slightly, saying, “There, let me have a look at you. How well you look! I daresay you equal Jane now.”

“Oh, Mr Bennet!” said Mrs Bennet, who had overheard her husband’s dry comment as she approached. “You know that cannot be so. Though you do look very pretty, Lizzy, I will grant you that.”

“How are you, Mama?” was Elizabeth’s reply as she hugged her mother.

“Very ill indeed! The ride here was insupportable. So many hours together stuck in the confines of a carriage! I thought for certain my nerves would be torn to pieces from the journey.” Then Mrs Bennet said something that rather surprised Elizabeth. “How are you, Lizzy?”

Unaccustomed to such attentiveness from her mother, Elizabeth took a moment to reply. “I am well, Mama.”

As quickly as the thoughtfulness appeared, it receded, and Mrs Bennet’s usual manner was restored. As she hurried to greet Georgiana, Elizabeth attempted to go with her in case Darcy’s sister felt overwhelmed by Mrs Bennet’s blunt conduct, but Mary and Kitty appeared and besieged their elder sister.

“Lizzy,” Kitty said as she drew back with wide eyes anchored on her sister’s protruding abdomen, “do you carry twins?”

“Kitty, really!” Mary admonished sharply. “Curiosity is no more ladylike than it is unseemly. Why do you not take care before you speak so, or else not say anything at all?”

Elizabeth burst out laughing with a rush of affection that overcame the shock of hearing such a question. Only a few paces away, Darcy was in conversation with her father and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had arrived earlier in the week from Matlock. She was sure he, at least, had heard Kitty’s comment; the sudden flash in his eyes suggested he was holding in his own laughter.

For her part, she thought she heard over the chatter Mr Bennet say to Darcy as he shook his hand something to the effect of, “I see you have been taking care of my daughter,” to which Darcy replied “I have done my best, sir.”

If the confusion in the vestibule was great then, it was nothing to when the second carriage pulled into the drive. Scarcely five minutes after the arrival of the Bennets, Charles and Jane, the latter with Charlie in her arms, disembarked.

“Jane, dear!”

Mrs Bennet in the lead, half the party flocked over to the Bingleys to meet the newest of their number.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was suddenly at Elizabeth’s side. “I say, this is already far more enjoyable than any private get-together our side of the family has ever had.”

“Do not commit yourself to an opinion until you have been subjected to a little more than our welcomes,” Elizabeth told him with a grin. “If your estimations remain the same after a few days
more in the perpetual company of my family, than I will credit you as sincere. You will forgive me if in turn I decide you have less sense than I first supposed of you.”

The Colonel chuckled, and at that moment the baby started crying. It was little wonder, with such enthusiastic attentions pressing from all around. Charles, however, did not seem to mind, and smiled as cheerfully as ever to see such a flurry over his child. At once, everyone shifted their efforts to quieting the frightened child, which really only made them all the louder, and Charlie’s crying redoubled.

Darcy, standing near his sister, had to raise his voice a bit to be heard over the din. “If everyone would please follow Mrs Reynolds, you will be shown to your rooms. Dinner will be served in an hour, so take until then to rest and refresh yourselves.”

As the last person filed up the grand staircase, Darcy and Elizabeth found themselves alone on opposite ends of the entrance hall. It seemed that Colonel Fitzwilliam had accompanied Georgiana to the music room to hear her play and bide their own time until dinner.

Darcy went to her with a smile on his lips. “Will you concede I was at least partly in the right about your duties as hostess being a little demanding?”

“I concede to nothing,” Elizabeth said brightly. “My abominable pride does not allow for it.”

“Oh, it is your abominable pride now, is it?”

“In part, at least. When I became Mistress of Pemberley, I no doubt came into temperament as well as money and property.”

The party had grown larger with the addition of the Gardiners.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner were more delighted than they could say to see their niece so happily situated, and their pleasure at having come at last for this much anticipated visit was unmistakable. Elizabeth was amazed to see how much her young cousins had grown since she had seen them last. Martha, now eight, was a full four inches taller at least, and even at a tender ten years of age, Lucy looked every bit like her mother. The boys, Edward and Henry, at six and four were as rambunctious as ever. Both were fascinated with Charlie and constantly asked if he could play with them, even after Jane gently explained he was yet a little too young. Their interest in him was displaced when they heard their mother address Darcy’s cousin as ‘Colonel,’ and soon they were eagerly bombarding him with questions of why he was not in his regimentals and if he had a sword. The Colonel took it all in stride and answered everything they asked in an animated language that very soon made him a favorite of the Gardiner boys.

The morning of Christmas Eve started out eventfully—one could even say chaotically—enough.

Mrs Gardiner, in somewhat of an alarm, came to Elizabeth as she was speaking with Mrs Reynolds about that evening. Her youngest, Henry, had not been in his bed when she went to dress him and she could not find him anywhere. Edward, who had been sharing the room with his brother, was still asleep at the time and had not heard Henry leave the room.

Elizabeth gave orders for all the staff to immediately put aside whatever duties they were performing to form a search party for the boy. Once the others were made aware of the situation, they joined the efforts. The Bennets and Gardiners were limited to searching the rooms of the house with which they were familiar, while Elizabeth, Georgiana, Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and the Bingleys combed the
other parts of the estate with the servants. Mary and Kitty stayed to the parlor with the rest of the children; it would not do for any more of them to become lost. There was a slim possibility that Henry could have managed to make his way out-of-doors, but Elizabeth thought it more likely that he was in the house.

After a quarter of an hour, Darcy returned down the main corridor from the north wing with Henry in his arms. The boy’s face was streaked with dried tears, but he looked no worse for the wear, and was even giggling as Darcy softly spoke with him. It seemed that he had forgotten his parents’ room was just beside his own and in the dark had become confused and lost his way. A thrill of exhilaration went through Elizabeth as she saw her husband hold her young cousin; a glimpse of what was to come.

“There, I told you he would be found, Minerva,” said Mr Gardiner as Darcy handed Henry over, though he looked quite as equally relieved as his wife and united his voice with hers in thanking Darcy.

With that calamity resolved, the rest of the day passed in the relative tranquility of having seventeen people under one roof.

Mr Bennet had retreated into the Pemberley library after the midday meal and Elizabeth went to join him. She found him much as she always did at home in his study, with a book in hand and an amused smile quirking his mouth as he read. Upon seeing her enter the room, however, he shut the volume.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you so happy, Lizzy.”

“Thank you, Papa,” she smiled. “How do you like Pemberley?”

“Oh, I like it very well, though not for the reasons you may be imagining. True, someone like your mother would find cause to rave over the richness of the tapestries or the depth of the armoires, but I believe it is the opportunity of having a sensible conversation that I like best of all about your new home.”

Elizabeth laughed a little before saying, “Then you do not feel Mary and Kitty have improved of late? I find them both remarkably better. I think Mary’s disposition has been enlivened by Kitty, and Kitty less silly for Mary’s influence.”

“That is true, I cannot begrudge them that. However…” his voice trailed off.

“Papa?”

“Well, Lizzy, to be frank, I still miss having your company.”

“I miss you too, Papa,” Elizabeth replied, suddenly feeling the threat of tears for such a disclosure.

“Is that the time?” Mr Bennet said, as he inspected the timepiece on the mantel. He was never one for the sentimental. “We should be going.”

As he led her out of the library, Elizabeth gave her father’s arm a reassuring squeeze, and he covered her hand with his own.

.*.

Christmas day dawned with the barest hint of snow, just enough to make everything look charming under shallow blankets of white.
Darcy went to his study and unlocked the side-drawer of his desk to claim his gift for Elizabeth. He slipped the narrow package into his coat pocket and headed for their bedroom.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was already out and about in the corridor while Darcy made his way on.

“Merry Christmas, Richard,” he greeted him.

His cousin smiled at him and replied in kind before unexpectedly segueing with, “You father-in-law is one of the most interesting characters I have ever met in my life.”

“Oh?”

“I had a long conversation last night with the man and his sense of humor is quite sharp. I see where your wife gets her wit.”

“Speaking of my wife, you shall have to excuse me; I have something to attend to.”

“Do not let me keep you, Darcy,” he said with a roguish smirk before heading for the stairs. Darcy knocked before he entered the bedroom.

“Come in.”

Darcy walked in smiling, and quickly shut the door behind him. “You do not ask who it is at your door—?”

He found himself robbed of his voice. Elizabeth stood before him, and the sight of her quite took his breath away.

She was wearing a crimson-red gown she had recently ordered from London. The Empire-waisted cut molded to her body in just the right places, and the neckline, though not immodest, dropped down rather low in the front. Half of her lustrous chestnut curls were cascading down her back. The rest was swept up in a series of small plaits that wreathed from her temples around to the crown of her head where a single poinsettia the exact color of her gown was tucked to the side. Her complexion was radiant, suffused with an ethereal glow. The effect was only accentuated as her cheeks blushed while he continued to stare intently.

“Are you afraid I am undiscriminating for whom I open the door?” she asked him.

“…what?”

Elizabeth laughed that sparkling heartfelt laugh he so loved to hear. “I take it you approve of my gown?”

Darcy forced himself to talk. “Very, very much.”

“I am glad. Wait there a moment. I have something for you.”

He watched in silent appreciation as she glided over to her vanity and retrieved a flat, wrapped parcel from therein. Approaching him again, she held the parcel out to him. “It is not something that costs, but…Merry Christmas.”

Darcy took it from her and uncovered a leather-bound book. There was no title on the cover or spine.

“Look inside.”
He lifted the cover and the end-sheet. On the first page, he saw not printed typeface, but the graceful hand of Elizabeth. Glancing up at her fleetingly, he brought the book closer to him to read what she had written.

In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

It took Darcy a moment to comprehend that they were his own words. Without thinking, he flipped to the next page.

I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun.

And to the next.

I love you, whatever may come. I love you above all other things, societal obligations be damned! I love you.

On every page thereafter were inscribed words that came back to him in reverberating echoes, all things he had said to Elizabeth at one time or another.

Gently shutting the book, he met Elizabeth’s eyes. She had been observing him the entire time, and upon seeing his face, she answered the question he had not voiced.

“You scorn the words you once wrote down to me in anger. This is a much fairer reflection of your character, a collection of the things you daily say that never are put to paper by you. It is not a journal exactly, but a keepsake I have been adding to ever since our engagement. Some of my fondest memories are contained in that book, and every one of them is something you have told me. I want you to have this as a reminder that one moment of folly cannot overshadow a lifetime of tenderness.”

Darcy was moved. He did not know what else to do, so he reached into his pocket and withdrew his own gift for her. “This seems quite inadequate now.”

Elizabeth’s smile was warm as he placed the package in her hands. She uttered a little gasp as she carefully removed the lid to reveal a necklace buried in folds of tissue paper. On the delicate chain hung a locket of intricate gold filigree laced with a few chips of ruby on the casing.

“Fitzwilliam, it is too much.”

“Too much for the wife I love above my own life and the mother of my child? I think not,” he teased, but at once firm she would have it.

She shook her head. “It is beautiful.”

“Would you wear it now? It matches your dress.”

Elizabeth nodded and drew up her hair as he moved to fasten the chain around her neck. When he had done, he let his hands stay on her, running them over her shoulders and back. She turned and looked at him meaningfully. She let the back of her fingers stroke his lips before she leaned forward to meet him, and he let his eyes drift closed. When she was so close that he could feel her breath, she advanced no more, letting her lips linger tantalizing on his with a feather-light touch that left every nerve in his body on fire and aching for more.

“We have guests,” she told him, each movement of her lips causing them to brush softly against his.
His eyes shot open just in time to catch a glimpse of her archly looking back at him as she slipped out the door.

To the untrained eye it would seem that everyone at the dinner table was simply talking without taking into account if they were heard or not, but an experienced one would have been able to determine that there were at least six different conversations being held amid the cacophony between food and drink.

When everyone had eaten their fill, they took to the drawing room and broke up into smaller parties. The Gardiner children played with the new playthings they had just been given this morning under the careful eye of their mother as she spoke to Elizabeth, Georgiana, Kitty, and Mary. Mrs Bennet was speaking with Jane about their upcoming visit to Verburry once they left Pemberley, periodically exclaiming over Charlie with doting simpers. At the card table, Mr Bennet was acquainting Charles about the new neighbors who had taken up residence at Netherfield, while Mr Gardiner was in discussion with Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam over which fishing tackle was the most reliable.

Though all had proclaimed themselves unable to eat another bite, when dessert and coffee were served, everyone partook of at least a little and the chestnuts were not to be passed up under any circumstances.

Elizabeth often found herself very distracted throughout the evening. Darcy’s eyes were frequently on her from across the room. He was already looking devastatingly handsome in his dark blue coat to begin with, but the look in his eyes was that she could scarcely keep her countenance.

It was not until her mother had begun in bragging terms about how Mary had formed something which held great promise of an attachment with the youngest son of her Uncle Philip’s clerk that Elizabeth attended the conversation she was supposed to be taking part of.

“Little Joseph Winchester!” she exclaimed as the image of a small boy with unkempt brunette locks and a smattering of freckles swam before her eyes. Of course, that was how he had appeared nearly six years ago, but she could not hear him mentioned and think of him otherwise.

“Mr Joseph Winchester and I are merely acquaintances, Mama,” Mary said carefully, but her cheeks were in high color. “I think him a very sensible sort of gentleman. We have similar tastes in books and discuss our ideas of them—philosophy, psalms, things of that nature. That is all.”

That was certainly the most generous sort of praise her sister would ever offer. Elizabeth acknowledged that, for once, their mother may have been quite right in distinguishing a potential suitor. After all, Mary had never been one to trouble herself to seek company in members of the opposite sex; to be sure, she did not seek company in members of her own sex. With a wry twist of her lips, Elizabeth tried to repress the silly notion that had arisen in her mind of how perfectly biblical such a match would be if it did indeed blossom into something more.

Mrs Bennet waved her hand in dismissal of her middle daughter’s protests. “Well do not waste valuable time on that nonsense with the boy, Mary. You must work on luring him into lov—”

“Mama, look!” Jane fortuitously cut in, saving Elizabeth the trouble of doing so before she embarrassed them further. “Charlie is smiling as you speak. He is eager for you to hold him.”

Elizabeth saw that her mother was now so impatient in wishing for her remaining daughters to marry that she no longer even wanted them to hold out to marry wealthy, just comfortably, so long as she was rid of them. Though this had not kept her from occasionally asking Darcy—who had somehow
managed to remain elusive on the subject—if he had any eligible relatives an appropriate age for them.

This also usually led her to eye Colonel Fitzwilliam as one would inspect a horse for purchase—as she was doing right now.

“Mama!” Elizabeth scolded, taking the opportunity to say her piece. “We are all perfectly sensible of your wish to see Mary and Kitty married, but you must stop—”

She struggled momentarily to find a delicate manner in which to word her mother’s incessant application to find her daughters husbands.

“—intimating it when you ask after Fitzwilliam’s relations. And for heaven’s sake, stop looking at the Colonel so!”

Mrs Bennet trilled. “I am the very soul of discretion.”

Here, Elizabeth was forced to quite literally bite her tongue; she did not trust herself to refrain from breaking her silence, either by laughter or skeptical remark, otherwise.

“I can assure you Mr Darcy thinks nothing of my inquiries. Mark me, wait until you have a daughter of your own and see if you do not think of little else. I hope this child is a girl, as Pemberley is not entailed. That would serve you right.”

Horrifyingly, this put Mrs Bennet in a mind to discuss something else entirely. Contrary to what she had just said, Elizabeth’s mother began to explicitly advise her on measures she could take to ensure a boy, most of which caused Elizabeth to blush to the very roots of her hair. The best of it was that Mrs Bennet spoke with a certainty that suggested her own endeavors had been successful, and by her methods she had produced an entire brood of males, not five daughters.

Mrs Gardiner tactfully turned the conversation to altogether different matters, earning Elizabeth’s gratitude as she was given time to compose herself.

“…true, sister, a very lovely time,” Mrs Bennet was nodding as Elizabeth turned to them once more. “But I find it extremely vexing that my Lydia and her Mr Wickham were unable to come.”

Aghast, Elizabeth sought Georgiana in the group, but Darcy’s sister was deep in conversation with Kitty and seemed unmindful of the name that had just been mentioned. Mrs Bennet, like most of Elizabeth’s family, had been left unacquainted with the particulars of Wickham’s past, and still did not know about his attempts on Georgiana.

Anxious in case Mrs Bennet continued this line of thought, Elizabeth quickly said, “Georgiana! Would you be so kind as to favor us with some music? If you should not like to sing, perhaps Kitty will accompany you.”

Georgiana obliged her and went to the pianoforte, but she did ask Kitty to join her. While Darcy’s sister played, hers sang.

“God rest ye merry gentlemen let nothing you dismay…”

Elizabeth had not need worried about persistence on the topic of the Wickhams. Mrs Bennet regressed to the original subject of Joseph Winchester, while Mary looked to be trying to ignore her as she dallied Charlie in her lap.

While her mother was in raptures over, as she put it, ‘Mary’s conquest,’ Jane took a seat next to
Elizabeth. “Have you noticed that Kitty seems a little out of spirits these past few days?”

Elizabeth turned to look at her elder sister with a small frown. “I had not.”

Jane nodded. “I thought myself mistaken, but when I asked Charles last night, he said he had perceived the very same thing. It cannot just be the absence of Lydia that makes her seem so.”

“I have noticed a difference in her behavior, but I put it to time spent with Mary, and I certainly had not thought her unhappy.”

Jane pursed her lips and nodded. “I am thinking of inviting her to stay at Verburry in the spring. Perhaps a change of scenery and society would do well for her.”

“I am sure she would be thankful, Jane. She could even spend part of the season here at Pemberley if she liked,” Elizabeth suggested.

With this idea in mind, a few minutes saw Elizabeth walking over to where her husband was speaking with Charles. She related what Jane had told her of Kitty, and Charles contributed his own observations.

“We thought it would be good for her to come visit with Jane and Charles, and then with us sometime in the spring.”

“Of course,” Darcy nodded. “Invite Mary along as well so she does not feel excluded.”

“I shall,” she smiled affectionately at him, and his eyes went dark with feeling once more.

Just then, Kitty and Georgiana finished their song to the applause of the room. No sooner had they stood from the bench than Mary seized the opportunity to succeed them at the pianoforte. As she sang the opening note off-key, Elizabeth could not help but think that the true indicator of the Winchester boy’s feelings for Mary would be if he thought her an accomplished musician; if so, then there could be no doubt of an attachment. With a smile, Elizabeth remembered Darcy admiring her less than adept fingering of the instrument at Rosings, and she turned her dancing eyes to look at him again before rejoining the women.

After Mary had played her two movements, Jane brought up her proposal that Kitty come back to visit in the spring. Mrs Bennet almost accepted on her behalf with more alacrity than her daughter.

In a quiet, playful voice, Elizabeth said to Mary, “You are, of course, also welcome, but if you have… other things to occupy you in Hertfordshire, Jane and I understand.”

Mary’s only response was to color.

The men intermingled with the ladies again as the night waned, and at two o’clock in the morning it was indeed time to retire. Sleepy calls of ‘good night’ and ‘Merry Christmas’ followed everyone to their chambers.

Elizabeth walked into her bedroom and turned to lock the door for the night. No sooner had she done so than she felt hands frantically turning her around. With her back pressed up against the panels of the door, Darcy was able to at last complete the taunting kiss he had been tempted with this morning.

“That was quite cruel of you, Elizabeth,” he said huskily, his eyes burning.
“Was it?” she said breathlessly. “Then I suppose I should make it up to you.”

Catching him by the lapels of his jacket, she brought him closer for another lasting kiss, and he responded with fervency, a harsh moan escaping the back of his throat. She lay her hands flat against his lower chest, feeling his irregular breathing as it moved through him before sliding them up to his shoulders and then to twine around his neck. Darcy broke away but at once started to kiss the rich, melting curves of her neck, brushing aside the locket he had given her so it would not hinder him. When he reached the hollow of her throat, from her lips he drew a pleased gasp that only spurred him to repeat himself again.

From there, it was quite an easy thing to give themselves over to the passions of a long winter night.
The vestibule was a teeming flurry of activity once more in the early days of January. Footmen were hauling trunks out the front doors and lashing them to the three carriages that stood at the ready in the drive while the Darcys and their guests bid their farewells.

The Bennets were to make their way on to Verburry to visit with the Bingleys at their new home for a fortnight. When they departed from there to Hertfordshire, Jane and Charles too would be leaving their home to return to Pemberley once more. Elizabeth’s confinement was but three weeks away, and Jane was coming to be with her sister during that time just as Elizabeth had for her.

“I am so glad you could finally come,” Elizabeth said to Mrs Gardiner as she kissed her cheek.

Mrs Gardiner held her niece close. “As am I. You make a fine Mistress of Pemberley indeed, and you seem so very happy.”

“I am, Aunt.”

“It is all I ever wished for you,” she said, briefly putting her hand to Elizabeth’s face. “Now, mind you take care of yourself in the coming weeks.”

“I will make certain she does, madam,” Darcy answered from beside his wife. He had been shaking hands with Mr Gardiner but now took hers and inclined his head slightly. “You have my word.”

“I have no doubt of that, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner said, giving him a fond smile as he handed her into the carriage first, followed by Lucy and then Martha.

“Come along, boys,” Mr Gardiner called to his sons.

Henry and Edward were Prattling away to Colonel Fitzwilliam and very unwilling to leave his side, but at last they came running and clambered inside the carriage after their sisters.

Mr Gardiner paused before shutting the door. “Thank you again for a lovely time. I hope we will be seeing the both of you again very soon. Perhaps a trip to Gracechurch Street when you are up to it?”

“We would be delighted, sir.”

“Have a safe journey, Uncle,” Elizabeth said. “Good-bye.”

With a snap of the reins from the coachman in his box, they were off. The little hands of the Gardiner children came peeping out of the windows to flail about in their good-byes, and Elizabeth and Darcy waved back until the carriage disappeared behind the rise of the valley.

“I have only begun to recover from our journey here, and now we are to leave again!” came Mrs Bennet’s wailing voice. “Traveling is such tedious business.”

Elizabeth turned towards the house to see her mother being led down the stairs by Charles.

“Nottinghamshire is not so very far from Derbyshire, Mrs Bennet,” Charles was telling her good-naturedly. “I should wager we will arrive before you have any complaint of fatigue.”

“Clearly he does not know your mother,” Mr Bennet muttered sardonically. “Be sure to keep your husband away from the gambling tables, Jane.”
Elizabeth found her father and Jane with Charlie standing just behind her. She laughed, and even Jane smiled.

“Well, my child, I suppose we must part ways once again.”

Elizabeth embraced him tightly. “Mary and Kitty will need someone to accompany them on the journey here come spring. When you choose who may occupy that office, remember to consider that you will have another grandchild to meet, Papa.”

“I shall keep that in mind, Lizzy.”

As Mr Bennet pulled away from Elizabeth, he looked to his eldest daughter. From her arms, Charlie stared back solemnly at his grandfather before throwing out his stout arms in his direction and making little grabbing motions with his hands. Mr Bennet initially looked taken aback, but in the next moment he had hoisted the child up into his own arms with a flicker of a grin.

Mrs Bennet came hastening over. “Good-bye, Lizzy!” With a significant glance at Darcy she began, “Remember to employ some of the methods I mentioned—”

“Yes, I shall, Mama,” Elizabeth agreed hurriedly before her mother began to repeat any of the things she had told her on Christmas in front of her husband and mortified them all.

The party divided into the two remaining carriages and before long they were rolling away down the lane, one after the other.

Colonel Fitzwilliam remained another two days; he would be stopping at his parents’ home before joining the rest of his militia division near the Channel. The night before he returned to Matlock, he, Darcy, Georgiana, and Elizabeth gathered in the parlor after dinner and talked familiarly. In some fashion or other, they had landed on the topic of Lady Catherine, and the Colonel was having a capital time abusing their relation.

“She has become even more ornery than before, if you can believe that, Darcy.”

“I would say that is impossible,” Darcy rejoined. It took little effort on his part to remember the invective-strewn tirade he had been treated to when his aunt learned he could not be moved in his decision to take Elizabeth as his wife. That letter had been burnt the very moment after he read it so Elizabeth would never see the vicious language in which his aunt had written of her.

He was recalled to the present when he heard Elizabeth say something most unexpected from beside him. “Fitzwilliam, perhaps you should attempt a reconciliation with Lady Catherine.”

The Colonel started, while Darcy replied emphatically, “No, certainly not.”

“She is your family.”

“Not anymore,” Darcy said darkly.

Elizabeth raised an impertinent eyebrow at him. “Whether you wish her to be or not, she is your aunt. You cannot stay estranged from her forever, and I would certainly not want for you to endeavor it on my behalf.”

“After everything she has done? After what she has said and done to you? No. I want nothing whatsoever to do with her.”
“It is your decision, but consider that in the end her efforts did not succeed.”

Darcy did consider. Yes, Elizabeth was his wife. He had married her and they had a child on the way; he could not be happier. But the material point was if he could forgive the woman who had wanted to deny him all of this. Darcy did not think he could.

He saw the corners of Elizabeth’s lips curl into a smile before she said, “I know it is a hopeless case for her to ever wish your good opinion again, but I think simple civility will suffice.”

Darcy burst out laughing, and Elizabeth’s clear, sparkling laugh joined his. Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam looked between themselves in confusion, at a loss to understand what was amusing them so.

When their laughter had subsided somewhat, Colonel Fitzwilliam started reminiscently, “There now, this is much better. If someone had told me that Easter at Rosings that my grave cousin and the spirited Miss Bennet would marry, I would have thought them either stark raving mad or in their cups.”

“Why?” Georgiana asked curiously.

With a gleam in his eye, Colonel Fitzwilliam had opened his mouth to respond to her, but Darcy sternly interrupted him in a threatening tone with, “Richard.”

“Oh come now, Darcy. You mean to tell me that Georgiana knows nothing of how the pair of you got on before?”

Elizabeth turned a questioning glance to him as well, and he could feel his cheeks burning. “She knew a little of it. I wrote to her about Elizabeth. Some of what I told her was…inaccurate, though I did not know it at the time, and that is putting it mildly.”

“He had written to me from Hertfordshire about meeting Elizabeth,” Georgiana affirmed. “From the very beginning he said that she was lovely and intelligent. Fitzwilliam had never spoken to me about any other lady of his acquaintance that way before.”

“Did he now?” the Colonel said thoughtfully, pondering this new information. “I had the distinct impression that your brother and the then Miss Bennet were not very fond of each other at one time. Or at least, I thought she was not fond of him.”

Darcy was looking everywhere but at his cousin. He had confided in his sister that Elizabeth had refused him when he first offered for her hand, but he had never told Richard. Still, Darcy knew he had his suspicions, and apparently his cousin had judged that now would be as good a time as any to discover if they held any merit.

“I was mistaken about certain things, Colonel,” Elizabeth intervened, “things that once I knew to be false helped me see your cousin in a different light.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam reclined back in his chair—a soldier’s retreat and an indication that he would resign from tormenting Darcy for to-night at least.

The rest of the evening was spent pleasantly. When Colonel Fitzwilliam took his leave the following morning, the Darcys were left to themselves at Pemberley once more.

The final quavering note of Mozart’s “Requiem” shivered in the air as Georgiana pressed down on
the ivory keys. Elizabeth and Mrs Annesley applauded her heartily.

“Beautifully done, Miss Darcy,” enthused her companion.

“I have never heard that piece played so very well by anyone before, Georgiana,” Elizabeth told her sincerely. “If Mary does indeed come to Pemberley with Kitty in the spring, she shall have you locked in here with her from dawn to dusk until you can teach her to perform on the pianoforte exactly as you do.”

With a faint blush coloring her fair complexion, Georgiana rotated on the bench before the instrument so her legs were placed on the opposite side and she could speak with Elizabeth. “I would be more than happy to, but I think Mary plays quite ably already,” she offered kindly.

Elizabeth laughed outright at her diplomacy. “Spoken like a true Darcy.”

“I do so hope they both come. I like your sisters very much. What fun it must have been growing up all together, and so close in age!”

“It was certainly never dull,” Elizabeth acknowledged with a tongue-in-cheek concession that would have done Mr Bennet proud. “I cannot imagine your sibling throwing a fit to borrow your ribbons and lace.”

Georgiana laughed gaily at the idea of her brother doing anything of the kind.

“Miss Darcy, it is eight o’clock,” remarked Mrs Annesley. “Your appointment at the modiste’s is at nine.”

“Will you be back in time to dine with us at midday, Georgiana?”

“I do not think so. Mademoiselle Avignolle always takes a great deal of time with my measurements, and I wish to stop for some new sheet music as well while we are by the shops.”

“Enjoy yourself then,” Elizabeth replied with a smile.

Georgiana left the music room, followed sedately by Mrs Annesley. Alone again, Elizabeth took up the book she had been reading earlier and settled more comfortably into the recess of the window-seat.

She had gone but two pages when the book dropped from her hands and landed with a muffled thud to the floor.

.

Elizabeth stood just outside of the library. The door was ajar, and from it she watched as Darcy sorted through papers at the small desk, signing some and only glancing at others before he discarded them. After several minutes, he caught sight of her

“Elizabeth,” he said warmly, “I was just about to come to you. I am finished for to-day.”

She approached him where he sat slowly, wondering how to put what she had to tell him in a manner that would keep him calm. Before she could come to any decision, however, the matter was taken out of her hands. As a dull, searing throb at the small of her back like the first she had felt in the music room wracked her, she unconsciously gripped the side of the desk to steady herself.

Darcy spotted the tips of her fingers going white with pressure. She sensed more than saw him look
from her hands to her face as she fought to compose herself, but by now he knew something was not right and dived out of his chair towards her.

“Elizabeth!”

When she was able, she looked up into her husband’s face and distinguished the panic there that she had hoped to avoid. “I am well,” she told him, releasing the desk and reaching for his hand, “but it is time.”

If she thought he would be relieved by this information, she could not have been more wrong.

For a moment, he only stared. Then understanding came. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, it is too early. There is a week yet.”

Elizabeth smiled a little at the petulance in his voice, but said gently, “Neil told me it was not uncommon for confinement to occur some weeks earlier or later than anticipated.”

Darcy stood there in silence; he seemed to be in shock. Elizabeth bit back the moan that rose to her lips as another twinge plunged through her, but she must not have concealed it very well because at last he came to himself.

“We need Neil and the midwife,” he said suddenly.

“I have already sent for them, but they will not come immediately. This will take time, and they need not be present for all of it.”

She saw her husband’s expression grow more distressed. “Your sister—”

“—is already on her way here by this time,” Elizabeth finished. “They were to come to-day.” She attempted to tease him to make him easy. “Instead of arriving early, they will simply be on time.”

There was no trace of a smile anywhere on Darcy’s face. “What is there to be done then?”

“Mrs Reynolds recommended I go to the prepared room.”

Darcy nodded. They made their way from the library to the grand staircase without difficulty, but as they were about to ascend, Elizabeth was forced to stop as another pain seized her. She clutched the balustrade to keep herself upright and breathed deeply to help it pass, and it did soon enough. She did not realize she had closed her eyes as well until she let her lids rise to find Darcy standing before her, his face taut with apprehension. Deftly, he lifted her into his arms and carried her up the steps himself.

Darcy was almost angry with Elizabeth’s lady’s maid by the time she finally opened the door.

She had disappeared with his wife into the bedchamber that had been specifically prepared for Elizabeth’s confinement so she could change into a nightgown. As Darcy was becoming as far removed from reason as possible, he felt the few minutes that passed in the interim were excessive and could not comprehend what was keeping her so long. He strode into the room before the handle of the door had done more than turn, and Elizabeth dismissed Lily with a kind look. The girl gave a nervous glance between them and bobbed a curtsey before she left.

Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed trying to free her hair from the elaborate style Lily had dressed it into only an hour since. As Darcy came inside, he drew behind her, eased her own hands away, and
began to unpin it for her. Running his fingers through his wife’s hair to smooth it, he loosely plaited the thick, dark tresses. In a while, he became aware that he was doing a rather clumsy job of it all because his hands were trembling quite badly.

He knew she could feel his treacherous fingers against her back when she asked him quietly, “Are you frightened?”

It escaped from him as a whispered confession before he could stop himself. “Yes.”

Elizabeth turned to face him then, cupping his cheek, and Darcy leaned into her touch as one of his own hands came up to cover hers.

“Do not be, my love.”

But it was in that moment that he saw the smallest spark of fear echoed in Elizabeth’s eyes, and that more than anything threatened to have him undone. She who had never betrayed the least bit of disquiet about this expectancy was now at the crisis of it, and any anxieties to be had were exposed whether she wished it or not.

And in spite of all that, she was comforting him.

Darcy brought her hand to his lips and pressed a soft, warm kiss to her fingers.

There was a knock at the door and Mrs Reynolds admitted herself into the chamber. “How do you get on, Mrs Darcy? Your pains are not too strong?”

“Not yet.”

Mrs Reynolds nodded in a satisfied manner. “Dr Neil and the midwife should be here in a few hours. Mr Darcy, perhaps you would do better to wait for him downstairs?” She addressed him passively, as though it was only a suggestion, but Darcy knew she wanted to remain inside the room in his stead; propriety demanded that he not be here.

“No,” he told her with tenacity.

The housekeeper hesitated, but then thought better of whatever it was she had been about to say. “If you require anything at all, Lily or I will be just out in the gallery.”

“Thank you, Mrs Reynolds.”

When the door shut again, the features of Elizabeth’s face contorted in pain, and Darcy could only watch as she grasped at the bedclothes until the tension left her body.

“I believe I should walk,” Elizabeth said after a few seconds, and with Darcy’s vigilant attention, they began to move carefully around the room.

The next two hours crawled at alternating intervals of suffering and respite, though the latter were becoming more infrequent and the former ever more intense. Mrs Reynolds checked in periodically to ask what progress was being made, and Darcy was always on the verge of answering her with a brusque ‘worse’ each time, though Elizabeth would answer before he could. She was panting through parted lips by this time, but despite being short of breath she would walk. Elizabeth did her utmost to keep from whimpering aloud, but there came a point where there was no restraining it. It was only when a paroxysm of pain so overpowering that it took her voice away and her legs temporarily ceased to support her weight that she consented to Darcy’s urging that she rest on the bed.
His anguish on her behalf was nearly as acute as her own. Every time Elizabeth bit her lip or made a convulsive movement to clutch his hand, a helpless fear tore through him unlike any he could recall experiencing before. There were moments where Darcy thought he could not stand to watch her endure this agony any longer, but even so he could not leave her.

A little before eleven o’clock, hurried footsteps came resounding down the corridor and in a moment the door to the room was cast aside to reveal a solicitous-looking Jane.

“Jane!”

“Oh, Lizzy,” she exclaimed as she came to stand beside Darcy, “we only just arrived! Mrs Reynolds told me the moment the carriage drew to a stop! How are you?”

Before Elizabeth could make any sort of reply, another two figures came through the wide open doorway. It was Neil and the midwife.

“About damn time, Neil,” Darcy said savagely. He knew there was nothing his friend could have done even if he had come earlier, knew that there was still nothing to be done but to have this take its course, but he gave vent to a small fraction of the impotence he was feeling all the same. He hated watching Elizabeth go through this torture.

The doctor was unfazed by his irritation and only stepped forward to take Elizabeth’s pulse as he looked at his pocket-watch, questioning her on various things all the while. As Neil tended to her, the midwife entered. She eyed Darcy with evident disapproval at his presence.

Whether it was for that reason or the fact that Jane was now come, Elizabeth pressed the hand she yet held to obtain his attention. “Fitzwilliam, you should go,” she murmured. “I shall be fine.”

Darcy knew he had to leave, but he felt as though he was abandoning her. She continued to persuade him it was for the best. Holding her hand between both of his for another instant, he quitted the room with the greatest reluctance. The midwife shut the door firmly behind him.

—*

Bingley spent the next several hours trying to do Darcy the same service he had done him during Jane’s confinement the only way they knew how: by offering a reassuring word now and again accompanied by a liberally poured glass of cognac. Unfortunately, Darcy was not as receptive to these gestures as Bingley had been. He could not dispel himself of the image of Elizabeth suffering in the room upstairs. At one moment he would pace the length of the library in restless agitation, but in the next he would sag into an armchair with no energy to speak of. Once or twice, he reached for the cognac to seek what little relief it could offer, but both times he set it back down without even tasting it; his hands were yet shaking too much to hold the glass steady and he did not want Bingley to see.

The Bingleys’ nursemaid, Miss Everblanc, appeared some time after noon with Charlie to ask about nothing Darcy paid any mind to and left again, but for the most part the hours ticked away for the two men in solitude with a protracted, mocking indifference.

At three o’clock that afternoon, there had been no news, but Georgiana returned from Lambton and was highly disturbed to find her brother in such a state. Once he was able to impart the particulars of the situation, the alarm on her countenance only lessened a degree; she could see exactly how upset Darcy was, try as he might to conceal it. She sat on the side of the divan closest to her brother and entered into their interminable vigil.
As the longcase clock chimed for the seventh hour, Darcy felt insanity stealing over him. He left his chair and deliberately made for the door.

“Fitzwilliam,” he heard Georgiana call after him warily, “where are you going?”

“To take a turn about the house.”

It was not a lie. He did intend to take a turn about the house. If in doing so he happened to find himself in the upper gallery, that was neither here nor there.

Darcy was yet a good fifteen paces from the room when he heard Elizabeth cry out on the other side of the door with excruciating clarity. He froze. His knees were threatening to buckle beneath him, and he stumbled over to the wall for support before it happened. This was really too much. Though he exerted to master himself, there was little use in it; he felt like a boy again, terrified and with everything beyond his control. As his wife’s pained voice pierced through him for a second time, Darcy fled from the gallery, feeling very much a coward but certain he could not prevent himself from bursting inside the room if he heard anymore.

When he returned to the library, he looked at neither Bingley nor his sister and downed his glass of cognac in one swallow.

“I am sure it will be over soon, Darcy,” Bingley spoke to his friend for the first time in hours as he replaced the empty tumbler on the end table. “Everything will turn out well.”

Darcy only spared him a single look, but it was enough for Bingley to know better than to attempt saying anything of the kind again. Darcy understood his friend meant well and that he had gone through this himself, but there were two details working against Bingley that would not allow him to take any comfort in what he said. The first was that Bingley had not been with Jane for any part of her confinement since Elizabeth had been present from start to end, and therefore he had not looked on as Darcy had looked on with Elizabeth. The second was still more imprecating: when in his position, Bingley already found reprieve by this time. As of right now, Elizabeth had been at this for three hours longer than her sister had.

None of them took any dinner though Mrs Reynolds insisted they should. Darcy knew if he ate anything he would be incapable of holding it down. It grew late and the only sources of light in the room came from the fire in the grate and a candelabrum or two, but neither Bingley nor Georgiana would leave Darcy alone in the library to wait. Though they struggled not to submit to the increasing heaviness in their eyes and limbs, each in turn fell asleep. Bingley was snoring lightly in his armchair while Georgiana drifted to one side of the divan until she was horizontal upon it and slept with her head pillowed in her arms.

With his heart throbbing much too quickly, Darcy sat rigid and pale in his chair as the hours wiled away.

Close to midnight, Georgiana stirred and woke to find him staring vacantly at the wall opposite. She slipped her warm hand into one of his and he gripped her fingers tightly.

“Elizabeth will be fine, Fitzwilliam. You know that, do you not?”

Darcy gave a curt nod, not trusting his voice. Georgiana decided to risk trying something she had seen Elizabeth do to calm her brother to great effect, and began talking to him of something else to keep his mind distracted.

“So what will be the name of my little niece or nephew?”
She was gratified to see him look faintly as though he were thinking of something other than Elizabeth’s suffering for the first time in sixteen hours.

“For a boy, we had thought—”

His voice died on his lips as a terrible scream that expressed agony of a kind no physical pain could cause rent the air.

“No! What is wrong? Stop! Stop!”

Darcy’s furiously pounding heart stuttered to a halt in his chest, and he saw Georgiana look at him in horror. By the time Bingley had jerked upright in his seat, he was already running from the library. He took the stairs three at a time and flew blindly down the pitch-black corridor as fast as his legs could carry him, passing several startled servants in their nightclothes as they gazed uneasily in the direction of the gallery.

Darcy threw open the door to the confinement room with such force that it slammed into the wall and rebounded back, and had a lesser man been in its trajectory, they would have been sent reeling. The scene that met him inside was something he could never have been prepared for, one he was certain would haunt him for years to come.

Elizabeth, her hair streaming out of its plait and tangling about her face, was fighting with everything she had in her to break free from the grasp Jane and the midwife each had on her.

“Release me, Jane!” she wept desperately. She was weak, but there was mad resolution in her face as she thrashed in her hysteria. “Let go, oh let me go!”

The midwife, who was on the side closest to the door, turned and saw that Darcy was in the room. “Sir!” she said in a scandalized tone as she at once tried to turn him out and scrambled to hide the bloodied linens as though that were the most important thing to be done.

The instant she let go of Elizabeth, she was able to rip away from her sister’s sole restraint. She went staggering out of the bed towards Neil, who Darcy only just realized was off to one side of the room with his back to the door and examining something on the table in front of him. With a sickening lurch in his stomach, he knew there was but one thing it could be.

The doctor whipped around. “Someone hold her still before she causes herself to bleed out!”

Darcy attempted to go to his wife, but the midwife impeded him from coming further inside. “Sir, this is no place for you—”

“Mrs Kale,” Neil barked, suddenly beside them both, “I really must insist you leave the room. You have done your work and now you must let me do mine.” With a callousness Darcy had never witnessed before in his friend, he marched the woman to the doorway and shut her out.

Darcy rushed forward to Elizabeth as she continued to resist Jane. “Elizabeth, you will do yourself injury!”

Her ravaged face came to focus on him as he stepped in front of her to bodily stall her efforts, and the sight of her eyes so raw with anguish pulled at his insides. “Fitzwilliam! Fitzwilliam, he took her, he took her!” and so saying, she collapsed against him.

As gently as he could, he put her back into the bed, sitting beside her to keep her there. He turned accusingly in search of Neil, only to find him walking towards them with a little bundle in his hands and a grim look on his face. Elizabeth saw him and at once stretched out to take her baby from him,
but the doctor did not seem about to yield anything, and Darcy’s hand was the only thing staying his wife from leaving the bed again.

In a sort of stupefied delirium, he listened as Neil explained how the infant—his daughter—had not cried when she was born, and that was the first sign something was wrong. As he went into the particulars of how she showed other indications of poor constitution like a frail pulse, shallow breathing, whitish skin coloration, and little response to stimulation, Darcy only took in bits and pieces of it.

“It is nothing that could have been helped. Newborns sometimes demonstrate these symptoms for a few minutes, but in other cases it is a sign of something more serious. There is little I can do…it is entirely up to her, but I must warn you to prepare for the worst.” Neil was uncharacteristically clinical as he related everything, but his eyes belied his sympathy as he looked between them. “I am so sorry.”

The world was falling away, and Darcy felt his chest constrict so that he could scarcely draw breath as devastation settled heavily over him. He could not even look at the baby now.

“No, no, no,” Elizabeth shuddered, and her whole body sank until her head was facedown in Darcy’s lap.

Hardly knowing what he was even saying, he whispered nonsensical things to soothe her as he drew her closer and mechanically stroked her hair. At the foot of the bed, he could see Jane quietly trying to stifle her own crying with the back of her wrist pressed to her mouth.

Darcy held Elizabeth as she sobbed brokenly, trying to keep her together while she threatened to fall apart in his arms. It was a blessing when her exhaustion drove her to cry herself into a fitful sleep.
And in the End, the Love We Make

It was a beautiful winter night. The sky was crisp and clear, every star a vivid diamond shining white against the endless expanse while dawn was but an abstract prospect they did not dread. Pemberley was still with nearly all of its occupants having long been in their beds by this hour.

Nearly all.

Silver and pale, the light of the full moon spilled through the lace curtains of the nursery while Elizabeth stood over the pannier awash in its glow. She was barefooted and in her nightgown as hot tears fell from her face thick and fast. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered indistinctly how it was she even had any left to shed, yet there they came, welling in her eyes with repulsive ease and deluging her cheeks with no indication of relenting.

Her fingers trembling faintly, she reached out to touch the mussed, woven blanket of the otherwise empty cradle. It was a creamy white coverlet that Mrs Reynolds had crocheted herself and given to the Darcys for the baby at Christmas. The housekeeper had done the same for Lady Anne when Darcy and Georgiana were born.

Suddenly Elizabeth was no longer only crying, but sobbing uncontrollably. She withdrew her hand and pressed it to her mouth as painful sensations came crowding in such fury until she thought she might lose herself to them. Vainly, she tried to quiet herself before she awoke the whole of the house.

“What is it, Elizabeth?” came a whisper.

She clumsily brushed at her face so Darcy would not see her tears, but there was little purpose in it. He had heard her.

Without another word, she felt him come behind her and hold her to him. There was nothing to be said, not just yet. Elizabeth closed her eyes and leaned back into her husband, letting herself draw strength from the powerful arm he had around her.

After a few minutes passed in that way, she turned more fully into his embrace so that the steady beat of his heart was at her cheek. Elizabeth looked up at Darcy to find his warm gaze fixed upon her. She stared into his eyes for moment. Her own eyes then drifted little by little down along his neck, past the breadth of his shoulders, until they came to rest on his other arm.

In the crook of it he cradled Elena Anne Darcy, pink and perfect, and slumbering quite cozily against her father’s chest.

Contemplating her daughter’s tiny face, hearing her make her endearing little grunting sounds in her sleep, Elizabeth’s sight blurred with tears anew, but this time they were accompanied by a tremulous smile.

When one slipped from the corner of her lashes, betraying her, Darcy brought the hand he had around Elizabeth away to tip her chin up to face him again.

“What is it, Elizabeth?”

She shook her head slightly and bit her lip. “I…seeing the cradle unfilled…I could not…” her voice hitched, and another tear slid down her cheek. Even now, she could not say it. The trauma was too fresh, and anything stood to inflame the resonating pain when it had scarcely begun to be but a memory.
Darcy’s thumb grazed her cheeks to dry them, all the while looking at her so tenderly that she knew he understood. He remained quiet, regarding her seriously. “There is no sense in you distressing over what could have been,” he told her. “You will never find any peace in that.”

It took a moment for Elizabeth to become conscious that he was repeating her own words to her, words she had told him early in the summer.

“I know, my love,” she caught his hand and brought it to her lips. “I know.”

He was right. If they were to heal, they had to let go.

The days between this one and that of Elena’s birth had seen more than enough of such fears, enough for a lifetime…

After exhaustion claimed Elizabeth, Neil left the confinement room with a grave promise to Darcy that he would stay at Pemberley for the night to do what he could. He led Jane out, and seeing she was in no state to speak of what was happening, spared her the unhappy task of telling Georgiana, Bingley, Mrs Reynolds, and whatever portion of the staff was awake that it was possible that the Darcys’ baby would not make it through the night.

Darcy numbly lifted Elizabeth from his lap laid her back against the bed. He then drew a chair to the bedside to watch over her. All along his movement through the room, he averted his eyes from the bassinet in the corner. If he looked, that would be the end of it; he would not be able to keep himself together, and he had to. For Elizabeth.

Eventually, fatigue conquered Darcy as well.

Very few hours had passed for them when Elizabeth suddenly awoke with a gasp. Sitting up, she brought her hands to her abdomen, convinced she would feel her child still inside and safe and realize that everything that had happened had been but a dream—a nightmare.

But when she met her diminished stomach, devastation came over her again with such intensity that she could no longer keep herself upright. The sole thought she knew for certain as all her desires, all her expectations, as everything came crashing down around her once more was that it had been no dream. It was real.

The pain she had suffered to bring their child into the world was nothing to this. Then, she had known the outcome to be worth any hardship. But now? What was there now but pain?

The mattress sank with the burden of more weight joining her on the bed and she could feel two arms enveloping her into their sheltering embrace. Darcy climbed between the linens with her, drawing her close to him as she wept with all the abandon of the first moment she had learned her baby would likely not survive. She could hear him whispering to her, but what she could not say. Trying to make sense of his words was too great of an effort and she could not attempt it. Instead she clung to her husband and let her tears soak the front of his shirt, his low murmuring at her ear and his warm breath against her cheek the only things that she would endure as she tried to shut out the rest of the world and its cold viciousness.

It was not supposed to be this way.

She freely gave herself over to sleep once more as it extinguished each of her senses one by one, her last coherent thought being the hope she would never have to wake up again to face what awaited her.
The next time Elizabeth opened her eyes, it was to the harsh light of morning filling the room and the sound of subdued voices close by. As she stirred, someone came to her and raised her up, trying to have her imbibe something from a glass they put to her lips. She turned away, refusing.

“Come now, Mrs Darcy,” came the kind accents of Mrs Reynolds, “you must take a little of something. Just some water and a bite to eat.”

Elizabeth shook her head. She wanted no food or drink. She wanted nothing, nothing that they could give her.

She felt another hand replace that of the housekeeper and press the glass to her mouth more firmly.

“Drink, Elizabeth.”

It was the same tone Darcy used with the servants, the one that was an order not a request, but there was still a hint of pleading lurking somewhere beneath though he tried to conceal it. She parted her lips to sip at what he offered. The cool water served to sharpen her sight a little bit, and she gazed around the overly-bright room.

Darcy was beside her, but that she already knew. Near the door were Jane and Mrs Reynolds, both watching her with compassion. She looked away from them, not wanting to see it. Her eyes fell to the bassinet just behind her husband. The baby was not inside of it.

All of her breath forsook her. “Where is she, Fitzwilliam?” she asked panic-stricken. “She did not—she is not—” her voice broke on the word.

Darcy put the glass aside and took both her hands in his. “No, no. Neil is examining her.”

She collapsed back onto her pillows, almost faint with relief. It was short-lived, however. Her baby was alive, but that solace came attached to an excruciating question: for how long?

Movement by the door caught Elizabeth’s attention, and she unclosed her eyes. Neil had come, and he was supporting the newborn. She sat up at once, and in spite of herself, hope flared within her as she stared intently at the doctor’s face.

Neil noticed her expression and shook his head regretfully. “There is no change.”

Darcy clutched her hands more tightly. Elizabeth was shaking from head to foot as her frail hopes were dashed. The room was silent for a long while when it suddenly struck her that she had never even properly seen her daughter last night.

“Can… I hold her?” She would beg if she had to.

Neil hesitated, uncertainty of the wisdom in allowing her this etched in every line of his countenance. Little did she realize it was not for the child’s health, but for Elizabeth’s own sake that he was reluctant. He could not deny her, however. Much as he felt it would do no good, it was not his choice to make. Coming to a decision, he walked forward and put the baby into her arms. Though Elizabeth was not aware of it, he, Jane, and Mrs Reynolds left the room to grant the three of them this moment of privacy. All the same, Darcy turned away from the scene.

Elizabeth looked down into the swaddling, gazing hungrily. She was so very small. Her eyes were shut, of course, but she could make out the dark, thick lashes against her terribly white skin. The diminutive nose, the puckered curl of her lips, every feature of her face Elizabeth took in and committed to memory, loving her more desperately with every second that passed. In that moment, the hollow aching in her chest, the feeling her heart was shattered into a thousand pieces faded as she
held her baby.

“Elena,” unexpectedly broke from Elizabeth’s lips as she remembered the name they had chosen for a girl. And just like that, tears gushed from her eyes. Elena. This was Elena. Her baby Elena.

“You have to fight, Elena,” she told her in a distraught whisper. “I will not let you go. You have to fight. You have your father’s strength, I know you can. Please, fight for me.”

When Neil knocked at the door an hour later, he saw Elizabeth was still holding the baby and Darcy was looking not at them, but towards the door to Neil, more dismayed than ever.

“I am sorry, but I think perhaps you should try seeing if she will feed at all.” In a more delicate voice, he said, “I do not wish to give you false hope. There is every chance she will not accept it.” He tried to have Elizabeth look up from the baby to be sure she was listening to him, but to no avail. “Mrs Darcy, Mrs Reynolds will be in the gallery if you require her assistance.”

It was fortunate that Neil had warned them, because if Elizabeth had expected the baby to take to her, she was mistaken. Nothing she did would induce Elena suckle or to even open her mouth. Though Mrs Reynolds was asked to come help, every effort was ineffectual. By the end of the countless attempts, Elizabeth was overwrought, and the housekeeper gently coaxed the baby from her and laid her in the bassinet so each could rest.

Though she did not wish to, Elizabeth did fall into a disturbed doze. Sometimes Jane sat with her, less often Georgiana would be there, but always present at her side was Darcy. He would not leave her. A number of times she awoke flushed and crying, and Darcy would lie with her, stroking her hair and back until she would quiet. Most times she lay passive in his arms.

The whole of the first day came and went in that manner. By the following morning, Elena was no better, and she still would not eat. Neither would Elizabeth. Although her husband had succeeded in getting her to at least take water, he could not persuade her with anything more substantial. Elizabeth became listless, and she spent greater lengths of time drifting in and out of a restless half-sleep.

During one of her more lucid moments in the early afternoon, Darcy was the only one with her, and he was trying once more to have her eat something from the tray Lily had brought earlier.

“Please, Elizabeth, just a few bites to keep up your strength.”

“I am not hungry. Where is Elena?”

“She is right here,” he replied, gesturing behind him towards the bassinet without a glance back.

“Elizabeth, the baby may not eat, but you must—”

Darcy had only ever referred to their daughter as ‘the baby,’ and even through her haze, it did not escape Elizabeth’s notice. “Elena, Fitzwilliam. Her name is Elena.”

He looked at her with his mouth drawn into a thin line before deliberately saying, “Elena.” It seemed as though the word caused him pain. A shadow passed over his features, and all at once he began with a catch in his throat, “I wish to God there was something—anything—I could—”

Elizabeth sat up so quickly, Darcy was alarmed into silence. “Do not speak to me of God, Fitzwilliam!” Her eyes, dulled with pain for almost two days now, cleared for an instant with something of their usual liveliness as anger flashed in them. “Not…not when….,” She choked. Not even her own voice could turn traitor to her and utter the words that if spoken aloud would gain all the finality of the tolling of the death knell.
Grief consumed her again, and she was left without voice, without breath, and without hope. After all, what kind of God would let this happen?

Late in the evening on the second day following Elena’s birth, Elizabeth was yet in her bed. Darcy was just beside her on it, and she at first assumed he had fallen asleep; however, when her eyes became accustomed to the shadowy light, she saw he was very much awake and watching her. She stared back at him, more tired than she had ever been in her life despite that she had done little but cry and sleep.

Darcy’s face suddenly lost the semblance of self-control he had been feigning. “Come back to me. I cannot bear it,” a single sob escaped him. “Not both of you.”

For the first time in the past two days, Elizabeth met his eyes. What she found there made her feel a shame she had not known since the day he had given her his letter in Kent. Every agony of hers was reflected in his eyes. He was in pain too. How selfish she had been not to see it.

She began to press burning kisses against his brow, his cheeks, his eyelids, and finally his lips as he allowed himself to give his turbulent emotions their reign for the first time since Neil had told them the danger Elena was in. Darcy’s reaction was instantaneous. They lay there crying and kissing, not with the usual intent, but as a desperate affirmation, a feverish reciprocity of reassurance they had no right to give but dared to anyway. Husband and wife endeavored to soothe one another in the face of a despair that tried to tear them asunder, their tears mingling together until they fell into sleep, tangled in each other.

Elizabeth roused some time later as awareness edged into her mind, uncertain what had been the cause. She did not open her eyes and instead clutched after the fluttering veil of sleep. Then it came again. Crying. Low and soft it reached her, but they were not the cries of a woman, nor of a man. As the sound continued, rising in volume, Elizabeth wondered why Jane did not go to Charlie.

Then her eyes flew open.

Her heart was in her throat as she wildly flung the linens away and started to her feet. Elizabeth held her breath as she looked into the bassinet.

Elena was crying, weakly, but crying all the same with her face scrunched up and her mouth open in little bleating wail.

“Oh, my darling!” Elizabeth took the baby into her arms and cradled her closely to her breast, kissing her tiny cheeks, now colored a very little bit.

She had cried more these past two days than she had in her entire life, and now her tears flowed once more, though this time it was with sheer relief and delirious ecstasy. Elizabeth attempted to hush the baby’s whimpering, but only halfheartedly; she could not help but want her to go on crying forever because she thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

“Fitzwilliam,” she breathed, touching his shoulder as she sat beside him. He awoke at once, pushing himself to sit up, terror of the worst blazing in him as he searched Elizabeth’s face.

He heard Elena before he saw her. Elizabeth could see the moment the baby’s cries registered in his head. Darcy’s frantic eyes froze, lingering on her as a tremor seemed to run through him. Then, slowly, he looked down. It was the first time he had looked Elena in the face since she was born, and the sight of his daughter stole his breath away. He brought a shaking hand to her lightly brush her head, almost afraid, but the instant he made contact with the warm baby skin, there was no fear. Darcy’s face was transcendent, and Elizabeth knew from that moment on, she would have another
with whom she had to share her husband’s heart.

Darcy kissed Elizabeth before leaning his brow against hers so both of them could gaze upon the new little life they two had created.

In the days following Elena’s recovery, she improved in health steadily, and by the time she was seven days old, it was as if she had always been the blooming infant she now was. Neil continued to stay on at Pemberley until five days had passed without her constitution showing any indication of declining, and he declared her out of danger.

Georgiana adored her niece from the first. However, it was not until the doctor left the house with the conviction Elena would flourish that she worked up the courage to ask if she might hold her.

“Am I holding her properly?” Georgiana asked nervously from the divan.

“You are doing wonderfully, Georgiana,” Elizabeth assured her.

She looked back down at the baby in her arms reverently. “She is so beautiful.”

“I think so too.”

Darcy watched his sister, his daughter, and his wife from his place at the small library desk. Strictly speaking, he should have been in his study tending to estate business, but he found he was nigh incapable of straying far from Elena. He had brought some correspondence and documents to look over nearby as an alternative, but neither would that do.

As Elizabeth caught him looking up from his papers yet again, she gave him a teasing smile. “Are we distracting you, Fitzwilliam? Should I take Elena to the nursery so you can give your attention to another quarter?”

Darcy grinned as he dropped his eyes to the letter his solicitor had sent, but he could make no sense of it because his whole interest was reserved and invested entirely elsewhere. Elizabeth knew very well he would only follow if she did indeed go upstairs.

The door from the corridor opened, and in came Bingley holding both of Charlie’s hands in his own as his son wobbled into the library, Jane just behind the pair of them. Cautiously, Bingley released his purchase to let him on his own, hovering. Charlie covered half the distance to the divan with teetering steps until he lost his balance and tumbled onto his behind. His father was upset he had not been quick enough to catch him, but Charlie, unhurt by his abrupt change in stance, only gave a burble of frustration and dropped forward onto his hands and knees to crawl for the remainder of the way to his destination. Elizabeth and Georgiana laughed.

“Nearly, Charlie,” Elizabeth told her nephew as she scooped him from the floor by her skirts. She kissed the top of his head and sat him in her lap.

“I tell you, you should have seen him at Verbury,” Bingley began. “Raised himself right to his feet with the leg of an armchair!”

“You have told them so, Charles,” Jane said with a hint of mirthful affection at her husband’s excitement. “At least three times by my count.”

Bingley turned sheepishly to his wife. “Have I?”
Darcy shifted his gaze over to the foursome on the divan. Elizabeth was talking quietly to Charlie as he thoughtfully regarded his cousin. Never having seen another so close in age and size before, Charlie had been fascinated by Elena ever since the first time he had seen her. Every so often, he would reach out a hand to touch her as if wanting to see what would happen when he did. Elizabeth or Jane would remind him that he had to be gentle, but Charlie somehow already seemed to know, and only ever nudged her with delicate prods.

“Lizzy, have you taken your tea?” Darcy heard Jane ask from across the room.

Elizabeth looked up from the children. “Yes, Jane.”

“And something to eat?”

“Yes, Jane.” Only Darcy noticed when she made slight face.

For the past week, Elizabeth had endured Jane’s upsurge of mollycoddling with a mixture of amusement, exasperation, and contrition. The chief of her patience for it was sustained only by the remorse she felt over the pain she had given her poor sister in the days just after Elena’s birth when she refused to eat or leave her bed. Secretly, Darcy was glad to have Jane as his accomplice on that front.

Then again, the entire staff was also seeing that their mistress and master were well tended to. The whole of the household was overjoyed that all had come to such a happy conclusion. There was a child at Pemberley again, the child of one most had known as a boy and watched grow himself over the years no less. While Jane, Bingley, and Georgiana had been told at once that the baby had rallied, it was not until the second morning after Elena had shown her first favorable sign and Neil was confident she would only progress that Darcy went down to the servant hall to inform them of it. More than one of the women gathered there had burst into tears, among them Mrs Reynolds and Lily, the latter of which threw herself into the arms of the flabbergasted groomsman James unobserved in the uproar.

Elena began to cry.

“Oh no, do not cry,” Georgiana said anxiously. She looked to Elizabeth as the baby continued to fuss. “I have upset her.”

Elizabeth began to laugh, but checked herself when she saw Darcy’s sister was truly panicked. “It is nothing you did, Georgiana. She is only ready for her nap. You did very well holding her.” She rose with Charlie and handed him over to Jane, who had already come to take him.

There was a tentative knock at the door before it opened. It was the nursemaid the Darcys had obtained. Miss Hart might well be said to have the most undemanding employment of any given member of the staff at Pemberley. Elizabeth rarely relinquished her maternal right, even at night. That was not to say that the girl did not try to reassert her duties.

“Excuse me,” she said with a curtsey to the room, “Mrs Darcy, I thought perhaps you might need me to bring the babe to the nursery.”

“I will take her, thank you,” Elizabeth declined politely, but declined all the same.

Miss Hart gave another curtsey, and Darcy could have sworn he saw her shake her head and smile on her way out.

Elizabeth turned back to Georgiana and bent to take Elena from her. His wife’s face was alight as she held their daughter, as it always was. She quitted the room.
After a time, Bingley and Jane began talking of something with Georgiana, and Darcy stole out of the library and made directly for the nursery.

Easing the door from its frame, he found Elizabeth by the window as she rocked Elena. He paused as he caught her voice softly singing a lullaby. The sound of it was vaguely familiar to him, but it did not resemble anything she or Georgiana had played on the pianoforte before. Darcy listened a minute more from the door before he recognized it: she was singing the same melody he had heard her humming that day in the garden all those months ago, the day they learned that she was with child.

Elena had not been crying for some time. Darcy crept over to them and saw that she was fast asleep, her face half-cuddled into her mother and one of her tiny hands with the fingers curled into their usual fist resting against Elizabeth’s breast. He did not wonder that his wife was not disposed to surrender their baby to her cradle just yet.

By the end of the second week of their stay, the Bingleys returned to Verburry.

Before Jane left, she exacted a promise from Elizabeth that she would care for herself, else she would return and install herself at Pemberley with her husband and son until she could be sure Elizabeth would never again neglect her own well-being so. Jane told her she had already spoken to Darcy of it and he agreed. It was the most immovable that Elizabeth had ever seen her normally even-tempered sister. She swore she would.

Things at Pemberley swiftly settled into a routine not very unlike the one that had existed before. Darcy still had the estate to manage, but he abandoned his work with more regular recurrence not only to see Elizabeth now, but to see Elizabeth and Elena. Georgiana sang and played on the pianoforte as much as ever, but along with her usual medleys of Beethoven and Vivaldi were interspersed old English and French lullabies she would learn especially for her niece. And though never unhappy, the household was noticeably more cheerful than it had been, every one of them infused with a felicity that was synonymous with their newest occupant.

As for Elizabeth, her days were the most radically altered, but she found she did not mind in the least. Tasks like dressing and bathing that once seemed commonplace were transformed into something marvelous when done for Elena, and although there were times when she wondered if she was handling motherhood as she ought to, she did what she thought was right.

To her delight, though not her surprise, Elizabeth perceived how naturally Darcy took to being a father. It was at once comical and moving for her to witness how something so small, scarcely the length of his forearm, could have such power over the formidable Master of Pemberley. The first time she came across Darcy asleep on their bed with a protective hand securing a sleeping Elena nestled atop him, Elizabeth could have cried at the picture they made together, the two people she loved most in this world. Though she had once been told daughters were never of much consequence to their fathers, Elizabeth was of the opinion that even Lady Catherine would rescind her pronouncement could she but see how Darcy tended to his daughter.

One late afternoon found Elizabeth and Darcy in their bedroom. Elena lay between them on the bed, staring up at her parents with bright, curious eyes, almond-shaped and fine; her mother’s eyes.

Elizabeth caressed Elena’s hair, full and satiny. “She has your hair after all, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy laughed lightly.

“It is true. See how the shade is a little darker? Just like your own.”
“So she does.” He leaned over to kiss Elizabeth languorously, and then pressed his lips to Elena’s cheek very softly. As he drew back, she stretched out a tiny hand and touched his chin, one side of her mouth curving into a crooked smile.

“If anyone in Meryton were to see your face in this instant, none would ever think you fierce or disagreeable again,” Elizabeth told him playfully.

Elena hummed and murmured little noises at the sound of her mother’s voice.

“Elizabeth, remind me to buy something for Bingley next time we go to town.”

She looked over to her husband in confusion. Darcy met her eyes, and she could see he was half in jest, half in earnest.

“I want to thank him for ever taking a house in Hertfordshire.”

For a moment, his wife only stared. Then, a smile broke across her face, and Elizabeth’s sparkling laugh rang out.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!