Love and Prejudice

by Yalegirl03

Summary

When his godfather, the ardent abolitionist Lord Farthington passes away, Mr. Darcy becomes the guardian of a young lady, Mary Caroline Farthington. The daughter of a formerly enslaved woman, Mary is brought up as Lord Farthington's daughter on a small free island in the Caribbean. An heiress in her own right, Mary makes waves when she arrives in England. When the dashing Colonel Fitzwilliam arrives at Pemberley after an ill fated stint in Louisiana during the War of 1812, Mary will discover if love can truly overcome prejudice.

Notes

I started this story in 2004 and took a long hiatus when I began law school in 2005. I am working on the story once again. 19 chapters are done and posted elsewhere on the web. I envision 30 or more chapters. I want to gather all of my stories here on this site.

I wrote this story inspired by Dido Elizabeth Lindsay and other free black women who lived in Georgian/Regency England during the time of Jane Austen's works. This was before Belle hit the screens and gave me all sorts of life. I wanted a story where a black woman lived during that time and had means and freedom. I wanted to take Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice up a notch and look at race instead of class. Forgive me if parts of this story are over the top. I want to do a rewrite with an eye towards publication when it is all done. With that said, I'd really appreciate any feedback and comments. I had the first chapter workshoped a few years ago, so I am not that thin skinned.
"London, England October 10th, 18---

Dear Mr. Darcy,

My name is Thomas Brambles, Esquire, solicitor and executor of the estate of Lord Matthew Farthington. I write you to inform you of an inheritance left to you by Lord Farthington and to relate to you my employer's final request.

Lord Farthington, as a close friend of your father the late Mr. Darcy, with whom he made several charitable and business investments, has bequeathed to you in his death his property on the island of New Sussex in the Caribbean. The property encompasses the entire island of thirty square miles and is rich in farmland. As owner of the entire island, Lord Farthington decreed that New Sussex a free island and its remaining so is a condition of the inheritance. The farms are tended by tenants of freed blacks and whites and clear fifteen thousand pounds a year. The island is currently under the direction of Mr. Krimpton, a capable and trustworthy steward who has served Lord Farthington for over twenty years. I will provide papers formalizing the bequest should you accept and meet with you at a time you may set.

Lord Farthington has also made a final request of a more personal nature. A letter detailing his request is enclosed with this missive written by his own hand. As a loyal employee of Lord Farthington and as a friend I pledge to lend my services to aide you in whatever capacity is needed in order to grant his request.

Please write to me at your earliest convenience informing me of your decision.

Sincerely,

Thomas Brambles, Esq."

"Loland Manor, New Sussex May 15th, 18---

Dear Mr. Darcy,

If you are reading this letter, noble sir, than I have lost my battle with consumption. I write to you as a dear friend and colleague of your father. I held your father in the highest respect and esteem, and was honoured to be made your godfather upon your christening. His innate sense of justice and concern for his fellow man garnered him the admiration of his peers and made him as dear to my heart as any brother could be.

Your father was proud of you, and described you as a gentleman of deep conviction who held fast to the ideals of truth, honour, duty and fairness. It is to these ideals that I now make my plea for assistance.
My request regards a young woman to whom I have given my name and protection, Miss Mary Caroline Farthington. Miss Farthington came into my care and protection in infancy, after the passing of her mother, a most noble and respected woman who suffered greatly at the hands of the institution to which I have devoted my life to defeating. During the time in which I have served as her guardian, I have come to love and admire her as if she were my own flesh and blood. She is a remarkably educated and accomplished young woman, having received the best education I could afford her. She is fluent in Latin, French and German, knowledgeable of world affairs and English politics and laws, and well-versed in philosophy and history. She also takes great delight in literature and also possesses a talent for the English language. She is also artistically gifted; she paints and embroiders, plays the harp and pianoforte with both passion and skill, and sings beautifully.

While I have been able, I have protected and nurtured her as a most beloved daughter. In passing, my greatest fear is that she will be left unprotected at the tender age of 19.

I have left Miss Farthington a generous inheritance. She will have 5000 pounds a year - more than enough to ensure that she is well provided for -- and the family estate in Sussex will pass to her possession upon her twenty-first birthday. Were circumstances different, her inheritance and accomplishments would make her a most desirable match for a gentleman of consequence and ensure her protection. However, Miss Farthington is the daughter of a Negro slave whom I purchased to secure her freedom from a most brutal master in America. Her heritage places her in a most precarious position under English law and I dare not risk leaving her unprotected until she achieves the age of majority. She is without family or friends in England. It is my sincere request that you serve as Miss Farthington's guardian, extending to her the same protection and guidance I strove to offer her.

It would give me great comfort to know that my Mary will not be left so wholly unprotected once I depart from this life. Should you fulfill my request, both my undying gratitude and that of Miss Farthington are yours.

Sincerely,

Lord Matthew Farthington"
Mary gazed anxiously out of the carriage window as the coach made its way along the lane to Pemberley, her new home. The dreary winter scene that passed before her did little to lighten her spirits. Grave trees with bare branches capped with snow filled brown meadows and dotted gently sloping hills. Mary shivered noticeably at the cold, her feet no longer heated by the now chilled warming bricks placed in the coach four hours ago at the inn. Mary did not know how she would ever adapt to such cold weather; it was so different from the warm climate of New Sussex where the temperature never dipped below the point of needing a light wrap. When she first arrived in London, the sight of snow had been a marvel to Mary, captivating her for many long minutes as she watched it coat the roofs and treetops in a thick blanket of white. But as the weeks in London drew long, the allure of snow quickly faded. Piles of brown slush, an unpleasing mixture of horse manure and street filth, soon lined every London road and the prospect of cold toes and wet and muddied petticoats soon kept her from venturing beyond the townhouse without the aid of a carriage.

Turning from the window, Mary absently fingered a letter from Miss Georgiana Darcy, the sister of Mr. Darcy. Georgiana's letters had been a source of comfort for Mary in her time of transition. As soon as Mr. Darcy sent word of his acceptance of the guardianship of Mary, Georgiana began her correspondence. They had written each other describing their various hobbies, enjoyments and other sundry details of their personalities with Miss Darcy expressing the earnest hope that they soon become good friends. At first Mary was surprised by Georgiana's request, but as there correspondence continued, Mary began to feel its sincerity. Georgiana's last letter had given her helpful hints as to what to expect at Pemberley, from Mrs. Reynolds's abhorrence of muddy footprints in the foyer after a hard rain to Mrs. Darcy's propensity to tease her husband. Despite Georgiana's warm letters, Mary still felt trepidation over her acceptance by the other inhabitants of Pemberley. She wondered if Mr. Darcy was a severe man or how Mrs. Darcy would receive another young woman in her home.

These anxieties succeeded in momentarily distracting Mary from her melancholy. Mary understandably still felt the keenness of the death of Lord Farthington, but to also be robbed of the only home she had ever known and to be ever separated from her friends and acquaintances further compounded her grief. Mr. Brambles, her guardian's solicitor, remained her only tie to her old life. He accompanied her on the arduous trip across the Atlantic and was her companion during her weeks in London. Mr. Brambles was a gentle grandfatherly man of two and sixty with large bushy gray eyebrows, a slight paunch and an easy rolling laugh. Ever conscious of her melancholy, Mr. Brambles often employed himself with the task of cheering her up, whether it was with the present of a new bonnet or some other bauble or the offering of an amusing tale during long carriage rides. While Mary was deeply grateful to him for his efforts and concern, such trinkets and stories affected her mood but little. She could not be persuaded from continuing her mourning in earnest. Concerned for her first presentation to Mr. and Mrs. Darcy at Pemberley that morning, Mr. Brambles tried to convince her to put away her black mourning dress of crape and bombazine in favor of a more becoming green gown with a matching pelisse that he had made for her while in London. It only being six months after her guardian's death, Mary heartily refused, but did agree to wear some ornamentation in the form of a ruby cross.

"Ahh, Pemberley. Is it not a fair sight, Miss Farthington?" Mr. Brambles ventured, breaking the silence that pervaded the carriage for the majority of the journey.

Mary returned her gaze to the carriage window to see the great house of Pemberley finally coming
into view. The house was rather large with tall stately columns gracing the facade that faced a sizable lake, now frozen over. The light grey stone of the building melded perfectly with the surrounding snow covered grounds as if the estate had sprung from the earth itself.

"Yes," Mary replied looking at the house in wonder, "I can't recall ever seeing a home so happily situated. Well, in addition to Loland Manor of course."

Mr. Brambles regarded her thoughtfully, before nodding his head in understanding. "I know Derbyshire is nothing like New Sussex, but it is my sincere hope that in time you can learn to be happy here also, Miss Farthington. It was your father's wish as well."

"In time I shall be happy again," Mary sighed, favoring her companion with a weak smile. "I will try to be so for his sake."

Soon after, their carriage stopped before the main entrance of Pemberley. Several footmen quickly descended upon their carriage, handing down the lady and elderly gentleman and seeing to their trunks and bags. Taking Mr. Brambles offered arm, Mary made her way up the steps of Pemberley following a footman. They were shown into the foyer where Mr. and Mrs. Darcy and Miss Darcy stood waiting to receive them, along with William Bennet Darcy. Mary was surprised at their warm reception, appearing in the foyer to greet them as if they were family. She had expected to be shown into a parlor where she would wait for several minutes for their arrival, not to be greeted by the warm smiles before her.

"Mr. Brambles," Darcy stepped forward taking the man's hand as they entered. "Welcome to Pemberley."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. Your warm reception humbles us," Mr. Brambles replied as he bowed. "Let me introduce Miss Mary Caroline Farthington."

Mary curtseyed shyly to the tall dark haired man. Although handsome, his countenance was stern. "Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy. It is an honor to meet you, sir. Thank you for welcoming us into your home."

"You are very welcome, Miss Farthington. In time I hope that you consider it your own," Darcy replied as he bowed ever so slightly at the waist. "Let me introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy and to my sister Miss Georgiana Darcy."

A woman about a head shorter than herself with curly brown hair and large sparkling brown eyes stepped forward matching Mary's curtsy before taking both of her hands into hers. "Let me welcome you to Pemberley, Miss Farthington. I am so sorry for your loss and it is my hope that you will find as much pleasure and peace within its walls and among the grounds as I do."

"Thank you, Mrs. Darcy. I have never seen a house so happily situated or met people so gracious."

"Miss Farthington," Miss Darcy stepped forward with a curtsy. "Welcome to Pemberley. I am ever so pleased that you have finally come! It is my earnest hope that we will soon become great friends."

"Thank you, Miss Darcy. It is a pleasure to meet you as well. I already feel as if I know so much about you from your letters. I look forward to getting to know you more."

Miss Darcy expressed similar sentiments, excitement over Mary's arrival written over her features. Mrs. Darcy smiled warmly at Georgiana, pleased at her attachment to Mary before introducing her
Little William Bennet clutched shyly at his mother's skirt and peered up at Mary with wide brown eyes and unruly dark brown curls.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, young Mr. Darcy," Mary ventured curtsying slightly. She found herself instantly enamored with the little one, enchanted by his shyness and expressive little eyes. He was no more than three years old, at best, and still unaccustomed to meeting strangers. He stared up at her wonderingly before replying to her greeting with a muffled "good evening" and retreating behind his mother completely. Mrs. Darcy apologized for the boy's shyness while a maid collected the young child to return him to the nursery.

Mary was relieved when Miss Darcy offered to show them to their rooms and happily followed the petite woman up the grand staircase to the second floor. Mary marveled at the decor of Pemberley as they made their way to their rooms. The furnishing and decor, although rich and ornate was also tasteful, a testimony to the elegant sensibilities of several generations of Darcys. Mrs. Darcy first took them to Mary's quarters, which were just across the hall from Georgiana's. Miss. Darcy seemed most pleased at these arrangements and was most eager to know if Mary approved of the room. Mary conceded that she could find nothing lacking in her chambers and that she liked them exceedingly. Her quarters consisted of a large bedroom with an ample sitting area complete with a modest writing desk. The dressing rooms were also well laid out and all of the areas featured walls decorated amiable with lavender wallpaper adorned with a vine and leaf motif. The bedroom also featured a large fireplace complete with a roaring fire. Mary thought that this was her most favorite feature of her quarters and envisioned spending many mornings and afternoons seated close to the flames in an effort to escape the chill of winter.

After giving Mrs. Darcy and Miss. Darcy her favorable opinion of the room, Mary was introduced to her lady's maid, April. April was a pretty girl of around eighteen with sea green eyes and curly red hair that escaped from underneath her cap.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," April curtsied to Mary.

"April is one of our most trusted and loved servants. Her sister, Betsy, serves as my maid and I am sure that you will get along famously."

"Thank you again, Mrs. Darcy," Mary began, taking the woman's hand in hers. "I am very grateful for your kindness in welcoming me into your home."

"There is no need to thank me, Miss Farthington," Mrs. Darcy began, her brown eyes sparkling warmly. "It is the least that we could do. Lord Farthington was my husband's godfather, afterall. So, we are practically family, are we not? And family is always welcome at Pemberley. On that note, would you be so kind as to call me Elizabeth? Mrs. Darcy is so formal."

"Yes," interrupted Georgiana brightly. "Do call me Georgiana as well, if we can have the pleasure of calling you Mary."

Mary smiled broadly, her first sincere smile of the evening. The anxieties that plagued her during the carriage ride began to fade in the light of Elizabeth's sincere welcome and Georgiana's eagerness. Mary took a deep breath, not wanting to embarrass herself with an influx of tears in front of her new acquaintances.

"Of course, Elizabeth and Georgiana, doing so would give me great pleasure."

"Excellent," Elizabeth replied with a gentle smile. "Now, I am sure that you are tired and would like to rest before dinner. I will leave you in April's capable hands."
After Elizabeth, Georgiana and Mr. Brambles left, Mary turned to April with a shy smile.

"Well, I believe Mrs. Darcy was quite correct in her estimation. I am quite tired and long to refresh myself after such a long journey."

"Very well, ma'am. I can ready a warm bath for you, should you desire one and the footmen will have your trunks up here in a few moments. Would you care for some tea in the meantime?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much. Thank you, April."

After a long hot bath, April helped Mary change into her attire for dinner. Upon Mary's insistence, April switched the cream gown she had laid out for a simple black gown with a square cut neckline and long sleeves. April was much displeased by her new mistress's choice of black attire for dinner, yet prevailed upon her to wear some livelier ornamentation in contrast. Mary agreed to this compromise, wearing a delicate silver chain with a mother of pearl pendant that shown brightly against the sienna skin of her chest.

Upon examining herself in the mirror, Mary was happy for the slight compromise, the mother of pearl pendant being a gift from her father upon her sixteenth birthday. Despite the picture of beauty before her, Mary was still found defects with her gown, hair and choice of ornaments, her nervousness over the ensuing meal coloring her judgment. While she was encouraged to find the Darcy's a kind and welcoming family, she did not look forward to the dinner hour which would allow them a closer scrutiny of her character. Mary was especially concerned over Mr. Darcy's opinion of her. She seemed like such a proud and fine gentleman and Mary felt much like a beggar maid with soiled clothes before him.

"Are you nervous, ma'am?" April ventured as Mary readjusted her gown in the mirror for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, I must admit that I am. All of this is so new, April and I am a little frightened by Mr. Darcy," Mary replied as she exhaled deeply.

"Afraid of Mr. Darcy? There isn't any need for that. He may appear proud or mean at first look, but he is the kindest and fairest master I have ever known. Why, I have never heard him raise his voice to anyone, and with his family he is full forever smiling."

This revelation surprised Mary. She could not imagine the countenance that greeted her a few hours ago transformed by smiles and laughter. However, she supposed that her first perception could be misguided. Thanking April, she made her way down for dinner, a little comforted by her maid's words of encouragement.

Mary found that the dinner hour was not one to be dreaded, as she had before. Rather than a time for close scrutiny, she found herself engaged in lively conversation and laughing in spite of herself at Mrs. Darcy's gentle teasing of her husband. Mr. Darcy was indeed all smiles during dinner, his eyes sparkling with good humor at his wife's gentle jabs. Mary was surprised by this aspect of their relationship. While Mr. Darcy seemed the picture of pride at first glance, his wife had a way of revealing his warm caring nature to all. Mary also found Mr. Darcy to be a lively conversationalist who was eager to learn more about his new charge. They chatted at length about their mutual interests in literature, finding that they both had a lively appreciation for John Milton. Mary found their exchange a comforting reminder of home. Lord Farthington would often engage Mary in good natured intellectual debates, taking great pride in developing his daughter's cognitive abilities. Mary thoroughly enjoyed those times together with her father, and missed them keenly. Georgiana and
Elizabeth seemed less engaged in this conversation, however, being less inclined to discuss Paradise Lost as they were to learn more about the new member of their household. When Mr. Darcy was drawn into conversation with Mr. Brambles on the latest debates before parliament and the upcoming sessions, Georgiana saw her opportunity to draw Mary into a conversation of their own.

"You wrote in your letters that you are a lover of music, much like myself. Would you give us the honor of hearing you play?" Georgiana asked shyly.

"Yes, doing so would give me much pleasure. However, I must beg that you also honor me by playing as well." Mary replied.

Georgiana's face brightened. "Thank you, Mary. I will oblige you and play, although I fear I may not be as proficient as yourself. Now that you are come here, perhaps we could practice together and learn a duet."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, Georgiana," Elizabeth broke in smiling broadly. "Although I fear that you are being too humble. I have never heard someone play as excellently as you do, Georgiana. I suspect that you are both quite accomplished at the pianoforte and will make perfect practice partners."

Soon after, Elizabeth rose to signal that it was time for the ladies to withdraw to the sitting room while Mr. Brambles and Mr. Darcy retired to the library for a glass of port. Georgiana and Mary followed her to the sitting room where they could engage in more casual conversation.

"So Mary, I trust your journey here was not too tiring," Elizabeth began.

"It was quite agreeable, thank you. We traveled from London where we had resided for a month while Mr. Brambles saw to some business regarding the estate. I looked forward to the journey to Pemberley, as I found myself quite shut in at the townhouse there."

"So you did not attend any concerts or plays, Mary?" Georgiana asked as she seated herself next to her.

"I am afraid not. Mr. Brambles was quite engaged and I spent most of my days alone in the townhouse. I have no friends or relations in town and so had no cause to leave cards with anyone. Consequently, we had not the pleasure of entertaining anyone."

"You must have been very bored, then. I could not imagine spending so many days without a companion for pleasant conversation." Georgiana continued, her brows wrinkled in sincere worry.

"For my part, I was not so very bored. I did find it confining in that I was not free to walk about and relish the fresh air as I am used to in New Sussex; the snow and mud covered streets and cold did little to compel me out of doors. However, I made use of my time in exploring my father's library. I took the time to reacquaint myself with Homer and to indulge myself in writing. I do look forward to enjoying the fresh air of Derbyshire and the freedom to wander the grounds come spring."

"Mary, I find we have one essential thing in common, a love of nature and long walks. Tell me, was your home in New Sussex given to fine constitutionals?" Elizabeth inquired slightly teasingly, happy to find a point of conversation on which they shared a common interest.

"New Sussex was exceedingly beautiful. I have been gone from there these six months and I must admit I do miss it greatly. Our home was not far from the beach. In fact, my rooms had a lovely porch from which I could see the Atlantic. The ocean waves would lull me to sleep and the smell of the salty water was refreshing," Mary took on a faraway look, her mouth spreading involuntarily into
a wide smile. "Every morning before breakfast I would steal down into the kitchen and take a piece of bread or fruit to tide me over and walk for an hour or so on the beach without shoes or stockings. I miss the feel of the warm wet sand giving beneath my toes as I made my way along the coast collecting shells here and there. Not far from the house was a great rock with a smooth flat surface that sat on the beach. I would climb on top of it with my journal and charcoal pencils and sketch and write poetry. Sometimes in the evening after the dinner hour, Lord Farthington and I would walk along the beach as well. We wouldn't say a word, each of us too absorbed in the sounds of the ocean and the power of a dark sea that stretched before us as far as the eye could see. I...I can remember the feeling of standing their trying to see through the darkness with just the sounds of the sea. It was like worship, like God was resting there."

Mary stopped her speech and looked down at her hands as if embarrassed, tears threatening to spill from her eyes at the recollection of her father and her home. "I apologize. I sometimes forget myself," Mary sighed, her voice brittle.

"There is no need to apologize, Mary." Elizabeth replied. "You describe New Sussex as the perfect paradise. From your description I could imagine myself walking along those shores and smelling the salt air. No wonder you miss your home so."

The ladies where soon joined by Mr. Darcy and Mr. Brambles. Elizabeth rose to greet her husband and seated herself in a chair across from him so that they could chat briefly as Georgiana engaged Mary in conversation about Georgiana's last season in London. After persuading Mary and Georgiana to delight them all with music, the Darcy's, Mr. Brambles and Mary soon retired for much needed rest.

"Well, Mr. Darcy, what do you think of our Miss Farthington so far." Elizabeth inquired of her husband, turning from her mirror to face him as she brushed her long brown hair.

"I find that I like her exceedingly," Darcy replied as he sat on the edge of the bed opposite her. "She is both modest yet confident in her speech, well read and educated and possesses the manners and charms befitting a lady. I am hopeful that Georgiana will find a kindred spirit in Mary."

"Am I right in concluding, Mr. Darcy, that you would add her to your ranks of truly accomplished women?" Elizabeth whispered, her eyebrows rising in challenge.

Darcy smiled, surprised that she remembered their early conversation at Netherfield where he declared that the mark of a truly accomplished woman is the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.

"Perhaps, Mrs. Darcy. However adding Miss Farthington to that esteemed company would push their ranks above half a dozen."

Elizabeth laughed gently in reply before setting down her brush and seating herself beside her husband. Darcy soon enfolded her in a warm embrace, placing one arm around her and drawing her close.

"She is a little shy and bookish," Elizabeth continued as she played absently with the fingers of one of his hands. "She reminds me much of my sister Mary in that regard, although one could never call Miss Farthington plain or sullen."
"Aren't you being a little hasty in your appraisal, dear? I found her neither bookish nor overly shy. She has a lively mind, and while not given to wit, she is thoughtful and articulate. As for her shyness and sad demeanor, the reason for those is evident enough I would hope."

Elizabeth started slightly, lifting her head from his shoulder. "I did not mean it as a critique, merely an observation. When she spoke of her time in New Sussex this evening, there was such a longing and sadness in her voice. The way she spoke of her home, with such passion and feeling makes me wonder how she will adjust to life here. Can she be happy here with us?"

Darcy paused thoughtfully. He could well imagine the whirlwind of emotions Mary must be dealing with. So many changes to be suddenly thrust upon her. He recalled how he first felt when at a mere three and twenty he was made master of Pemberley and guardian to Georgiana having just finished at Cambridge all without a father or mother to guide him. While Mary did not have the burden of being master of an estate or guardian to a younger sibling, she was robbed of all that was familiar and comfortable to her and in less than two years time she too would be mistress of a great estate.

"Well," Darcy began after many moments, "I am sure in time she will come to love Pemberley as her home. She is still grieving and it will be some time before her true disposition is made known to us. Until that time, we should endeavor to make her life here as comfortable as possible."

Elizabeth sighed her agreement, content with her husband's outlook on the situation. "Yes, Georgiana and I will do whatever is in our power to make her feel welcome. And with Christmas nearly upon us, there will be more than enough activities to keep her diverted. We will treat her as if she is our own sister reunited with us at long last."

Darcy smiled down at his wife, pleased at her eagerness to welcome Miss. Farthington. He admired his wife's good and giving nature. He was sure that his wife's statement was made in earnest and that her welcome of Miss Farthington would be genuine and complete.

Mary's second day at Pemberley was consumed with touring the house and grounds by carriage and being introduced to all of the essential staff members, including Mrs. Reynolds, the head housekeeper. Mr. Brambles spent the entire day in Mr. Darcy's company, attending to business matters and coming to an agreement regarding Mary's inheritance. Georgiana took it upon herself to personally show Mary around Pemberley, freeing Elizabeth to see to other matters. Mary found the house pleasing although its size and number of rooms caused her some confusion when trying to find her way about. The estate included a breakfast parlor, an east facing parlor for the afternoon, a westward facing parlor for evenings, a solarium filled with exotic plants and flowers, an impressive library, a music room, two dinning rooms, a grand room used for balls, ten guest chambers, two kitchens, two lower floors of servant quarters, six main quarters complete with sitting rooms and dressing rooms and a myriad of hallways, staircases and other rooms of which Mary lost count.

Towards the end of the tour they came upon a large room with bright windows filled with portraits, paintings and lovely statues. A large portrait of Mr. Darcy stood on the east wall that captured the man's handsome features and tall noble stature, but somehow was unable to capture the warmth and sincerity that Mary found directed towards his family and on occasion, to herself. On the opposite wall was a portrait of Elizabeth in an emerald gown with a small white dog curled at her feet. She looked directly at the viewer with large brown mirth filled eyes and her mouth trying to conceal a smile. The other walls contained a portrait of Georgiana seated at the pianoforte looking shyly at the viewer with her back to the instrument and her hands folded demurely in her lap. Of all the portraits
Mary had viewed this day, this one captured the essence of the subject most acutely. Over the marble mantled fireplace hung a large portrait of the late Mr. Darcy with a young Fitzwilliam Darcy at his side and a beautiful woman with abundant black locks seated before him. Her smile was radiant and her large blue eyes shown with warmth and wisdom. Mary stood before this portrait for some minutes.

"I find myself admiring this portrait quite often," Georgiana replied as she came to stand beside Mary. "I often wonder if my mother had the chance to bestow that same smile upon me before she died. They all look so happy in that painting. I wish I could have known her better. She was so beautiful and kind."

Mary looked from her portrait to her friend and noticed the sadness behind her serene smile.

"I am sure that she did, Georgiana, and that she would be very proud and pleased to have you as a daughter. I wish I had even a painting to admire of my mother. She also died in childbirth, leaving me without the opportunity of sharing her smiles and tender caresses."

Georgiana clasped her friends hand in hers. "Forgive me, Mary. I did not know."

"It is alright," Mary smiled warmly. "I suppose we are sisters in this sorrow. Yet we are also united by knowing the love and tender affections of relations who were both mother and father to us. I can see how well loved you are by your brother and also by Elizabeth. Family is such a comfort..."

Nearly overcome with emotion, Mary slipped from her dear friend's grasp and walked over to a window, staring unseeing over the sleeping winter landscape of Pemberley. She struggled to force back the tears. Mary knew how unseemly it was to show such displays of emotion, or so she had been taught by her governess. She also did not want to bring further sadness to her new friend.

"Mary..." Georgiana whispered as she stepped behind Mary, tenderly placing a small hand on her shoulder. "May I ask permission to embrace you?"

"Oh, you need not ask," Mary replied, her tears now falling in earnest at Georgiana's shy display of friendship.

The two embraced for several long minutes with Georgiana comforting her friend whose wounds were so fresh. Georgiana had the benefit of the passing of many years since her mother's death and her dear father's some ten years ago. She could very well comprehend Mary's feelings.

"Mary, I am so happy that you have come to stay at Pemberley," Georgiana began as she moved them both toward a small settee near the fireplace. "I feel that we will soon become great friends. I want you to know that if you ever feel the need to confide in someone or need a friendly ear just to listen, that I am here for you."

"Thank you, Georgiana," Mary smiled having finally mastered her tears. "You know, I have hardly ever cried after my father's death. If anything, I felt numb to just about everything around me. You must think me awfully calloused?"

"No, I'd never think that, Mary. Everyone grieves in their own particular way."

Silence fell between them as they both sat deep in thought. Georgiana searched her mind for something that might be of comfort to her friend. Smiling broadly, Georgiana remembered something that her brother had shown her prior to Mary's arrival.

"Come, Mary. I have something to show you that you may find comforting. I cannot begin to understand how I overlooked it before."
Georgiana rose and made her way to a glass and mahogany case that ran most of the length of the east wall. Inside the case was a substantial collection of miniatures of family members, friends and ancestors. A few of the miniatures were just of the eye of a loved one, while others depicted the subject in the bloom of youth. Georgiana searched the case for the particular miniature.

"There," Georgiana exclaimed pointing to a gold cased miniature. "Here is one of your dear Lord Farthington. I dare say it was taken when he was quite young. How handsome he was."

Mary leaned over the case and smiled. "Yes, that is Lord Farthington. He must have not been more than three and twenty when that was taken. He almost appears the same as I remember him, except for a few gray hairs and lines in his face."

The miniature depicted a young man in a blue-gray waistcoat and jacket with a white neck cloth intricately tied. His light brown hair framed his face in large waves. His green eyes stared directly at the viewer and crinkled slightly at the outer edges. His long narrow nose pointed to lips curved into a slight smile that looked as if he was suppressing laughter.

"This miniature belonged to my father and was taken soon after they graduated from Cambridge. If you like, I can request that Fitzwilliam give it to you. I am sure that my father would want you to have it."

"Thank you, Georgiana. You are too kind, but I could not accept it." Desiring to change the subject, Mary began to examine the other miniatures in the case. Mary inquired after the picture of a striking man with dark black curls and deep blue eyes wearing a red coat. Mary found him quite handsome, with a square jawline and masculine brow. His face had the look of a man trying to look grave and serious despite a nature that was easy and given to laughter and teasing.

"Ah, that is my dear cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. He was my guardian with Fitzwilliam after my father died. He is in the army and is like a brother to Fitzwilliam and myself. He often stays with us at Pemberley and at Grovenor House in London when his duties allow. He is due to arrive at Pemberley in a few weeks time for an extended stay of two months or so. I can hardly wait for his arrival; for he is my favorite cousin and we have not had the pleasure of his company for these past two years."

"I should like to meet him," Mary replied before turning to another miniature. "And who is this young man below Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

Georgiana paled slightly at the picture of the grinning brown haired man. "That is George Wickham, the son of my father's steward and the husband of my sister in the law, Lydia," Georgiana sighed in a low voice.

Mary gazed at her friend in concern. It was as if a dark cloud had passed over Georgiana's face at the mention of the man. What must he have done to cause her such distress at the mere mention of him? Mary was determined to know more, but held her tongue as she knew Georgiana would share all when and if she pleased.

"Oh my, I have quite forgotten the time, Georgiana. I think it best we leave our perusal of these miniatures until tomorrow."

"You are quite right, Mary. The time has gotten away from us," Georgiana paused before turning to her friend with a grin quite reminiscent of Elizabeth. "I wonder if you have been studious during our tour of the house today. I will quiz you now and let you lead the way back to our quarters."

Mary laughed, surprised at Georgiana's challenge. Nodding in reply, Mary led the way out of the
The days soon turned into weeks as Mary adjusted to life at Pemberley. She soon found herself quite comfortable roaming the halls of Pemberley and navigating the intricacies of country life. Sunday mornings were spent attending services at the rectory not far from Pemberley. Mary found her first two Sundays at the church somewhat trying. She enjoyed the sermons well enough and the song selection, but Mary was ever knowledgeable of the eyes of her fellow church goers. They always seemed to be upon her and low whispers would greet her as she walked down the aisle to her place in the front pew with the other members of the Darcy household. Mary could not fathom if these whispers were out of curiosity or distaste. Frankly, it mattered not to her, both options were disconcerting. Mary desired nothing more than to worship in relative peace. The closing hymn was the high point of church, for Mary, as she knew that she would soon be free to return home. On Sunday afternoons, Mary would steal away on her own to the confines of Mr. Darcy's. Mr. Darcy had extended to Mary an open invitation to sample the delights of his library whenever she chose. Mary eagerly accepted this offer, although she was still a little wary of visiting the room when he was abscended there. Mary would spend her time in prayer, or writing in her weathered journal or reading some new found literary treasure. Besides her visits with William, her times sequestered in the library were her favorite.

Mary soon found herself incapable of being long out of the company of the young Master Darcy. Little William Bennet Darcy soon became her ever constant companion and biggest fan, aside from Georgiana. When Mary first met little William, she found him to be a shy boy easily frightened by strangers and one who sought comfort in the folds of his mother's skirt. The shyness that marked their first meeting soon gave way to a rapt fascination with his new playmate. On their second meeting, Mary was pleased to see that William had summoned the courage to forsake the protection of his mother's skirts to creep towards her and pester her with a litany of questions. Mary soon came to realize that curiosity rather than courage led to William's growing talkativeness. One question tumbled after another as William approached the mysterious new house member: Where do you live? Who is your papa? How old are you? Do you like strawberries? Why are you brown? Does your color rub off? Why is your hair like that? Will you stay here forever? Mary took care to answer every question with patience and good nature, even his impertinent questions about her hair and skin were answered with a soft smile and gentle reply. Having concluded that she was a princess from some faraway enchanted isle, as he came to understand New Sussex, William could hardly stand to be far from Mary's side. William was fond of her stories, gentle pinches and undivided attention when she visited him in the nursery. He looked to her late morning visits with all the anticipation and excitement of a four year old child. Mary, for her part, was quite enamored as well. She was soon won over by William's wide brown eyes and soft chubby cheeks. She also savored the opportunity to concoct stories for such an obliging and appreciative audience. In addition to her new found friend Georgiana, little William was a source of comfort and light in her existence.

On the second Tuesday since Mary's arrival, the cook prepared a sumptuous meal for dinner, putting before them dishes of such various colors, flavors and textures that Mary was soon overwhelmed. Never had she eaten such a variety of dishes in one meal that spanned the continent. Mary noted that Mr. Brambles seemed most content with what was before him, taking little time away from his plate for conversation and focusing on savoring the tastes and textures before him.
"My compliments to your cook, Mr. Darcy." Mr. Brambles began as he lifted his wine glass in salute. "I do not remember when I last enjoyed a meal so satisfying."

"Thank you, Mr. Brambles. I believe Mrs. Murphy thought to give us a tour of English and French cuisine in your honor." Mr. Darcy replied as he signaled a servant to refill his wine glass. "Miss Farthington, I understand you were able to tour the grounds of Pemberley visiting tenants with Georgiana today. I trust you found everything to your liking."

"Yes, Mr. Darcy. The grounds are so very well maintained. I am anxious to see them once spring has arrived."

Darcy smiled as he was always well pleased to hear Pemberley praised. "Well, Pemberley at its best during the springtime. I am sure you will have your fill of gardens and groves then. You may even venture to discover the hidden glens that my cousins and I were so fond of in our youth..."

The entrance of a servant with an express post interrupted Mr. Darcy. Thanking the servant stiffly, Darcy went to reach for the letter displayed on the servant's tray.

"Your pardon, sir, but this letter is addressed to Mr. Brambles," the servant demurely redirected as he made his way over to Mr. Brambles.

A surprised Mr. Brambles rose to accept the letter. Hastily breaking the red seal and reading through the contents, Mr. Brambles whitened slightly before turning his eyes toward Mary.

"Whatever is the matter, Mr. Brambles? You look unwell." Elizabeth asked worriedly.

"No, I am quite well, Mrs. Darcy. It is just that I have been summoned back to London with all immediacy."

"Summoned to London?" Mary asked rising from her chair. "Is it something serious, Mr. Brambles?"

"I am afraid that it is, Miss Farthington. I must cut my time here short. I must even leave this very hour."

"Then you shall have use of my coach, Mr. Brambles," Darcy said as he rose placing his napkin on the tabletop.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy, you are most kind," Mr. Brambles replied before walking to Mary who affectionately took both of her hands in his. "I am sorry to leave you so soon, Miss Farthington. I know I promised to stay with you here a full month at least, but you seem to be quite well here and have almost come to think on this place as your home. I promise that I will write from London at the first opportunity."

Mr. Brambles bowed and bid farewell to Georgiana and Elizabeth before following Mr. Darcy from the dining room to prepare for his journey. Dinner progressed without Mary registering a word that was said, her mind was so focused on Mr. Brambles departure. She was torn between genuine concern for the affairs that called for the urgent summons and resignation that Pemberley was indeed her new home. The past months had been so consumed with traveling and temporary stays that Mary did not fully register that she would never truly return to New Sussex or her old way of life. Not in the mood for evening card games or music, Mary made her excuses and retired early to her chambers.
"Princess Mary, will you tell me a story?" little William asked as he ran over to Mary's chair in the nursery.

Raising the small boy to sit in her lap, Mary ran a hand through the young boy's wild dark brown curls. "Nothing would give me more pleasure, little one. Which story would you prefer? Would you like to hear about the terrible sea monster and the pirate Greybeard or about little Juju and the witch of Gorland Wood?"

"Tell me about the witch, Mary. I should like to hear that one," William replied as he nestled himself into the crook of Mary's left arm.

Mary smiled obligingly before placing a soft kiss on the top of his head and breathing deeply to begin her tale of an adventurous boy named Juju and the peril he found when he tried to steal magic potion from the witch of Gorland Wood. Little William laughed, shuddered, gasped and cheered throughout her yarn and by the time Mary finished the tale, with little Juju escaping the evil witch alive but with the tail of a squirrel, William lay yawning in her arms.

"Can I hear another, Princess Mary," William asked with a yawn. "Won't you tell just one more?"

"No, little William. You shall have to wait until tomorrow. Then I shall tell you the story of Greybeard the Pirate. But, for now, you must be off for a nap and I have business elsewhere."

Kissing William on his soft cheek, Mary passed the contented child to his nanny. Mary then took leave of the nursery to take a much needed walk. She had not ventured outside in at least two weeks and she reckoned that the fresh air would do her health and mind some good. Mary scampered down the main staircase as quickly as her legs would safely carry her. She did not want to miss the opportunity of enjoying such a rare early December day. As she reached the bottom of the staircase, Mr. Darcy was just crossing the foyer.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," Mary curtsied her greeting.

"Good morning, Mary," Darcy paused to bow slightly and favor her with a smile. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I am off to take a much needed walk. I have been most anxious to get outside and the weather today favors me."

"Ah, I might have guessed. If Elizabeth were not otherwise engaged, I am sure she would have beaten you to the door. I hope you have not forgotten to oblige little William with another of your tales this morning. He spoke of nothing else last night other than his princess and her amazing yarns. It appears as if you are a regular Sharazad, enchanting my son with your daily stories."

Mary laughed at the mention of her little shadow. "Yes, I have just come from the nursery and little William. He is such a sweet child."
"Good, good. Enjoy your walk, Miss Farthington and do be careful to dress warmly and not to stray too far from the house. The weather is fine, but I bid you to be cautious," Darcy warned, taking on his most fatherly tone as if he were speaking to his Georgiana.

Mary nodded in reply before making her way to the front door and calling for her coat, bonnet and gloves. As soon as she was sufficiently far from the house, Mary set off at a fast clip gathering her skirts in her hands as not to trip. Delighting in the fresh air and warmth of the sun, Mary ventured farther from the house than she intended. Soon even the cold did not bother her as her limbs were warmed with the exertion of her flight. She was glad of the exercise as it allowed her room to think. It had been over three days since Mr. Brambles abrupt departure from Pemberley on urgent business. While Mr. Darcy received word of Mr. Brambles safe arrival in town, his short missive contained no details about the nature of the urgent business that summoned him there. Mary could not help but to wonder if there was some issue that had arisen with the management of New Sussex. While her father did not make her privy to all of the business surrounding the island, she was well area of its importance to he and his colleague's abolitionist endeavors. New Sussex stood as a singular free island in a Caribbean very much filled with plantations. New Sussex had been no different prior to Lord Farthington's father having come into possession of the isle, but it was not until Lord Farthington that New Sussex became a safe harbor for abolitionist expeditions and for men and women freed from bondage. As it stood, Lord Farthington's good will and the indulgence of the Crown were the only factors ensuring that New Sussex remained unique among its sisters. Arriving at the lake, Mary soon slowed to a leisurely stroll breathing deeply. She would put her worries from her mind. Mr. Brambles was a capable solicitor and had served her family well for decades. New Sussex could not be in safer hands.

The waters of the lake were still and partially covered in ice. Mary sighed in resignation. This frozen lake would have to make due and replace the lull of the ocean to which she had been accustomed. In many ways, Mary had been a child of the ocean, spending her days by the water which afforded her such peace and bid her to dream. Sitting down on a tree stump near the lake edge, Mary was soon lost in memories of her home in New Sussex, remembering her times with Lord Farthington and the lonely months when he was away on travels. Those were the most unpleasant times of her memory. His work often took him to America and the Caribbean colonies where he and his colleagues would document the atrocities of the slave trade in an attempt to sway the English public to the abolitionist cause. When Mary was a young girl, she could not comprehend why Lord Farthington refused to take her on these journeys. Mary viewed them as an opportunity for adventure, not able to understand the danger involved in these missions and her precarious status in slave holding colonies and in the American south. Mary would cry bitterly while she watched his ship cast sail from port, knowing that it would be months before she saw her father again. On one occasion when Lord Farthington was preparing for a trip to Virginia, an eight year old Mary packed a small bag complete with a piece of fruit, her favorite doll and a bonnet and placed it gingerly on top of Lord Farthington's trunks. Donning his hat and coat, Lord Farthing smiled gently at Mary as he picked up the meager parcel.

"What do we have here, Miss Mary? Are you preparing for a trip?" he asked as he stooped down next to her, peering gently into her brown eyes.

"I am coming with you, Papa," Mary replied innocently, her eyes shining with expectation.

Lord Farthington sighed as he opened her little bag, smiling as he took note of its contents. "I see that you packed well, little one. You even remembered Lady Rubela." Passing the small brown cloth doll to Mary, he gently stroked her cheek with his free hand. "You know that I cannot take you with me, Mary, no matter how much I would delight in your company."

Mary's sweet smile slipped into a pout and she hugged Lady Rubela tightly. "But, but I hate it when
you go away. It is no fun when you are away. Nana makes me play alone all day and Miss Jenkins makes me get up early to practice my French."

Sitting on one of his trunks, Lord Farthington gathered Mary in his arms and sat her on his lap. "My trips are very dangerous, sweetling. They are no place for a little girl such as yourself."

"Why do you have to go away?" Mary asked looking up at him with watery eyes. Mary tried to keep a brave face, knowing how Lord Farthington disliked excessive tears.

"You know that I only go away to help people who are in trouble, people who have been stolen from their homes and their mommies and daddies and made to work for cruel people. I must go, Mary to help them be free. You have never put up such a fuss before. What is so important about this trip?"

"Because Mother was born in Virginia," Mary said in a low whisper, her head bowed to prevent him from seeing the few tears that began to roll down her cheek.

Lord Farthington sighed deeply, before lightly kissing her on the head and gathering her closer to him. He had told Mary stories about her mother, although his stories were a gentler version of reality. Her mother was called Dinah, he had told her, and she lived on a large farm in Virginia where they grew tobacco that men sometimes liked to smoke. Dinah was very beautiful with the same large brown eyes of Mary and a kind smile for all with even white teeth like a string of pearls. Her hair was long and braided in a thick rope that rested on her back and she worked as a maid in a large grand white house. When he met her, she was in danger from a terrible man. Lord Farthington stole her away to protect her. Already laden with child, Dinah gave birth to Mary early while traveling to New Sussex without the aid of a midwife and only the ship's physician who was inexperienced in such matters. Mary was born at sea and was counted a miracle because she was born so small but was strong. Lord Farthington told her how he laughed in spite of himself at the strength of the grip of her little hand on his thumb. He named her Mary because it meant "sea of bitterness" and "hoped for child." Dinah died soon after childbirth, slipping into a deep contented sleep after the difficult delivery. Lord Farthington had told her this story many times, lulling her to sleep with descriptions of her mother's strength, beauty and kindness. Mary longed for anything connected to the woman that haunted her dreams.

"Do you know what would please me exceedingly, little one?" Lord Farthington had asked, his green eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled gently down at her. "I would be ever so grateful if you would do me the honor of stitching this cloth for me. You can practice your stitching on this and whenever we are parted again, I will keep it in my breast pocket so that you will be near me."

Mary sadly obliged, taking the white handkerchief from him before receiving another gentle kiss on the cheek. Mary would never forget the gentleness of Lord Farthington's refusal nor the sadness her childlike heart felt watching his ship depart that morning. As she grew in maturity, she began to understand the nature of Lord Farthington's work and his refusal to bring her with him on his missions. However, she was afforded the opportunity of touring Europe with her guardian upon her 16th birthday. Their travels during those eight months were among her favorite memories; the excitement of a young woman encountering the great wide world for the first time was forever imprinted in her mind.

During her reverie, Mary had soon abandoned the cold tree stump to wonder around the edge of the lake, her eyes fixed on the quiet waters almost unseeing. As she neared the glade that bordered one side of the lake, she did not notice the sound of hoof beats quickly approaching. Suddenly, a great brown horse was before Mary, rearing back on its hind legs and nearly unseating its rider. In a panic, Mary cried out, shielding her face with her hands as she fell back onto the cold damp earth. For his
part, the rider of the great beast was equally astonished, not expecting to encounter anyone by the lake on a winter morning, much less a young lady. The horse's hooves narrowly avoided Mary and the rider was able to steer it a few yards away before quickly dismounting and hurrying to her side.

"Forgive me, madam. Are you hurt?" the man asked as he knelt beside her.

"No, I am quite alright," Mary replied as she struggled to catch her breath. "I do require your assistance in standing."

"Of course," he replied before gently taking her arm and lifting her to her feet. He tried to get a look at her face, but her bent head and bonnet prevented him.

Mary busied herself with brushing off her now wet gown and regaining her composure before confronting the man who had nearly trampled her.

"Let me offer my sincerest apologies once again, my lady," the man replied bowing low as he took one of her gloved hands into his. "The fault is all mine as my foolhardy and reckless riding endangered you. Allow me..." the man paused as he rose and met her face. He flushed slightly at the sight of Mary as if surprised at her countenance.

Mary's breath caught in her throat as she looked at the stranger, who was not so foreign after all. Mary could not forget the deep blue laughing eyes nor the unruly black curls of the man before her. He appeared even more handsome than in his portrait, a few years adding a pleasing refinement to his features.

"I accept your apologies, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I too was not aware of my surroundings and I fear I nearly caused you injury by frightening your horse so."

Colonel Fitzwilliam started at her use of his name. He had not recalled meeting the lady before, as he was sure that he would not have so quickly forgotten a face as pretty or a voice as pleasing as hers.

"Forgive me, ma'am. I did not realize that we had the pleasure of meeting before. My deepest apologies for my rudeness," the Colonel released her hand, a fine blush spreading over his face.

"No need for apologies, Colonel Fitzwilliam. We have not met formally; it is just that... I am acquainted with your face from a likeness I have recently seen. Let me introduce myself. My name is Mary Caroline Farthington. I reside at Pemberley and am in the guardianship of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. I have been in residence here for just under a month." Mary replied before favoring the Colonel with another smile.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Farthington," the Colonel bowed again before shifting uncomfortably from one foot to another.

"Well, it has been a pleasure formally making your acquaintance, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and while I do enjoy your company, I must soon return to the house. I fear that the cold is becoming too much for me, especially given the dampness of my gown."

"Forgive me for my rudeness, madam. Would you allow me the pleasure of escorting you to the house?"

Mary nodded her consent and shivered unconsciously. She had been out of doors far too long and began to question the wisdom of her morning jaunt. She was not accustomed to such frigid temperatures, but her longing for fresh air had overridden her better judgment. Mr. Darcy’s warning to her a few hours before began to ring in her ears.
"Allow me," the Colonel divested himself of his overcoat before placing it around Mary's shoulders. Mary made to protest but the Colonel would not hear of it.

"I am flattered by your concern for my health, Miss Farthington, but I am an old army man and I am quite accustomed to facing the extremities. Furthermore, my carelessness is the reason for your damp state and I would never forgive myself if you caught cold."

"Thank you, sir," Mary replied as she lowered her head and brought his coat tight around her shoulders. The Colonel's coat had the smell of musk which Mary found both comforting and unsettling.

"Miss Farthington, should we begin our journey to the house?"

"Yes, yes. I am sure they are wondering after my absence as it grows quite near the luncheon hour." Mary took two steps forward and winced noticeably in pain. She had presumed herself uninjured at her ability to stand, but the effort of walking pained her left ankle greatly.

"You are hurt, Miss Farthington," the Colonel exclaimed, his eyes widened in worry as he took her right arm.

"No, it is only a trifle, I am sure that I can make it unassisted," Mary replied with a weak smile. She attempted another two steps before crying out in earnest and leaning heavily on the Colonel.

"No, no this will not do," the Colonel stated firmly, his voice beginning to take on the command of his rank. "You must permit me to place you upon my horse, Miss Farthington. The house is two miles off at least; an impossible distance for you to go on in this manner. I will walk beside you and hold the reigns."

Mary gasped both at the mention of being carried by the Colonel and the suggestion of riding the Colonel's horse. Mary had no experience upon horses, never having proper lessons and she was somewhat shaken by her first encounter with the great animal. She began to think of how she could get home by other means. It was too cold and her gown too wet to for her to wait there by the lake while he rode for assistance. It was indeed too far for him to carry her and to arrive at Pemberley clutched in the Colonel's arms would cause quite a stir, not to mention that the very idea caused her even more alarm. Mary returned her look to the Colonel, her brow knit with worry. He simply smiled in return, the act rendering his face even more handsome. Mary quickly returned her gaze to the horse and then back to the Colonel.

"How frightfully rude of me," the Colonel began, his eyes twinkling with mischief, "You have not been properly introduced. Beauregard, may I have the honor of introducing you to Miss Farthington," the Colonel bowed with a flourish as he led the horse toward a frightened Mary.

"Miss Farthington, may I introduce you to my faithful stead Beauregard. Although he may snort and stomp a fine show, dear lady, he is the most gentle of creatures."

Mary eyed the Colonel warily, not fooled by his attempt at humor, to which he replied with a wide disarming smile. "You may pet him, if it pleases you Miss Farthington. He is quite harmless and a perfect gentleman."

The Colonel gently stroked Beauregard's side to demonstrate the safety of the action. Glancing at him timidly, Mary reached out a tentative hand to the horse. Mary's fear began to give way to delight as she gently stroked Beauregard's side, enjoying the feel of the animal's soft hair underneath her glove. The Colonel laughed gently, causing Mary to favor him with a shy smile.
"Miss Farthington, I think I have come to a solution for our dilemma. I will place you on Beauregard and I will ride in the saddle behind you guiding the reigns and insuring that you do not take a tumble. I can see no other reasonable option at the time. Does this arrangement suit you?"

Mary averted her glance, looking in the direction of the house. While the prospect of riding Beauregard frightened her, the idea of being in such close proximity to the Colonel worried her. However, riding with the Colonel was her best option. Surely, no one could view it as improper but rather as a prudent decision given the circumstances.

"Alright, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I can see the wisdom in such an action. Now comes the matter of my mounting your horse." Mary turned her head to Beauregard, his height intimidating her once more. She doubted her ability to mount him with any grace.

Smiling gently, the Colonel placed his hands firmly around her waist and blushed at her sudden intake of breath. Giving her words of reassurance, he lifted her with little trouble onto Beauregard and swiftly took his place behind her. Mary was too frightened to be alarmed by the closeness of the Colonel or by the warmth of his hands as he gently released her fingers from the reigns so that he might guide the horse. It was not until Beauregard set off at a gentle trot that Mary had the opportunity to notice the closeness of the Colonel as the jolt of the horse's movement sent her back against him. He instinctively closed one arm around her as he guided the horse with the other.

After a few minutes, Mary's nerves calmed, reassured by the gentle pace of the creature and the Colonel's adeptness as a horseman. Riding with her legs to one side in the fashion of a lady, Mary found that she had nestled closely to the colonel, her check pressed against his chest and her arms circled about him. Mary's cheeks warmed at the realization; she was heartily ashamed of her foolish fear that led her to such an impropriety. Mary quickly moved to put some distance between them, raising her head and loosening her hold around his waist. Instantly, Mary missed the warmth of the Colonel and the comforting firmness of his chest. Mary tentatively raised her eyes to view the Colonel, worried at his reaction to her behavior. His eyes claimed hers as his lips curved into another disarming smile. Their eyes locked for several moments before Mary turned away to look down the path before them.

"See, Miss Farthington, your fears are quite unfounded. Beauregard is indeed a gentle beast and you are quite safe here beside me," the Colonel offered, trying to break the tension that had settled around them like a dense fog.

"Yes, you were quite right, Colonel." Mary murmured in a low tone.

Undaunted by the sparseness of Mary's reply, the Colonel ventured for an easier avenue of conversation. "So, Miss Farthington, where did you call home before you came to Pemberley?"

"I lived on the isle of New Sussex in the Caribbean, sir. It is there where I lived all my life until now."

"New Sussex, you say? I believe that I am familiar with that island. During my last deployment about a year ago, our ship docked briefly on the island to refresh our provisions. From the short time I was there, I found it to be a most handsome place. I particularly remember the whiteness of the sand and the purity of the water. The water was so clear that a man could stand waist deep and see his boots as clearly as if he were on dry ground."

Mary turned to look up at the Colonel, her interest immediately piqued at the mention of her beloved home. She was quite surprised that he should know of New Sussex and the Colonel immediately found some favor with her. They chatted about New Sussex and shared their experiences of crossing the Atlantic before they arrived at the house. Mary had soon forgotten her fear and discomfort, so
enthralled by the Colonel's easy conversation. When they had reached the front steps, Colonel Fitzwilliam jumped down from Beauregard and passed the reigns to a waiting servant.

"May I help you down, my lady?" the Colonel asked, his voice once again taking on a playful tone.

Mary smiled down at the Colonel, who was bent in a comical obsequious bow. "Yes, kind sir. Your assistance would be most appreciated."

The Colonel gently placed Mary on the ground before whispering to her, "I know what I am about to ask may shock your gentle sensibilities, but I only ask as you are hurt and are in no condition to climb the stairs. May I have permission to carry you into the house?"

Mary nodded, having realized that it would come to this. Someone would have to carry her in or arrange a brier to assist her. As she did not want to cause an unnecessary stir in the house and did not look favorably on attempting the stairs on her own, Mary resigned herself to the fact that such an action would be necessary. She only hoped that Mr. and Mrs. Darcy would not be cross with her for becoming injured and being placed in such a compromising situation.

Colonel Fitzwilliam lifted Mary with little effort, carrying her as one would a babe, her arms clasped around his neck for support. Mary was mortified anew at their increased closeness, heat rushing to her cheeks as she looked everywhere but at the Colonel. Their entrance into the foyer caused quite a commotion, as Mr. Thomas, the butler, had rushed to announce his arrival and the condition of Miss Farthington. Georgiana was the first to hurry into the space, her feelings torn between concern for her injured friend and delight at the arrival of her favorite cousin. Close on her heels were Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth.

"Cousin Richard! Mary! Mr. Thomas said that you were injured on the grounds! Are you alright? What happened? Do you need a doctor?" Georgiana questioned rapidly as she flew to Mary's side.

Mary's mortification gave way to her friend's sincere concern and she ventured a weak smile. "Georgiana, it is nothing to worry about. I was just startled by Colonel Fitzwilliam's horse and fell injuring my ankle. It is nothing really, merely a trifle. The Colonel has been good enough to see me here safely, and for that he has my sincere gratitude." Mary turned to smile warmly at the Colonel whom she found staring down at her intently. Mary returned his gaze before flushing inwardly and looking to her worried friend.

Georgiana sighed with relief as Darcy and Elizabeth entered the foyer in haste.

"Welcome, cousin. I see that you have managed to make quite an entrance as usual." Darcy greeted coolly, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Greetings, Darcy. It is a pleasure to be at Pemberley again, although my entrance was not what I first intended. It would appear that I happened upon a fairy on the road and having injured her delicate ankle, I am now bid to carry her to safety," Fitzwilliam replied with a mischievous grin, attempting unsuccessfully to set aside his cousin's anger with humor. Darcy merely replied with a scowl.

"We are grateful for your assistance to Mary, Richard. No matter the nature of your entrance, you are most welcome," Elizabeth answered stepping forward to greet her cousin as she shot her husband an annoyed glance. "I believe we should send for a doctor for Mary. No matter how much you attest to your wellness, I would have your ankle properly seen to. Richard, would you be so good as to carry Mary to her room? Georgiana and I will show you the way."

Looking over the Colonel's shoulder as they ascended the stairs, Mary could see that Mr. Darcy was
not pleased at the recent turn of affairs. Mortification took her anew as she was most desirous of his good opinion in all things. She was also troubled at the idea that she may have caused the Colonel to be looked on unfavorably by his cousin. She silently cursed herself for allowing herself to be so lost in her thoughts that she was insensible to all around her. If only she had been more careful.

"Here we are, Miss Farthington," Colonel Fitzwilliam began as he entered her chamber following Georgiana and Elizabeth. "I have delivered you safely to your abode as intended."

"Thank you," Mary managed as the Colonel gently placed her onto a settee by the fireplace.

"It was a pleasure making your acquaintance, Miss Farthington, although I wish it had been under more pleasant circumstances," the Colonel ventured with a slight smile.

"The pleasure was mine, as well. I...do apologize for startling your horse so. I did not mean to be the cause of such commotion or to kindle any anger in Mr. Darcy towards you," Mary began as she looked at the Colonel intently.

"You take too much upon yourself, Miss Farthington. I must have all the blame, take none for yourself. And do not trouble yourself with Darcy, I know my cousin well. He is merely protective of those in his care and his anger will pass when he is assured that you are well. Speaking of my dear cousin, I should speak to him now. Georgiana, Elizabeth, Miss Farthington, I take my leave of you." The Colonel bowed to each lady in turn before making his way for the door.

"Cousin Richard," Elizabeth called as he reached the door. "Thank you again for your care of Mary. It is most appreciated."

Colonel Fitzwilliam nodded before heading down the corridor in search of his cousin.

The Colonel found Darcy sitting in the library in expectation of his arrival. Standing to greet his cousin, Darcy clasped Fitzwilliam on the shoulder in salute.

"Cousin, it has been far too long since I last saw you." Fitzwilliam began, taking a seat across from him.

"And I you, Fitzwilliam. While I am delighted at your arrival, I am curious to the manner of your entrance. You are three days early without so much as a trunk at your disposal. Not to mention the affair with Miss Farthington."

"Well, I found myself able to slip away from the regiment earlier than previously expected and so I took the opportunity to surprise you all with an early arrival. It is not as if Pemberley is ever unprepared for a guest!" Fitzwilliam smiled good naturedly, knowingly indulging Darcy's pride in the management of his estate.

Noting his cousin's acceptance of this excuse, Fitzwilliam continued in a more sober tone. "It has been a long two years, dear cousin, two years that have given me a particular longing to be with my family. When I last saw you, I did not envy you at all, despite your fortune and felicity in marriage to such an excellent woman. So many responsibilities were laid at your feet, so many lives tied to the correctness of your decisions or the whim of your conscious. Yet now I would trade the freedom of bachelorhood for your happy chains of family life."

At this Fitzwilliam rose and poured himself a glass of brandy before positioning himself by the fireplace. He could not begin to describe the events of the last two years to Darcy. Although they had shared everything throughout their years, his deployment had brought with it memories and
experiences that irrevocably altered him. Although he tried to present himself as the same sly charmer of his youth, age and experience had sobered him, bringing in him a longing for a more peaceful and settled life. He desired a family and a reason for living beyond the will of the Crown or the pleasures of the flesh.

"Happy chains of family life? Why, Fitzwilliam, what has overcome you? You talk quite like a man in need of a wife." Darcy ventured in surprise and in sincere concern.

Fitzwilliam turned to face his cousin, favoring Darcy with a sad smile before taking another sip of brandy. "Do not trouble yourself, dear cousin. Nothing has overcome me other than the maturity a man attains by living out in the world. I am quite myself, just a tad bit wiser, I suppose. You are correct in assuming that my thoughts have turned lately to taking a wife. But this inclination in no different that of any other man my age. I am nearly four and thirty! Not to mention the charge my father nearly daily reminds me of. As the lesser son of an earl, my future is tied to marrying well. Although I begin to think that I'd be just as pleased with the life of a simple commoner if I was as equally blessed in matrimony as you are, dear Cousin."

Here Fitzwilliam paused, studying his glass of brandy. He thought of Elizabeth and how she had first enchanted him at Rosings Park with her bold almost impertinent nature and beautiful eyes. The same nagging question that he had debated these past five years taunted him once more: If he had cast aside family expectations and asked for the hand of Elizabeth, the daughter of a poor country gentleman, would he now know the happiness so evident in Darcy?

A pregnant silence settled over the room, causing both men to fidget uncomfortably. Fitzwilliam looked his cousin over intently, before deciding to change the subject.

"This talk of wives recalls to mind my injured fairy," Fitzwilliam began, resuming his seat. "So, Darcy, tell me more about Miss Farthington. The lady tells me that you are her guardian and just lately made so, at that!"

"Miss Mary Farthington," Darcy began, his lips pursed in a tight line. He had almost forgotten his cousin's memorable entrance. "I wonder what there is left for you to know. You seem to be well acquainted with the lady already."

Fitzwilliam laughed at his cousin. "Come Darcy, it is not at all as bad as that. What I and the lady told you is the sum total of our encounter. I was riding off of the designated road, reacquainting myself with the grounds when I came upon Miss Farthington. I admit that I was quite caught up in my own thoughts and gave no notice of the lady until I was upon her. My horse reared back, frightening the lady. She fell, injured her ankle and I rode with her back to the house to seek aid. That, dear cousin, is the total of our acquaintance although I admit that the lady was already familiar with my name and face whereas I had no knowledge of her."

Appeased by Fitzwilliam's plain account of his dealings with Miss Farthington, Darcy's parental instincts were subdued for the time being. As they were in communication regarding all matters, Darcy began to acquaint the Colonel with all he knew regarding Mary, including her relation to Lord Farthington, Mr. Bramble's letter and finally Lord Farthington's request.

"That is amazing, Darcy. Nearly doubling your wealth in one turn and acquiring a new charge? This Lord Farthington must certainly think highly of you, and I dare say his trust is not misplaced. Although I wonder at the urgency for guardianship, for Miss Farthington appears to be quite an accomplished and mature woman. These attributes on top of her fortune would make her quite the eligible lady if not for..."

"Yes, which is precisely why Lord Farthington sought proper guardianship for the lady," Darcy
began cutting him off. "We both know what befalls young ladies of fortune who are improperly protected." Darcy relinquished his seat to poke nervously at the logs in the fireplace.

"Come cousin," Fitzwilliam replied coming to stand beside him. "You mustn't always torture yourself over Georgiana. We had no way of knowing Wickham's scheme and you ultimately prevented the disastrous elopement. And Georgiana, she has turned out most wonderfully; I believe she has quite recovered from the scoundrel."

Darcy sighed, casting aside the poker and leaning on the mantelpiece. "Yes, you are right, Fitzwilliam. What is done is done and there is no need to continue to dwell in the past."

"Good, good," Fitzwilliam answered slapping Darcy on the back before resuming the activity that Darcy had just relinquished.

A knock was soon heard at the door as a maid arrived to announce the serving of luncheon. Darcy and Fitzwilliam happily made their way to the dining room. Fitzwilliam was eager to speak with his dear cousin Georgiana and to suffer the gentle teasing of Elizabeth. He was also hoping to converse with Miss Farthington once again.

Fitzwilliam was somewhat crestfallen to find that Mary could not join them and that Georgiana chose to sup with her in her quarters as they awaited the arrival of the doctor. However, Elizabeth's report that she believed Mary had only suffered a minor sprain comforted him.

"It appears that your regimentals suit you after all, Richard," Elizabeth teased, her brow raised in challenge. "You have been Mary's knight in shining red armor, plucking hapless damsels in distress from the jaws of certain danger."

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily. "A fine knight I make. I cause damsels to be in distress and then conveniently arrive to save them from harm and reap all of the praise!"

Elizabeth laughed in response, warmed to find that the Colonel was still as good natured and charming as he was when they first met. Luncheon passed amicably as Fitzwilliam was soon appraised on all the latest news of their relations, including the birth of Lydia Wickham's third daughter, Mary Bennet's recent engagement to the brother of Charlotte Collins and the recent birth of Jane Bingley's third and fourth child...a pair of twin boys. Soon the arrival of Dr. Edwards interrupted them. Elizabeth excused herself to attend to the doctor and Mary.

Dr. Edwards' examination verified Elizabeth's suspicions that Mary suffered from no more than a minor sprain and that a few days rest would see her well mended. Dr. Edwards advised that Mary avoid putting weight on her ankle and that she rest with it elevated as much as possible. While Mary was relieved that her injury was a minor one, she did not look forward to spending her days resting in her quarters, especially when such a lively house guest had just arrived. Georgiana comforted her, promising to visit her often and take tea with her everyday. Elizabeth also promised to allow little William to spend his mornings with her, if she was up to the challenge.

"Of course, Elizabeth. I would love to have visits from William. I am sure my little shadow would miss his stories terribly otherwise. He is a dear, well behaved child and we shall get along fine. I only worry that he will bore of me," Mary smiled.

"Oh, that could never be, Mary." Georgiana replied. "He loves you best of all."

"Well, not more so than me, I should hope." Elizabeth added eliciting a gasp and blush from Georgiana. Elizabeth laughed at Georgiana's distress. "It is alright, Georgiana. I am only teasing you. I should hope that you could now know when I am speaking in earnest and when I am not."
A knock at the door soon caught their attention. Elizabeth bade the person enter and was surprised to find the Colonel at the door. Georgiana ran to properly greet her favorite cousin and Mary hid her blush behind her hand. Elizabeth noticed Mary's movement with humor, but did not give the reaction much consideration. Colonel Fitzwilliam had managed to charm her, as well when they first met at Rosings with his easy manner and flirtatious attention to her person. Elizabeth was amused to later learn that Darcy had been quite jealous of his cousin and the reactions he was able to elicit from her. Mary's infatuation would soon pass.

"I have come to inquire after the patient," Fitzwilliam smiled as he looked from Elizabeth to Mary. "I trust that you are quite alright?"

"Yes, I am fine, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Let me thank you again for your kindness to me."

The Colonel smiled broadly at her expression of gratitude before Elizabeth excused herself to see to preparations for dinner and to the Colonel's rooms.

"Speak nothing of it, Miss Farthington. I would, however, request one favor from you, well...two favors."

"Of course, Colonel Fitzwilliam, if it is in my power to grant."

"First, would you do me the honor of calling me simply Fitzwilliam? And second, may I have the pleasure of calling upon you each day until you are better?"

"I...I would be happy to oblige you, Fitzwilliam." Mary answered demurely, staring at her hands.

"Thank you, Miss Farthington. I will leave you and Georgiana now. In the excitement of this morning, I had forgotten the weariness of travel. Until dinner, Georgiana," Fitzwilliam bowed to Georgiana before turning to Mary. "And until tomorrow, Miss Farthington."

After Fitzwilliam departed, Georgiana turned to her friend, her face wreathed in smiles. "Is he not the best of cousins, Mary? He looked so handsome in his uniform. You cannot begin to know how happy I am that he has come! Are you not glad to meet him?"

Mary smiled at her friend who was giddy with happiness. Mary had not seen her so animated before, and the sight warmed her. "Yes, Georgiana, I am quite pleased as well."
Mary's first few days of recovery were full of good company despite being confined to her quarters. After breakfast on the first day of her recovery, both Colonel Fitzwilliam and little William Bennet called on her. Mary was quite pleased to see them both, William riding on his uncle's shoulders, his face beaming. Mary dismissed her maid April and greeted both of her visitors with a radiant smile.

"Good morning, Fitzwilliam! Good morning, little William. How is my little shadow doing this fine morning?" Mary held her arms open to the child who as soon as his uncle placed him on the ground ran to her embrace.

"Princess Mary, Mama said that you were hurt. Are you feeling better? Promise me you will not die." William exclaimed, looking up at her with wide eyes.

Mary laughed before pulling the child next to her on the couch. "No, William, I assure you that I am well. I merely hurt my ankle, little one, and I have no intention of dying anytime soon."

William grinned widely in response before forsaking his spot on the couch for his more preferred seat in her lap. Mary giggled before wrapping her arms around the little one to hug him anew. Fitzwilliam merely stood by the door, transfixed by the scene before him. Noticing his gaze, Mary turned to favor him with a smile.

"Fitzwilliam, please have a seat. I have been a terribly rude host to not offer it to you sooner. Would you care for some tea? I shall ask April to bring up a fresh pot."

"Please, do not trouble yourself. I merely came to escort young Master William to his princess and to bid you a pleasant morning," he replied before bowing slightly and turning towards the door.

"No, you must stay with us, Uncle Richard. Mary has promised to tell me a story of pirates and sea monsters!" William piped up excitedly. "Princess Mary, you must make him stay, just for a little while."

"That would be up to the Colonel, William. While we may both desire his good company, we mustn't impose on him," Mary corrected.

"It would be no imposition, madam. I would be obliged to stay for a moment. I would hate to disappoint young William." Fitzwilliam paused. "Nor would I wish to disappoint you, Miss Farthington."

Mary's cheeks warmed at his statement, not daring to meet Fitzwilliam's steady gaze. Mary nodded and motioned to a free chair before busying herself with the effort of ringing for her maid. Overjoyed at his uncle's decision to stay, William bounded from Mary's lap to climb onto that of Fitzwilliam. After William's pleading for the story to commence, Mary favored them both with a tale of Graybeard the Pirate who outwitted a sea monster who stood guard over a secret treasure. Mary was pleased with William's unabashed delight and surprised by Fitzwilliam's interest in her story. The Colonel was all smiles during her tale and his applause exceeded that of William when the story was over.
"Well, little Shadow, I believe it is time for you to depart for your morning lessons and that Colonel Fitzwilliam would like to visit more with your father and Aunt Georgiana. So, I bid you ado." Mary kissed William on his head once more and bid him goodbye despite his protests to enjoying her stories far more than Latin.

"Come, come Master William. We must be dutiful soldiers of the crown and do whatever our noble Princess commands," Fitzwilliam ordered rising from his seat to salute Mary, causing a giggle to rise from William.

"So, now I am to be royalty with an army in my command?" Mary asked, unsure if Fitzwilliam meant to mock her.

"Why yes, Miss Farthington. Young William has crowned you thus and after hearing your tales, I must concur with his conclusion. You already have one knight who has pledged fealty to you. Does your heart have room for another?"

The entrance of Georgiana prevented Mary from responding, although Mary could herself form no answer to such a question. Fitzwilliam made his exit with William in tow after greeting his cousin. Georgiana looked after him with a smile before turning to her friend. Worry soon overcame her features as she looked to Mary.

"Mary, are you unwell?" Georgiana asked as she neared her friend's side.

"Yes...I mean no, I am well," Mary replied, smiling gently at her friend who still looked over her worriedly.

"Perhaps you should rest then, Mary. I can call April to assist you to bed..."

"Georgiana," Mary interrupted, "you are a dear, but really there is no need for all of that. I am perfectly fine."

Georgiana finally relented, assured of her friend's health, before launching into a discussion of her excitement over the upcoming Christmastide. Christmas was little more than three weeks away, Georgiana reminded her, and Pemberley would soon be caught up in a whirlwind of Christmas events culminating in the festivities of Twelfth Night. Elizabeth's Georgiana desired to enlist Mary's assistance in visiting the tenants on Christmas Eve to hand out Christmastide baskets filled with candies, sweet meats and all manner of good things. Twelfth Night was to be especially exciting, with a small party of neighboring families from Lambton and bordering estates convening for a day full of merry making. There would be dancing, a fine dinner and sleigh rides preceded by ice skating on the lake. Mary grew excited listening to Georgiana's description of the upcoming festivities, especially the prospect of ice skating. She had never gone ice skating before and was eager to learn, although wary of getting hurt in the process. Georgiana assured her that learning to skate was the simplest thing ever and that she and Fitzwilliam would make excellent teachers.

"This will be one of the first times that we will have the Christmas season all to ourselves. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are spending the holiday in London with the Bingley's and their new twins and Mary and Kitty are staying in Hertfordshire with the Lucas family. I am looking forward to such a quiet holiday," Georgiana concluded with a satisfied sigh.

"And what of the Wickhams? Are they spending the season elsewhere?" Mary inquired, curious about her failure to mention them before.

Georgiana's face fell at the mention of the name Wickham. "Yes, I am afraid so. They always stay at their home in the North for the holidays and will thankfully do so this year."
An uncomfortable silence settled between them as Mary tried to understand what she could have said that caused Georgiana such discomfort. Mary then remembered Georgiana's reaction to the miniature of George Wickham during her first tour of the house. Georgiana had paled noticeably and answered her question in a tight manner wholly unlike her nature. Mary concluded that this Wickham character must be of a bad sort to disjoint Georgiana so. She wondered what he could have possibly done to illicit such sadness and displeasure from her friend.

Colonel Fitzwilliam held true to his word, visiting Mary the next three days of her recovery, always with little William in tow. He'd listen attentively to her stories before thanking her and favoring her with a bow after the conclusion of each tale. Mary wondered at his attention to her stories and grew flattered by his compliments. After each visit, Mary felt a small hope growing within her that the Colonel could possibly favor her. She had long admitted to herself that the gentleman held a certain attraction. He was handsome, kind, easily elicited laughter from her and was very attentive, always concerned for her health and comfort during his visits.

Slowly, the sadness that had held her captive since her father's passing gave way to a secret longing that Mary found both alarming and painful. This longing was alarming in that it was completely new and foreign to her. Mary had never been long in the company of eligible gentlemen, forever surrounded by maids, governesses and the protective watch of Lord Farthington. She hardly knew how one went about the business of infatuation or how to tell if a gentleman's attentions were genuine or merely platonic in nature. This longing was also painful in that it unearthed an entire set of insecurities that Mary had never dealt with. Every possible obstacle to a union between herself and the Colonel presented itself as soon as she realized her growing attachment. Their age difference was one concern. He was nearly four or five and thirty while Mary was yet twenty years in age. Surely he must view her more as a child than as an eligible lady. Her experiences were so limited and unvarying while he had traveled all over the globe and studied at the finest university in the world. Then there was her social status. Mary was rich to be sure, but would the son of an earl seriously consider uniting himself with the daughter of a black slave who had no idea who her blood father was? All of these doubts and objections soon served to dampen the small flame of love that began to burn within her. Mary concluded that Colonel Fitzwilliam's attentions were merely of a friendly nature. Yes, her reason would forever rule over her foolish heart.

However, daily afternoon visits from Georgiana did little to support the conclusions of Mary's mind; they only added fuel to her nascent affection. While Georgiana delighted in informing Mary of the entire goings on of Pemberley, conversation rarely strayed too far from the subject of Colonel Fitzwilliam with Georgiana keeping her abreast of every action of the gentleman, including his every inquiry after Mary's health or person.

Despite the limited nature of their conversations, Mary was pleased at the chance to grow closer to her dear friend. Not only would Georgiana take tea with her, but Mary was often favored with visits late at night after most of the house had gone to bed. Mary would be alerted by a soft knock on the door after which Georgiana would scamper into the room, blushing furiously as if she were breaking the law.

"Georgiana, you look positively guilty of some crime, sneaking in here at this hour!" Mary teased her upon the first late night visit.

Georgiana giggled, before taking a seat on the bed next to her. "Oh, but I am, Mary. My brother would be positively livid if he knew I was up and about at this hour."

Mary laughed incredulously as she slid over to give Georgiana more room. "I should think your
brother was too concerned with other matters such as running Pemberley and disciplining young William to worry about your bedtime. Why Georgiana, you are one and twenty, a grown woman, not one to be babied!"

Georgiana nodded sadly. "Yes, I share your opinion, surely I do! But, what is to be done? I cannot simply beg for him to treat me as an adult, which in itself has all the appearance of immaturity. I confess that I do not believe Fitzwilliam will ever view me as a true adult until I am married with children of my own."

Mary sighed before grinning mischievously and poking Georgiana in the side. "Then, I suppose we will have to get you married off!"

Georgiana and Mary broke out in peals of laughter at the idea before venturing to propose possible suitors.

"How about Mr. Brambles, Mary. I take it he is without a wife and sufficiently mature enough to please my brother," Georgiana offered, barely suppressing a laugh.

"Oh, come now. He is nearly old enough to be your grandfather. I also hear that he prefers, redheads, dear Georgiana, so I fear that you are out of luck." Mary replied laughingly.

"Hmmm, what about Parson Geoffries?" Georgiana replied. "Surely he is in need of a wife to help him run the parish and guide the ladies in upright living. Perhaps he would be a suitable match?"

"Parson Geoffries? Heavens, no. Georgiana, you neglect one quality the wife of the parson must possess," Mary replied struggling to affect a serious tone. Georgiana raised one eyebrow in question.

"She must be very virtuous and have a great love of hearing sermons before bedtime!"

Georgiana laughed, accusing her of wickedness before they settled in a comfortable silence.

"What about Colonel Fitzwilliam? He is amiable and already has the Darcy family mark of approval," Mary ventured, breaking the silence.

"No, Colonel Fitzwilliam will not do, either. I am sure he sees me as quite a little sister more so than anything else..." Georgiana paused as she looked at her hands intently. "However, that would not prevent you, Mary." Georgiana teased, quickly recovering her humor.

"Oh, but the Colonel would not have me, Georgiana, I am sure," Mary laughed nervously.

"Mary, why would you say that?" Georgiana inquired, concern etched on her face. "I am sure that any gentleman of consequence would favor you as a bride."

"Yes, Georgiana, but my connections, my...my parentage? What of these? When I learned that I was to be sent to England after my father's death, I soon made peace with the fact that I would most likely never marry. Luckily his generosity ensured that I would never be forced into being a governess or a servant. The best I have hoped for is a life as a single woman."

Georgiana sat in silence for some moments, watching her friend closely who had resigned herself to a life alone. To never marry or know the joys of motherhood was a fate she had never contemplated. She supposed that perhaps one could live such a life with joy. To be a woman free from familial obligation and in possession of a fortune could be quite freeing. To think that one could simply live for oneself and make one's own destiny. Georgiana began to think that such a life might not be so foreboding. However, Georgiana could see that Mary did not share her opinion and that her resignation to a life of spinsterhood, as some would call it, was met with sadness and regret instead of hope.
"I suppose that what you say is true," Georgiana began. "But what about love, Mary? How could connections, parentage or society stand against the force of a man and a woman who are deeply in love? I am convinced that such a love is not just a thing of fairy tales and feminine fantasies. I have seen it realized in my brother's love for Elizabeth. By all accounts the daughter of a poor landowner with no connections should never have dreamed of marrying a man like Fitzwilliam."

Mary looked up at Georgiana in surprise. She had assumed that Mr. and Mrs. Darcy had begun as equals and that Elizabeth was a lady of high breeding given her confidence and skillful management of an estate such as Pemberley. Georgiana smiled and nodded in affirmation.

"Do not give up so easily on a life of happiness, Mary. You are accomplished, beautiful, in possession of a good fortune and untainted by scandal." Georgiana paused, her cheeks flushing slightly, "I am sure that I shall see you married before myself."

Georgiana and Mary spent the rest of the night conversing happily on other subjects, sharing stories of their childhoods and memories of their fathers. They soon found that they had much in common, despite growing up on opposite sides of the Atlantic. They had both had similar childhood stories of mischievous adventures, unwanted pianoforte lessons and difficulties mastering the quadrille. Some three hours later, the pair parted for welcome sleep.

On the fifth afternoon of her recovery, Mary sat curled up with a book by the fireplace, her injured ankle elevated on a cushion. Mary's choice for that afternoon was a weathered copy of Paradise Lost. The volume had belonged to Lord Farthington and his father before him and was now one of her most treasured possessions. Mary sat fingering the fine leather spine laced with gold etching when she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in, please," Mary called, resting the book on her lap.

"Good afternoon, Mary!" Elizabeth greeted brightly as she entered the room, two large volumes clutched to her chest. "I have raided the library, for you Mary. I know how much you like to read and I thought your injury would allow you the opportunity to sample more of Fitzwilliam's library."

Mary returned the pleasant greeting, happy to have a chance to converse with Elizabeth and equally enchanted by the prospect of a new book. Elizabeth handed the two volumes to Mary before taking a seat across from her.

"The Confessions of Saint Augustine and Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World,'" Mary read aloud before looking to Elizabeth questioningly.

"I thought that perhaps you may be interested in reading a little philosophy and theology. My younger sister, with whom you share a name, took great pride in reading much theology," Elizabeth said with a wry smile. "I confess that Fordyce held little beauty for me and of her suggestions for my reading Augustine was the only author that I truly enjoyed. As for the other volume, that one is from my personal collection. I perceive that you are a young woman on whom the delights of satire will not be lost."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," Mary replied as she placed the volumes on the table. "I shall read them as soon as may be."

"Good, I hope that you enjoy them and that in a few days time you'll be able to forage through Pemberley's massive library on your own once more. When I first came to be here, the library was my favorite place," Elizabeth began as her face took on a wistful look. "I'd spend hours there
combing the shelves for books to devour. There were so many that at first I was overwhelmed!"

"I should like to explore those shelves myself in a few days time," Mary replied.

"Indeed you shall," Elizabeth smiled good naturedly. After dismissing April, Elizabeth turned to Mary, regarding her gently before proposing a question. "I hope that you have not found your confinement too, shall we say, confining?"

"No, not at all," Mary replied eagerly. "I find that I do not want for amusement or visitors. Georgiana has brought me some thread and needles for embroidery and she visits me, often twice a day. Sometimes she joins me for Colonel Fitzwilliam's visits with William. The Colonel is so kind to visit me so often, he has never missed a morning story and as I was surprised by his interest in children's tales, I find that I enjoy his company a great deal. I often wonder how little William will cope once the Colonel leaves, as he is quite taken with his uncle and Fitzwilliam is so easy with him. You'd hardly know the two had been separated for two years!"

Elizabeth started at Mary's speech, a mild look of surprise spreading across her features. Unbeknownst to Mary, despite all her reasoning against the likelihood of an attachment between herself and the gentleman, her countenance when speaking of him had all the looks of a woman completely infatuated. She involuntarily smiled a most becoming grin and her eyes became more lively and animated.

"So, Colonel Fitzwilliam has visited with you every morning?" Elizabeth pressed, one eyebrow arched in thought. "That is quite kind of Richard. Tell me, how do you find him?"

"Fitzwilliam?" Mary questioned in turn. "Well, I...I find that he is an amiable man who is both kind and witty. He is all smiles and politeness and can carry a conversation with more ease than I have seen in most other men of my acquaintance. I confess that I can find little to dislike about the Colonel's behavior or appearance."

"Yes, Richard is all charm and gallantry. Few women could be immune to such pretty words as flow from his tongue or such devoted attentions," Elizabeth replied dryly before pausing a few moments in thought. "Tell me Mary, has Colonel Fitzwilliam ever visited you alone?"

Mary's cheeks warmed; alarmed at the turn the conversation was taking. "No, he has not. The Colonel escorts young William to my sitting room each morning to hear my stories. April attends me during these visits and sometimes Georgiana joins us as well. It...it is all quite innocent, Elizabeth. If...if I have done anything improper..."

"No, Mary, you mistake my intention," Elizabeth interrupted leaning forward to place a hand over Mary's. "I did not mean to suggest any impropriety on your part or that of the Colonel's. I...I merely seek to offer you some sisterly advice. Though you are nineteen, Mary, you are yet young to society and the attentions of gentleman. The effect Fitzwilliam has on you has not gone unnoticed by me. I have noticed the turn of your countenance when speaking of him and the modest blushes and looks when he is present."

At this Mary looked away, lowering her head in embarrassment. Had her feelings been that evident, even before she was sure of them herself? Mary began to feel as if she were a silly school girl and chastised herself inwardly. If Elizabeth had noticed such things, surely Colonel Fitzwilliam had.

"Mary," Elizabeth said gently as she moved to sit on the settee beside her. "What I say to you now is out of the most sisterly concern. It is not a judgment on your character, for you are one of the sweetest and most honest persons of my acquaintance. Do not let the Colonel's charms so easily claim your affections. Many a young woman has been charmed by an officer in regimentals,
including my younger sisters...and myself."

Elizabeth paused to see the effect of her words. She was relieved to see that Mary displayed neither mortification nor anger at her advice but sat listening to her attentively. Elizabeth smiled warmly and squeezed Mary's hand before continuing.

"When I first met my husband's cousin over six years ago, I too was affected by his easy manners and attentions. I believe Mr. Darcy even had cause to be jealous...but that was months before I came to love Darcy as I do now. However, I knew that Fitzwilliam's obligations and lack of wealth would prevent those flirtations from maturing into anything more. I do not mean to suggest that Fitzwilliam is to blame, for he cannot help his friendly nature and it is always done in the most innocence."

Mary regarded Elizabeth for a few moments, surprised and somewhat saddened by her speech. The objections and doubts crafted by her mind returned to assault her heart anew.

"I believe you say these things because you are afraid of my pledging my heart only to have it broken. But, let me assure you, Elizabeth that my heart is not in danger. It is forever ruled by my good sense. Yet, I thank you for your advice. I know it was most kindly given and I will consider it thoughtfully."

Elizabeth smiled sadly. "Well, I am glad to hear it. However, I came to visit with another purpose in mind. I wanted to talk to you about preparing for the season."

"The season? We are to leave for London already?" Mary questioned, somewhat saddened to be quitting Pemberley so soon.

"Yes, but not until after Twelfth Night. We will arrive in London at the start of the season with the entire family and Colonel Fitzwilliam. It can be quite overwhelming with all of the social obligations. There will be dinners, balls, breakfasts, plays and operas to attend. There will be so much for you to experience. For my part, I could do without so many balls and polite visits with acquaintances. However, I do take delight in making sport of our neighbors and the season provides so many opportunities for that," Elizabeth laughed to herself.

Mary's eyes grew wide; her slight vexation over their previous topic of conversation fading in comparison to her anxiety over the season. She was not yet prepared to experience the season, assuming that her winter and spring would pass uneventfully at Pemberley. She thought of all the balls and dinners with some concern. "I fear that my wardrobe may not be sufficient for so many events, Elizabeth."

"Do not worry, Mary. The tailor and seamstress will be arriving in a few days so that you can have some new dresses. You will soon have so many gowns that you will lack trunks to transport them in!"

Elizabeth and Mary laughed lightly before embarking on a long discussion about the season in London, Elizabeth sharing her experiences of her first introduction to London society as Mrs. Darcy including amusing stories about flamboyant ladies in draped in orange with gaudy feather adorned turbans. So they passed the next full hour before Elizabeth was called away to help settle a dispute between two housemaids. Her maid April arrived soon after Elizabeth's departure.

"This has just arrived for you, miss," April announced as she handed a letter to Mary.

Mary read the name on the missive in relief, "It is from Mr. Brambles! I had wondered when he'd remember to write. Thank you, April."
April curtsied slightly before going to the dressing room to attend to matters. Mary eagerly broke the wax seal before reading the letter:

Dear Miss Farthington,

My deepest apologies for neglecting to write to you sooner. Business of the utmost urgency regarding your late guardian's estate detained me. Rest assured that all matters are well in hand and that your future is secure.

A most welcome event occurred during my first days in London that have made the visit more worthwhile where you are concerned. While attending to business in London, I was privileged to meet Lord Farthington's nearest blood relations, his cousins Mrs. Beatrice Peterson and her son Mr. Derek Peterson. The Pet bers are a fine and elegant family who hold your late guardian in high esteem and supported his endeavors in the movement here in London. I regret that you were unable to make their acquaintance during our time in London as the Pet bers were out of town. This I was able to relate to them upon our meeting and they expressed equal regret, having heard much of your growth and development from Lord Farthington's letters. Mrs. Peterson herself insisted on writing you to in the near future to extend to you an invitation to join them in Brighton during the summer months. They are quite eager to meet one whom they regard as a cousin.

I regret that business further prevents me from returning to Derbyshire in the near future but should you need assistance in anyway, do not hesitate to ask me. You may reach me through the address on this letter. My most sincere prayers for your health, happiness and safety.

Sincerely yours,

Thomas Brambles, Esq."

On Saturday afternoon, the ninth day of Mary's confinement, Dr. Edwards returned to Pemberley to check on her progress. Much to Mary's delight, he proclaimed her ankle sufficiently healed to resume scampering about the countryside. As soon as she was able, Mary donned her coat, bonnet and gloves to take a short turn in the now barren west facing gardens before nightfall. Mary was pleased at the freedom to walk about Pemberley once again and relieved to be free from Colonel Fitzwilliam's daily visits. Following Elizabeth's advice, Mary worked to quell her affections for Fitzwilliam. However, she found enduring his visits, filled with intent stares and flattery, were exhausting to her resolve. It appeared that no matter how Mary worked to ignore his pretty words and appear unflustered by his smiles Fitzwilliam remained unmoved, continuing his visits and even conniving to increase the length of his stay. Although the visits continued unabated, Mary did begin to notice some changes in the Colonel on the previous morning's visit. Fitzwilliam dropped the pretense of merely escorting young William or staying simply to appease his young cousin. His speech was colored with less flattery and pretty words and marked by more silence and stares. Mary found this new mode of intercourse even more unnerving, growing flustered and embarrassed under Fitzwilliam's steady gaze. Whenever Mary chanced to look up from young William, she was met with Fitzwilliam's dark blue eyes fixed upon her. Mary began to wonder if Fitzwilliam was more than just a natural flirt and especially took pleasure in her discomfort, choosing an alternate strategy
of vexing her.

That morning's visit was much of the same. Soon after his arrival, Fitzwilliam took his place by the fire, leaning with one arm on the mantle as he watched her steadily. When Mary chanced to look up some moments later, she found his position altered but his gaze unchanged, now sitting across from her, his head propped on one bent arm. After the story was finished and Mary dismissed young William, Fitzwilliam lingered for a moment. He took a seat across from her, looking at the fireplace with a somewhat pained expression on his face.

"Fitzwilliam, whatever is the matter?" Mary asked as she rose and stepped towards him.

Moving as if startled, Fitzwilliam turned to regard her before quitting his seat and stepping back from her. "Forgive me, Miss Farthington. I fear I have lingered too long causing you undo stress. I take my leave of you, but let me express my happiness at your renewed health," at this Fitzwilliam took her hand and bowing, softly kissed the back of it before leaving abruptly.

Mary could still feel the warmth of the Colonel's lips on her hand as she made her way down for dinner. While she was eager to sup once again with the entire family, she looked to meeting again with Fitzwilliam with some anxiety. Much to her pleasure, Mary was not seated next to Colonel Fitzwilliam, but by Georgiana. Dinner passed with little conversation offered by Fitzwilliam who sat across from her and Mary was content to chat with Georgiana and Elizabeth throughout the meal. The effort of making conversation distracted Mary from the rising feeling of vexation that Fitzwilliam's constant gaze prompted in her. Mary was relieved when the ending of dinner allowed for her escape to the sitting room where more distance could be put between them. However, distance was denied her when a game of whist was called for by Georgiana. Much to Mary's consternation, she soon found herself a loser to a surprisingly expert Georgiana.

"Well, now that my little sister had caused us all to look the fool by trouncing us in a game of whist, I think it is time for a little entertainment," Darcy announced as he rose from the card table to seat himself by the fire.

"Yes, yes," Elizabeth agreed enthusiastically. "Mary, would you favor us with playing a song? You play so beautifully and we have not had the pleasure of hearing you for some time."

"Darcy has told me much about your talent, Miss Farthington, and I have been all anticipation to hear you for myself," the Colonel added, becoming more animated as he rose and stood before Mary. "I wonder if your voice is as enchanting in song as it is in reciting tales of fancy," he added in a lowered tone for Mary's ears alone.

Mary flushed inwardly despite herself, before muttering her intention to play. Taking Fitzwilliam's offered arm, Mary allowed herself to be escorted to the pianoforte. Seating herself before the instrument, Mary began to play and sing a folksong her father had been fond of and had asked her to play often after they had finished their evening meal:

The water is wide, I cannot get o'er
And neither have I wings to fly.
O go and get me some little boat,
To carry o' er my true love and I.

A-down in the meadows the other day
A-gath'ring flow'rs both fine and gay
A-gath'ring flowers, both red and blue,
I little thought what love could do.

I put my hand into one soft bush,
Thinking the sweetest flow'r to find.
I prick'd my finger to the bone
And left the sweetest flow'r alone.

I lean'd my back up against some oak,
Thinking it was a trusty tree.
But first he bended then he broke,
So did my love prove false to me.

Where love is planted, O there it grows,
It buds and blossoms like some rose;
It has a sweet and pleasant smell,
No flow'r on earth can it excel.

Must I be bound, O and she go free!
Must I love one thing that does not love me!
Why should I act such a childish part,
And love a girl that will break my heart.

There is a ship sailing on the sea,
She's loaded deep as deep can be,
But not so deep as in love I am;
I care not if I sink or swim.

O love is handsome and love is fine,
And love is charming when it is true;
As it grows older it groweth colder
And fades away like the morning dew.

When Mary had finished her song, everyone applauded loudly asking that she favor them with another. Mary agreed, but asked that she not be forced to sing. When she began playing once again, Georgiana, Elizabeth and Darcy began to chat quietly among themselves while Fitzwilliam made his way to Mary's side. He stood silently by the instrument, leaning ever so gently against it as he watched her. Mary's annoyance returned at his renewed inspection of her person, prompting her to return his look with some irritation.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam. Tell me, is there something about my playing or my appearance that is objectionable to you?" Mary challenged flashing him an angry look, her voice deceptively even.

"Why would you suppose a thing like that?" Fitzwilliam questioned in reply, sipping lightly from his glass of brandy as he grinned wickedly.

"I have noticed that there have been but a few moments this evening when I am not under the scrutiny of your eye. What else am I to suppose but that there is something about my person you find offensive?" Mary replied, before returning her attention to her playing. She had already misplayed several notes, her hands slightly shaking from nervousness and ire.

"Ah, you are a perceptive one, Princess. I confess that there has been one aspect of your person that has caused me great consternation as of late. For my part I am dumfounded as to why you persist in wearing that awful bombaze. The look of mourning does not suit you."
Mary started at this, misplaying another note as she lifted her chin in defiance before replying in a barely civil tone. "I was unaware that you were so well versed in women's fashions, Colonel. Perhaps you should consider a change of occupation."

Fitzwilliam seemed to take little notice of her increased anger, laughing gently in response to her thinly veiled insult. "I must contradict you on that point, Princess. Women's fashions hold little interest for me. I am much more inclined to occupy myself with the observation of the beauty of a certain lady."

Mary gasped audibly before quickly ending her song. The room broke out in light applause, their companions having seemingly taken little notice of their heated exchange.

"May I escort you to your seat, Miss Farthington?" Fitzwilliam asked, offering his arm with all politeness.

Mary curtly nodded her consent, lightly touching her hand to his bent arm and walking with him to her seat. Mary could barely focus for the rest of the evening, her mind engaged thoughts of Fitzwilliam. While the man had intrigued her before, now she found him positively infuriating. Yet, she realized that she was more disappointed in her reaction to his teasing than angry at the Colonel. She could not fathom how he easily elicited such strong reactions from her. Since his arrival, she had experienced such emotions that were unlike her, from infatuation to embarrassment and now anger. Mary considered apologizing to the Colonel for her incivility, but could not bring herself to look at the gentleman much less to speak to him.

Mary was more than relieved when the night finally ended and she could retire to the sanctuary of her rooms. She looked forward to attending services in the morning, having missed service last Sunday due to her injury. Mary made a note to especially pray for patience on the morrow.
Chapter 4

Originally Posted on Monday, 1 August 2005

Sunday morning brought relief to Mary's troubled mind. She had spent a good deal of the previous night in restless sleep over Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mary resented that he could put her into such a state with seemingly little effort on his part. Church for Mary presented the perfect opportunity to calm her thoughts and she looked to it with great expectation. Mary was one of the first to be dressed and ready for services that morning, being seated in the morning room for breakfast a full half hour before the others. Mary did not mind the solitude, taking the opportunity to read through her prayer book.

Mary was displeased to find herself seated next to Colonel Fitzwilliam once at church. She had hoped to be seated beside Georgiana and William, offering her a welcome respite from the gentleman. Mary's discomfort increased when at the start of worship Colonel Fitzwilliam sought permission to share her prayer book as he had forgotten his own. Mary begrudgingly assented to his request, despite the increased intimacy such an arrangement would demand. Fitzwilliam favored her with a disarming smile in thanks, causing Mary to flush inwardly and turn away with embarrassment. Mary became more flustered when the opening hymn began. She found it difficult to focus on the words of the hymn as she was so affected by Fitzwilliam's singing. His voice was strong and harmonized perfectly with Mary's soprano, a rich tenor that swelled and seemed to fill Mary's senses. Mary was relieved when the hymn came to an end and Parson Geoffries rose to the pulpit. Her disposition and focus was greatly improved by the sermon, with Parson Geoffries delivering a rousing homily urging them all to acts of charity during the upcoming season. Mary was surprised to find the Colonel equally as engrossed in the message as herself. Yet, the impact of his sermon on her mood was somewhat lessened by the disapproving glares Mary occasioned to notice cast in her direction from other parishioners. Mary wondered at the meaning of these looks but endeavored to ignore them and to focus on the service.

After the service ended, Mary walked out with young William in tow, Georgiana being escorted by the Colonel and Elizabeth by her husband. As usual, the family was soon surrounded by neighbors wishing to pay their respects to the family of Pemberley. Parson Geoffries followed the family out of the church, pulling aside Mr. Darcy for a word once he had performed his obligation of shaking the hands of a few passing parishioners.

"Mary, where has papa gone?" William asked, pulling at Mary's skirt as she stood off to the side of the crowd, watching Elizabeth and Georgiana greet fellow parishioners.

"He has gone to have a word with the parson, William. We must not disturb him," Mary replied patting the young boy on the head.

"But, I only want to ask him a question," William replied, before heading off in the direction he had seen his father go.

Mary sighed deeply before following William, worried that he would get himself into some mischief. William had just entered the nave of the church before Mary caught up with him.

"William, I told you we must not disturb your father," Mary whispered in the boy's ear. "Now, go off and pester your uncle."
William pouted dramatically and turned to do as he was told, eliciting a silent chuckle from Mary. She made to follow him until she heard her name mentioned by the parson. Mary walked closer to where Mr. Darcy and Parson Geoffries were conversing by the pulpit in order to hear what was being said.

"Mr. Darcy, you must understand that to allow Mary to continue sitting in the front pew will only cause more discord among the congregation. I don't bring these claims to you because one or two local bumpkins have complained, but other families of importance have come to me with their concerns," Parson Geoffries stated sheepishly.

"Well, parson," Mr. Darcy replied curtly, "I do not understand what business it is of theirs to be concerned about the goings on in my home or who sits in our pew during service. The young lady, for all purposes, is a member of the Darcy family and has every right to attend services at this church."

"Mr. Darcy, please pardon me if I have misled you," the parson interjected, his voice shaking slightly. "Miss Farthington is of course more than welcome to join us in worship here. Every child of God is welcome in His house. Rather, the issue is that she sits in the front pew. If you would be so kind as to instruct her to sit in the rear of the church with the servants. That would be the reasonable..."

"With the servants!" Mr. Darcy cut him off hastily, his voice never rising but taking on a more authoritative tone. "Miss Farthington is a gentleman's daughter and is living under the guardianship of a gentleman who, if I may remind you, is responsible for the financial upkeep of this parish."

Parson Geoffries started, all color draining from his face. "But Mr. Darcy, she is a negress and it is highly..."

"Parson Geoffries, you have said more than enough. Miss Farthington will continue to sit in the front pew with the Darcy family. Also, let me advise you to have a word with your parishioners in their treatment and discussion regarding the lady. Miss Farthington is to be given all of the deference and respect given myself and Mrs. Darcy. If for some reason this poses a problem for you, then I strongly advise you to begin searching for another position! Do I make myself perfectly clear, Parson?"

Mr. Darcy spat the title out with contempt, his face flushing slightly and his posture seemingly growing more tall and foreboding in the delivery. Parson Geoffries was clearly affected, hurriedly voicing his agreement before shrinking away from the man.

Mary quickly turned to rejoin the family. She could hardly believe what she had just heard. The whispers, the silent rebukes, the looks she had received all returned to her remembrance, understanding crashing on her like a great weight. Tears began to stab at her eyes as she hastened for the carriage. Mary was too distraught to notice Colonel Fitzwilliam's approach and ran directly into the gentleman.

"Ahh, Princess, I was looking for you. I see that once again you are not looking where you are going," Fitzwilliam smiled down at her, reaching out one arm to steady the lady.

"Please excuse me, Fitzwilliam, I must return to the carriage," Mary choked out as she tried to avoid his eyes, a few tears escaping from her own. The Colonel was one of the last people she wished to see. Mary did not want him to see herself in her present state; surely he would think her weak from her display of emotion.

"Good God, Mary, whatever is the matter? Are you ill?" Fitzwilliam asked in a low earnest tone as he took her gently by the shoulders.
"No, I...I just need to get away from this place and from these people!" Mary replied in anguish, her effort to contain her tears proving futile.

"Of course," Fitzwilliam responded as he offered his arm to her. "Come, we will take a short walk down the lane so that you may compose yourself and we will be off for the house at once."

Mary nodded her agreement, leaning heavily on Fitzwilliam's offered arm. However much she might have distrusted the gentleman, Mary was all too eager to escape at once. After instructing the driver of the coach to meet them once the others were collected, Fitzwilliam led Mary down a tree lined road just off from the church. Spying a wooden bench a dozen yards down the lane, Fitzwilliam guided Mary towards it, willing her to sit.

"There," Fitzwilliam whispered as he placed her on the seat. "We will rest here a bit before joining the others for home. Here, dry your eyes with this."

Fitzwilliam drew a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and offered it to Mary. Taking the cloth, Mary mumbled a quiet "thank you" as she dabbed her cheeks and eyes. Fitzwilliam knelt on the ground before her in quiet agitation as Mary struggled to contain her tears. After a few moments, Mary began to become herself again.

"I am sorry, Fitzwilliam. I did not mean to impose upon you like this."

"Please, offer no apologies, Miss Farthington. I am happy to be here to offer any help or comfort that I may."

"Thank you," Mary replied looking up at him, her eyes still wet with tears.

"You are quite welcome, Miss Farthington. Now, tell me, what has upset you so?"

Mary shook her head as if to deny his request. Fitzwilliam sighed, taking her gloved hands into his.

"Please, Miss Farthington, tell me what has happened? Perhaps I can make it right."

Mary regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, relishing in the feel of his warm hands surrounding hers. She was unsure if she should disclose all to the man that had been her tormentor, but the gentleness of his response and the earnestness of his look spurred her to trust him. Upon hearing Mary's explanation, Fitzwilliam rose and paced distractedly back and forth in front of Mary, quietly uttering oaths beneath his breath.

"This defies reason! Nay, it defies every sense of Christian decency and decorum," Fitzwilliam said angrily as he continued to pace. "To besmirch you so; it cannot be borne. I will speak to my cousin directly and we will have this parson turned out on his ear!"

"No," Mary objected rising from her seat, somewhat surprised by his impassioned response. "That will not do, Fitzwilliam. The parson is not the source of the problem. Would you also bar the entire congregation from the church as well so that I might be comfortable?"

Fitzwilliam quit his pacing and faced her, before throwing his hands up in resignation and sighing deeply. "No, you are correct, but what else is to be done?"

"There is nothing to be done," Mary resumed her seat, wringing her hands up in thought. "I have behaved like a naïve child," Mary began after a few minutes of silence. "I have been sheltered all my life, indulged by my father to believe that I would always be respected and admired
wherever I go. New Sussex was such a place. I'd walk through town with my father to be greeted with such sincerity and warmth. No one thought it strange that I should call him father despite our contrasting shades. London, to be sure, lacked such warmth but when I arrived at Pemberley...," Mary paused to catch her breath, tears threatening to spill forth once more. "I have been so happy here and made to feel so welcome. I forgot that the rest of the world is not as kind."

"Miss Farthington, I will not stand by as you unjustly abuse your own character," Fitzwilliam interjected solemnly, taking Mary's gloved hands into his and bidding Mary to look him in the eye. "This matter with the parson is no reflection on your character, but rather brings to light the faults of others. All those who know the goodness of your heart cannot help but to admire you."

The arrival of the carriage and horses soon interrupted their solitude. Mr. Darcy was the first to alight from his horse, soon followed by a footman who led Beauregard by the reigns. Mr. Darcy's countenance was one of concern mixed with anger as he walked towards the pair.

"Miss Farthington. Fitzwilliam. I trust that all is well."

"No, all is not well, cousin," Fitzwilliam replied as he escorted Mary from the bench towards the carriage.

"You are not ill, Miss Farthington?" Darcy inquired, his anger dissipating to worry.

"No, sir. I am well,' Mary replied, her head lowered to shield her eyes.

"Then why did you both depart on your own from the church and not wait for the carriage as expected?"

Mary stammered an inaudible reply, unsure of how to answer him truthfully. Fitzwilliam squeezed her arm lightly, indicating that he would speak for her.

"Cousin, let us discuss this once we are back at Pemberley," Fitzwilliam interceded, a hint of irritation in his voice. "I am sure Miss Farthington is growing chilled and much desirous of returning home."

Darcy agreed to this arrangement, mounting his horse and riding ahead of the carriage. Fitzwilliam handed Mary into the carriage where Elizabeth and Georgiana were already seated, concern etched over both of their faces.

"Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam whispered, still holding her gloved hand as he leaned into the carriage. "Do not worry about Mr. Darcy. I will discuss all with him."

Mary nodded her reply, favoring Fitzwilliam with a hesitant smile as he firmly shut the carriage door. She was most grateful when the carriage finally began to move toward Pemberley. The ride home was thankfully a quiet one, Elizabeth and Georgiana satisfied to wait until another time to discuss what had occurred. Mary's emotions were in too much turmoil for her to attempt conversation without tears. Mary was both angry and hurt by what she had heard. Part of her desired to do nothing more than to lock herself up in Pemberley and never venture into society again. However, she knew that to do so would do her more harm than good. She could not forgo all the delights the world had to offer because some people wholly unconnected with her found her unacceptable.

Mary reflected on Colonel Fitzwilliam's kindness to her, unconsciously fingering his handkerchief as she leaned her head against the carriage window. Mary's only comfort in the morning's events had been Fitzwilliam's kindness to her. He was different from the man who had driven her to distraction over the last few days and so much more like the man who had been so caring and attentive when
they had first met. She watched him as he rode beside the carriage, admiring his form. He seemed to fit the role of a soldier perfectly, his figure tall, lean and broad shouldered, his posture perfectly erect as he rode tall in the saddle. Even in profile, Mary could see that his expression was stern as he seemed to glare down the road before him. Her heart twisted at the realization that he was still very upset by what had occurred. She had been surprised by the strength of his anger, reacting to the slight as if it had been leveled against himself.

The Colonel turned as if aware of her inspection, his severe countenance softening as he noticed her watching him. Mary held his look for what seemed like several long minutes, surprising herself by her unwillingness to look away. Finally, Fitzwilliam broke the gaze, tipping his hat as he rode ahead to join Mr. Darcy.

The ride back to Pemberley was too short for Colonel Fitzwilliam; a good hard ride was what he needed to settle his mind and quell his ire. Fitzwilliam could not think back on the morning without hurt and anger battling for supremacy in his heart. The sight of Miss Farthington in tears had felt as if someone had twisted a knife in his gut. Her large brown eyes, usually sparkling with wonder and spirit, were then dull with pain and reddened with suppressed tears. She had looked so fragile then. It was a look similar to that which overcame her at the prospect of riding Beauregard when they had first met. Then he had the luxury of being able to be of assistance to her whereas now there was little he could do to heal her of this fresh wound. His impotence to right the wrong further fueled his frustration.

Sensing his cousin's displeasure, Darcy bid him to join him in the library as soon as they arrived at Pemberley. Fitzwilliam agreed, following his cousin with a look of agitation.

"Fitzwilliam, now that the ladies are safely returned to the warmth of Pemberley, perhaps now you would be so good as to provide me an account of what transpired today," Darcy began as he poured two glasses of brandy.

"Cousin, the heart of the matter has already been laid before you! This morning after services I came upon a distraught Miss Farthington who wished nothing more than to be as far from the church as possible. You cannot be at a loss for what the cause of her distress was?" Fitzwilliam questioned, his face reddened slightly from his anger.

"Parson Geoffries..." Darcy replied after a moment's thought, "The poor girl must have heard it all."

"Yes, she did indeed hear every word and was understandably most distraught."

"Well, perhaps she can be comforted with the news that I have already spoken with the parson," Darcy replied as he seated himself by the fire, sipping his brandy casually.

"You are not calling for his immediate dismissal!" Fitzwilliam replied, his voice rising noticeably as he moved to stand before his cousin, "Do you propose to let the man go unpunished for his slight?"

"No, I am not seeking to replace the parson. The matter is well in hand, cousin."

"Well in hand," Fitzwilliam repeated incredulously. "I am sure if Georgiana had been the one offended, you would act differently!"

"You are wrong on that account, Fitzwilliam," Darcy replied, his voice tight from anger. "I would
have conducted myself in the same manner had my sister been involved. I am not insensible to the fact that Miss Farthington has been unpardonably offended. How would you have me act, cousin? Should I challenge the parson to a duel?"

"Of course not, Darcy, let's not play games! There must be something more to be done than the bandying about of a few harsh words!" Fitzwilliam countered animatedly.

"All that can be reasonably done has been done. In this you must be satisfied!" Darcy stated firmly.

The Colonel uttered an oath beneath his breath as he turned from his cousin. "I cannot stand by and do nothing to alleviate her suffering," he sighed as he ran one hand through his dark mane.

Darcy rose from his seat, eyeing his cousin thoughtfully for a few moments. "Cousin, it strikes me as very peculiar that you have taken such a passionate interest in this matter. I have not seen you so angered for quite some time."

Fitzwilliam straightened at this, turning to face his cousin. "I am simply concerned for her well being. Wouldn't any gentleman be angered when a lady is so disrespected? The thought that anyone would suggest that a lady of her stature sit with the servants! My word!"

"Yes, any gentleman would be affronted," Darcy replied, looking at his cousin intently. "But a gentleman would also act within the bounds of reason. I wonder cousin, is there something you are not telling me regarding Miss Farthington?"

"Are you accusing me of some sort of impropriety? If you are, sir, speak it plainly now so that I might have my justice," Fitzwilliam challenged, his voice deceptively even.

"Heavens no, Fitzwilliam! Despite your purported reputation as a wooer of ladies I know you are no cad! However, your interest in Miss Farthington has caused me some concern, not so much for the lady as for yourself!"

"For myself?" Fitzwilliam repeated incredulously. "Whatever could you mean, Darcy?"

"Only this cousin," Darcy replied as he stepped toward him, his face flushed from their exchange. "You appear in great danger of losing your heart, nay, even your good sense if you persist in your attentions to a lady so far below your own status."

Fitzwilliam stared at his cousin in disbelief. The Colonel was at a loss to understand why Darcy would conclude that he was considering attaching himself to Miss Farthington. He was further dumfounded to hear Darcy speak of the danger of attaching oneself to a woman of low social rank, when he had withstood the wrath of both Aunt Catherine and Lord Matlock to secure the hand of Elizabeth.

"You look at me now, cousin, as if I am in possession of two heads. However, you cannot think me blind to the signs of your growing attachment. You have visited the lady every day of her confinement and once she was pronounced well, you attended her as a most dutiful suitor. Elizabeth has noticed this as well," Darcy challenged, pacing the room slowly and eyeing his cousin angrily as he spoke. "I have also noticed a change in your demeanor. You have been noticeably pensive and distracted, especially when Miss Farthington is in the room. Your eyes barely leave her person and your conversation is littered with praises for her. Is it no wonder that I believe you are in danger of forming a most unsuitable alliance? Your behavior this morning, nay, during this very conversation confirms all of my suspicions."

Fitzwilliam turned from his cousin, walking over to the fireplace and leaning against the mantle. He
could not deny the veracity of Darcy's conclusions. He found himself enchanted with Miss Farthington upon their first meeting and his admiration for her only grew with each subsequent encounter. While he did find her uncommonly beautiful, he also was drawn to the liveliness of her mind, her shyness, her way of rallying courage when she was confronted and her motherly and affectionate way with young William. He found that he could not keep himself from seeing the lady every day or from monopolizing her attention through some moment of teasing or flattery. His feelings had been so new and had seemed to form so naturally that he had yet to name them.

"I have no wish to deny these charges," Fitzwilliam replied, turning to look at his cousin earnestly. "I dare say that I am very well on my way to being very much in love."

Darcy started at this confession, crossing his arms over his chest as if he were chastising a child. "You cannot be serious with these claims, Fitzwilliam! An alliance between yourself and Miss Farthington would simply be unacceptable, you must see this!"

A new anger rose in Fitzwilliam's chest as he quit his place by the fire and stood firmly before his cousin. "I do not see this! Why should I see this?"

"Come, cousin, you are a man of the world. You cannot be insensible to the ways of society or the duty due to your family. She is rich to be sure, but what of her family or her parentage? Yes, she bears Lord Farthington's name but this is all she shares with the gentleman!"

"You speak of duty to one's family and connections! How ironic to hear these words from you, Darcy," Fitzwilliam spat out.

"This is not about me, cousin. Our situations are in no way similar. Mrs. Darcy's sire is a gentleman while that of Miss Farthington is a slave. How would Lord and Lady Matlock react? Or better yet, what sort of reception would your beloved receive when presented to the ton! What you experienced today is only a small taste of the censure you both would receive. I cannot even begin to think of the children. You must consider their prospects as well."

"I believe you have spoken enough," Fitzwilliam replied through gritted teeth, turning from his cousin and heading for the door.

"Richard," Darcy caught his cousin by the arm bidding him to halt his escape. "I do not say these things to hurt you nor to insult Miss Farthington. Indeed, Mary has become a much treasured friend and member of this household. I would do nothing to harm her or to impede her happiness. However, you must concede that to marry her would be beyond the bounds of reason. You cannot deny or escape who she is."

Fitzwilliam was too angry to offer his cousin a reply. Shrugging off his grip, Fitzwilliam left the library with determined steps. In his anger, he barely acknowledged Georgiana standing in the hall before the library doors, her face drawn in worry. He managed a few clipped words of greeting before brushing past her to descend the stairs. Georgiana watched his flight with alarm, following his figure as he called for his coat and horse and hurriedly quit the house.

As soon as she arrived home, Mary made her way to her rooms, refusing to speak with Elizabeth or Georgiana despite their renewed entreaties. More than anything, Mary wanted to be alone, instructing April to allow no one admittance and to inform the household that she would forgo her
afternoon meal. Mary fell back onto her bed, curling her legs toward her chest as she bent her head to meet them. A deep longing for her home overcame her, causing fresh tears to fall from her cheeks. Mary did not know how long she lay like that, passing in and out of sleep, before a gentle knock at the door caught her attention.

Mary was surprised to find Georgiana at her door holding a tray full of all sorts of good things to eat as well as a pot of hot tea. Georgiana smiled tentatively, thanking April for allowing her in, as she made her way over to the table by Mary's bed.

"I hope you do not mind a visitor and are not too angry with April. She told me when I visited earlier that you were forgoing food and company. I convinced her that it would be cruel to allow you to starve of both food and guests," Georgiana chirped brightly as she placed the tray before Mary.

"How very clever," Mary replied, a faint smile registering in her eyes. "I guess I have no choice but to enjoy both the company and the meal."

Georgiana chuckled as she handed Mary a cup of tea, "I suppose that will have to do for an invitation."

"I apologize. I am not feeling myself today," Mary murmured sipping her tea lightly.

Georgiana sighed deeply, looking from her cup of tea to her friend with concern. "Mary, will you please tell me what happened today. I have been so anxious for you. You looked upset in the carriage."

"Oh Georgiana, I can barely stand to repeat it without crying," Mary exclaimed rising from her seat.

Georgiana rose from her seat to stand beside her friend, her brow knit with worry. "It must have been awful. Richard and Fitzwilliam had a terrible argument over it soon after we arrived."

"Arguing? Over me?" Mary exclaimed, her eyes widening.

"I have never seen Richard so angry as when I passed him in the hall. He was in quite a state and quit the house directly. No one is sure where he has gone," Georgiana continued, not noticing Mary's growing alarm.

"No, this will not do! I did not mean to be the cause of such a fight," Mary exclaimed, turning from her friend and walking towards the window. A heavy snow had begun to fall, coating Pemberley in a fresh coat of white powder. Mary grew more alarmed over Fitzwilliam's sudden departure. "I...I should not have even told him. I have already been the cause of enough trouble today."

"Mary! I am sure you are not to blame. Why would you ever blame yourself?" Georgiana asked, crossing the room towards her.

Moved by Georgiana's concern and unwilling to cause her friend more anxiety, Mary related all that had occurred that morning. Georgiana was shocked and angered by what she had heard and also confused. She refused to believe that Parson Geoffries was capable of such behavior, but she also could not doubt Mary's account. Georgiana was also surprised by the conduct of her neighbors and acquaintances, being completely unaware of the whispers and rude treatment Mary had suffered. However, Georgiana was encouraged by her brother's defense of Mary and the Colonel's kindness to her.

"I am so sorry, Mary," Georgiana began after the two had sat in silence for some minutes.

"Sorry for what, Georgiana? You have done nothing but been a good and loyal friend."
"I could have done something, Mary. Those were my neighbors and friends that treated you that way. I should have defended you or been there to protect you, but I wasn't even sensible enough to notice what was going on. I have been a terrible friend to you."

Mary smiled weakly, before hugging Georgiana tightly. "Oh, Georgiana, you have been the best of friends to me," Mary replied, fresh tears forming in her eyes. "You have welcomed me here as if I were a sister and treated me with such kindness. I should have confided in you. I did not want to burden you with my problems, but all I have done is cause you to worry."

Mary paused, observing her friend thoughtfully. It would not do for them to go back and forth over who was the worst friend. Mary grinned mischievously, having come up with a solution. "If you will agree that you are indeed a superb friend, I will pledge to tell you everything as a friend aught."

Georgiana smiled broadly, nodding her head in agreement as the two embraced. Mary and Georgiana laughed gently at the sight of each other's tears. They were then content to enjoy their luncheon, occupying themselves with discussion of happier subjects.

Mary soon found herself in better spirits thanks to Georgiana's gentle attentions, the unpleasant events of the morning being forgotten for the moment. However, she could not help but be concerned over Fitzwilliam's argument with Mr. Darcy, taking all the blame for it upon herself. Mary's concern only grew when Colonel Fitzwilliam did not return to join the family for dinner. The snow had begun to fall more heavily and showed no signs of abating before sunrise. Neither Elizabeth nor Georgiana had received any word from the gentleman and Mr. Darcy looked in no mood to entertain her inquiries regarding his presence. Dinner was mostly silent and awkward, increasing Mary's unease. Elizabeth ventured to offer some conversation during the meal, but most of her efforts were returned with silence.

After the meal, Mr. Darcy opted to adjourn to his library in solitude for the remainder of the evening, leaving the ladies to entertain themselves in the sitting room. Mary sat with Georgiana and Elizabeth until about nine in the evening, attempting to employ her energy in reading. As the minutes passed, Mary's agitation grew until she bid her companions good night and made to retire to her chambers. On the way to the stairs, Mary was surprised and pleased to encounter Fitzwilliam just returning for the night.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam," Mary greeted him, a look of relief spreading across her features as she hurried towards the gentleman.

"Good evening Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam replied, returning her greeting with a sad smile as his eyes searched hers.

Mary gazed at his face in concern. His blue eyes which normally seemed to sparkle with mirth were now weary and drawn. His hair was disheveled and a light stubble lined his face, lending to his overall unkempt appearance. It pained her greatly to see him in such a state, even more so at the thought that she may have contributed to the cause.

"Are you well, Fitzwilliam? We were all so anxious when you did not return for dinner. And with it snowing so heavily I feared for your safety. The roads, were they very bad? You do not look well at all," Mary confessed, her words spilling out in a rush as she wrung her hands.

"Were you very concerned, Princess?" Fitzwilliam inquired in a low voice, his lips curving into a sad smile as his eyes searched hers.
"Georgiana told me that you had a fight with Mr. Darcy," Mary replied as she held his gaze. "I began to be afraid that you would not return and that I had a hand in driving you away."

Fitzwilliam's face fell as she spoke these words, his brow furrowing slightly. He took a step towards her, closing the small distance that separated them, as he stretched out one hand to caress her cheek. "Mary," Fitzwilliam whispered as he bent his head towards her, "you could never drive me away unless it was your most earnest wish."

Mary leaned into his touch, shivering slightly at the heady mixture of his closeness and the sound of her Christian name on his lips. While Mary was frightened by the strength of the feelings that coursed through her, his expression frightened her more. She saw in his countenance a look of such longing and desire that she did not trust herself to fully comprehend its meaning. Elizabeth's words of warning surfaced again to give her pause, but they were silenced by her heart's protests.

Mary was not sure how many moments they were employed thus before Georgiana and Elizabeth's collective gasp broke the spell. Mary instantly drew back from the Colonel, her eyes darting from the gentleman to her guardian and friend. Mary suddenly felt ashamed for allowing Fitzwilliam such liberties and for her response to his touch. She cast him a wide eyed glance before running from the foyer for the safety of her rooms.
Colonel Fitzwilliam stormed out of the library, Darcy's words still ringing in his ears. He could scarcely credit Darcy’s vociferous condemnation of his attachment to Mary. Briskly calling for his horse from the bewildered footman who scurried behind him, Fitzwilliam made his way towards the stables and Beauregard. He needed to put some distance between himself and his cousin before he said something that he would later regret. As soon as his horse was ready, Fitzwilliam mounted his steed and rode off at a quick pace down the main road towards the gates of Pemberley.

Longing for such a ride, Beauregard responded with enthusiasm to his master's urging, quickening his stride into a maddening run. Fitzwilliam allowed himself to be caught up in the sensation of the quick movement, the cold winter air lashing through his hair and against his face, Beauregard straining beneath him as he fought to keep up with his master's demanding pace. Fitzwilliam came to his senses and slowed his pace after two miles of hard riding, mindful of his horse’s health. Beauregard was a faithful animal that served him well, it would not do to ride his horse to death due to his poor mood. He settled into a moderate trot alternating with walking, the countryside passing unnoticed around him. He passed nearly an hour in such activity before his temper cooled and his mind cleared. He was some distance from Pemberley then, perhaps ten miles or more. Looking about his surroundings to get his bearings, he found himself near an overlook with a view of rock-studded hills and a gentle winding river below it. Dismounting his horse, Fitzwilliam patted Beauregard affectionately and secured his reigns, leaving the horse to nose about in the sparse grass as he looked around.

A little distance away he spotted a small town nestled by the river. The town had the appearance of all that was peaceful and quaint with small thatched roofed cottages lined along its dirt roads and a few buildings of some significance scattered about it. Sighing as he took in the prospect, Fitzwilliam seated himself on a large rock to take a rest. His mind wondered to the events of the morning, causing him to shake his head in disbelief at both his own behavior and that of his cousin. He could not remember ever having had such an argument with him before. Darcy and Fitzwilliam had always been close, even closer than he was with his own brother Henry, and usually of the same mind. Their proximity in age served to make them fast playmates as boys. They would scamper about the grounds of Pemberley or Allendale House, his childhood home, looking for mischief and adventure. They took special pleasure in vexing the housemaids by tracking all manner of mud and dirt into the house and secreting frogs into the kitchen. As they grew in maturity and put aside their boyish pursuits, their relationship had changed to one of mutual respect and confidence. By the time Darcy’s father had died during their final years at Cambridge, it only seemed fitting that both be named guardian of Georgiana. Since then, Fitzwilliam had been a steady source of support and aid to Darcy through all manner of troubles such as the ordeal with Georgiana and Wickham, Darcy’s search for Miss Lydia Bennet and Darcy's struggle to win the acceptance of Elizabeth into the family. In all of these struggles Fitzwilliam had been a most trusted advisor, advocate and agent. Fitzwilliam's heart ached over the realization that the one for whom he had been such a source of support would now refuse to lend his own.

The cold bite of the afternoon air soon began to affect Fitzwilliam, causing him to shiver unconsciously. He had not realized how long he tarried on the hilltop surveying the scenery distractedly. The sun had already begun its lazy retreat into the west.
"It will not do for me to freeze to death," Fitzwilliam sighed aloud, turning from the scene before him and walking towards Beauregard, who released a weary neigh as he neared. Fitzwilliam's stomach growled loudly in response, causing him to laugh aloud despite himself.

"Don't worry old boy," Fitzwilliam replied as he gently stroked the animal's side, responding to both his stomach and his horse. "We shall get you some rest and hay anon."

Fitzwilliam made his way down towards the small town he had spied from the hilltop in search of a tavern or inn where both he and Beauregard could find sustenance. The sun had already set as he reached the outskirts of the village. Warm light cast by newly lit lanterns illuminated the road before him. As he neared the town square, shopkeepers could be seen busying themselves with preparations for closing.

"Excuse me, good sir," Fitzwilliam called to a merchant busily engaged in sweeping the steps in front of his shop, "could you direct me to the nearest public house or inn where I might find refreshment for my horse and myself?"

"Sir, I'm afraid we don't 'ave no pubs. We do 'ave an inn just a quarter mile down the way. It ain't quite fit for such a fine gentleman but the ale is cold and the stew is hot."

"That will serve me well enough," Fitzwilliam murmured before nodding his thanks.

The merchant affected an awkward bow in return as Fitzwilliam spurred Beauregard towards the inn. He found the shopkeeper's description of the inn apt. It was a very small establishment of merely two stories in height that could not have held more than five or so guestrooms. Despite the small size of the inn, the service was adequate. As soon as he dismounted, a boy met him to take Beauregard to a small stable in the rear of the establishment where he would be provided with water, hay and a relatively warm place to tarry. Fitzwilliam found the appearance of the inn as well managed as the service. The décor was simple as were the furnishings, and the inn was kept impeccably clean. The floors were freshly scrubbed, as were the windows that glowed warmly from the candles placed before each one. At the bar a few older men with gray hairs and rounded bellies sat nursing pints of ale and exchanging local gossip. A matronly woman with a round pleasant face kept bar, watching over her patrons as would a mother hen. The entire establishment had the air of a pleasant country inn, quite the opposite of the rowdy smoked filled officer's clubs that he was accustomed to. There would be no drinking himself into a stupor this night. Spotting a table tucked away towards the back of the room, Fitzwilliam sat down hoping that his luck in finding a well managed inn would extend to being offered an edible meal and an adequate selection of spirits.

A rosy-cheeked girl of no more than fifteen years greeted him with a smile. "Good evening, sir. What can I get for ya?"

"A glass of brandy will suit me as well as a hot meal. Would I be lucky enough to be able to have some roast lamb or mutton?"

"Oh, I'm sorry sir, but we don't 'ave any roast tonight," the waitress replied, shaking her head and sending her blonde curls dancing. "But, we do 'ave shepherd's pie and some roast carrots. That'll do ya just as fine as any roast. My ma makes the best shepherd's pie this side of Derbyshire."

"Well, then shepherd's pie it is," Fitzwilliam smiled weakly, unsure if the girl's statement really did much to recommend the dish to him. "And just bring the entire bottle of brandy."

The girl curtsied shyly before running off to her task, leaving Fitzwilliam to brood as he saw fit. His homely surroundings were unable to penetrate the blackness of his mood, although the pleasant smells wafting from the kitchen caused him to reassess his previous judgment of the shepherd's pie.
The girl soon returned with a glass and a bottle of brandy, which Fitzwilliam accepted with pleasure. Pouring himself a cup of the strong spirits, Fitzwilliam sighed with a strange contentment. Perhaps it was better this way. What he needed most of all was a quiet place to collect his thoughts rather than a flowing tap to numb them. After having one glass of the stuff, Fitzwilliam debated pouring himself another before resolutely pushing the bottle away. It had been two solid weeks since he had imbibed to the point of drunkenness, seeking to dull the ache of memories he wished long forgotten.

Fitzwilliam’s thoughts turned to his deployment in Louisiana, one of the former American colonies where one of the most devastating battles of the so named War of 1812 was waged. Fitzwilliam still bristled from the irony of his being dispatched to a pointless war a few scant months before Napoleon escaped from Elba. Fresh from battling Napoleon during his first reign of terror on the continent, Fitzwilliam had been deployed for over a year to this southern state to take part in the ill fated battle of New Orleans, home to festering swamp lands, withering summer humidity and some of the most troubling memories of his reckoning. It was there in January of 1815 where he saw so many of his men fall to a ragtag amalgamation of American soldiers, militiamen and Jean Lafitte’s band of pirates. He was forced to watch helplessly as the Americans shot one of his men after another from the safety of their garrison as General Pakenham blindly continued the assault. Dashing, young and a quick rising star in both the military and society, Edward Pakenham had fought alongside Fitzwilliam in the Napoleonic campaigns. Pakenham’s successes there showed him to be a capable leader; however his promise as a military strategist was soon cut short. Exhausted, dispirited and lacking in both supplies and confidence in their young general, the men were ill prepared and little able to mount a strong defense much less storm the American ramparts. The ladders his men had spent the better part of a week constructing had been ordered left behind in Pakenham’s lust for battle. At least Colonel Fitzwilliam was able to ensure that his men were properly outfitted with rifles and sabers. Other regiments were less prepared, barely arriving at Chalmette in proper uniform. Pakenham had predicted an easy victory before leading his men to their defeat and his own death. He fell to an American musket ignorant that the battle was a fruitless effort; the Treaty of Ghent had been signed days before effectively ending the war in a draw. More than 700 British soldiers lost their lives with another 2,000 captured and wounded. A paltry 71 Americans met similar fates.

Fitzwilliam returned to England a man of changed demeanor and outlook. His thoughts permanently fixed on the events of January 1815. He could not close his eyes without encountering the pale ashen faces of his troops haunting him from the grave. Sleep evaded him and his waking moments were spent reliving the events of that day. While he had thought the hustle and bustle of life in London would be a welcome distraction, he soon found the society there grating. He could no longer play the role of the charming and witty younger son of an earl. Balls, dinners and nights at the opera became a chore where the only thing that enabled him to appear the picture of civility was a flask of brandy. The nights where his attentions were not demanded by the ton were spent at the officer’s club. Even more exhausting than playing the role of his former pleasant self while in society was doing so for his closest relations. Lady Matlock had been the only one not fooled by his charade, recognizing his change in demeanor as soon as he set foot in the house. Fitzwilliam had done his best to avoid a discussion with his mother, spending the majority of his time at the officer’s club or on various errands about the town. However, his efforts proved useless in the face of his mother’s concern. Fitzwilliam remembered the eventual confrontation with some shame.

"You are not happy, son," Lady Matlock began after closing the door to the morning room behind her.

"Mother, whatever do you mean?" Fitzwilliam replied, turning from his mother to lean against the mantle of the fireplace, his customary retreat when he felt put upon. "I have never felt better. I couldn’t be more pleased to see London and my family after such a long absence."
"Richard Anthony Fitzwilliam," his mother began assuming a voice of mock anger. "You do remember that lying is a sin, do you not? You cannot fool me, Richard. You are miserable and it pains me greatly to see it. You have been home for nearly a month and it is plain to see that you are not yourself."

Fitzwilliam sighed deep in his chest before turning to face his mother. "And what if I am not myself, mother? Do I not have the right to be a little miserable?"

"I am worried, Richard, and so is your father. We were so afraid for you when you were sent to that awful war. I know that it must have been a horrible experience. I understand..."

"Please, do not tell me that you know anything of how I am feeling," Fitzwilliam interrupted her, his voice laced with bitterness. "You cannot begin to understand the things I have seen. Have you ever seen your friends slain before your eyes and their bodies thrown without ceremony into shallow mass graves? No, I do not think you have, mother. I do not think you have ever held a man while he lay struggling for his last breath. When you have lived one moment outside of your gilded cage then you can presume to tell me how I feel!"

Fitzwilliam's rant was met with a cold silence from her ladyship, who stood before him looking years older. Hurt and anger struggled for supremacy over her countenance as she stood looking at her son as if he were a stranger. He had never seen his mother look so small or bewildered as she did then and he immediately regretted both his harsh words and his tone.

"Mother, I am sorry. I..." Fitzwilliam began, his voice having lost the bitter edge of before.

"Do not ever presume to speak to me in that manner again," his mother began her voice a near whisper as she regarded him with sad gray eyes. "Yes, I have never known the suffering that you have experienced, Richard, nor do I desire to. However, I do know how to be grateful to those who have given me all that I have."

Fitzwilliam watched dumbly as his mother turned from him and exited the room quietly. For the next few days, he could hardly bear to look his mother in the eye. It was then that he decided to quit his parent's home for the quiet of Pemberley. He left London without sending word of his early arrival, seeking immediate rest for his mind that had been so addled by war. He was drawn back to the silent frost covered gardens of Pemberley; the long varied paths through quiet forests that he knew awaited him there, a fitting landscape for his dark mood. He had never expected to find his source of peace in the form of a young woman, especially one who was herself in mourning.

Fitzwilliam pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration before reaching once again for the brandy. He had promised himself not to give way once again to the bottle, but surely one extra glass of spirits would do him little harm. He had managed to down little more than a few gulps before his cheery waitress was by his side again with a tray of steaming food. Acknowledging the food, Fitzwilliam mumbled his thanks in a low tone before taking a bite of the offering. He was surprised to find the food more than tolerable and was moved to offer a sincere smile to the girl who stood by his table waiting expectantly for his reaction.

"I believe I am now inclined to agree with you, miss. This is perhaps the best shepherd's pie I have ever had the pleasure of eating."

The girl smiled broadly in response, before scampering off towards the kitchen to inform her mother.

Fitzwilliam let his mind stray to more pleasant thoughts of Mary as he silently devoured his meal. When he had first happened upon her only a few short weeks ago, he had no idea that he would find his solace in the countenance of a gentle fairy. Yes, that is what he had thought her then, when he
nearly trampled upon her there by the lake. She had seemed to grow right out of the frost covered ground like some dark winter sprite, all clad in somber black with such bewitching brown eyes that he was immediately rendered speechless when he first looked upon them.

Fitzwilliam closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, taking another sip of brandy as he recalled every detail of the lady that had captured his heart. He found Miss Farthington to be so very different from the ladies of the ton with whom he was accustomed. Fitzwilliam thought most of the ladies of his acquaintance overly talkative, prattling on incessantly with the latest gossip or opinions on the fashion and the like. Miss Farthington, however, was usually quiet and reserved, yet when taken with flights of fancy or speaking of her childhood home she overflowed with such a torrent of words that if spoken by another they would seem foolish but when coming from her lips were each turned a treasure. While other ladies of his acquaintance received his attentions with coyness, Mary's darting eyes and quick intakes of breath at his flirtations or touch attested to lack of artifice. Mary's voice further beguiled him, her tones both light and soft yet not requiring one to strain to hear her. He remembered his surprise upon first hearing it, supposing that his first notion of her being a fairy was correct as he found himself constantly enraptured by whatever words passed over her lips. During her daily stories with young William, Fitzwilliam found the sensation of listening even more delightful than the vision of her seated before him. That is not to say that he did not find her beautiful, although that is not the word he would use to describe her appearance. Beautiful had the notion of something that needed to be caged or cosseted to preserve its value. Mary's beauty was not that of one forever under the shade of a parasol but was all that was natural and fresh; her sun kissed nutmeg complexion defiant of the frost of the English winter.

If there was but one feature that Fitzwilliam could affix the beginnings of his infatuation to it was Mary's eyes. He could now understand Darcy's fixation with the eyes of his wife. Indeed, a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman was a thing to be admired. Mary's eyes were large and unguarded dark brown pools that shone with warmth and earnestness. Every turn of her mind or heart could be seen in them. When afraid, they seemed to grow impossibly larger and more beautiful revealing the vulnerability of a woman who strove to ever have the appearance of composure. When she was miserable and helpless, as he had found her that morning, they had the power to draw any man to her defense, making her sorrow his own and willing him to make all well at any cost.

While he had only known Mary for a short time, it was enough for him to be sure of his own heart. The past two weeks had been some of the happiest and most peaceful of his recent memory. He had not known that he could find such pleasure in listening to children's tales or by simply being in someone's presence. He smiled to himself as he pushed his now empty plate away from him. Six years ago he thought it impossible that he would again have the option to marry for love. A moderately pretty woman with a comfortable fortune was all he desired in a wife. Elizabeth and Darcy had shown him the hollowness of such a desire. At that time his cousin had the courage to do what Fitzwilliam would not do, as well as an income sizable enough to make such a union possible.

Darcy. Fitzwilliam found himself growing more disappointed with his cousin than angry. Fitzwilliam wondered why Darcy would not support him in doing the very thing he had done. Indeed, his marriage to Elizabeth brought on the disapproval of a few powerful people in his family circle, including the Earl of Matlock. Yet, Fitzwilliam's parents had warmed to Elizabeth after a few months and with the birth of William Bennet, their previous objections were forgotten. The ton was also cold in their initial reception of Mrs. Darcy, but quite a few parties were won over when the character and merits of the lady were demonstrated. Mrs. Darcy was not liked by the entire ton, to be sure. Some ladies were still sore that a country girl of little social standing was able to wrangle a catch such as Darcy when their charms proved inadequate.

Fitzwilliam was not silly enough to think he would not face similar or even greater resistance from his family and society in marrying Miss Farthington. While no one could raise his or her nose at Miss
Farthington's wealth or accomplishments, Darcy was correct in his estimation of the censure his marriage to a black woman would bring. Although parliament had abolished slavery in England and the African heritage of Queen Charlotte was widely known and even celebrated in verse and art, Fitzwilliam was well aware that the opinion of the common man was not in keeping with that of parliament or the crown. However, Fitzwilliam regarded the love of Mary as more valuable than the good opinion of anyone. Fitzwilliam had little desire to be received at balls or assemblies and he no longer found pleasure in the hollow social life of London. All he required to make him happy was a comfortable house to live with the wife of his choosing and their children.

Placing a few coins on the table in payment, Fitzwilliam rose from his chair with an air of determination about him. He would not let Darcy's displeasure keep him from the object of his affection. He would take his one chance at happiness and secure Mary as his wife.

The return to Pemberley was more arduous than Fitzwilliam had expected. A heavy snow had begun to fall during his tarry at the inn and the roads grew more hazardous by the minute. It took him nearly four hours to arrive at the front steps of Pemberley, his muscles sore from the ride and his aspect altogether disheveled. He desired nothing more than a hot bath and a warm bed as the footman divested him of his sodden overcoat. He was surprised to find Mary just crossing the foyer as he entered.

Her warm greeting and smiling face chased the chill of his long ride from his limbs as he watched her hurry towards him. Her brown eyes squinted with worry as she examined his person and treated him to a barrage of anxious questions. Fitzwilliam smiled despite himself at her display of concern, pleased that she missed his presence. His smile disappeared pleasure mingled with pain at her confession that she thought she had a hand in his sudden departure.

He took a step towards her, closing the small distance that separated them, as he stretched out one hand to caress her cheek. Her skin was warm and soft as silk.

"Mary," Fitzwilliam whispered as he bent his head towards her, "you could never drive me away unless it was your most earnest wish."

Fitzwilliam's heart raced at her response to his touch. Her eyes never left his as she leaned into his touch, her lips parted slightly in an inaudible sigh. She could not have known what a pleasing picture she made then, her eyes wide and searching and her head bent gently to the side. Before he knew what he was about, he found himself drawing closer to claim her lips in a kiss. The entrance of Elizabeth and Georgiana prevented him from achieving his goal. As he watched Mary's figure advance up the stairs and out of sight, he silently cursed himself for both his lack of discretion and the timely entrance of his cousins.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam, would you care to explain what has transpired here tonight?" Elizabeth asked Fitzwilliam, her cheeks slightly flushed from the shock of what she saw.

"Mrs. Darcy, I...I assure you there is no need to be concerned. Miss Farthington and I were just...we were simply engaged in an innocent conversation," Fitzwilliam replied, slowly recovering himself as he became more aware of the impropriety of what had just taken place.
"Conversation? Is that what they are calling it these days?" Elizabeth's voice was even as she sternly addressed him, but Fitzwilliam thought he detected a glimmer of amusement in her brown eyes.

"I... I assure you, Mrs. Darcy that we were indeed conversing. However, if you would like to discuss this matter further, may I suggest that we retire to the music room?" Fitzwilliam had suddenly become aware of the footman and butler who had attended him upon his return and who undoubtedly witnessed the entire event. He suddenly felt more like a silly chit of sixteen years rather than a gentleman of nearly four and thirty.

Elizabeth assented to Fitzwilliam's request, bidding Georgiana goodnight as she began to lead the way to the music room. Georgiana frowned at her apparent dismissal before mounting the stairs determinedly to her chambers. Fitzwilliam watched this display of his young cousin with some surprise, before Elizabeth's gentle clearing of her throat recalled him to his purpose. Fitzwilliam followed Elizabeth into the music room; his jaw set tight expecting the worse. As Miss Farthington's guardian, Elizabeth had the right to be most severe in her judgment of his scandalous behavior. It was even within her right to force him to marry Miss Farthington, a sentence he would undoubtedly be happy to carry out. However, Fitzwilliam was unwilling to bring censure to Miss Farthington and so strove to appear the picture of contrition.

"Elizabeth, I must extend my sincerest apologies for my reckless and imprudent behavior this afternoon," Fitzwilliam began. "However it may have appeared, you must know that I would never think of compromising Miss Farthington. I await your good judgment as to my sentence. I am fully prepared to do my duty as a gentleman."

Fitzwilliam waited for Elizabeth's response, watching the woman expectantly. He was surprised to see her determined frown inch towards a smile before breaking out into a full-blown laugh. Fitzwilliam was taken aback by this display, as it was quite the opposite of what he had anticipated. When Elizabeth's mirth showed no signs of abating, Fitzwilliam soon found his feelings shifting from astonishment to offense.

"I fail to see what is so humorous, Mrs. Darcy," Fitzwilliam stated firmly, his pride slightly wounded. "It is you that I find amusing, dear cousin," Elizabeth managed between deep breaths as she fought to regain her composure.

Fitzwilliam frowned in response, finding the offered answer to his question a further affront to his dignity. Noticing the dramatic turn of his countenance, Elizabeth erupted into another bout of laughter.

"Richard, you are indeed Fitzwilliam's relation. You both detest being laughed at," Elizabeth offered once her laughter had subsided. "But, how is one expected to react to such a speech? You know me well enough, dear cousin, to know that I would only find amusement in such an oration. From what I observed of your ‘innocent conversation’ a forced marriage to Miss Farthington would not be the unwelcome sentence you describe."

Fitzwilliam sighed in relief, comforted by Elizabeth's ability to find humor in any situation.

"Oh, do not suppose that you are to go unpunished," Elizabeth continued, noticing his sigh. "While I know you well enough to have no cause to fear for Miss Farthington's reputation, I do find this whole situation rather confusing. For the first time in quite a while I find myself completely uninformed of what is going on in my own home. Something happened this morning at church, of that I am sure, for it must have triggered the other goings on of today. I promise to absolve you of all guilt if you would be so kind as to inform me of all that you know."
After bidding Elizabeth to sit, Fitzwilliam went on to explain to her all that had occurred from Mary's experience overhearing the parson to his subsequent argument with Darcy and flight from Pemberley, leaving out the portion of his argument concerning his feelings towards Miss Farthington. Fitzwilliam did not want to distress Elizabeth with details concerning the words they exchanged nor was he anxious to hear more arguments against his courtship of Mary. Throughout the narration, Elizabeth's countenance displayed a range of emotion from sadness to anger to bewilderment. Fitzwilliam felt his own emotions being stirred in the relation, causing him to rise from his seat and begin pacing about the room.

"Well, that certainly explains a great deal. Mary's unrest this morning, my husband's ill temper, your absence from dinner and the exchange between Mary and yourself in the hall," Elizabeth replied in low tones, her eyes downcast. "Tell me Richard, do you truly love her?"

Fitzwilliam abruptly quit his pacing, turning towards Elizabeth with a look of disbelief. He did not recall speaking of his affection for Miss Farthington, having endeavored to avoid the subject if possible.

"Do not look so surprised, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth answered his questioning look, rising from her chair and regarding him with a warm smile as she walked towards him. "I had an inkling that there may be some sort of attachment growing between the both of you. However, it was not until this evening that I was assured of your feelings regarding Mary."

"Have I been that transparent?" Fitzwilliam smiled ruefully. "I must say that I am heartily disappointed in myself. My years of military training have not served me well in the art of subterfuge."

Elizabeth smiled broadly at this declaration, before taking her cousin by the hand and leading him towards a couch.

"Your face betrays it all, cousin. But, take heart and rest assured that your skills as a soldier in the King's army are not in question. I am sure that you can conceal matters of state well enough, but matters of the heart are all together different. They have a way of making a man not quite himself," Elizabeth smiled sweetly, as if recalling some pleasant memory before continuing. "Richard, I confess I am somewhat surprised for I cannot recall when I last saw you so smitten with any lady, and this after spending three seasons with you in London."

Fitzwilliam regarded Elizabeth thoughtfully for a moment. He had missed his conversations with her during his long absence.

"Yes, I suppose it is rather surprising. My heart may have not been easily touched in the past," Fitzwilliam sighed deeply. "May I speak candidly with you, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, of course, Richard, you know that," Elizabeth replied with a gentle smile.

"I have not been a happy man for quite some time. I will not go into all the details now, but until I rode into Pemberley a fortnight ago, I had not known such happiness or such heartache as I do now. I had thought that joy and I would forever be estranged until I met Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam paused, rising from his seat to stand by the nearly extinguished fire. He tossed another log onto the fire and poked the embers distractedly.

"This may sound foolish, but to even be in her presence brings me such a contentment that I never wish to leave her side," Fitzwilliam continued before turning to face Elizabeth. "She is truly everything that is lovely and desirable in a woman and although I am sure I do not deserve her affection, I would be the happiest of men if she would consent to be my wife. Neither Darcy's
displeasure nor any supposed familial censure can sway me from that course."

The serene smile that had graced Elizabeth's face during Fitzwilliam's confession was quickly replaced by the pursed lips and furrowed brow of confusion. "Fitzwilliam told you he was against your attachment?"

"Yes, he told me in no uncertain terms that he would not support me in seeking her hand. Darcy thinks that our alliance would be 'beyond the bounds of reason' and that I should be wary of aligning myself with a woman whose status is so below my own," Fitzwilliam repeated his cousin's condemnation in a tone laced with bitterness and irony.

"No, cousin. That cannot be right. My husband would not say such a thing," Elizabeth replied, her good humor gone in an instant.

Fitzwilliam sighed, "For your sake and my own, Elizabeth, I wish I were speaking an untruth."

"I still fail to see why he would say such a thing. He supported Anne's marriage to Mr. Thackery despite his relative poverty of both income and connections not to mention our own marriage. Unlike Mr. Thackery or myself, Mary does not lack fortune..."

"But she lacks connections, Elizabeth," Fitzwilliam interrupted wearily. "In this aspect I fear that your husband is of the same mind as Parson Geoffries. Neither of them can see beyond her skin. The daughter of a merchant Darcy could support. Nay, even the daughter of a barkeep would be more palatable to him than the daughter of a slave."

Elizabeth sank into her chair, disbelief and grief written over her features. Fitzwilliam watched Elizabeth with some concern, desiring to bring his friend some comfort but not knowing what to say. They sat for several moments in silence, each lost in their own thoughts on the subject. Fitzwilliam wondered if it were indeed wise to reveal all to Elizabeth as her mood was markedly altered by his confession.

"Richard," Elizabeth began, turning to her cousin with an earnest look. "I must confess that I am much grieved by my husband's opinion on the matter. I know his consent is necessary for you to court and wed Mary, but beyond that, I could not bear to see your friendship suffer for this or to have our family forever divided."

"Elizabeth, do you mean to tell me that you are against my attachment for the sake of family peace?"

Fitzwilliam sighed, his heart sinking at her words. He had thought that in relating all that he might secure Elizabeth as an ally.

"No, Richard. You mistake my meaning. I support you in this, surely I do. However, I cannot bear to witness any bitterness between you and Fitzwilliam. I intend to speak to my husband, plead your case and perhaps help him to see reason."

"Elizabeth, you cannot begin to understand how happy you have just made me," Fitzwilliam beamed, kissing his cousin's hands in thanks.

"There is one other matter that we must discuss before I petition my husband on your behalf," Elizabeth began once her cousin had released her.

"Yes, of course. Anything, cousin." Fitzwilliam replied, the smile never leaving his face as he resumed his seat on the couch next to her.

"It is clear that you are very sure of your own heart, but are you sure of Mary's regard for you? I can believe the sincerity of your declarations, but before we battle the collective will of my husband and
your parents, we should be sure that Mary is as much in love with you as you are with her."

"Mary's regard?" Fitzwilliam replied with a look of confusion laced with doubt. "I...I am sure that she would receive my attentions with pleasure."

"Are you very sure, Richard?" Elizabeth replied. "Miss Farthington has known you for a scant few weeks. While I have detected some partiality on her part, I wonder if she has had the time to truly known her own heart. I remember a certain gentleman who being very sure of receiving a positive response to his solicitation ended up very surprised and disheartened at a certain lady's vehement refusal."

"Do you speak of that Collins fellow? Darcy told me of his ill fated and comical quest for your hand. Do you mean to compare me to that foolish chap?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"No. I am sure that no one could find any resemblance between the two of you save for you both being men and my cousin," Elizabeth laughed, her humor returning. "No, I mean to compare you to your esteemed cousin Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"Darcy!" Fitzwilliam exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that he applied for your hand only to be refused?"

"Yes, it is true," Elizabeth replied with a broad smile. "I am very surprised that Darcy never told you that particular story! However, I suppose a gentleman would be more forthcoming with tales of another man's folly than with his own. It all took place at Hunsford. Mr. Darcy proposed rather badly and I resolutely turned him down. At the time, I couldn't have been more surprised or offended by such a proposal while he could not have been more surprised by my vehement refusal."

"That is a shocking story, indeed," Fitzwilliam replied shaking his head in disbelief. "However, I can believe my cousin capable of delivering a botched proposal."

"It was not the manner of the proposal that won my refusal," Elizabeth continued, regarding her cousin seriously. "Rather, I was offended that he should presume to propose at all. You see, although I knew of Mr. Darcy, I really did not know him as he should have been known. With a little more communication and time, my eyes were opened and I was able to see that he was the very best of men. When he renewed his addresses, I happily accepted them knowing that I truly loved him."

At the conclusion of her tale, Fitzwilliam appeared to be very out of sorts. While he himself had just this morning named the feeling that was growing within his breast upon first meeting Miss Farthington, he had assumed that the lady joined him in a mutual regard. The thought of Mary disliking him or even being indifferent troubled him greatly.

"You think that Miss Farthington would reject my proposal of marriage?"

"I could not say one way or the other, Richard. My advice is only that you allow her every opportunity of knowing you better. She will know her own heart in time."

"In time..." Fitzwilliam replied, rising from his seat dejectedly. "Time is one of the things that I do not have mastery over."

A short silence settled between them as Fitzwilliam ruminated over all that had passed between them. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, the fatigue of the evening catching up with him. Elizabeth's support had given him cause to hope again. Yet, those hopes were now threatened by doubt.

"Richard, I have an idea," Elizabeth began. "I have been formulating a plan to have a Twelfth Night ball here at Pemberley. I know we had originally envisioned a quiet holiday, but I thought a ball
would be an excellent way to prepare Mary for all of the social events of the season. Several families of note from throughout the area would be invited, including your brother the Viscount and his wife Lady Rebecca. There remain a few weeks between now and Twelfth Night. During that time I will prevail upon my husband and you can be about the business of divining the feelings of Miss Farthington."

Fitzwilliam readily agreed to Elizabeth's idea, encouraged by her support despite his growing doubt as to Mary's regard for him. Elizabeth entreated him to take heart that all will work out for the best. On that note, Fitzwilliam bid his cousin goodnight after escorting her to her chambers and headed toward his own with a lighter spirit.

Elizabeth entered her bedroom chamber with a weary body but a mind too engaged to easily allow her sleep. Her spirits were very much disturbed by what Richard had related to her. While she was surprised to learn the depths of her cousin's feelings for her charge, she was more surprised by her husband's vehement opposition to such a union. She had never known Fitzwilliam and Richard to be in such disagreement and while the familial strife vexed her greatly, she was more saddened over the reason for the discord rather than the discord itself.

Five years into their marriage, Elizabeth had grown to believe her husband was truly the best of men. While they had their occasional spirited disagreements, she knew her husband to be of a fair and temperate mind. All vestiges of undo pride and pretension had long been erased from his character. He was a fair and generous employer and landlord as well as an ardent philanthropist. He supported a variety of charities and causes from abolition to homes for the rescue of wayward girls even when the support of such causes was not popular in their social circle. Elizabeth never had cause to be ashamed of or disappointed in her husband until now. For the first time in their marriage she began to doubt if her husband had truly changed from the man who had offended her so at Hunsford.

Laying down her brush, Elizabeth eyed the door adjoining her chamber to that of her husband with some trepidation. As always, the door was unlocked. The pair had seldom slept apart save when Mr. Darcy was away on business or she was visiting friends or relations elsewhere. Other than those necessary occasions, she had only locked her door during their bitterest disputes. One such disagreement found them feuding with one another for nearly a week, her door remaining locked the entire time. Their reconciliation had been particularly poignant, with each promising to never let the sun set with their anger still in high tempest. However, this night Elizabeth could not bring herself to speak with her husband; much less share the same bed with him. With a sigh, Elizabeth rose from her seat and firmly locked the door.
"You could never drive me away unless it was your most earnest wish," Richard replied breathily as he caressed Mary's cheek with one hand.

Mary sighed with contentment, her eyes closing as she leaned into his touch. Upon opening her eyes, she was surprised by the intensity of Richard's gaze. His blue eyes were fixed upon her with a look of complete ardor. Mary grew alarmed, but did not make to protest as Richard slowly bent his head to capture her lips in a gentle kiss. The kiss soon grew from a tentative peck to a passionate assault upon her mouth that stole her breath away. They parted after what seemed like several minutes, each panting heavily from the exertion. Mary and Richard regarded each other thoughtfully, an unspoken invitation and acceptance passing between them. Lifting her with little effort, Richard carried Mary up the stairs and toward his chambers.

Mary woke with a start, her cheeks hot with embarrassment. She slid quickly from her bed and stumbled towards her nightstand. Mary washed her face with cool water, regarding her reflection carefully in the mirror as she wondered what had become of her. For the second time that night, Mary had woken herself from dreams of Fitzwilliam that had grown steadily more intense. They all had begun the same, a version of her encounter with Fitzwilliam the prior evening. Yet they all ended differently, growing from a chaste kiss on the cheek to more carnal expressions of affection.

After drying her face, Mary pulled her quilt off of her bed and pulled it around her shoulders as she made her way over to the window. Dawn was just arriving and the faint orange yellow light of the sun made the snow covered ground shimmer. Mary observed the thick blanket of white with some trepidation. She wished that she could take an early morning walk to collect herself before facing the rest of the household and the consequences of her behavior. However, that plan was less than desirable with a good two feet of snow covering the ground.

Mary turned from the window and sat before the fire, tucking her legs beneath her and drawing her blanket tight. She could not help but to wonder what sage advice her father would have for her in her present situation. Lord Farthington had rarely spoken to her about matters of the heart or how to deal with gentleman admirers beyond the biblical instruction he gave. She knew from Proverbs that the fear of the Lord was a valuable feature of a virtuous woman, more so than beauty or charm. She had listened dutifully to exhortations on modesty and obedience and had studied diligently the stories of women of virtue in the Bible. Beyond these moral lessons, the only other instruction he had given her was of an academic and artistic nature as he valued the development of talents and intellect as highly as the development of a strong moral core. Mary now wondered at her father's lack of instruction on these matters.

While Lord Farthington had been remiss on instructing his daughter in matters of the heart, he was careful to shelter her from anything he presumed harmful, including the few would be suitors she had in New Sussex. Her beauty and fortune had won her the admiration of a few young men on the island. Sometimes after returning home from church or from the rare social function she was permitted to attend, flowers and trinkets from her admirers along with the occasional note would await her. Her governess would always intercept these items on instructions from Lord Farthington. Thus, Mary was hardly aware at her suitor's failed attempts at courtship, receiving their attentions to her at church and about town with kind indifference. Now Mary found herself responding to a
certain male's attentions with anything but indifference. She found her new situation quite frustrating.

Mary could not reconcile Elizabeth's account of Fitzwilliam with her own perception of the man. Elizabeth had warned her of the Colonel's flirtatious manner and ability to render any lady thoroughly besotted while his heart remained untouched. His teasing and forward behavior throughout most of their acquaintance had lent much credence to Elizabeth's characterization. Yet, his behavior on Sunday had mirrored his behavior when they had first met, renewing her growing affection for him. Rather than the rake who found pleasure in vexing her, Fitzwilliam was protective, gentle and kind. Mary shut her eyes and smiled despite herself at the memory of the touch of his hand upon her cheek and the sound of her Christian name on his tongue. While those actions could also be attributed to a rogue, the look in his eyes could not. Mary had seen a depth of emotion and feeling in his look that made her tremble. Perhaps Elizabeth did not really understand Fitzwilliam either. Maybe Fitzwilliam was a good man who genuinely cared for her.

Mary's contemplations were interrupted by a light knock at the door. Mary was pleased to find April at the door along with two housemaids with buckets of hot water for her morning bath. Mary greeted her with a smile ready to begin her day.

Darcy woke up in a foul mood. He spent a sleepless night in an unfamiliar bed; his own. Darcy rarely slept in his bed, the piece of furniture functioning more as decoration than a place to sleep. In addition to his weariness, anger over Elizabeth's actions compounded his ill temper. When he first attempted to enter her room and found he door locked, he was immediately stricken with worry, having assumed that Elizabeth was ill. However, her maid reported that her mistress did not report any ailment when she attended to her. Darcy could only assume that Elizabeth was angry with him, but Darcy was at a loss for the cause. He reviewed his behavior toward her with care and found it to be blameless. What vexed him the most was that he and his wife had long since made a promise to one another to not let the sun set on their anger and to readily relate to one another their displeasure.

Darcy entered the breakfast room and was pleased to see that Elizabeth was there breakfasting alone.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," Darcy began as he entered the room. "I hope that your evening was a pleasant one."

"Yes, thank you," Elizabeth replied in a low tone, her eyes fixed on the plate in front of her. Darcy could tell from this action that something was seriously the matter. Normally when Elizabeth was merely angry with him, her ire could be read in the fire in her eyes and the defiant set of her shoulders when she faced him. Darcy found that the resentment he had harbored when he woke up began to fade as he became sincerely concerned for his wife. An angry Lizzy he could handle, but a Lizzy in pain was another matter.

"I am surprised to hear that seeing as I found your door locked last night. As your maid did not report any ailment to me, I can only assume that something else was troubling you."

Elizabeth took a sip from her cup of tea, her features schooled to be indifferent.

Darcy sighed, before pulling out a chair and seating himself beside his wife, "Elizabeth, won't you tell me what is troubling you so? I cannot repair the situation if I do not know what is bothering you."
At this final sentence, Elizabeth turned to look at him, her eyes showing some of the fire he was more accustomed to, but her voice betraying a deeper hurt. "I fear that you are well aware of the cause of my 'trouble,' William. In fact, it is of your creation."

Darcy replied with a look of confusion. "I am sorry, Elizabeth, but I do not understand your meaning. I cannot think of anything in particular that would have upset you so. If you would simply tell me what I have done..."

"William, tell me plainly. Why won't you allow Fitzwilliam to court Mary?" Elizabeth turned to look at her husband fully, her eyes narrowed.

"I have not forbid him from courting Mary. He has never come to me seeking permission." Darcy replied, taken aback.

Elizabeth set her tea cup firmly on the table. "However, you have clearly told him of your disapproval of his choice which has all the strength of forbidding him from courting her!"

"So this has been the source of your discontent?" Darcy replied as he quit his seat and paced to the other side of the room. "I am surprised, madam, that you have such strong objections to a conversation that did not concern you."

"I beg to differ, Mr. Darcy. The conversation is of my concern as it affects the happiness of a dear friend and that of a sweet and completely suitable young woman who is my charge," Elizabeth replied passionately as she quit her seat to stand before her husband, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Good morning," Colonel Fitzwilliam greeted brightly as he entered the breakfast room. His smile faded as he observed the scene before him. "I seem to have come for breakfast at an inopportune time. If you will excuse me."

Darcy raised his hand to halt his cousin's retreat. "Please, Fitzwilliam, do sit and enjoy your breakfast. Mrs. Darcy and I will continue our conversation in my study."

Fitzwilliam watched them depart with some concern before being distracted by the lovely smell of fresh bacon wafting from the sideboard.

As soon as they entered the library, Darcy shut the door firmly behind them and bid his wife to be seated. Elizabeth gave him a withering look before planting herself in the offered chair and folding her hands in her lap. Elizabeth steeled herself for the confrontation that she knew would have to take place.

"May I ask how you have come to the conclusion that I forbade Richard from seeking Mary's hand?"

"It is not as if I simply imagined this situation," Elizabeth replied passionately, "Richard told me that you have pronounced the prospect of their union to be 'beyond the bounds of reason.' Were those not your words or did Richard tell me a fiction?"

"Yes, those were my words. I am not ashamed to claim them."

Elizabeth stared at her husband aghast. "You may not be ashamed to claim them, Mr. Darcy, but I am ashamed that you spoke them," Elizabeth replied as she rose to face her husband, her voice wavering slightly. "William, how can you stand by such words given our history? Did you not once consider our union to be unreasonable?"
"This is not the same!" Darcy countered. "Why do you and Fitzwilliam persist in making that comparison? You are a gentleman's daughter and I am a gentleman's son. In essentials we are the same. That is not the case for Miss Farthington. No matter how dear she may now be to us, there is no way of denying that she is..."

"That she is what?" Elizabeth challenged hotly. "That she is black? That her mother and her father where slaves?"

Darcy looked at her dumbfounded, surprised by her passion.

"Mr. Darcy, no matter how much you wish to deny it, our situations are essentially the same. I was not able to choose the family into which I was born. And while my family was reprehensible to you at one point, my family did not change who I was nor did our lowly status prevent us from being essentially good and honest people. Neither were you able to choose to be born into a life of power and privilege. Your position in life is simply an act of providence. Your wealth, your family prestige, your Cambridge education does not make you any better of a person than the lowly merchant or stable hand..."

"Elizabeth, I think you have said enough..."

"I do not think that I have. Could Mary choose her parents or her race? Would she be more sweet or more dear to us if she were born a Darcy or a Fitzwilliam? Would she be any better in the essentials?" Elizabeth demanded as she faced him.

"Of course not, Elizabeth," Darcy replied. "But we must be reasonable and think about what is best for Mary and our family. Mary must not marry Fitzwilliam; she simply cannot. We must be realistic."

Elizabeth looked up at her husband in disbelief. "I knew that you had your pride, Mr. Darcy. But I did not know that you were ruled by mean prejudices as well."

"Is that what you think of me?" Darcy replied in a low tone, his hurt evident in his features. "I did not think that you could regard me so meanly, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth huffed in frustration. "William, what am I to think when your behavior offers no other explanation?"

Darcy sighed before taking a seat and motioning for Elizabeth to do likewise. "There is more to my position than taught prejudice and supposition. Please, sit down and allow me to better explain myself. Perhaps by the end of my tale you may think better of me."

Elizabeth nodded her agreement before taking a seat opposite her husband. Darcy regarded her silently for a few moments and took a calming breath before he began.

"As you are aware, Miss Farthington was very distressed after leaving church yesterday morning. But, you may not be aware of the cause of her distress. After the service, Parson Geoffries told me that it was his desire and that of several members of the congregation that Mary not sit in the front pew with us during services. He found it highly improper for a 'negress' to sit up front and thought her better suited to sit with the servants. I, understandably, was very displeased by this and told Parson Geoffries so. I made it clear to him that if he could not treat Mary as a Darcy and would not speak to his parishioners about proper Christian conduct regarding her, then he should seek another position."

"Unbeknownst to me, Mary overheard our entire conversation and was quite distraught. Fitzwilliam
was somehow there to console her and once we were home confronted me about the situation. We disagreed over how it should be handled and then found ourselves in the very conversation that has upset you so. Fitzwilliam admitted that he loved Mary and intended to seek her hand. I freely admit that my response was meant to discourage him from seeking her hand. It was my intent to demonstrate how their different social statuses would impact any future that they would build together. My language and tone, in hindsight, may have been overly strong. However, I did not speak so out of any dislike of Miss Farthington nor from some prejudice regarding her heritage. I acted as I saw fit to protect her and to protect Fitzwilliam."

"To protect them?" Elizabeth interjected. "To deny them a chance at happiness?"

"Yes, to protect them. From society. From our family. From a life of pain and scorn. No matter how we feel about Mary, society will look upon their union with derision. They will be shunned from society and cut off from our family. Their children also will be unable to escape censure and would never be received by the ton," Darcy rose from his seat and began to pace.

"I should hope that they would always be welcome at Pemberley," Elizabeth replied.

"Of course they would be, Elizabeth. However, you must understand that Mary and Richard would be in a situation very different from ours. My family and the ton could forget the source of their displeasure when your charm and wit was displayed before them. However, Mary cannot conceal what they find offensive; they merely have to look at her to discover it. As long as it is in my power, I will not let Mary face such unnecessary pain."

“Oh, Darcy,” Elizabeth said as she rose from her seat and crossed the room towards him offering her hand. Darcy clasped it firmly before continuing.

"Remember the censure you received when our engagement was announced? I remember it clearly. Even with your wit and strength, it sometimes reduced you to tears. Now consider yourself in Mary's place but facing venom three times as potent. How would you fare if you had Mary's gentle temperament? She does not have your strength, Elizabeth. She is far too sweet and her heart is easily wounded. You have seen this for yourself. What happened with the parson is just a small taste of what she may face."

“She may not need such protection. You cannot shelter her from every ill word or purpose."

"Yet, it is my duty to protect her," Darcy replied, voice slightly raised. "I promised to protect her as her father strove to do during his life and I intend to keep that promise."

Elizabeth regarded her husband thoughtfully, acknowledging the truth of his words as she remembered their engagement and first year of marriage. She again saw her husband as the honorable and caring man with whom she had fallen in love. She began to regret some of her harsh words. Elizabeth smiled remorsefully at her husband, tears forming in her eyes.

"You are right, William. It is your duty to protect her. Yet, should we deny those we care for their chance at happiness? I am sure that they will face difficulties, yet love is worth fighting for...I know that we were worth fighting for."

At this, Darcy wrapped his wife in a warm embrace, stroking her hair.

"Come now, you know that I cannot stand to see you cry. Our love was worth fighting for. I would face a thousand Lady Catherines all in high dudgeon to be with you."
Elizabeth chuckled before pulling back from him to meet his eye. "Would not Richard do the same for the woman he loved?"

Darcy loosened his hold on her and looked down at his wife. Her face betrayed both the strength of her emotions on the subject and her determination to plead her case with success. He could not deny the truth of her arguments yet he was reluctant to put aside his concerns on the matter.

"I will think on what you have said," Darcy replied after a few moments. "Right now that is all I can promise."

"That is enough," Elizabeth replied as she stepped closer to him to resume the closeness of their embrace. Darcy kissed the top of her head, breathing in the familiar scent of lavender.

"I was in misery without you last night," Darcy whispered into her hair after several long moments. "I can never sleep without you by my side."

"You do look worse for the wear, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth replied as she turned her head to look up at him, smiling impishly. "I wonder what can be done to improve your spirits."

Darcy grinned his reply before kissing her deeply on the mouth.

"Never shut me out again," Darcy breathed as they parted.

"I promise, my love," Elizabeth replied as she kissed him again. "I will try not to assume the worse in the future."

"Now, that will never do, Mrs. Darcy," Darcy replied as he looked down at her roguishly.

"Why not?"

"If you did not jump to conclusions, my Lizzy, we would have less opportunity to reconcile, and that would be a pity."

"Yes, quite a pity," Elizabeth replied as their lips met again.

Fitzwilliam was disappointed to have missed seeing Mary at breakfast. His interview with Elizabeth the night before gave him a reason to hope yet also unearthed doubts that he had not previously considered. He despaired that he had been too forward with Mary, forgetting himself after the stress of the day. He remembered the look on her face before she fled with some pain. It was a look of both alarm. While Elizabeth did not censure him for his action, perhaps Mary did. As soon as he finished breakfasting with Georgiana, Fitzwilliam began roaming the halls of Pemberley in search of Mary. He was surprised to find her alone in the solarium rather than absconded in the library or visiting Master William in the nursery as was her habit. He entered the room quietly, enjoying the sight of Mary walking among the plants and flowers, her head bent in thought and her fingers running absently over the foliage as she passed. He wondered what occupied her mind and secretly hoped it was thoughts of him.

As if sensing his presence, Mary looked up from her contemplation and turned towards him, her face absent of the smile Fitzwilliam had hoped to receive.
"Good morning, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Mary greeted him.

"Good morning, Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam replied, crestfallen by her return to formality. "You are looking very well this morning. I trust that your rest was satisfactory."

Mary smiled slightly, "In truth, I found that my rest was much disturbed, but I thank you for the compliment. I hope your night was more restful, Fitzwilliam."

Fitzwilliam suppressed his smile, "I too found my sleep much disturbed last night. I hope that yours was disturbed by dreams as pleasant as mine."

Mary started at this, turning from him and proceeding with her walk about the solarium. Fitzwilliam silently cursed himself for his comment, recollecting his primary purpose for seeking Mary out.

"Miss Farthington, may I join you in taking a turn?"

"Yes, you are very welcome," Mary replied avoiding his gaze.

Fitzwilliam thanked her for the courtesy and offered his arm to her. Mary glanced at his arm and then up at him as if she were unsure before taking it. They walked silently for a few moments, each unsure what to say to the other. Growing uneasy of the silence, Fitzwilliam ventured to begin some sort of conversation.

"How did you find the prospect of a snow covered Pemberley this morning, Miss Farthington?"

"Well, the view from my rooms was quite lovely this morning, although I fear so much snow has quite ruined my plans for the morning. Does it always snow so much in England?"

"Well, Derbyshire winters do have their share of snow. However, I would rank last night's precipitation as being heavier than usual."

"I suppose that is some comfort then. I fear that I shall never grow accustomed to this weather."

Silence descended upon them again as they completed one circuit around the room. Fitzwilliam took the opportunity to savor the closeness of her, memorizing the feel of her hand pressed against his arm, the smell of her hair scented with rosewater and the slight downward curve of her lips as a slight frown graced her features. He found himself slightly saddened by her reception of him. While she was polite and obliging, he could tell that she was disturbed in someway. He sighed in disappointment, thinking that perhaps she found his actions from the other night objectionable. Not one to allow himself to suffer needlessly in torment, he stopped their progression around the room and turned toward her with a look of sincere regret.

"Miss Farthington, you must allow me to apologize if my behavior last night offended you in anyway. Indeed, it was not my intention to cause you any distress. My behavior was presumptuous and forward and I must beg your forgiveness."

"There is no need for your apology, Fitzwilliam. Last evening we were both not ourselves," Mary replied as she quickly averted her gaze.

"Were my attentions to you unwelcome?" Fitzwilliam asked, almost pleadingly, as he took one of her hands into his.

"No." Her reply was nearly inaudible as she bent her head to study her hand in his.

Fitzwilliam allowed a smile to overtake his features. Mary's terse reply was all the encouragement he
"Mary," her head shot up to meet his gaze at the use of her name, "nearly as soon as I met you, you have impressed me as a woman of many accomplishments whose gentle spirit and kind heart have set you apart from others. Your beauty and grace only add to your charms."

"Fitzwilliam, I..." Mary interrupted, turning her gaze towards their intertwined hands once more.

"Please, Mary," Fitzwilliam stopped her reply. "I do not presume to now ask you the one question that is my heart's desire. I merely beg of you a simple favor. While this may appear to be an odd request from one who shares the same dwelling as yourself, I ask your indulgence nonetheless. Will you permit me to call upon you at your leisure? All I desire is the opportunity to win your affection and to convince you of the violence of mine."

Fitzwilliam waited for her response, unconsciously holding his breath as he watched her. Mary continued to study their joined hands for several moments, her face indiscernible, before she whispered her consent. Fitzwilliam smiled broadly before gently raising her chin with his free hand, bidding her to meet his gaze.

"I am sorry, I am afraid that I did not quite hear. Would you remind repeating that, Mary?" he questioned teasingly.

"Yes, Fitzwilliam," Mary smiled up at him. "Nothing would give me more pleasure."

Delight and relief flooded Fitzwilliam's face at her reply. The only thing that would have made him happier at that moment would have been if she had agreed to marry him. However, he was more than content for now.

"Mary, you do not know how happy you have made me," Fitzwilliam replied as he moved his hand from her chin to caress her cheek. He smiled as she instinctively moved into his touch, her eyes never leaving his. His look became more intense as he rubbed his thumb gently over her lips. Mary responded by parting her lips slightly, closing her eyes on a sigh. Fitzwilliam decided to complete the happy task he had set out to complete last night, bending his head towards hers to claim her lips in a gentle kiss. Her response was tentative and shy, confirming his suspicions that she had never been kissed. Fearful of frightening her away, he forced himself to move from her lips to regard the impact of his touch on her. He watched as her eyes fluttered open and her lips parted in a wide smile.

"Now that you have taken to addressing me so informally, may I call you by your first name as well, sir?"

"Yes, by all means, Mary," he laughed, humored by her formal reply after such an interaction.

"Then I shall call you Richard when we are as we are now. Richard is so much easier than Fitzwilliam."

Fitzwilliam laughed again, before bringing her hands up to his lips to kiss. "Yes, I suppose it is. Yet you must admit, madam that Farthington is quite a mouthful as well."

Mary laughed and then gasped as Richard turned her hands over to bestow a kiss in the palm of each. Mary laughed again as she pulled herself out of his grasp and continued to walk around the solarium. Fitzwilliam stood watching her for several moments, overwhelmed with joy at her reception of him. He knew now that she was far from indifferent and began to hope that in time her admiration would grow in fervor to match his own. He could only hope that Elizabeth was having as much success in convincing Darcy to allow him Mary's hand.
Chapter 7

Overnight Pemberley was transformed from a quiet estate into a storm of frenzied yet orderly activity. With little more than two weeks before Elizabeth’s grand Twelfth Night celebration, hardly anyone in the house was permitted to do anything other than prepare for the festivities. The guest list needed to be compiled, invitations sent out, menus planned, guest rooms prepared, seating arrangements calculated on top of countless other tasks. Darcy and Fitzwilliam were allowed to be excused from the fray, their input on appropriate guests being the only duty required of them. While Mary desired to be part of the planning for such a special event, as the guest of honor she was forbidden from lifting a finger. Elizabeth was surprised to find Georgiana as her willing assistant. Georgiana had never been very enthusiastic about planning such elaborate parties, much less one on such short notice. She had always seemed to prefer quieter affairs whose guests were limited to a circle of intimate family friends. However, Georgiana was determined to do her utmost to make this Twelfth Night celebration the best that Pemberley had seen in years.

Colonel Fitzwilliam took full advantage of being exempted from the house party preparations, spending most of his time in the company of Mary and young William. When he discovered that Mary had never been ice skating, he took it upon himself to be her teacher. For her part, Mary could not fathom why one would willingly strap blades to one’s feet and scoot about on a sheet of ice for merriment. She infinitely preferred an un-bruised bottom and a cup of hot tea to that sort of reckless amusement. However, Fitzwilliam proved to be a rather persistent and persuasive advocate of the sport. He employed all of his rhetorical skills and the gentle persuasions of a lover to coax Mary out of the warmth of Pemberley’s halls and onto the frozen lake. Much to his chagrin, his most powerful and successful tactic proved not to be his wooing, but the doe eyed pleading of little William. Mary could not long prove resistant when such youthful exuberance was before her.

So, Mary found herself wrapped in blankets and furs riding in an open sleigh with Fitzwilliam, young master William, Georgiana and her maid as companions. Another sleigh followed behind them with a few more servants who brought hot cocoa and treats. After a time, they stopped beside the lake. Fitzwilliam brushed off the waiting servant and leaped out of the sleigh before turning and offering his hand to assist Georgiana and William. Mary simply took one look at the frozen lake and nuzzled herself deeper into the blankets.

“Come Miss Mary,” Fitzwilliam coaxed, “you’ll never learn how to skate properly if you do not get out of the sleigh.”

“I still cannot believe you convinced me to come out here, Richard,” Mary grumbled in a voice loud enough for only Fitzwilliam to hear.

Fitzwilliam smiled before whispering conspiratorially, “This is the first time I have seen you pout so dramatically, Mary. I must admit that I find it rather charming.”

Mary’s pout only increased at this pronouncement, causing Fitzwilliam to laugh in earnest.

“You would not want to disappoint little William, would you?” Fitzwilliam replied, deciding to change his tactics. “He has been waiting for so long to show his Princess his skills on the ice.”

Mary looked over to where William was standing on the ice with Georgiana, his skates already strapped on and a bright expectant look on his face. Mary bit her lip. She could not disappoint her Little Bits. When she had finally agreed to learn to ice skate, he had spoken of nothing else for three
days straight. Mary turned to look at Fitzwilliam. He was grinning at her most impudently, one eyebrow arched high in a manner that could make Mary agree to almost anything.

Mary sighed dramatically, “You must promise me that you will not let me fall, Richard. If I should bruise my bottom, I will never forgive you.”

Fitzwilliam’s smile grew as he handed Mary down from the sleigh. Once she was on solid ground, he bowed deeply over her gloved hand and whispered saucily.

“I promise that I will do my best so that your bottom remains unbruised. I shall guard it with my life.”

Mary gasped at Fitzwilliam’s bold remark, which only caused Fitzwilliam to smile in satisfaction. He took great delight in shocking Mary’s sensibilities, especially as their courtship was still unofficial. He had yet to speak to Mr. Darcy of his intentions towards her and had asked her to withhold telling the news to others until he had spoken with her guardian. Mary wondered at the necessity for such secrecy, but agreed to the scheme nonetheless.

Mary’s maid assisted her in strapping on her skates and within minutes Mary found herself clutching to Fitzwilliam’s arm with all of her strength. Fitzwilliam chuckled and spoke reassuring words to her as they slowly made their way out onto the ice. Mary held her breath as their pace increased from a slow shuffle to a glide.

“There, Miss Mary. You have not fallen and are doing quite well.” Fitzwilliam announced once they were well out onto the ice.

“Yes,” Georgiana concurred as she skated towards them with little William in tow. “You will soon discover that skating can be great fun. We’ll have you skating as if you were born with skates attached to your feet come Twelfth Night.”

“I will be more than satisfied with merely remaining upright,” Mary replied with a smile before being distracted by an urgent tugging at her skirt.

“Yes, Sir Little Bits?”

“May I do my tricks for you, Princess Mary?” little William pleaded, a huge smile stretching from one rosy cheek to another as he looked up to her with wide eyes.

“Why, you have never offered to show your Aunt Georgiana or I these tricks, Master William.” Fitzwilliam replied, attempting to sound offended.

“You can watch too, Uncle Richard. I will show you how to do tricks for Mary!”

Mary laughed as she watched little William hurriedly skate out farther onto the ice in preparation for his tricks.

“Sir Little Bits?” Fitzwilliam questioned with a look of amusement.

“Well, William was quite insistent that every knight aught to have a proper name given to him by his lady and that Sir William would not suffice. So, I dubbed him Sir Little Bits, which was surprisingly met with much satisfaction on his part.”

Fitzwilliam and Georgiana chuckled in reply before their attention was called away by William’s cries that his tricks were about to begin. Mary made sure to clap and cheer loudly after William skated backwards, twirled about in a lopsided circle and performed a few simple jumps. Little William beamed with pride before skating back towards Mary and taking her hand to lead her out on
the ice. Fitzwilliam relinquished her other arm and watched bemusedly as a nervous Mary skated with only Sir Little Bits for guidance.

“Miss Darcy?” Fitzwilliam queried, turning his gaze from Mary to his cousin as he offered her his arm.

Georgiana took his arm with gratitude before setting off at a slow pace.

“I am happy to have this opportunity to talk with you,” Georgiana began. “I have had little opportunity to chat with you since you arrived.”

“Yes,” Richard replied, as he slowly turned from observing Mary and William to focus on his cousin. “It would appear that much has changed since I was last at Pemberley. William has become quite the little gentleman and you have a new friend in Miss Mary.”

“Yes,” Georgiana replied with a faint smile. “Mary and I have become fast friends. I am quite happy she has come to Pemberley. It is very nice having someone closer to my age with whom to converse.”

“Yes, Miss Farthington is delightful. William is taken with her as well. One can hardly blame him for being so besotted with one so charming and pretty.” Fitzwilliam replied wistfully as he returned his attention to Mary and William.

The pair skated for a few minutes, chatting disjointedly about Fitzwilliam’s tour in America and time in the West Indies and about Georgiana’s first season in London. Georgiana found herself growing more annoyed by her cousin’s inattentiveness as the conversation wore on. His eyes were frequently fixed on Mary and his replies to her queries were short and rather perfunctory in comparison with their usual ease of conversation. The needling worry that had plagued Georgiana since finding Fitzwilliam and Mary in a somewhat compromising position a few days before now gained strength as she observed her cousin’s countenance.

“No,” Georgiana thought to herself. “He cannot have serious designs on Mary, I am sure. Fitzwilliam has always been amiable and given to admire anyone of his acquaintance. Yes, his interest is merely friendly. I am sure of it.”

Having thus rationalized her suspicions away, Georgiana endeavored to be more lenient toward her cousin. Just as she turned toward him to enquire after her Aunt Josephine, her cousin came to an abrupt stop, causing Georgiana to momentarily loose her footing.

“Cousin, whatever is the matter?” Georgiana cried out as she regained her equilibrium.

Georgiana looked up to find that her cousin had already left her side and was skating with great haste toward Mary who was in danger of taking a rather nasty spill on the ice. Fitzwilliam managed to skate to her aide just in time to catch her as her efforts at remaining upright had failed.

Concern for her friend overcame Georgiana’s annoyance at her cousin’s abandonment. She skated toward them enquiring after Mary’s safety.

“I am quite fine now, Georgiana.” Mary smiled at her warmly. “Just as I was beginning to think I had gotten the hang of things, I found myself in danger of landing on my bottom! Well, at least I hope I would have landed on my bottom.”

“Well, as you say, you are quite safe now.” Fitzwilliam smiled down at her before blushing slightly. Fitzwilliam had forgotten to relinquish his hold of her and still held her protectively in his arms. He
apologized briefly before setting her upright and offering his arm.

“If you do not mind, Sir Little Bits, I shall take over escorting the Princess.” Fitzwilliam saluted William, dismissing him from his duties.

William returned the salute before offering his services to his Aunt Georgiana. She gladly accepted his hand and resumed her turn about the lake. Once the pair was some distance away, Fitzwilliam leaned over to whisper in Mary’s ear.

“Did I not promise to guard your bottom with my life?”

Mary bit back a smile and attempted to look at him disapprovingly. Fitzwilliam grinned in satisfaction, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

They skated for most of the afternoon, Mary rarely relinquishing her hold on Fitzwilliam’s arm after her near fall. She found that she grew to like ice skating, despite her earlier disparaging comments on the sport. While she was not a true proficient, Mary managed to loose her footing only twice more. True to his word, Fitzwilliam was there to catch her both times.

Having bathed and dressed rather quickly, Mary found herself in the pleasant position of having a nearly an hour to herself before dinner. Taking advantage of the solitude, Mary retrieved her journal from her trunk and made her way towards the library. She was accustomed to writing in her journal on the beach in New Sussex, the gentle sound of the waves inducing her to dream and write freely. The sea had indeed been her muse and companion. How she missed it! However, Mary found that Pemberley’s library was an adequate spot to do her journaling. While there were no waves to calm her spirits and stir her imagination, there was always a large fire to warm her and comfortable chairs in which to curl-up.

Mary perched on one such chair and opened her journal. She had but a few pages left in the well worn leather book. As she searched to find an unused page, she could not help but pause and read her entries from the past few years and admire her sketches and drawings. Her fingers stilled over a charcoal drawing of her father. She had drawn the picture a few days before he had fallen ill to the disease that would eventually claim his life. She smiled down at the picture. She had drawn it as they sat together by their favorite rock on the beach. He had just returned from one of his long trips to America where he had spoken on the abolitionist cause to sympathetic audiences in the North. As was their habit, they had taken a long stroll along the beach to get reacquainted with one another. During their walk, Mary had begun to notice that his steps were a little slower than before and that he leaned on his walking stick often. She had commented on his slow steps only for him to reassure her that he was indeed well, just a little more fatigued from his journey than he had thought. However, the following morning confirmed Mary’s fears. A fever had come upon him in the wee hours of the morning, sending the house into a frenzy. The doctor was sent for and had managed to break the fever easily. Despite the alarming nature of the fever, the doctor had assured Mary that her father would recover with a few days bed rest. He had a stout constitution and was very fit for a man of three and fifty. The doctor assured her that a trifling cold would not bring such a man down. Lord Farthington had been optimistic as well, even to the point of ignoring the doctor’s orders and escaping his chambers to join Mary on her evening walks. He would not listen to Mary’s protests, claiming that the exercise made him feel better.

However, Lord Farthington had been gravely mistaken. A few days later he could not even be
roused out of bed. The doctor had little hope for her father’s recovery, finding that he had consumption. Mary knew that this was a death sentence and decided to devote all of her energy to her father’s comfort and care. She had her father’s bed moved towards the balcony so that he could look out over the ocean and all of the windows to his quarters thrown open so that he could breathe fresh air. During the last two weeks of his life, Mary hardly slept in her own room, preferring the settee in her father’s chambers when she wanted for rest and spending most of her time in an armchair by his bed. At night she would sing him to sleep and during the day she would read to him from Paradise Lost or simply sit and hold his hand.

The night he died he was struck with a persistent and violent fever, which Mary toiled tirelessly to break. After hours of his restless tossing and moaning, her father had lay surprisingly still, exhaustion providing him some semblance of sleep. Ignoring the pleas of her governess and the head maid, Mary decided to keep watch over her father, unwilling to leave his side for a moment.

Mary woke late the next morning in her own bed, confused and disoriented. In a panic, she quit her bed and ran to her father’s room. The house that morning was strangely silent. Gathered before her father’s door in a somber mood was the doctor, the head maid and her governess. Ignoring their pleas for her to stay without, Mary pushed past them and into her father’s room. She would never forget the feeling of anguish that overcame her at the sight of her father’s body. He had passed in the night alone and without her comfort. Her sorrow was too deep for words or tears. Mary felt bruised and too weak to stand. She would later be grateful for the presence of the doctor behind her when she sank to the ground insensible to all around her.

Mary set aside her journal, the task of writing another entry completely forgotten as her eyes filled with tears. Mary did not know how many minutes she sat lost to her tears before she heard her name being called.

“Mary? What has happened? Are you ill?” Darcy asked as he picked up the journal and took a seat beside Mary. Looking at the open page, he soon guessed the cause of her tears.

“Ah, you are missing your father, are you not?”

Mary nodded in response, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her bare hands. Darcy handed her his handkerchief and silently watched as she sought to regain her composure.

“My own excellent father died around this time of year. I too often think on him as Christmas draws near.”

“I am sorry.” Mary offered as she returned his handkerchief to him. “Was it very long ago?”

“It will be eight years this January. Long enough for the wounds to heal. However, one never forgets those who are dear to you.”

“Yes, one never does. Sometimes I can go several days without thinking on his passing, while other days the simplest thing will remind me of him.”

“I can tell you this, Mary. The mourning does get easier. Wounds begin to heal with time and one can begin to think on the loved one that has been lost with fondness absent of tears. Yet the wounds never fully heal. It is only natural that you should think on your father. With his passing you have also lost a small bit of yourself.”

Mary smiled sadly, turning her gaze from Darcy to look towards the fire. “I wonder how preparations for Christmas are coming on New Sussex,” Mary offered in an attempt to change the topic of conversation. “It was always such a festive time on the island! Father always made sure to be
home during Christmastide and it was always a time of joy.”

Darcy regarded her thoughtfully. “While I fully realize that Christmas here at Pemberley can never be the same as it was at your home, I do hope that you can find some joy with us here this season. We are certainly happy to have you here to share it with us.”

Darcy smiled warmly at Mary before rising and offering her his arm to escort her to dinner. Mary returned his smile, and taking the offered arm made her way out of the library and down to dinner.

---

The next morning found Pemberley a buzz with activity in preparation for the next days’ Christmas Eve festivities. Servants busied themselves in nearly every room of Pemberley hanging greenery and decorations while the kitchen staff was busily preparing for tomorrow’s Servant’s Ball. Mary, Georgiana and Elizabeth were busily employed in the wrapping of presents for all the servants and their children, a momentous task that lasted them well into the afternoon.

The ladies found their time together to be most agreeable, as it was a day spent mostly to themselves. Mr. Darcy was engaged with estate business for most of the morning and late afternoon. Fitzwilliam chose to spend his day exclusively in the company of his young cousin. After the morning lessons were done, he spirited the young lad outside to engage in some winter sport. The pair planned to spend their afternoon ice skating to be followed by a delicious repast of hot chocolate and cake.

Fitzwilliam laughed gaily as he watched his little cousin perform a simple jump and twirl about the ice, unabashed joy written all over his rosy cheeks. He could not recall a time when he had so much pleasure on the ice, save for his time teaching Miss Mary how to skate. That had been a pleasant time indeed. A skating lesson was an excellent excuse to be near her, her timidity at the new sport causing her to cling to his side for support. He remembered her grumblings and dramatic pouting with amusement, especially given her delight at the sport by the end of the afternoon.

The sound of cracking ice abruptly drew him out of his reverie.

“William! William!” Fitzwilliam called as he scanned the ice in a panic. His little cousin was no where to be found. Fitzwilliam’s eyes grew wide as he spied the cause of the sound that had alerted him. A large crack and hole in the ice had appeared.

Fitzwilliam’s heart sank into his gut as he realized what had happened. Shouting for the aide of the servants that had accompanied them, Fitzwilliam sprinted toward the hole in the ice. Upon reaching the edge, he quickly pulled off his skates, shoes and great coat before leaping into the frigid waters in search of his cousin. The shock of the cold water hitting his skin as he drove in was great, yet his fear for the life of little William dulled his sensation. He swam deeper and deeper finding no sign of his cousin. The dimness of the light under the ice rendered his search difficult and he began to despair of finding his young charge. Just as he thought his lungs would burst from the lack of oxygen, he spotted William floating lifelessly a few feet away from him. Fitzwilliam swam toward him, clutching the young child to his chest before kicking his way to the surface.

With a great gasp, Fitzwilliam surfaced with young William tight in his grasp. Suddenly, many hands were upon them, pulling William and himself out of the water and hurrying them towards the bank of the lake where they were shrouded in blankets. Fitzwilliam hurried to William’s side. The young boy lay motionless, his face a shade of pale blue against the white blankets. Acting quickly, Fitzwilliam turned the boy on his back, tilting back his head and placing his mouth over the boy’s forcing air into
As the ladies of Pemberley finished up the last of their wrapping, a great commotion drew their attention. A flustered maid soon burst into the drawing room startling all with her announcement.

“Ma’am, there has been an accident with Master William. Colonel Fitzwilliam is bringing him inside this instant. You are needed at once.”

Her task forgotten and her face growing pale, Elizabeth leaped from her seat and quickly followed the maid. Mary and Georgiana followed, both dreading what they would find. They all ran towards the main stairwell to see a greatly disheveled Fitzwilliam at the base of the steps clutching an unconscious William to his chest. Elizabeth let out a cry of her son’s name before racing down the stairs to meet Fitzwilliam.

“We were skating and he fell through the ice,” Fitzwilliam explained breathlessly as he handed his precious burden to Elizabeth.

“My son,” Elizabeth choked out as she nuzzled her son’s cheek with her own. “He is so cold. We must get him warm.” Elizabeth began to run back up the stairs and toward her son’s rooms, shouting for Mrs. Reynolds and for the doctor to be summoned at once. Georgiana followed in her wake, tears already streaming down her face.

Mary made to follow after them, until saw the state Fitzwilliam was in. His hair and meager clothes were soaked, clinging to his frame. His feet were devoid of shoes and covered only in wet stockings. His skin was deathly pale and he trembled as he mounted the stairs. Mary flew to him, throwing her arms around his waist to assist him up the stairs. In their panic over William, the servants had followed Elizabeth and Georgiana, leaving Fitzwilliam unattended and forgotten.

“The fault is mine, Mary. If I had only been by his side,” Fitzwilliam mumbled as he buried his face in her hair.

“No, Richard. You mustn’t blame yourself,” Mary soothed as she cupped his face in her hands and brought him round to face her. “You were there to save him. All will be well, Richard.”

Fitzwilliam wrapped his arms around her, drawing Mary towards him. Mary began to be afraid as she felt the dampness of his clothes and the coldness of his skin against her own. A shiver ran through Fitzwilliam’s body so strongly that Mary could feel it in her own.

“Come, we must get you out of these clothes and warm. You will catch your death in this state.”

“I must see after William. I will be fine,” Fitzwilliam replied as he released her and began to make his way towards William’s rooms.

After a few steps, he began to sway precariously and had to place a hand on the wall to steady
himself. Mary resumed her place at his side, draping his arm over her shoulder and assisting him to
his rooms. Fitzwilliam leaned heavily upon her, feeling his tiredness keenly as the adrenaline that
propelled him began to diminish. Mary helped Fitzwilliam into his room, heedless of all notions of
propriety as she helped him to his bed. Leaving his side for but a moment, Mary rang for his valet.
Mary was soon back at his side, working determinedly as Fitzwilliam’s strength waned. Silently, she
removed his wet stockings before moving to remove his waistcoat and shirt. Fitzwilliam made to stop
her, grasping her hands as she reached for his cravat.

“We must get your warm, Richard.” Mary replied as she suppressed a blush. “I have called for your
valet, but until he surfaces I am determined to see to you. I will not have you fall ill.”

At any other time, Mary’s persistence in divesting him of clothing would have amused him greatly,
but observing the sincere worry in her eyes and acknowledging the tremors and weakness of his own
body, Fitzwilliam acquiesced. As his drowsiness became too much to fight off, the searing heat of
her hands upon the bare skin of his chest was the last thing he felt before darkness overcame him.

For her part, Mary was momentarily distracted by the sight of Richard’s masculine figure as she
worked, but the coldness of his skin soon abused her of all notions of maidenly reserve. She had just
thrown a blanket over his sleeping form when his valet finally arrived. If the older gentleman was
shocked by the presence of a young lady in his master’s bedroom, he did not betray those feelings.
Mary instructed the valet to see that the fire was restored and his master was made as warm and dry
as possible before quickly leaving the room.

Once outside, Mary leaned heavily on the door and breathed deeply. She fought the urge to return to
Fitzwilliam’s side. She knew she did not have the right to be by his side, but she wished she could be
there all the same. Indeed, his appearance had shaken her deeply. Images of another man she cared
for that had been taken from her too soon came unbidden to her mind. Mary said a silent prayer
before hurrying toward William’s room.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8:

One would hardly recognize Pemberley as the same estate of that morning. All of the busy preparations for Christmas Eve ground to a halt as the entire household waited for news of the state of young master William. The dining room and drawing rooms were quiet and dark, bereft of their usual chatter and activity. Elizabeth, Darcy and Georgiana all maintained a constant vigil in William’s room, watching the sleeping boy fretfully.

Mary chose to sit guard in the hallway between both of their rooms, willing herself to remain away from Fitzwilliam’s chamber. Fear gnawed at her stomach as the minutes drew long. She had instructed the servants not already engaged with William in what should be done for the Colonel. That was all that she could do at the moment until Dr. Roberts was available to see to Fitzwilliam. It seemed as if an eternity had passed since a servant hurriedly escorted the physician to William’s rooms. Mary wondered why the inspection was taking so long. Her heart almost broke at the thought that her Sir Little Bits could be in serious danger. Her lips moved in silent prayer as she beseeched God to keep those she cared for.

Fitzwilliam. A sigh escaped from her mouth as she thought on him. He had been so weak when she left him to the care of his valet. His skin, already pale, had taken on a sickly pallor and had been covered in a sheen of cold sweat. Mary had been struck by the sharp contrast of the dark hair of his chest against his pallid skin. The feel of his skin beneath her fingers as she stripped away his nearly frozen sodden garments had only added to her fear. Mary touched her lips absentmindedly, remembering the coolness of his blue tinged lips against hers as she gently kissed him after covering him with heavy quilts and coverlets. He had been asleep then, giving in to his fatigue. She remembered whispering to him nonetheless, commanding him to be well before his valet had entered the room.

Mary was stirred from her thoughts by the exit of Dr. Roberts from William’s room. Rising quickly from her perch, Mary approached the doctor eager for news of William’s condition.

“He will be fine, Miss Farthington,” Dr. Roberts replied to her unspoken question. “With some rest, he should be fine in a day or two. We’ll just have to watch for any sign of a fever.”

Mary’s shoulders relaxed some at the news, as she released a breath she did not realize she had been holding.

“It is good that he was brought out of the water so quickly,” Dr. Roberts continued. “I fear things could have been much worse had he stayed in such frigid water for much longer.”

Mary nodded in reply, thankful for Fitzwilliam’s quick action.

“You may see him if you like,” the doctor offered before turning to leave her.

“Dr. Roberts, may I have a word?” Mary called after him, her voice anxious.

“Yes, of course. What can I do for you?” The older man smiled back at her gently.

“I am very concerned for Col. Fitzwilliam. He was the one to rescue William this afternoon. He did
not look well at all when he arrived back at the house, and I was wondering if you might look in on him while you are here.”

“Col. Fitzwilliam? Mr. and Mrs. Darcy never mentioned that the gentleman was ill.”

Mary frowned slightly at this bit of news. “I am sure they did not realize that he was unwell. The house was in such a state when they arrived that I think Col. Fitzwilliam was quite forgotten."

Dr. Roberts rubbed his chin thoughtfully before shaking his head slightly and giving Mary a reassuring smile. “Of course I will attend to the Colonel right away.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Mary broke out into a wide smile, her first all evening.

Mary led the doctor to Fitzwilliam’s rooms explaining all she had observed of his condition on the way. Mary took a seat outside of Fitzwilliam’s chambers, determined to get a report on his condition as soon as the doctor finished his examination. Leaning her head back against the wall, Mary let go a deep sigh and closed her eyes. Mary would not ever forget the look of fear and concern on Elizabeth’s face as she set eyes on William that afternoon or the anxiety shown on Mr. Darcy’s countenance. She understood their fear as parents. However, as the hours passed, she could not understand how so little thought had been given to Col. Fitzwilliam. No one had inquired after him and they had said nothing to Dr. Roberts about him. Mary was sure that they all loved him very much, yet she could not help but feel a little angry on the Colonel’s behalf. He had looked truly ill indeed upon entering the house. And on top of it all, the poor man seemed to blame himself for the accident. Mary wondered if Elizabeth and Darcy blamed him as well and so neglected him accordingly. Mary quickly chastised herself for harboring such uncharitable thoughts. They could not possibly be so unfeeling towards one they loved.

After many long minutes, the doctor came out of the room, his face unreadable. He had barely quit the room before Mary was on her feet pestering him with questions. Dr. Roberts smiled at her grimly before relating his patient’s condition.

“It appears that the Colonel is suffering from general asphyxia from cold. It is a mild case, but he is still in danger. I expect him to make a full recovery with the proper care. He sleeps now but should be monitored closely until he awakens. I’ve instructed the valet to ensure that the fire remains robust. When he awakens he should be given plenty of warm fluids. Hot tea and milk.”

The doctor paused, taking her hand into his and patting it reassuringly. “I should commend you for your quick thinking, Miss Farthington. Had it not been for your solicitous care, I fear that the Colonel would not be with us now.”

Mary’s eyes grew a bit wide at this pronouncement. She had not told her role in the affair to Dr. Roberts. She realized after the fact how unseemly it would be for a young unmarried woman to be found in such a position as she had been that afternoon. The doctor was quick to relieve her of her distress.

“Col. Fitzwilliam’s valet informed me of your role this afternoon. Have no fear. I will not relate the details of what transpired to anyone. You have no cause for shame, Miss Farthington. Had you not acted as you did, the Colonel would be dead. Asphyxia is a serious business requiring immediate treatment. Getting him warm as soon as possible was vital. The gentleman is much in your debt.”

Mary favored the doctor with a small smile as she thanked him for both his praise and his silence on the matter. The doctor accepted her thanks with a tired nod.

“Do not fret, Miss Farthington. I believe that all will turn to rights,” Dr. Roberts replied. He took a
few steps away from her, before turning again as if he had forgotten something.

“You may see him, if you like,” the doctor added before favoring her with a slight smile.

Mary watched the doctor return to William’s room, before hurrying to Fitzwilliam’s chambers. The doctor’s permission had been quite unnecessary; her concern would have had her by his side regardless of what was considered proper. She had not realized how close the Colonel had come to death, and resolved to see him for herself. The Colonel’s valet quickly answered her light knock on the door. He surveyed Mary coolly, before stepping aside and allowing her entrance.

“Should you require anything, miss, I will be in the dressing room,” the valet quietly informed her before slipping from the room.

Mary was surprised by this reception. No words had been needed to make her desires known. She wondered if she had indeed made a friend in the valet or if the doctor had left instructions to allow her admittance. Whatever the reason for the valet’s cooperation, Mary was grateful for the moment of privacy.

Mary quietly moved towards the large four-poster bed where Fitzwilliam lay. He had been changed into a dry sleeping gown and was tucked securely under heavy blankets, just as she had instructed the valet. His arms lay above the blankets, one bent and resting on his chest while the other lay at his side. He had the appearance of one in a peaceful slumber, his chest rising and falling in a slow steady rhythm, his eyes shut with long lashes fanned against his cheek. His skin still held a sickly pallor that frightened her. The room was almost unbearably hot. This pleased Mary for she knew that the heat would help speed his recovery. Mary doubted whether or not she should disturb him. She noticed that a sheen of sweat began to form on his forehead, a few drops already falling down his face, hugging to the curve of his nose. Taking up a cloth, Mary went to his side and gently dabbed at his forehead.

Mary wondered about the strange mix of feelings she felt for the man who lay sleeping before her. Only a few weeks ago, she found him to be the most annoying and infuriating man of her admittedly limited acquaintance. How things had changed since the night of the snowstorm. Now she found herself longing for his company and his caress. His smile, which she had once thought sly, now thrilled her and she could be completely undone by one arched eyebrow. His teasing, to which she always feigned astonishment, secretly delighted her. However, she found her heart was warmed most by his gentle attentions toward her. He was ever conscientious of her feelings and always gentlemanly in their moments alone. Ever conscious of propriety and her naïveté, he had never pressed her for than a chaste kiss upon the lips and a gentle caress of her face. Truly if he had been the sort to trifle with the affections of a young lady, as Elizabeth had led her to believe, he would not have felt restrained by manners in the attainment of his goal.

The thought of marriage had been so far from her mind less than a month ago, and now she found herself receiving such attentions from a gentleman that under any normal circumstance would lead to courtship and marriage. Previously, the thought had frightened and perplexed her. What did she know about marriage and becoming a wife and mother? She had no examples of such in her upbringing and her father had never discussed the idea with her. However, as she lightly ran her hand over the hair of the man sleeping before her, the idea of marriage did not seem so foreign. Mary felt she was well on her way to being in love with Fitzwilliam, if the feelings she felt could be properly called love. They were so new and overwhelming, that Mary wondered about their constancy and depth. However, she did know that if the Lord chose to take this man from her so soon after reclaiming him that had been her entire family, she might not survive the hurt. Mary took one of his large hands into hers. She was pleased that it felt warm to the touch. She brought it up to her lips and placed a kiss upon the palm, as Fitzwilliam was wont to do to her in their moments.
alone. Mary gently folded her fingers into his before bringing both hands against her cheek.

“Please, Richard,” she whispered to him. “Please be well.”

Elizabeth, Darcy and Georgiana were surprised to hear Dr. Robert’s report on the condition of their cousin. None of them had realized that Fitzwilliam was even ill, much less that his condition was so severe. They had been so concerned for William that they had not even considered that Fitzwilliam might have been affected by the cold dip in the lake. Darcy was especially concerned, as he regarded Fitzwilliam as a brother.

“How is he now, doctor? May we see him?” Darcy asked.

“He is resting now and will probably be in a deep sleep for quite some time. He should be monitored constantly for the next day or two for any signs of fever. You may visit him, if you like. I believe that Miss. Farthington is with him now.”

“Miss. Farthington? Why is Mary with him?” Georgiana questioned, surprising everyone.

“Well, the lady was quite concerned for his state and I suggested that she look in on him to help calm her nerves. It was Miss. Mary who informed me of the Colonel’s illness and who is responsible for his current condition. If not for her timely instructions and actions, I fear the gentleman would be severely ill if not dead.”

Darcy nodded at this bit of news, the look on his face grave. Since William was sleeping soundly and was out of danger, Darcy and Elizabeth and Georgiana decided to look in on their cousin; leaving the nursery maid to sit with William should he awaken during their absence.

Darcy and Elizabeth were the first to enter Fitzwilliam’s chambers. The sight that greeted them gave rise to quite different feelings in the breast of each. Mary sat in a chair close by Fitzwilliam’s bedside, holding Fitzwilliam’s right hand against her cheek as she bent her head in what appeared to be a silent prayer.

“Mary?” Elizabeth questioned in a low tone as she approached the girl from behind, laying one hand on her shoulder.

Mary moved as if startled, dropping Fitzwilliam’s hand and rising from her seat. She hurriedly wiped at her eyes before turning to face Fitzwilliam’s new visitors.

“We know. Dr. Roberts explained that you were watching over him,” Elizabeth replied, giving Mary a tired smile and her hand a reassuring squeeze. “How fares the patient?” Elizabeth asked as she took the seat that Mary had just vacated.

“He sleeps soundly, as you can see,” Mary replied, forgetting her previous discomfort at being found in such a position by her guardians. “Rich…Fitzwilliam has improved much in looks since this afternoon. Some of his color has returned and he seems to have warmed up.

Darcy’s eyebrow rose at Mary’s slip of the tongue. However, his concern over her increased familiarity with his cousin soon gave way again to his concern for Fitzwilliam’s well being. He stood
by his wife, one hand on her shoulder as he watched his sleeping cousin. Fitzwilliam and he were like brothers and their friendship had only increased once they became guardians of Georgiana and weathered the trials of Ramsgate together. Now, he found himself indebted to him for the single handedly rescuing his son, who was dearer to him than anyone in the world. Darcy had missed his cousin a great deal during his tour of duty in the Americas and had been vastly pleased to have him at Pemberley once again. The family had been grateful that he escaped the dangers of the war unscathed when so many of his comrades had fallen or been gravely injured. Darcy would never have imagined that his cousin would find himself in such a life-threatening situation on the very grounds of Pemberley.

Georgiana entered the room soon after, going to Fitzwilliam’s side and taking his left hand into hers. The look on her face mirrored that of everyone in the room. All were greatly concerned and exhausted by the trials of the day. The family sat for several long minutes observing their cousin before Elizabeth broke the silence.

“I fear it is growing very late and you all look exhausted. I suggest that we take turns sitting with Fitzwilliam per the doctor’s orders. I can take the first shift and sit until dawn. I do not think I could possibly sleep tonight.”

“No my dear, I will sit with Richard through the night. I insist that you get some rest. Even if all you do is lay in bed staring up into the canopy. There is no need to argue with me. I insist,” Darcy commanded as he assisted his wife in rising from her seat and placed a chaste kiss upon her forehead. “Please, I could not fathom having another loved one fall ill today.”

Elizabeth nodded her acquiescence. “Well, then I shall retire to bed then. However, I shall not retire to my room as you demand, but will rest with William in the nursery.”

“Fine,” Darcy replied. “I shall ask Mrs. Reynolds to prepare a cot when I speak to her about canceling the Servant’s Ball.”

“Must the ball be cancelled, brother?” questioned Georgiana, “I do know how everyone was looking forward to it. We have held a ball nearly every Christmas Eve, and everything is nearly ready. Cook has been baking all day. It would be a shame for so many pies and cakes to be left uneaten”

“I know, sweetling, but what can be done? I would not feel right having such festivities while Richard must be attended to. I am sure the staff will understand,” Darcy replied.

“Could we just not attend the ball?” Elizabeth offered.

Mary thought for a moment, before offering a solution of her own. “I could stay behind and look after Fitzwilliam and William while you all attended the ball. Then the ball need not be cancelled, Elizabeth.”

“But, Mary. That would hardly be fair for all of us to go while you stay behind,” Georgiana protested.

“I confess that I do not mind, Georgiana. I would be more than content to stay behind. My presence would certainly not be missed while everyone would expect all of you to attend.”

After a little more urging on Mary’s part, Darcy and Elizabeth agreed to Mary’s plan. Now that William was pronounced well, only being in need of a good day’s rest, both parents felt comfortable enough to commit to one evening away from his side. Soon, all of the ladies repaired to their respective chambers to retire for the night, leaving Darcy to look after Fitzwilliam until dawn.
This chapter I changed some details about Fitzwilliam's illness. The term hypothermia didn't come into use until the 1900s when thermometer technology allowed for better diagnosis. It was described as general asphyxia from cold when witnessed among Napoleon's troops and other times likened to delirium. The treatment was warming, but there were different methods and theories on how it should be done.

I also changed the detail of Mary leaving Fitzwilliam's trousers to his valet for modesty's sake. So yes, Mary saw everything. But I don't think she cared much or paid attention because her boo was deathly ill.
Chapter 9

The morning of Christmas Eve found the house in much better spirits then the night before. Preparations for the Servant’s Ball resumed and Georgiana and Mary made visits to Pemberley’s tenants on behalf of the Mistress of Pemberley. Mary and Georgiana traveled from house to house providing generous baskets of sweet stuffs, preserves and warm linens to each family. They were received warmly at the majority of homes, although Mary endured a few wide eyed stares and impertinent questions from some of the children. Most of Pemberley’s tenants had observed Mary on Sundays at the parish and were very much aware of Pemberley’s latest occupant. The most impertinent children were quickly shushed by their parents for fear of offending the master’s ward, and by proxy, the master himself. At the very worst, Mary’s presence was hardly acknowledged at all by the lady of the house. Mary’s smile would grow tight as she pointedly handed them their basket of gifts and wished them a happy Christmas. Despite their apparent distaste for her person, they remained sensible enough to accept the basket of alms.

Mary was gratified that they were able to dispense with their duty to the tenants by mid-day so that she could take her afternoon repast by Fitzwilliam’s bedside. During the day, the family took turns sitting with Fitzwilliam, watching for any changes in his condition. He woke briefly in the late afternoon and Mary was able to get him to partake of some broth before he fell back into a deep sleep. Dr. Roberts was encouraged by this development and the family felt more at ease regarding their plans to attend the Servant’s Ball.

Soon the time for the ball arrived. Georgiana, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy retired to prepare for the ball while Mary headed to William’s room to take of supper with him. The pair passed the hour amicably and Mary treated little William to a story after supper was finished. William sat enchanted for the entire tale. A large yawn on the part of the child signaled the story’s end. William begged Mary to continue, protesting that he was not the least bit tired before giving in to another big yawn. Promising to conclude her story the next afternoon, Mary kissed her little knight on the forehead and left him to the care of his nurse.

Mary made her way towards Colonel Fitzwilliam’s chambers. The Colonel’s valet received Mary more cordially this evening, a quiet understanding and acceptance having been formed between the two. Mary released the valet from his watch so that he could partake of some dinner and perhaps attend the Servant’s Ball as well. All nonessential staff members were in attendance at the ball. Only the valet, William’s nurse and Mary’s maid April stayed behind to look after the ill men.

Mary resumed her place by Fitzwilliam’s side, taking up a piece of embroidery that she had left in his rooms to occupy herself during her shifts. Fitzwilliam slept soundly. Most of the color had returned to his cheeks and Mary thought he looked remarkably well. The anxiety that had robbed her of rest was lessened greatly by his improved health. Content with the notion that Fitzwilliam would rest peacefully for most of the night, Mary set to work on her sampler.

A few hours later, a deep sigh stirred Mary from her task.

“Mary,” Fitzwilliam greeted her, his throat parched and scratchy.

“Shhh, now.” Mary ordered him gently, as she dropped her sampler and moved to pour him a cup of water. She brought the cup to his lips with one hand while helping him lift his head with the other.
“There now,” Mary smiled as she dabbed some of the water that had spilt off of his chin with a cloth.

“So you have come to wait on a foolish wounded soldier?” Fitzwilliam asked, a faint smile lighting upon his lips at the feel of Mary’s hand smoothing back his hair from his face.

“A foolish soldier? No, I only see a brave knight. Is it not the duty of every lady to see that her knights are well looked after when they are ill?” Mary replied to him, before favoring him with a broad smile.

“Brave knight, indeed,” Fitzwilliam harrumphed as he turned his head from her. “Foolish is a more apt title. But for my inattention, William would be well and our Christmas would not be spoiled.”

“How can you speak so ill of yourself, Richard?” Mary countered fervently, “If not for your attention and bravery, William might have drowned and our Christmas would have truly been bleak. But he is well, or will soon be well again. We have much to be grateful for this Christmas in that you both are with us still.”

“Nay. You are too good, Mary. I am to blame and I feel it keenly as I should. I could have prevented it,” Fitzwilliam replied, his voice low and full of regret.

“Look at me, Richard,” Mary commanded, her voice stern. “You are not to blame. How could you have known about the weakness in the ice? We all skated upon it without concern not two days ago. No one could have known the ice would break.”

“But had I been more attentive he would not have fallen at all. I could have…”

“You were there to save him!” Mary cried as she clutched his hands tightly in her own. “With no thought to your own safety, you jumped into the water and brought him back. You could have died in the process, Richard…you almost did,” all sternness fled her voice as she mentioned his sickness.

“Mary?” Fitzwilliam whispered, his brow knit in concern at her change of demeanor.

“I was so afraid, Richard,” Mary choked out, as she tried to wipe the tears that now fell fast. “You were so cold and pale. I thought that…I thought that you might leave me.”

Mary found herself being gently pulled toward the bed. Giving no resistance, Mary followed Fitzwilliam’s gentle urgings and lay beside him, her body on top of the covers that were tucked around him. He gathered her close with one arm and bid her to rest her head upon his chest.

“Shhh, my love, all is well,” he cooed to her as he rubbed her back gently. “You see that I am quite well. Unshaven and quite possibly ill smelling, but quite well.”

Mary could not help but chuckle through her tears. He did look a sight and he had seen fresher smelling days, but Mary would hardly complain. They lay together for several minutes, Fitzwilliam gently rubbing her back and speaking soothing words to her as her tears ran their course. Soon Mary found herself calming, the anxieties and fears of the day beginning to melt away from Fitzwilliam’s soothing caress. Soon her breathing matched his own and Mary was overcome by the comfort and safety she felt in his embrace. She knew that her present position was improper, but she did not care. All that mattered to her was that she was in the arms of the man that she loved and that he was well.

Mary had not realized that she had fallen asleep until a strong jolt broke her from her slumber.

“Richard,” she queried, her voice thick with sleep, “is anything the matter?”
As she regained her senses, Mary realized that things were not well. Mary found that her cheek, that had once rested comfortably upon Fitzwilliam’s chest, was now slick with his sweat. In fact, Fitzwilliam’s clothes were soaked from his perspiration and, although he slept, he had begun to thrash about in his bed. It was as Mary feared; a fever had set in.

Moving quickly from the bed, Mary rang the bell for a servant, before returning to Fitzwilliam’s side to wipe his brow with a wet cloth from the basin by his bedside. As Fitzwilliam’s thrashing became more pronounced, Mary’s unease grew. She wondered how things could have changed so quickly in only the span of a few hours. Soon, her maid April appeared in the doorway. Mary instructed her to alert the doctor that the Colonel had caught fever. As she waited for the doctor to arrive, Mary attempted to cease Fitzwilliam’s violent movements by grasping his arms for fear that he might injure himself. However, Fitzwilliam proved too strong, and she instead found herself thrown to the ground. Mary cried out as she landed on her hand, twisting it painfully. Entering the room soon afterwards, Dr. Roberts rushed to her side and assisted her in standing.

“Are you injured, Miss Mary?”

“It is just my wrist, Dr. Roberts,” Mary replied as she held her forearm gingerly. “But it is of no concern. Merely a sprain, I am sure. It is Richard who concerns me more.”

The doctor looked her over quickly and, satisfied that she was not in too much pain, moved to Fitzwilliam’s bedside as he shed his coat.

“Would you be so god as to send for a footman or another strong servant to help me,” the doctor requested.

Mary sent April to gather a few footmen from the ball. Mary settled herself onto a chaise and watched the scene as she cradled her wrist to her chest. Her sense of uselessness only served to increase her anxiety. She could do nothing to aid Fitzwilliam and could only sit and look on in fear. Mary felt a foreboding sense of déjà vu. It was very late into the evening when Fitzwilliam’s fever finally broke.

“Well, the worst has passed, Miss Farthington,” Dr. Roberts announced as he mopped his brow with a cloth. “The colonel gave me quite a scare, but he appears to be more himself now. He should sleep without anymore problems until morning.”

Mary smiled and nodded, before drawing her injured hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. She grimaced at the pain of the movement, her injury, which had temporarily been forgotten, now making itself more than apparent.

“You should let me have a look at that, Miss Farthington. Come, come.”

Dr. Roberts examined Mary’s wrist, noting the swelling that had taken place and prodding it gingerly for signs of any breakage. After some moments of discomfort on Mary’s part, for having endured the pain, and on Dr. Roberts’ part, for being the instant cause of it, he determined that Mary’s wrist was bruised, but now sprained. The doctor removed the makeshift linen brace that April had fashioned for Mary, and replaced it with a more permanent linen wrap to keep the wrist immobile. After inspecting his handiwork, Dr. Roberts tried to persuade Mary to retire for the remainder of the night. Mary refused to be moved, arguing that she wasn’t the least bit tired and pleaded to be able to sit with Colonel Fitzwilliam just a few hours more. Dr. Roberts consented to this wish, and after informing her that he would only be a few doors down should he be needed again, he retired to his rooms. Mary resumed her seat next to Fitzwilliam’s bed, pulling a quilt that April had brought for her around herself as best she could with her good hand. Mary watched Fitzwilliam sleeping soundly, his black hair wet with perspiration and framing his face haphazardly. Mary determined that whatever
she did she would not fall asleep. She would be there should Fitzwilliam need her, she would not be left to face the worst alone as her father had.

A bright light woke Mary from her slumber. Mary moved to shade her eyes from the light as she slowly recovered consciousness.

“Good morning, miss,” April curtsied to her from her place by the window. She had just opened the curtains after bringing in a tray with a pot of hot tea and a plate of biscuits and jam. “Mrs. Darcy sent up some breakfast for you.”

“Breakfast?” Mary murmured as the fog in her head began to clear and she surveyed her surroundings. She was no longer in Fitzwilliam’s room, but had been placed into her own bed. “April, what time is it?” Mary asked anxiously as she leapt down from her bed.

“Why, it is nearly a quarter ’till eleven, miss.”

“Oh, no. I must see to Richard,” Mary raced from her room with April following close behind with her dressing gown in hand calling for her to stop. When she finally reached Fitzwilliam’s chambers, she threw open the doors not bothering to knock.

“Good heavens!” Dr. Robert’s exclaimed as he turned around. “Oh, it is only you, Miss. Mary. You gave me quite a start. Is everything alright?”

“Richard,” Mary cried out as she hurried towards the doctor. “Is Richard…tell me the Colonel is not dead.”

“Why, I dearly hope that I am not.”

Mary gasped, her look of anguish giving way to one of relief. Dr. Roberts smiled at her, before stepping aside to give her an unobstructed view of the bed. Fitzwilliam sat grinning at her, his back supported by a mountain of pillows. He looked remarkably well, being clean-shaven and wearing a fresh shirt and cravat. Dr. Roberts slipped from the room, closing the door behind him. At the sound of the door closing, Mary fell upon the bed, seizing him in a tight embrace as she showered his face with small kisses.

Fitzwilliam laughed, “If this is the greeting I am to receive, I think I should spread reports of my demise everyday.”

“Richard, how can you tease me at a time like this?” Mary protested through her laughter.

“Tease you? I assure you that I am perfectly in earnest. To be showered with kisses by a beautiful woman who jumps into your lap while only wearing her delicate nightgown. What better way to start one’s day.”

Mary laughed and hit him playfully on the shoulder. Fitzwilliam feigned injury, which won him more kisses of apology, just as he had desired. Mary clutched him closer and buried her face in the space between his neck and shoulder. Fitzwilliam laughed again until he felt Mary’s hot tears on his neck.

“I see that I have the unforgivable habit of causing you to leak,” Fitzwilliam said as he pulled Mary back far enough so that they could look one another in the eye. “Come, tell me what is the matter. For all my jesting, I am well, as you see. There is no reason for this sadness,” he pleaded in a more
Mary savored the feel of his hand caressing her cheek before replying. “I am not sad, Richard. Indeed I am quite the opposite.”

“Then why these tears, Princess?”

“Last night you were in such a state. It scared me so and I vowed that I would not sleep or leave your side until I knew you were well. When I awoke in my own chambers, I feared that I had failed you, just like I failed him,” Mary explained as she brushed a wayward lock of hair from before his eyes. “But, here I find you well and just as handsome and exasperating as before and I thank God that it is so.” Mary embraced him again, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Just like who, my love? Who did you think you failed?” Fitzwilliam asked after several moments.

Mary took a deep breath before telling him about the night her father died. Fitzwilliam listened closely, coming to better understand her behavior and fears. When she finished her account, Fitzwilliam cupped her face in his large hands and brushed away the new tears that began to fall down her cheeks.

“You must remember what I promised you, Princess,” Fitzwilliam said, his voice soft and tender. “I will never leave you unless it is your most earnest wish.”

“Yet such a thing is not in your power to ensure,” Mary protested.

“What I know in my heart is within my power, Mary. I would never abandon you. I would face all of Napoleon’s armies to stay by your side.”

Fitzwilliam pulled Mary towards him and captured her lips in a kiss. Finding no resistance, he pulled Mary against him on the bed, his hands roaming her figure through the thin fabric of her chemise. Mary soon forgot her tears, so consumed was she in this new feeling of abandonment. All she was sensible of were Fitzwilliam’s lips, hands and the smell of him, clean and earthy. Soon, a pleasantly startled Mary found herself beneath Fitzwilliam, the thick covers of the bed a barrier between them. Fitzwilliam resumed his attentions to her mouth, this time seeking entrance with his tongue. Mary was surprised by this action, but she soon came to enjoy the sensation of this more intimate contact. Just when Mary began to wonder if she could do without air for much longer, Fitzwilliam moved from her mouth to placing kisses down her neck and along her collarbone. Mary thought to protest at the break in contact until she shivered at the sensation caused by the soft brush of his lips against her skin.

Fitzwilliam remembered himself upon hearing Mary’s soft moan. He moved his weight off of her, laying to the side of her as he ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“Forgive me,” Fitzwilliam whispered as his breathing returned to normal. “I did not intend to take such liberties.

“There is no need to apologize, Richard. These activities… were not unpleasant,” Mary replied as she bit her bottom lip and turned away from him.

“‘Not unpleasant?’” Fitzwilliam repeated. “I should take offense and work to extract higher praise than ‘not unpleasant.’ But I fear that by doing so I make take actions that we both may come to regret.”
“Then perhaps it is best that I take my leave of you,” Mary replied as she moved to get off the bed. “I also would not want to be found so scandalously underdressed in a gentleman’s bed.”

“It may be too late for that,” Fitzwilliam replied. “The good doctor was witness to your attack on my person upon your bursting into my chambers. However, he is the picture of discretion.”

“Attack on your person!” Mary replied incredulously. “I thought you said there was no better way for one to start one’s morning. If it is such an imposition, I will be sure to never ‘attack’ you again.”

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily at this retort. Mary slipped from Fitzwilliam’s room and hurried to her chambers. Closing the door behind her, Mary fell upon her bed and laughed in delight. What a wonderful Christmas this was turning out to be.

Georgiana stood motionless in the hallway, watching Mary’s form retreat down the hall back towards her bedroom. Georgiana had thought to check on her cousin after breakfast and to perhaps sit with him for a while once the doctor was finished with his examination. Georgiana was surprised to find Mary, rather than the doctor, slipping from Fitzwilliam’s rooms. Upon seeing Mary’s exit, Georgiana unconsciously stepped into a nearby doorway, ensuring that she had an unobstructed view of Mary without fear of detection. Georgiana watched Mary make her quiet exit and was alarmed to find Mary clad only in a thin chemise, her feet bare and her dark hair unbound and hanging in thin dark ropes that framed her face and shoulders. However, it was not Mary’s state of undress that caused Georgiana’s alarm, but the look of pure joy that covered her face.

Georgiana was not released from her spell until several moments after Mary had disappeared into her own chambers far down the hall. Her suspicions regarding Mary and the Colonel could no longer be brushed aside. Hurt and humiliation warred within her chest as Georgiana quickly made her way for the safety of her own rooms. Once safely in her chambers, she dismissed her maid with orders that she not be disturbed and sank onto her bed as her resolve gave way to a flood of tears.
Chapter 10

Her tears spent, Georgiana lay upon her bed staring uncomprehendingly at the lace canopy. Georgiana wished that she could undo what she had witnessed in the hall that mid-morning. However, the image of her friend slinking away from her cousin Richard’s bedchamber in naught but her chemise proved too potent to be imagined away. Georgiana suspected that she had caught Mary leaving from some sort of assignation with Richard. However hard Georgiana tried, she could develop no other explanation for Mary being alone in Richard’s room so improperly dressed. Yet Georgiana did not want to think so meanly of her friend or her cousin. She knew Mary and understood her character. Richard was her guardian and had always conducted himself with propriety and decorum. Surely nothing too improper had occurred between them. Georgiana concluded that there had to be some sort of understanding between the two. The scene she had witnessed in addition to the other instances of displayed sentiments that Georgiana had noticed only served to turn what she had thought to be paranoia and mere suspicion to irrefutable fact; Richard’s heart was out of her reach.

Richard had always been a favorite of Georgiana’s. When they were children, she looked forward to his visits above that of any other relative. While Fitzwilliam was always a kind and solicitous brother, Richard had been the only one who ever really listened to Georgiana. She felt as if she could tell him everything, no matter how trivial or silly. He would even oblige her in attending her tea parties. Richard was always mindful to conduct himself with the manners befitting a formal tea; never once did he spill his tea or send Georgiana into hysterics by sneaking a frog into the teapot like George sometimes did. After their father passed away and Fitzwilliam changed from brother figure to that of a father, it was Richard who became her source of constancy. He remained her confidante and the one who could always make her smile or laugh at herself, even at her lowest moments. Following the affair at Ramsgate, Georgiana began to appreciate these qualities of her cousin even more. She had never felt such shame or degradation as when Wickham’s true nature was revealed to her and she began to see the disastrous consequences of her foolhardy actions. Even more so than the possible scorn she would face from society, Georgiana feared losing the love and good opinion of her brother Fitzwilliam and the affection of her cousin. Despite her fears, Fitzwilliam never lost his love for his sister, becoming even more solicitous and attentive than before. However, when Georgiana looked at her brother, she could not help but be reminded of the worry and shame she had brought him by her foolish actions. During Richard’s visits she could somehow forget her heartache and shame.

When Richard was sent away to the Americas when the war broke out, Georgiana thought her heart would break again due to her longing for him. Two long years he had been away. During that time Georgiana had grown and matured, leaving behind her girlish ways to become a woman. With the support of Elizabeth and her aunt, Lady Matlock, she had been presented at court and thrived during her first season. She was admired and sought after by some of the most eligible bachelors of the ton. However, none of them, even the wealthiest and most titled of her suitors could fill the space Richard had long occupied in her heart. Her brother and sister could not understand why she refused her first offers of marriage and courtship. Georgiana did not think that they would be able to understand that she was saving herself in the hope that Richard would return and offer for her.

Georgiana now thought herself a fool of the highest order. All of her hopes and dreams had been for naught. Instead of returning from the war and asking for her hand, Richard was wooing one whom Georgiana had thought of as a dear friend. Georgiana knew not with whom she should be more angry: herself for believing that Richard had loved her as more than a little sister or Mary for capturing his affections in her stead.
As the Darcy family Christmas Eve celebrations were put on hold due to the illness of both Colonel Fitzwilliam and young master William, the family of Pemberley resumed their celebrations on the evening of Christmas. Dr. Roberts pronounced Col. Fitzwilliam well enough to join the family for the evening repast, provided that he was kept warm and bundled. Declining the family’s invitation to join their Christmas celebrations, Dr. Roberts left them to rejoin his family in Lambton for what was left of the Christmas season. Mr. Darcy ensured that the doctor was paid handsomely for his services and sent him home with an assortment of rich foodstuffs as an offering of thanks to his wife for sacrificing her husband to them during the holiday.

The Christmas meal was a festive time for the entire household. Everyone dressed with particular care, including young William who looked forward to the opportunity of joining the adults at the evening meal and being allowed to stay awake well past his normal bedtime. April attended to her mistress with a particular sense of glee that evening as she was given free reign to make Mary as pretty as she desired. Comfortable with transitioning from her mourning attire, Mary was easily persuaded to retire her grey and black gowns for the lovely green gown that April had laid out for her, as well as a becoming necklace with an emerald pendant. April adorned her locs with gold pins, leaving a few of the thin dark ropes to hang about her face. Mary could not help but smile at the pleasing picture reflected in the mirror once April’s work was complete. She wondered if Richard would be pleased as well.

As the dinner hour struck, Mary left her chambers to make her way towards the dining room. As was her custom, Mary first went to Georgiana’s room so that they could make their way down together. After waiting for several minutes, Mary became concerned that they would be late for dinner, which would not do. Mary knocked lightly on Georgiana’s door and was surprised when Georgiana’s maid answered and informed her that Georgiana had already departed. Mary wondered at this, as they had always gone down to dinner together. Resolving to worry about it no more, Mary made her way down to the dining room alone. Perhaps Georgiana had just been anxious to meet the family for the Christmas dinner. Mary was certainly anxious to meet one particular gentleman again.

Mary entered the sitting room to find that the entire family had already gathered for the Christmas meal. Everyone looked well in their holiday attire; even little William was taking extra care to behave as a proper gentleman in his fancy coat. Mary spied Georgiana sitting off to the side of the family and made to smile at her friend in greeting. She looked lovely in her pale blue gown. Mary was astonished to find that her friendly smile was not returned. Upon seeing her, Georgiana paled slightly before casting her eyes down towards her lap. Mary’s thoughts on this strange behavior was interrupted by Mr. Darcy’s greeting.

“Wonderful, we are all assembled,” Darcy stated as he moved towards her. He gave Mary a brotherly kiss on the cheek, pronouncing her to be the picture of loveliness. Mary’s cheeks grew warm at this unexpected display, and she cast her eyes downward in embarrassment.

“I find myself in complete agreement,” the Colonel offered as he walked over to join them. “I am sure that I have never seen three lovelier ladies in all of England!” His eyes rested on Mary alone as he said this, a disarming smile on his face.

Mary met the Colonel’s gaze with a warm smile of her own, heat diffusing her cheeks once again. For one that had recently been so ill, Fitzwilliam was in remarkably good looks. Mary had thought that she was not the sort of girl to have her head turned by a red coat, but she could not help but look on Fitzwilliam in his regimentals with admiration. She had never seen a man who looked more handsome.
Mary had not realized she had been staring until she was called to her self by Elizabeth’s discrete cough. Elizabeth suppressed a grin at Mary’s startled reaction before pronouncing that they all retire to dinner. Little William offered his mother his arm, which she laughingly accepted, grasping his little hand in hers. Finding himself supplanted by a younger man, Darcy offered his arm to Georgiana. This left Fitzwilliam with the happy task of offering his arm to Mary, which was accepted with great pleasure.

Darcy watched the scene with some anxiety, noticing the look of happiness on the face of Mary as she placed her gloved hand on the Colonel’s arm, which was affectionately covered by his own hand. Fitzwilliam, who had not ceased staring at Mary like some moonstruck fob since she entered the room, looked down upon her with a look of satisfaction and contentment that unnerved Darcy. As he escorted his sister to dinner, Darcy resolved to pay particular attention to the pair during the course of the evening’s events.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was pleased to be seated next to Miss Farthington during dinner. She looked particularly well in a fetching green gown with a pleasingly low cut neckline. Fitzwilliam found it particularly difficult during dinner to keep his eyes from slowly venturing towards the décolletage of his dinner mate given the events of that morning. Luckily, Mary seemed to be unaware of his attentions to that particular region of her figure. In order to help cool his ardor, he made sure to engage his young cousins in conversation. Georgiana was unusually quiet during the meal, answering Fitzwilliam’s attempts at conversation in noncommittal phrases. When it was clear that conversation on that score would be fruitless, he turned to chat with William, who sat across from him between his mother and aunt. His wee cousin looked particularly well, as if recent dour events had never occurred. The Colonel took great delight in causing the young boy to dissolve into giggles by sharing colorful stories of his and Darcy’s boyhood.

However, his greatest delight came from conversing with the young lady beside him. When he did not have the good fortune of monopolizing her attentions, he watched her as she conversed with others, committing every turn of her face to memory. He looked forward to the day when he had a superior claim to her looks and smiles. Fitzwilliam would have regarded the meal as perfectly enjoyable but for Georgiana’s silence and the dark looks sent him by his cousin Darcy. Fitzwilliam did not wonder at the meaning of these, although it did serve to damper his hopes that Elizabeth had succeeded in altering Darcy’s opinion on his suit.

After the meal, the entire family retired to the drawing room for more celebrations. The room was decorated in greenery and red ribbons, with a large Yule log burning in the fireplace. Despite the recent events that caused the celebrations to be put on hold, Mrs. Reynolds had been adamant about having the Yule log lit on Christmas Eve as tradition required. As was the custom, the festivities began with the reading of the Christmas story by Darcy. He sat in a large chair with the family Bible and a well-bundled William in his lap. The others gathered on various couches to listen. Fitzwilliam was sure to secure a seat beside Mary for the telling, who dotingly covered his legs with a warm throw.

Following the Christmas story, the family exchanged gifts. Little William looked forward to this portion of the festivities most of all. His eyes grew as wide as saucers as he began to unwrap the small pile of presents that was set before him. The full extent of his mirth was unleashed as he unraveled a smart wooden shield painted in bright colors of orange and red along with a toy sword. William launched himself into his father’s arms repeating his most earnest thanks as he hugged him tightly. Darcy returned the boys embrace while laughing cheerfully. While he strove to impart to his son the importance of maintaining a gentlemanly comportment, Darcy could not help but be amused at his son’s unsuppressed joy. Elizabeth laughed at the sight, and bent low to receive her kiss of thanks as well.
“We felt that no knight could be without his sword and shield,” Elizabeth explained as she ruffled her son’s dark curls, “How else are you to protect your kingdom from dragons and fell beasts?”

To accompany his sword and shield, his cousin Fitzwilliam presented young William with his own mount. Well, to be more precise, it was merely a stick horse, but from William’s delight in the object, it was clear that the young boy would not quibble over such a distinction.

“Now, all that remains is for you to be knighted by your Queen,” Mr. Darcy announced, to the amusement of all. Mary watched with delight as the little boy knelt before his mother to be knighted with the wooden sword. Upon officially being dubbed Sir Little Bits of Pemberley, William leapt from his position on the floor to claim his knightly accoutrements and to begin his duty. As William rode his horse about the sitting room, the other members of the household exchanged gifts among themselves.

Mary sat and wistfully watched the scene unfold before her. In all of the excitement and anxiety of the past few days she did not have much time to think upon the import of the season. This was her first Christmas without her father. Those celebrations spent with him had not been so different from this celebration. She would share a meal with her father, one that she had cooked with her own hands as the servants were all given the day off to spend with their own families. As cooking was not an activity she was often privy to, the meals were simple, yet hearty. A roasted chicken with vegetables and fresh bread followed by a pie was the extent of their meal. Afterwards they would sing carols together and exchange simple gifts by the fire. While Lord Farthington possessed great wealth, he was careful not to spoil his daughter with an abundance of fine gifts.

The gifts Mary received this year were very fine. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy gifted her with a new ruby broach and ear fobs as well as a fine set of drawing papers and charcoal. Having noted her drawings in her journal, Mr. Darcy thought she might like to develop her skills with a drawing master once they returned to London. Mary accepted these gifts with great delight. Her own gifts to her guardians were simple in comparison. To Elizabeth, Mary gave a comb inlaid with mother of pearl that she had found in a shop in Lambton. To Mr. Darcy, Mary gave a leather bound book on the Napoleonic wars. These gifts were received with great delight as neither had expected to receive any gifts from their charge.

Georgiana quietly presented Mary with her present of silk bookmarkers. Mary was delighted with the gift as it was just what she needed. Her thanks were accepted coolly, her tight hug of gratitude unreturned. Mary knew not what to make of this. Her gift of music to Georgiana was accepted with equal coolness. Mary continued to be confused by the behavior of her friend and resolved to discover the cause of her peculiar behavior as soon as they had a moment alone.

Mary’s contemplations on Georgiana’s behavior were interrupted by Colonel Fitzwilliam’s quiet approach. Mary greeted his interruption with a warm smile. She observed that both of his hands were held behind his back and he wore a sly grin.

“Can you guess what I have hidden behind my back, princess?” he queried once he reached her.

“A gift for me, perhaps?” Mary answered, answering his grin with one of her own.

“I marvel at your perceptiveness,” he replied laughingly as he brought a small wrapped box from behind his back. He gave the room a quick cursory glance to ensure they were not being observed before holding the box out to her. As she reached out to accept it, Fitzwilliam caught her hand and pulled her closer to him. “I would ask one favor of you, Mary,” he whispered to her, “I would that you refrain from opening this small token until we meet tonight in the solarium a quarter hour after all have retired. Say that you will meet me?”
Mary bit her lip before nodding her agreement. This was met with a wide smile on Fitzwilliam’s part. After maneuvering themselves towards a corner where their conversation would be less observed, Mary presented him with his present, which required no waiting on his part.

“I knew not what to give to you,” Mary began as she handed Fitzwilliam a wrapped parcel. She nearly faltered at the darkened look of passion she saw in his eyes. “However, I could not see your use for baubles or ornamental things. So, I felt that I would give you that which I really desired to give. I hope it is to your liking.”

Fitzwilliam carefully unwrapped the parcel to find a small book of Shakespeare’s sonnets. He noticed that there was a piece of paper jutting out just beyond the pages of the book. He opened the tome and noted where the paper was placed. Fitzwilliam’s heart swelled at the discovery. Closing the tome, Fitzwilliam brought Mary’s hand to his lips and lightly brushed the back of it with a gentle kiss.

“I thank you, Miss Farthington,” Fitzwilliam said loud enough to be overheard. “It is just the gift that I desired.”

Mary smiled warmly before indicating that it would be best to rejoin the others. Elizabeth watched their return with great interest, her joy at the obvious intimacy between the two written on her features. Darcy, however, watched the proceedings with a wary feeling. It was growing more apparent to him that his earlier discussion with his cousin had gone unheeded and that his cousin had taken to wooing Mary under his very door against his wishes. However, what he found even more troubling was Mary’s growing regard for Fitzwilliam. Unlike some women of his acquaintance, her feelings could be plainly read upon her features. All night her features plainly betrayed her deepening infatuation with Fitzwilliam. Darcy knew that if certain steps were not taken soon, the pain he had hoped to shield her from would be unavoidable.

After the exchanging of gifts, the family sang Christmas carols and hymns while partaking of hot-spiced wine and mince meat pies. Georgiana, however, retired soon after the singing began begging fatigue. Elizabeth raised a speculative eyebrow at the pronouncement, exchanging a worried glance with Darcy. Georgiana’s sullen spirits had not gone unnoticed by her sister. Elizabeth made a note to speak with Georgiana at a later time. It was not until late in the evening when the rest of the household made to retire. Little William had long ago fallen asleep in his mother’s lap, one small hand still clutching a half eaten ginger spice cookie. Despite the events that marked the beginning of their yuletide, all felt that it had been a fine Christmas indeed.

Mary fingered the ribbon of the small gift box as she sat waiting impatiently for the clock to note the time of her intended rendezvous with Fitzwilliam. Excitement and anticipation knotted within her stomach. She was eager to know what was contained within the small box and even more eager to meet with Fitzwilliam in private. She wondered what he had thought of her gift. At first she thought she had been too brazen in her choice of gift. Mary had folded within the pages of the book of poetry a portrait of herself drawn by her own hand. She wondered if Fitzwilliam had realized the import of the sonnet where she had chosen to place her portrait. Looking again at the box she held in her hand, an earnest hope began to grow within her breast as to what the box contained. Mary eyed the clock on her mantle once more. Much to her displeasure, only five minutes had passed by. Oh! How tortuous the final ten minutes would be!

Fitzwilliam left his chambers and made his way towards the solarium not five minutes after he had retired to his room. No one had seen him on his journey to the solarium. Most of the candles in the halls had been snuffed out necessitating that he bring a candelabra to light his way. Coming to the
solarium, Fitzwilliam made to light a few candles in the room before thinking better of it. The moon was shining particularly bright that evening providing sufficient illumination to light Mary’s path once she arrived as well as adding a pleasing atmosphere to the room. Fitzwilliam made his way towards the small fountain in the centre of the room and placed the candelabra on the marble bench there. Fitzwilliam drew in a deep breath which he exhaled smoothly as he turned to look about the room. Yes, this would do perfectly, he thought.

Fitzwilliam sat to collect his thoughts. He was surprised at how nervous he felt as the minutes passed until Mary would come to him. He felt that he had no cause to fear her rejection. She had made her feelings abundantly clear in her gift to him. Still, he found his hands shaking slightly as he eyed his pocket watch. In the distance, Fitzwilliam heard the door to the solarium open. He shot to his feet, nearly causing the candelabra to topple in his haste. Fitzwilliam let out a brief curse as he set the candelabra to rights. A small giggle alerted him to the fact that his clumsiness had not gone unnoticed.

“I do not see what is so humorous, Miss. Farthington,” Fitzwilliam scowled as he faced a grinning Mary. “I could have set myself aflame, and I assure you, that would be no laughing matter.”

Mary made to school her features into a look of contrition. “Forgive me, Colonel Fitzwilliam. You are quite right. It would indeed be a pity to scorch such a lovely red coat.”

Fitzwilliam smiled at this, his attempt at looking dour abandoned. “Did you have any trouble coming here? Were you seen?”

“No. Everyone was quite tired after the festivities. I did have to give April some excuse for my absence. However, she would tell no one.”

“Good,” Fitzwilliam replied before giving her a quick kiss on the lips. He took her hand into his own and gently led her towards a window. “Is it not a beautiful night, Mary?”

Mary turned her gaze from Fitzwilliam’s face to look out the window. The moon was high and exceedingly bright, making the snow covered grounds of Pemberley shine as if someone had sprinkled it with crushed diamonds. It was indeed a beautiful evening. Mary stepped closer to Fitzwilliam and leaned her head back on his shoulder as she voiced her agreement. They remained silent for several minutes looking out over Pemberley and at their image reflected in the glass.

“Do you remember what took place on this spot, Princess?” Fitzwilliam queried, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” Mary answered, a smile tugging at her lips. “This is where we shared our first kiss,” Mary turned towards him, her eyes shining in expectation.

Fitzwilliam cupped her cheek in his hand and slightly dipped his head towards her, placing a lingering kiss on the corner of her mouth.

“Not a week ago I met you here and revealed part of my heart to you. Tonight I wish to show you all,” Fitzwilliam whispered against her cheek, his breath heating her skin. “That morning I told you that I most desired to ask you one particular question but for having won your heart. Do I have it, Princess?”

“It is your own, Richard,” Mary whispered in reply, her eyes never leaving his.

At this, Fitzwilliam claimed her lips again, this time kissing her mouth hungrily. They remained thus for several long moments before breaking apart.
Fitzwilliam rested his forehead upon her own, his voice breathy for want of air, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not true which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove,” Fitzwilliam paused to kiss away two tears that slid down Mary’s cheeks. “O no! It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken. It is the start to every wandering bark, whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken. Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks,” he paused again to kiss each, “within his bending sickle’s compass come. Love alters not within his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

Once he had finished reciting the Bard’s words, Mary reached for him and claimed his lips again. Fitzwilliam laughed as the kiss ended, surprised by her initiative. Fitzwilliam lead Mary to the bench where both the candelabra and the unopened gift box sat. After carefully placing the candelabra on the ground, which caused Mary to snicker softly, Fitzwilliam bid Mary to sit and open the box. Mary complied with gusto. Upon opening the box, Mary discovered an even smaller box tucked within. She looked at Fitzwilliam quizzically, to be answered with a grin and wag of the eyebrows. Mary smiled at his antics before opening the smaller box to reveal a small velvet covered box that left no doubt over what could be found inside. Mary opened the box to find a pair or drop pearl earrings. Mary’s expectant smile faded.

Seeing her disappointment, Fitzwilliam caught her chin and gently urged her to look at him. “Are they not to your liking, Princess? I know that they are not the most grand earrings, but they were the best that Lambton had to offer given a soldier’s salary.”

“No…I mean yes, they are quite lovely Fitzwilliam,” Mary smiled at him in an effort to reassure him. “They are quite beautiful indeed. I could not be more pleased with your gift. Thank you, Richard.”

Fitzwilliam smiled at her, sensing her disappointment and understanding its source. How he would have loved to have gifted her with quite a different sort of jewelry. But for his promise to Elizabeth, he would be down upon his knee at this very moment.

“I wanted to give you these as a sign of my affection for you. I also hoped that you would do me the honor of wearing them at the Twelfth Night Ball where I hope to have the honor of your hand for the first.”

Mary smiled at this request, closing the small velvet box. “I would be delighted, Fitzwilliam.”

Fitzwilliam answered her acceptance with a kiss upon the lips before standing from the bench.

“The hour grows late, Princess. Perhaps we should make our way back to the family wing?”

“I think it would be best if we left separately, Richard.” Mary answered, her voice shaking slightly. “You go first and I shall follow after a time.”

“Of course,” Fitzwilliam replied as he took her hand and kissed it. “Merry Christmas, Miss. Farthington.”

“Merry Christmas, Col. Fitzwilliam.”
Chapter 11

Mary sat in the dimly lit solarium watching Colonel Fitzwilliam’s figure retreat from the room. Once he had gone, Mary let out a deep sigh. Opening the velvet box, Mary took out the pearl earrings and examined them in the candlelight. They were indeed a beautiful pair of earrings that would complement her warm brown skin nicely. However, they were not the gift that she had been expecting. Slowly, disappointment began to take root within her breast until her chest felt so full that it would burst. A few traitorous tears escaped her eyes.

“Foolish, foolish Mary,” she silently cursed herself.

However, no sooner had she thought the words did she realize the false accusation behind them. She had had every reason to expect a proposal this night. All of his acts and words had spoken of a desire to make her his bride. Every look, touch and kiss had spoken of his admiration of her. Any rational woman in her position would have expected an offer of marriage.

However, perhaps she was foolish. Had not Elizabeth warned her to be careful with her heart? Elizabeth had said that Richard was a charmer who could easily make a woman believe herself in love. Mary also wondered why Richard had not yet sought her guardian’s permission to court her formally. Yet, surely if Richard had only intended for her to be an amusement he would not have wooed so well. At least twice he had practically declared himself. While a gift of earrings had not the same meaning as an engagement ring, a man did not give jewelry to a woman he only intended to use as a flirtation, Mary reasoned. No, Richard would not use her so ill. Mary wiped angrily at her cheeks. There had to be another explanation. Perhaps there was some impediment that merely delayed his proposal? He had asked her for the first set of the ball. He did not mean to quit his attentions to her.

Mary closed her eyes as she remembered Richard’s words to her moments earlier. He had asked if her heart where his alone. Surely she had his heart as well. Mary resolved to be patient and to wait to see what the ball would hold. She could not doubt Fitzwilliam’s character nor did she want to allow herself to regret giving her heart so freely.

Pemberley was a whirlwind of activity in the days leading up to the Twelfth Night Ball. Not only was Pemberley to be the host of a ball on that night, but the great house would also be host to a number of guests who would stay at Pemberley for a few days before and after the ball. With both Fitzwilliam and young William fully recovered, Elizabeth found herself free to throw herself headfirst into the final preparations for the festivities. Georgiana and Mary where also drafted to assist Elizabeth in overseeing preparations. Rooms were aired and made ready, decorations where hung, fresh flowers were plucked from the hothouse, and the kitchens were abuzz with activity. Mary found all of the activity to be exciting as well as a little overwhelming. Her father in New Sussex never found it necessary to have more than a few friends in attendance at their home. As such, Mary only had to oversee the preparation of a few guest rooms and modest meals.

Due to all of the preparations, Mary had little time to spend in frivolity. However, she still managed to make time for Sir Little Bit’s afternoon stories, much to the young gentleman’s delight. Mary was crestfallen to find that Richard was absent from these times, yet Mary was able to find much delight in the company of her most loyal and first knight.

Mary also found that her evening chats with Georgiana were impacted by the preparations.
Georgiana often claimed fatigue, begging off their late night discussions until another day. After three nights of such excuses, Mary began to suspect that there was another reason for Georgiana’s reluctance. However, whenever Mary sought to inquire after the state of her friend, Georgiana assured her that all was well and that she was merely overcome by the hubbub of the season. This explanation only served to calm Mary’s concerns for a few days.

Walking into the music room, Mary was gratified to find Georgiana seated at her pianoforte shuffling through a stack of music. Smiling broadly, Mary moved towards her friend.

“Georgiana, I know that you are about to practice, but I was wondering if we might take the opportunity to chat for a moment.”

Georgiana stilled and settled her music before answering. “Perhaps we can speak later, Mary. As you see, I am about to practice my music and I like to keep to a precise schedule.”

“Please, Georgiana,” Mary pleaded as she came to stand by the pianoforte. “It should only take a few minutes. I can sense that something is bothering you and I would have us talk about it.”

Georgiana kept her gaze fixed on the keys before her before replying, “We shall talk, but it shall be at another time.”

Georgiana began to play signaling that the matter was closed. Mary regarded her friend with some amazement. She turned to leave the room and acquiesce to her friend’s desire before thinking better of it. Mary sat down beside Georgiana and began turning pages for her friend.

“There is no need for you to turn pages for me, Mary. I will do quite fine on my own.”

“I am sure that you are quite capable of playing without assistance,” Mary replied as her eyes followed the music. “But, I am determined to speak with you. I feel that you have been avoiding me and you do not seem to be yourself. You are my friend, my best friend in fact, and I cannot sit by while you are angry with me.”

“Angry with you?” Georgiana queried as she continued to play. “Whatever would give you that idea.”

“Well, you have barely spoken to me since Christmas and whenever I approach you to do so you invent some reason why we cannot. I miss our conversations.”

“I am sure that Cousin Richard would be very obliged to keep you company if you are feeling lonely,” Georgiana replied, her playing becoming more discordant.

“Fitzwilliam? What has he to do with it.”

Georgiana stopped her playing and took a steadying breath before turning to face Mary for the first time. “I saw you leaving Richard’s rooms on Christmas morning.”

Mary looked at her friend quizzically to which Georgiana replied with an uncharacteristic and inelegant snort.

“You must remember it. You were wearing naught by your nightgown when you left a gentleman’s private rooms. I have seen the way he looks at you and the secret smiles that you share,” Georgiana glared at her friend although her tone remained soft. “It is fairly obvious to me that there is some sort of …relationship between you and Fitzwilliam. I would caution to you both to take care. If I am aware of your liaisons it is not long before my brother will discover them for himself.”
Understanding dawned on Mary. Georgiana thought that something illicit was occurring between her and Fitzwilliam. Mary’s previous concern for her friend turned to anger.

“How dare you! You know not of what you speak. I thought that you were my friend, but if you were you would not accuse me of something so despicable!”

“What other conclusion could I come to given your behavior! If you were my friend you would not carry on such a dalliance with my cousin!”

Mary’s mouth fell open in shock. “We have done nothing of which I am ashamed.”

“Any lady of breeding would be ashamed to be found in so compromising a position!”

“Since you are determined to assume the worst of me, let me be explicit about what occurred that morning. I woke up that morning in my room after spending the night nursing your cousin through a horrid fever. I must have fallen asleep sometime during the night after he quieted and was carried by a servant to my rooms. Having so recently found myself in a similar situation when my father became ill and died, I panicked and I feared the worst. I could not bear the thought that another man I loved could be taken from me in such a fashion. I rushed to his room not thinking of what I wore or who might see. I found him well and with the doctor. We…,” Mary paused unsure of what she should reveal as she began to comprehend the impropriety of their behavior. “We embraced and I returned to my rooms. There was no dalliance, no planned assignation.”

Georgiana listened to Mary’s explanation with a slowly deflating posture. Her anger at her friend gave way to remorse and even embarrassment. Of course nothing untoward had occurred, the previous night her cousin had been racked with fever while she and her brother and sister had been enjoying themselves at the Servant’s Ball. Mary had been there to comfort him when she had not. In fact, despite Georgiana’s regard for her cousin, she had not even offered to stay and play nurse to him.

“Then there must be an understanding between you?” Georgiana asked meekly.

“Yes,” Mary paused, unsure of how to reply. “…And no. There is no engagement, if that is what your question. But he has assured me of his love for me and I in turn have pledged my heart to him.”

Georgiana swallowed thickly. She had assumed the worst of her friend and in her accusations had forced Mary to confess what had only brought herself pain. Richard was in love with Mary and beyond her reach.

Mary broke the silence that had settled about them. “I apologize if any of my actions have caused you pain.”

Georgiana looked up at this pronouncement. She felt as if she were the one who owed Mary an apology although she found herself to be then unequal to the task. Georgiana was disconcerted to find that Mary’s eyes had begun to well with unshed tears.

“I would not wish to do anything to harm our friendship as your good opinion means much to me. Even before I arrived here you have treated me as a friend. I…I” Mary’s efforts at checking her tears proved futile. “If you would excuse me.”

Georgiana watched with a sinking heart as Mary fled the room, tears streaking down her cheeks. After gazing at the closed music room door for some moments, Georgiana turned towards the pianoforte as if to resume her playing. However, she soon gave up the pretense of practicing as she laid her head down on the instrument and wept.
Two days before their guests were set to descend upon Pemberley, the family sat for the evening meal. The plans for the ball were coming together nicely and Elizabeth was pleased that her efforts to introduce Mary to society from the comfort and safety of Pemberley would be a success. She was less assured of the opinion of her husband regarding a match between Mary and his cousin. Elizabeth had kept her promise to Fitzwilliam to try to convince Darcy that the match would be a good one for all parties involved. Darcy had come as far as to concede that Fitzwilliam’s regard for Mary was genuine and that he had observed affection on the part of Mary. However, he still had reservations about the prudence of agreeing to the match as it would undoubtedly subject Mary to the ridicule of society. Elizabeth hoped that her house party and ball would demonstrate to her husband that Mary would be well received by those in society whom they regarded as their friends and close acquaintances. If Mary was well received at the ball surely those who admired her as Miss Farthington would not despise her as Mrs. Fitzwilliam.

Darcy was engaged in similar contemplations as he watched his cousin and his charge engaged in private conversation, their heads bent toward one another and almost touching. Fitzwilliam had done little to hide his admiration of Mary and was obviously wooing her despite his vocal objections to the match. Darcy took a full swig of his wine before releasing a heavy sigh. It appeared as if his entire family were at odds with him over his opinion on the match. He looked towards Georgiana to find her watching the couple with an unreadable expression on her face. Darcy almost thought it was a look of resignation, however he could not imagine what would cause his sister to feel such a way.

“So, Mrs. Darcy, what entertainments have you devised for our guests?” Fitzwilliam suddenly addressed Elizabeth. “I was just telling Miss Mary about some of the more traditional Twelfth Night entertainments.”

Elizabeth smiled, happy to speak of her preparations. “I thought that our friends might enjoy participating in some winter sports, especially those who are coming from town. I had thought that an afternoon of ice skating would be an enjoyable pastime, but we now know that the ice on the pond is quite unstable. Seeing as we have a nice coat of snow about the grounds, I thought that sleigh rides would be an adequate substitute. A few blankets, warming bricks and a basket with hot cocoa and refreshments. The grounds will look absolutely splendid.”

“A sleigh ride sounds delightful,” Mary replied excitedly.

Fitzwilliam smiled at his dinner partner. “There are few outdoor winter amusements which are its equal.”

“Yes, sleigh rides can be very romantic, especially those done in the evening under the stars.” Elizabeth added, looking at her husband with a conspiratorial gaze.

Darcy could not help but to smile back at his wife’s teasing look. However, his amusement soon faded as he watched his wife’s eyes stray across the table toward Mary and Richard. Darcy frowned as he observed the shy smile Mary gave Fitzwilliam in response to his roguish wink. He decided to have another discussion with his cousin once dinner was over and the gentlemen separated from the ladies.

“Who has accepted our invitation to stay with us?” Georgiana queried, discomforted by the turn of the conversation. “I do hope cousin Gregory is to attend. It has been quite sometime since he has visited.”

“I had a letter from my brother the other day,” Fitzwilliam offered as he took a sip of his whine. “He is to join us along with the Viscountess, her cousin Lady Letitia and a few of his associates.”
“It shall be a pleasure to see Gregory again,” Darcy replied to this announcement. A plan soon began to form in his head after the mention of Lady Letitia. Lady Letitia was a woman of considerable fortune from a distinguished family. As Darcy remembered, she had seemed to enjoy the company of Fitzwilliam when last they were all together.

“We are also to expect a few house guests who claim an acquaintance with you, Mary,” Elizabeth addressed her with a wide smile. “Mr. Brambles has written to say that he shall join us for the festivities as well as your cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Peterson.”

Mary’s face split into a wide smile at this pronouncement. She was beyond pleased to know that she would meet with Mr. Brambles again and she was very anxious to meet Mr. and Mrs. Peterson. Mrs. Peterson was her father’s cousin and closest living relative as far as Mary was aware. They had exchanged a few letters over the past week with Mrs. Peterson inviting her to spend the summer months with them at their house in Brighton.

“That is lovely!” Mary exclaimed. “Mr. Brambles was my father’s solicitor. He accompanied me from New Sussex until I was settled here at Pemberley.” Mary explained to Fitzwilliam in reply to his look of confusion. “I shall be very pleased to meet with him again.”

Fitzwilliam smiled, gratified by Mary’s pleasure at being reunited with old friends and new. “I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance as well.”

After the evening meal, the men separated from the women to partake of port and fine cigars.

“Pemberley shall be quite the mad house in a few days time. However shall you manage all the simpering ball guests, cousin?”

Darcy laughed. “I think I shall manage them quite well. I admit that I formerly had little love for balls and house parties, but Elizabeth has helped me to feel quite comfortable at such events. Do not mistake me,” Darcy protested at Fitzwilliam’s huff of disbelief. “I would still much prefer a quiet evening with family and a few close friends to a ball. However, balls are no longer the grueling ordeal that they once were.”

“Well, it has been quite such time since I have partaken of the fripperies of polite society. I just hope that I can remember all of my dance steps. I hope that the Corantes is still in fashion.”

“I am sure that none of the ladies will disparage your skill at the dance, cousin. As I recall, you always were quite fond of dancing. However, I should warn you that Elizabeth has insisted that there be a waltz in addition to the country dances,” Darcy groaned.

“Scandalous!” Fitzwilliam exclaimed with mock horror. “Really I am sure that the ball and house party shall be everything that is delightful and proper.”

“Fitzwilliam, I would ask a favor of you,”

“A favor? If it is in my power to grant, Cousin, then you shall have it.”

Darcy took a slow drag of his cigar before replying. “As you are aware your brother is to attend the ball and shall be accompanied by his wife’s cousin Lady Letitia.”

“Yes, what of it?” Fitzwilliam asked warily.

“Well, Lady Letitia Montrose is a very eligible lady of no small fortune and from an excellent family. It is my desire that you assist Elizabeth and I in our hosting duties by being her companion of sorts this weekend during the house party.”
“Companion? Surely Lady Letitia does not need me to chaperone or coddle her. Furthermore, I would not wish to give Lady Letitia the wrong impression regarding my intentions.”

“Well,” Darcy replied as he sipped his port casually, “You could do much worse than Lady Letitia. Such a connection would undoubtedly be pleasing to both your parents and her own.”

“What are you about Darcy? You are very much aware of where my intentions lie.”

“Yes, I am quite aware of your intentions toward Miss. Farthington. You persist in pursuing a connection with her despite my disapproval.”

“I have no wish to deny that a connection is my intent,” Fitzwilliam replied as he placed his glass firmly on the table before him. “In fact, I plan to ask for her hand in marriage.”

“You would ask her hand despite my disapproval!”

“Yes. I would. I love Mary and she has been so very kind as to return my affections with equal ferocity. I would suggest that you begin to acquaint yourself with that reality.”

“You forget, cousin, that she is my charge and cannot marry without my consent. Furthermore, I have control of her fortune until she reaches the age of twenty-five.”

“I am quite aware of your duties to her as her guardian. You forget that I am very familiar with the role of protector of young ladies. However, I fear you have let your concerns about the views of society cloud your better judgment.”

“On the contrary. I fear that is you who has been behaving without the guide of judgment.” Darcy rose from his seat and took his customary position by the window. “You must realize that my opposition to the match stems purely from my concern for Mary and yourself. If I were to allow you to wed you would be shunned by all proper society.”

“Cousin, I fully understand your concerns about the reception Mary and I would receive. If I loved her less or if she were indifferent, such concerns would be sufficient to sway me from my suit.”

Fitzwilliam sighed heavily before joining his cousin by the window, his glass of port in hand. “I love Mary. I truly do. You of all people know that I have never been in the position to say such a thing about any other woman. I am prepared to spend the rest of my life making her happy and protecting her from harm. I assure you that I am equal to both tasks.”

Darcy turned to face his cousin. By his grave tone and sober expression, Darcy knew that Fitzwilliam meant every word that he said. He had observed his cousin carry on innocent flirtations with many women and he knew that his intentions toward Mary bore little resemblance to those amusements. His cousin, the self-proclaimed life long bachelor who loved good society and all of its amusements, was now declaring that he intended to settle down with a woman whose background would mean that he would be forever excluded from that society. Something had changed in Fitzwilliam during his long absence from England, something that allowed Fitzwilliam to see in Mary a future he would not have previously welcomed. However, Darcy was unsure if his cousin’s resolve and conviction would be sufficient to shield Mary from harm. He did not wish to make his cousin unhappy nor did he desire to give Mary further cause for pain when she had so recently suffered so much. If her heart was truly touched as he suspected, Mary would be harmed regardless of his decision. Darcy realized that the choice before him was only that of choosing the proverbial lesser of two evils.

“I do not know if I am prepared to give you the answer which you desire. However, I promise to
consider the matter some more. Until then I would ask that you do the favor which I have asked of you.”

“Oh, then that will have to be enough for me right now,” Fitzwilliam answered, a small smile of relief playing about his mouth. “And I will honor my promise to play host to the Viscountess and her sister.”

“Thank you,” Darcy replied. “Shall we rejoin the ladies? I fear we have deprived them of our presence long enough.”

The gentlemen left Darcy’s study to join the ladies who had assembled in the music room. The sight that greeted them was everything that was charming. Georgiana sat at the pianoforte busily playing a charming air while Elizabeth stood by her voice raised in song. Mary was seated not far from the pair, her fingers busily plucking at the strings of a harp. Darcy and Fitzwilliam took seats so as to enjoy the lady’s exhibition.

Fitzwilliam was entranced by the vision of Mary at the harp. Her long fingers delicately strumming the strings of the harp and her head bent in concentration, a few locks of dark hair falling over her forehead. He had never had the opportunity to see Mary play the harp and he found that he found even more pleasure in her playing the stringed instrument than in her pianoforte performances. With the harp Mary seemed to forget the world around her, all of her focus consumed in her playing. Her face was relaxed, a delicate smile formed on her lips. Her shoulders lost all tension as she appeared to melt into the instrument. Fitzwilliam barely registered when the performance came to an end until Darcy’s enthusiastic clapping brought him out of his reverie.

“That was a most excellent performance,” Darcy praised the trio as he stepped forward to kiss his wife’s hand. “Will you all be favoring us with a similar performance when our guests arrive?”

“Yes, dear. We shall be performing for our guests but not during the ball. We have each been practicing on our own and tonight is our first time playing together,” Elizabeth replied before giving her husband an impish grin. “Do you think we’ll put the Darcy name to shame?”

“Oh, of course not,” Fitzwilliam answered in all seriousness before Darcy could reply. “That was the most delightful performance I have heard in quite sometime.”

“However you have been marooned in the wilds of America these last few years,” Elizabeth teased in return. “Perhaps your taste in music has been dulled.”

Fitzwilliam smiled broadly at this jest. “I assure you, Cousin Elizabeth, my tastes in all things have only become more refined.” Here his eyes moved from Elizabeth to rest on Mary who returned his gaze with a look of embarrassed confusion.

Georgiana observed the interaction with slightly heightened color while Elizabeth smiled goodnaturedly at the pair.

“Well,” Darcy replied, drawing the gaze of all towards himself. “I am sure that our guests will be well pleased with your performance. Would you please delight us with another song?”

Mary offered to play the pianoforte as the trio had only prepared one joint song. Fitzwilliam made to follow Mary to the instrument under the guise of turning pages but thought better of it and sat next to Georgiana instead.

“I do look forward to hearing you all perform again, Georgiana.”

“Truly?” Georgiana queried, turning to observe her cousin.
“Very much so,” Fitzwilliam answered with a smile. “I did not know that Miss Farthington was so accomplished at the harp. She is a remarkable woman.”

Georgiana followed her cousin’s gaze to focus on the figure of Mary. Georgiana sighed before dropping her eyes toward her lap. She had never seen her cousin look upon her with such a look of devotion and, dare she admit it, passion. Fitzwilliam had only ever looked upon her as a sister, someone to protect and look after, not as a woman to be loved and desired. Georgiana observed her cousin watching Mary once more and wished in her heart that one day a man would look upon her in a similar fashion. Wickham had written her pretty words and spoken of his false devotion but never had he looked at her with such a heated gaze. She fought the rising feeling of jealousy that grew within her breast. After Mary had finished her song Georgiana clapped politely before declaring her intention to retire for the evening.

“Are you unwell, Georgie?” Fitzwilliam questioned her as she rose from her seat to depart.

Georgiana smiled weakly at his use of her childhood name. “I am only a little fatigued. There is no need to concern yourself.”

Georgiana bid everyone goodnight before making her way towards her rooms with a heavy heart.
Chapter 12

Mary sat in the east drawing room trying her best to attend to the novel in her hand. During the two-hour period in which she was engaged in the activity, she had only managed to read one paragraph. Sighing in frustration, Mary cast the book aside deciding to give up the pretense of reading to take a turn about the room. Elizabeth, Darcy, Georgiana and Fitzwilliam were all assembled in the room as the first of their guests were due to arrive at any moment. Noticing Mary's movement, Fitzwilliam decided to follow her example and set aside the newspaper he had been attending to join her in her circuit about the room.

"I didn't realize that you found Milton so distasteful, Princess."

Mary turned and offered Fitzwilliam a shy smile as he took his offered arm. "No, Milton shall remain one of my favorites as he was the favorite of my father."

"Well, if it is not Milton whom has caused you such distress, I must know the cause. While others here may not be able to discern your mood, I have been a diligent student. Despite the protestations that you will surely offer, I can tell that you are not at ease."

Mary shook her head in amusement. Indeed, she would have assured him that she was very well despite the unease that had been growing in her spirit over the previous week.

"I would not say that I am distressed so much that I am quite anxious about today and the ball later this week. While it is very kind that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are holding this gathering in my honor, I have become quite enamored of our small family setting."

Fitzwilliam nodded his head in understanding. "While the ball shall be quite a crush…anything less would be an unforgivable affront to Mrs. Darcy's reputation for hosting excellent parties…the house party shall be quite small indeed. It could also be considered a small family gathering, as all who will be in attendance are family in one way or another. Mr. Brambles and your excellent cousins will be in attendance as will my brother Gregory, his wife and her cousin."

Mary stopped their progress and turned fully towards Fitzwilliam. "What are your brother and sister-in-law like, Richard? Will they like me?"

Fitzwilliam took her hand in his and pressed it gently. "Do not worry, Mary. Those who come to know you cannot help but to love you. While my brother inherited more than his fair share of the Fitzwilliam pride, we are much alike. I am sure that Gregory shall be delighted with you, although he ought not be too delighted."

Mary smiled at Fitzwilliam's teasing before preparing to reply in kind when she was interrupted by a servant announcing the arrival of the Viscount and his party. Fitzwilliam gave Mary a reassuring smile before leading her out of the drawing room and towards the foyer with the rest of the family.

Mary took a steadying breath as she smoothed nonexistent wrinkles from her dress. Despite Fitzwilliam's confidence in her reception by his family, Mary could not shake the foreboding sense of unease that settled around her. Not long after, the doors to Pemberley were thrown open to admit the Viscount Gregory Alexander Fitzwilliam, his wife the Viscountess Daniela, their son Ronald and the Viscountess' cousin Lady Letitia.

"Welcome to Pemberley," Darcy greeted the party with genuine warmth clasping his cousin's arm in greeting.
"Thank you, Darcy. It is indeed a pleasure to be at Pemberley once more," the Viscount replied with an equal measure of warmth. "I am sure that you remember my wife, Daniela, our son Ronald and our cousin Lady Letitia"

"Of course. You are very welcome to Pemberley," Elizabeth stepped forward to greet them before turning to Ronald. "You have grown much since we last met. Why soon you shall be taller than me!" Elizabeth ruffled the young boy's hair. Ronald, who was not yet ten years old, blushed at the praise and attention.

After greeting Elizabeth and Georgiana, the Viscount embraced his brother warmly and pronounced him only slightly browned and weathered from his time in the Americas but, sadly, no longer the most handsome Fitzwilliam brother. The Viscount looked to be an amiable man. He was significantly older than his brother and not as handsome, although he was not ill favored. While Richard's hair was dark and wavy, his brother's hair was all light brown curls touched with grey. The Viscount shared his brother's imposing height, yet his figure was more slight, the life of a member of the gentry being undoubtedly more leisurely than that of a soldier.

His wife, the Viscountess, did not appear as amiable as her husband. She greeted Mr. Darcy in a stiff manner, holding her hand out somewhat imperiously for her cousin to kiss in greeting. The Viscountess was a petite woman with auburn hair and fashionably pale skin. Her dress befitted her station, although Mary considered the richly dyed silks as too fine for traveling. Mary might have considered the Viscountess to be a beautiful woman were it not for the dour expression that graced her perfectly symmetrical features and the air of importance that she held about her.

Lady Letitia was not as formal as her cousin the Viscountess but was just as prideful. She returned Elizabeth's warm welcome with a graceful nod of her head and a few restrained words of thanks. She greeted Mr. Darcy with the same reserve, although she offered him a slight smile as well. Georgiana received the warmest reception out of all the Darcy's as Lady Letitia lightly embraced her and offered twin air kisses on either side of Georgiana's face. Lady Letitia was a very fashionable and beautiful woman with blond hair and striking green eyes. While the Viscountess was a rather petite woman, Lady Letitia was tall in stature with a light figure. However, Mary soon began to think that Lady Letitia was not so beautiful once she observed the Lady's greeting of Fitzwilliam. For that gentleman she offered a dazzling smile and she blushed prettily as Fitzwilliam bowed over her outstretched hand.

Mary was more predisposed to like young Ronald upon their first meeting. He was a miniature version of the Viscount, save for his mother's auburn hair and his plump cheeks. He appeared to be a very happy child who was no doubt quite doted upon by his father. He mimicked his parent's greetings with as much self-possession as a ten year old boy given to mischief could.

After the family had finished their greetings, Mr. Darcy turned toward Mary in order to introduce her to the group. Mary stepped forward prepared to meet the Viscount and his family when Lady Letitia's tinkling laughter stayed her steps.

"Darcy, I thought that you would be immune to the fashions of town. A Negro servant? How droll!"

Lady Letitia's pronouncement was met by gasps from both Georgiana and Elizabeth. Heat diffused Mary's cheeks and her eyes darted to meet Fitzwilliam's whose countenance quickly moved from one of shock to anger. Fitzwilliam looked as if he would speak until Darcy's clear voice rang out.

"I am afraid you are quite mistaken, Letitia. Pemberley remains as unaffected by fickle London fashions as ever," Darcy answered her in a firm yet civil tone. "I would like to present Miss Mary Caroline Farthington, the daughter of the late Lord Matthew Farthington and my ward."

"I am afraid you are quite mistaken, Letitia. Pemberley remains as unaffected by fickle London fashions as ever," Darcy answered her in a firm yet civil tone. "I would like to present Miss Mary Caroline Farthington, the daughter of the late Lord Matthew Farthington and my ward."
Lady Letitia appeared more surprised by the pronouncement than embarrassed by her mistake.

Mary quickly dropped a proper courtesy to the Viscount and his family and offered them a warm smile as she rose despite her discomposure. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, your lordship."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Farthington," the Viscount replied after casting his cousin-in-law a quick disapproving glance.

"Well, I am sure that you would all like to rest after your long journey," Elizabeth brightly addressed the Viscount and his family. "I'll show you to your rooms."

Mary watched as the Viscount and his family followed Elizabeth and Georgiana up the main stair towards the family wing. Mary knew not how long she stood staring after the party until she felt Darcy's warm hand pat her shoulder reassuringly. Mary turned to give him a weak smile in order to allay the concern etched on his features. Nodding to Fitzwilliam, Darcy made his excuses and retired to his study in order to attend to some business.

As soon as Darcy had left the foyer, Colonel Fitzwilliam moved to gather Mary into his arms. Fitzwilliam could not forget the image of Mary's tear streaked face that Sunday morning after overhearing Parson Geoffrey's cruel words. He had both wanted to soothe and protect her and punish those responsible for her tears. Rather than purely feeling anger on her behalf, the Colonel now felt a measure of shame in that his relations were the cause of her distress.

"I am well, Richard. Truly," Mary answered his unspoken question, halting his progress with a caress of his arm. "I am sure that Lady Letitia meant no harm. Perhaps she has only encountered one such as myself in the position of a servant."

"You are too good, Mary. I wish that I could be half as forgiving as you," Fitzwilliam replied, pulling her into his embrace despite her assurances.

Mary allowed herself to enjoy the luxury of being held in Richard's arms and breathing in his spicy scent. As the house began to fill with guests for the house party and the ball, she knew that such stolen moments would be rare indeed. Mary did not want to let Richard know how much his cousin's comments had discomfited her. While events of the previous weeks had given her a thicker skin, she could not help but feel a pang of hurt when such comments were thrown her way.

She sometimes wondered why her father would have sheltered her so from the cruelties of the world only to send her to a country where her hue somehow marked her as inferior. In such situations, she longed for New Sussex and the friends she left behind. A few letters from her home were her only link to that world and they gave her little solace. However, her new friends at Pemberley in the form of Georgiana and Elizabeth proved to be her staunchest supporters, despite her current difficulties with Georgiana. Mr. Darcy she could not count as a friend; he was her guardian, after all. Yet she knew that he would always be her advocate and defender and that he understood the pain of being so early separated from a loving father.

Richard had become much more than a friend to her during their short acquaintance. She found security in his embrace and in his presence. It was Richard that made Mary thankful that her father had sent her so far from home and all that was familiar to live with the Darcy family. Had she remained in New Sussex, she would have never met Richard. In moments like this when she was ensconced in his arms, her head resting in the nook between his chin and shoulder, Mary felt something akin to completeness. Taking a deep breath, Mary steeled herself for what would be a trying evening and week.
Mary's opinion of Fitzwilliam's relations did not improve much over the course of the evening. After resting and refreshing themselves after their long journey, the family joined the Darcy's for the evening meal. Rather than eating in the family dining room, the expanded Pemberley party moved to the much larger and more formal green dining room. Mary found that she much preferred the intimacy of the smaller less ornate room, but she sensed that the Viscount and his family were much more accustomed to more formal arrangements. Mary was mollified to find herself seated across from Fitzwilliam for the meal. Mr. Darcy was seated at the head of the table, as usual, with Elizabeth to his right. Georgiana was seated in between Elizabeth and Mary. The Viscount sat to the left of Darcy beside his wife, while Lady Letitia sat between the Viscountess and Fitzwilliam.

Mary ate in silence for most of the meal, as the Viscount, Darcy and Fitzwilliam monopolized most of the conversation as they discussed politics and business and the Viscountess and Lady Letitia engaged Elizabeth and Georgiana in discussions of fashion. As Mary had little interest in fashion or business, she allowed her mind to freely wander rather than try to add to the conversation. She would sometimes catch the eye of Richard who would wink at her surreptitiously. Mary would smile slightly in response before attending to her plate.

Mary's musings were soon interrupted as conversation turned towards herself. The Viscount was very interested in learning more about Miss Farthington and politely asked her about her home and travels. Mary was pleased to speak on one of her favorite subjects and described New Sussex and her European tour with evident delight. Mary enjoyed conversing with the Viscount who was everything that was amiable and kind in his replies and questions.

"And how are you finding England, Miss Farthington?" the Viscountess asked. "I imagine it must be quite different from the Caribbean."

"Yes, England and New Sussex are quite different. Winters in New Sussex never are as cold as English winters. However, I find that England has much to recommend herself," Mary replied.

"Cold winters? Surely there must be more which differentiates England from the Caribbean," Lady Letitia laughed in response. "New Sussex must have been quite savage in comparison to proper English society."

Mary inwardly cringed at the rebuke. She began to think of a proper reply when Fitzwilliam answered for her.

"I found New Sussex to be positively lovely. The people were genteel and very hospitable and the society was refreshingly free of such artifice that one so often encounters in certain parts of English society." Fitzwilliam finished his comment with a pointed look at Lady Letitia and a casual sip of his wine.

Not recognizing the barb directed towards her, Lady Letitia nodded her head in agreement.

"I am sure New Sussex is a delightful place. It is indeed refreshing to visit such a simple and rustic place. However, I know not how one could long endure even the most pleasant of countries without the amusements of proper society. Why, to be without such diversions as can be found in Town or during the season, I am sure that I would find myself quite bored."

"Why, I never found myself bored in New Sussex. There were always many things with which to amuse oneself. I grant you that life in London is quite different from life in New Sussex. However, having experienced both, I cannot say that I was deprived by experiencing one at the expense of the other."
"Well, shall we ladies retire to the drawing room?" Elizabeth addressed the party as she stood from the table.

Fitzwilliam watched the ladies exit the drawing room with some concern. He was not pleased with the behavior of his sister in law or her cousin towards Mary. However, he was not surprised by their thinly veiled contempt. When Gregory and Daniela had married, it was clear that the lady had accepted him primarily for his title and station rather than for any true affection. While she was kind and well mannered toward himself and his parents, Fitzwilliam observed her indifferent and rude treatment of those in her employ and her lack of regard for anyone she deemed beneath her own social circle. He had expressed his concerns to his brother only to be told that he was well aware of his bride-to-be's lack of affection. Marriage, he argued, was no more than a business transaction. Lady Daniela's family was one of the best families in England and her dowry was impressive enough to please the Fitzwilliam family. She was also a beautiful woman, so Gregory was sure that any children that would result from the union would be as well favored as they would be well bred. At the time, such an explanation of the entire business was sufficient for Richard. Indeed, all he sought in a bride was a comfortable fortune and a pretty face. However, now he could not fathom marrying a woman as prideful and cold as Daniela or as self-centered and artful as her cousin Lady Letitia.

The men departed to partake of cigars and drink in Darcy's study. The men caught up on the business of each other's lives and the subject of Miss Farthington was unsurprisingly a main topic of discussion.

"Your father must have made quite an impression on Lord Farthington for him to have left you an inheritance and the guardianship of his ward," Gregory remarked after hearing Darcy's explanation of how Miss Farthington came to reside at Pemberley.

"Yes, I suppose that must have been the case. I admit that I was quite surprised at the news myself, although my father had spoken to me on a few occasions about his friendship with Farthington and his support of his abolitionist work."

"So what are your plans for Miss Farthington? She appears to be quite the genteel and accomplished girl. Shall she be a companion to Georgiana?" Gregory queried.

"Miss Farthington has no need for employment, brother." Fitzwilliam answered for Darcy. "She is an heiress for heaven's sake."

"Indeed," Darcy replied, "She is to inherit her father's estate in Sussex which rivals Rosings in size and fortune and her dowry is quite substantial."

"I am sure she won't long reside at Pemberley or bear the Farthington name," Fitzwilliam added, which earned him a chastising glare from Darcy.

At this the Viscount let loose a quick bark of laughter. "I am sure that once she arrives in London that Miss Farthington will no doubt be pestered by fortune hunters and gentlemen of severely depressed means who would gladly offer for her. What's a little, or rather a great deal of tawny, when there is such a fortune to be had?"

Fitzwilliam colored at his brother's statement. Gregory was known to become rather frank and a bit coarse in his language when he was a bit in his cups. Fitzwilliam made to object when Darcy's hand on his arm forestalled him.

"I believe that we have deprived the ladies of our company for long enough," Darcy announced as he put out his cigar. "Gentlemen?"
The Viscount and Fitzwilliam followed Darcy to rejoin the ladies in the drawing room. Upon entering, Fitzwilliam immediately sought out Mary, seating himself on the settee beside her. He did not notice Lady Letitia's small huff of annoyance when he by passed the open seat beside her for the settee. Fitzwilliam noticed that Mary's smile was a little strained. Sensing that Mary had had her fill of polite conversation for the evening, Fitzwilliam suggested that they have some music. As if sharing his intentions, Elizabeth agreed that music would be a splendid idea and asked Mary to favor them with a song on the pianoforte. Mary readily agreed and moved towards the instrument.

Fitzwilliam was about to offer to turn pages for her, when Georgiana rose to join Mary at the instrument. Sensing that Mary was in good hands, Fitzwilliam contented himself with watching Mary play from his current seat. He was pleasantly engaged in the activity for a few minutes, before Lady Letitia interrupted by seating herself in the abandoned seat next to him.

"It seems like it has been ages since we were last in each other's company, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Lady Letitia addressed him.

"Indeed, it has been three years at least," Fitzwilliam replied disinterestedly as he turned his attention back towards Mary's performance.

"Three years? My goodness, you are right. It was two years and nine months ago when we danced at Lord Blakely's ball at Gresham House. What a pleasant evening that was."

"Yes," Fitzwilliam replied noncommittally.

"Well, you must tell me how you have spent your time since then. My cousin tells me that you were traveling in the Americas!"

"I would not call it merely 'travel', Lady Letitia," Fitzwilliam replied with a sigh as he turned towards her. "It was war."

"Oh! How ghastly! You must have been very brave…"

Fitzwilliam resigned himself to spending the remainder of the evening giving terse replies to Lady Letitia's vapid questions. However, he found himself happily relieved of his burden when Elizabeth begged Lady Letitia to take up Mary's place at the pianoforte as she took such delight in hearing her play. Delighted to be given an opportunity to display her talents, Lady Letitia rose from the settee and made her way towards the instrument.

Mary returned to her seat beside Fitzwilliam, much to the gentleman's delight. The evening soon ended as the Viscount's party was much desirous of rest, much to the delight of all.

The Viscountess' preparations for bed were interrupted by a rapid knock on her door.

"Who is it?"

"It is Letitia, I must speak with you!"

The irate voice of her cousin could be heard from the other side of the door. Ever the volatile person, the Viscountess could sense that whatever her cousin had to say would not be fit for the ears of a servant. She dismissed her maid before bidding her cousin to enter.
Lady Letitia entered the room in a huff, firmly shutting the door behind her.

"What possibly could be of such import that you should come in all this state to speak to me?"

Lady Letitia ignored the calmly placed question of her cousin and launched directly into her diatribe.

"I believe that we must be the only sensible occupants of this household! Why, they parade that chit around as if she were a Darcy rather than some offspring off of the wrong side of the sheets…or even worse! The Farthington heir! It is all quite ridiculous. I think the hot Caribbean sun must has addled Lord Farthington's brain for him to leave all of his estate to some slave girl's misbegotten daughter. And to throw a ball at Pemberley in her honor! It is all so ridiculous."

"Ahh, so it is Miss Farthington that has you in such a state. What can Mr. Darcy's ward be to you, dear Letitia?"

"She is nothing to me, of course. I… I just can't stand to see the low borne allowed to so freely mix among their betters. What can Darcy be thinking to allow such a girl to be part of his household and to interact so with his sister and son! Why she is on a first name basis with them all! And your brother is just as bad. He could barely keep his eyes off the chit the entire night. If I did not think the idea of a union between the two to be so laughable I'd be expecting an announcement!"

The Viscountess laughed. "So now you are jealous of Miss. Farthington? Do you truly think such a girl could win Richard's affections? He may be a second son, but he need not throw himself away for a bit of coin especially when you have both a great family name and a substantial fortune. Come now, only gentlemen in quite desperate situations do such things, and Richard is far from desperate. You have nothing to fear in that corner."

"Yes, yes. I know all this. Any sensible gentleman would do as you say. However, what if his travels have given him a taste for the exotic? He barely spoke to me or looked at me the entire night! Perhaps I should apply more rouge…" Letitia pondered, as she preened in the mirror.

"Then he shall do what all men of high birth do whenever their tastes turn to the unconventional. A discrete liaison, perhaps, but definitely not marriage," the Viscountess replied in a bored tone.

Letitia gasped at her cousin's matter of fact pronouncement. "How do you know such things, Daniela?"

"You forget, Letitia, that I am a married woman several years your senior. You have only been out of the schoolroom and in proper society for a few years now, so you must concede that there are things to which I might be privy that you have never experienced. Do you think Gregory is always the dutiful husband? He has his dalliances and I pretend to be blind to them. We have a mutually beneficial understanding. He sees to his needs discretely and I am left quite free to be about my own business without interference."

Letitia sat heavily upon her cousin's bed looking quite defeated.

"Oh, don't pout so dramatically," the Viscountess laughed. "Such is the way of the world, cousin. The only thing of importance is appearances. As long as one's standing in society is secure and your home life is fairly agreeable, what can affection add to the equation? Richard is a rational man. He knows he cannot long be about playing the soldier and to settle down he shall need a wife that is both rich and respectable. You are both, not to mention very pretty."

"But he barely pays me any notice, Daniela! I am five and twenty and quite at risk of being permanently on the shelf. I don't know if I can bear to put up with another season."
"Perhaps if you were not so picky, Letitia. You could have been wed four times over. Mr. Stanwich was quite rich and respectable and much sought after in the ton, yet you surprised us all by refusing his hand!"

"Please do not speak of Mr. Stanwich again! He was quite the bore. Besides, he was not…"

"Colonel Fitzwilliam? I declare, I know not how two dances could have you act so stupidly over one man! He's not even the firstborn."

"But he is the second son of an earl and that is something! Daniela, we have been through all of this before. You know the only reason I came along to this house party was to secure the Colonel."

The Viscountess sighed in resignation. "I know and I intend to keep my promise to help you in that quest. But you must agree to follow my lead and my instruction."

Letitia nodded her head enthusiastically.

"Good. My first instruction is that you cease this stupid jealousy toward Miss Farthington. She is nothing but a distraction and for whatever reason the Colonel does not appear to be too impressed with your attempts to put her in her place."

Letitia frowned in response and made to object until her cousin raised her hand for silence.

"No arguments, Letitia. Miss Mary Farthington can be nothing more than a flirtation. You have no competition in that corner."
Georgiana sat at her dressing table, absently staring into the mirror before her. She was looking forward to the house party and the arrival of their final houseguests. Relatives of Mary’s father were due to arrive that afternoon. Georgiana was thankful that Mary would have more houseguests that would be supportive of her. She still found herself blushing as she thought about the treatment of Mary at the hands of her cousins. Seeing Mary's expectant demeanor deflate following her harsh reception was painful to Georgiana; she felt as if the slight were against herself. Despite their argument a few days ago and Georgiana's heartache over the loss of Fitzwilliam, she found herself wanting to comfort Mary. She had thought about going to her room the night before to offer her apologies, but Georgiana could not bring herself to leave her rooms.

While Georgiana did not feel that she could bring herself to talk to Mary directly, she did feel that she could be supportive of Mary and perhaps shield her from some of the Viscountess and Lady Letitia's rudeness. She suspected that Lady Letitia's behavior went beyond her natural snobbery. To act in such a manner towards the ward of one's host was a show of disrespect. Georgiana was well aware of Lady Letitia's designs on Richard; subtlety was not a concept that Lady Letitia could grasp. Women like Lady Letitia felt that the best way to raise their own prospects with gentlemen of quality was to insult other women. Unfortunately for them, this tactic often had the adverse effect of driving away their intended target. Georgiana wondered how Lady Letitia had so quickly determined that Mary was competition.

Lady Letitia had always been cordial to Georgiana, sometimes overly so. Perhaps there was some artifice and calculation behind that. Georgiana had plenty of experience dealing with mercenary women using similar devices to win her brother's affections. She was suddenly struck by the realization that while Lady Letitia had instantly perceived Mary as a threat to her plans, the lady had never appeared to fear such competition from her. Georgiana wondered at this disparity in treatment. While one could argue that one way to curry the favor of a gentleman would be to be kind and solicitous to their ward, it would also be counterproductive to heap effusive praise on another woman of marriageable age in that gentleman's presence.

Perhaps Lady Letitia had never viewed her as competition for Colonel Fitzwilliam's affections because she had not truly been competition. Nothing in her behavior towards Colonel Fitzwilliam would suggest more than a sisterly affection for an older cousin. Likewise, nothing in his attentions towards her would suggest more than a brotherly affection for a much younger cousin and ward. For a woman as observant as Lady Letitia, at least when it came to the subject of Fitzwilliam, it would be readily apparent that the gentleman held a regard for Mary that went beyond the platonic or filial. Georgiana was ever mindful of the shared looks and covert glances that passed between Fitzwilliam and Mary. She did not doubt that Lady Letitia had observed them as well.

Had Georgiana come to this conclusion a few weeks prior, the mortification that she felt when she discovered Mary and Fitzwilliam's relationship would have been reduced. While this realization caused Georgiana some pain, she found that it helped to alleviate some of the residual animosity that she felt towards Mary. Georgiana had blamed her friend for the loss of Fitzwilliam's affections. However, as his affections had only been of the brotherly variety, and she was confident that those sentiments remained, Georgiana began to see the uselessness of harboring any ill will towards her friend. Added to this was Georgiana's natural propensity to seek peace. It had been quite a trial to maintain a frosty attitude toward Mary. Forgiveness, or rather seeking forgiveness as there was little for which Mary had to repent, was much less exhausting than holding onto anger and hurt. Georgiana had missed her conversations with her friend and their time spent in companionable activity. She was eager to renew those bonds of friendship, but she was unsure of what words to say to heal the breach between them.
Giving herself one last look in the mirror, Georgiana rose from her vanity and made her way down to the breakfast room. Until she found the proper words and the courage to say them, she was resolved to act as the loyal friend that Mary needed.

Mary made her way to the nursery for her daily appointment with Sir Little Bits. Behind her back she held a surprise for her first and most loyal. Upon entering the nursery, Mary was surprised to discover that her audience had grown. Ronald stood upon her entrance, bowing slightly at the waist in greeting.

"Good morning, Miss Farthington," the young boy her greeted formally. "Would it be acceptable for me to join William for the story?"

Mary smiled and laughed good-naturedly at the request. "Why of course. However, I must insist that you call me Mary."

"No," William protested as he ran over to greet her. "You must call her Princess Mary because she is a princess."

"No she isn't," Ronald protested. "I will do no such thing."

"She is a princess and if you want to hear her stories you shall call her by her proper title!" William crossed his arms and glared at his cousin. He took his job as a knight very seriously.

"You don't have to call me princess," Mary soothed as she took a seat on the settee. "William and I simply like to play pretend. It is great fun. I am his Princess and he is a knight in my court."

"Yes, you must see my armor, Ronald. I have a sword and everything. Uncle Richard is also a knight. Princess Mary named me Sir Little Bits," William piped up excitedly. He was anxious to have his older cousin take part in his games.

"Does Uncle Richard have a knight's name as well?" Ronald asked, suddenly more interested in joining the fun knowing that his uncle also took part.

"Yes, he does," Mary replied, thinking quickly of a suitable name. "He is called Sir Gallant."

"Does my lady have need of me?" Colonel Fitzwilliam asked as he stepped into the room. He had been standing at the door for quite sometime watching the scene with amusement.

Mary turned towards the Colonel, her face wreathed in a broad smile. "Yes, Sir Gallant. I bid you to come attend to the telling of the tales with Sir Little Bits and Ronald."

"Princess, why can't I have a proper name like Sir Little Bits and Sir Gallant?" Ronald pouted, abandoning his previous position in order to emulate his uncle.

"Do you wish to join my court, Ronald?" Mary asked, doing her best to suppress a smile.

The boy nodded his head eagerly. William clapped in triumph and ran to retrieve his sword from the chest where he kept his toys.

"If he is to be knighted, you will need this Princess," William stated very seriously as he handed Mary his small wooden sword."

"You are quite right, Sir Little Bits," Fitzwilliam replied. "It is good that you are attentive to knightly
Mary laughed lightly as she took the sword from William. She bid Ronald to kneel before her.

"Do you, Ronald Fitzwilliam, promise to uphold the office of knight, serving your Princess and protecting the kingdom from all manner of fell beast and Viking raiders?"

"Vikings?" Fitzwilliam whispered to Mary.

"Yes, Vikings are an ever present threat to my kingdom, Sir Gallant. Do not interrupt," Mary whispered in return.

"I promise, Princess Mary."

"Very well. Then I dub thee Sir Kelvin the Red."

Mary tapped Sir Kelvin on each of his shoulders with the blade of the sword before commanding him to rise. Sir Little Bits clapped and shouted in appreciation.

"Now, Sir Kelvin, are you ready for a story?"

At the boy's eager nod, Mary turned to retrieve the presents that she had made Sir Little Bits from underneath the pillow where she had hidden them.

"You are in luck, Sir Kelvin, as today's story comes with a special surprise."

Mary brought out two cloth puppets sewn onto wooden spoons. The spoons she had acquired from the kitchens as castoffs and the puppets she had sewn and stitched herself. The puppets were of a handsome prince and a fearsome red dragon.

William squealed in delight, jumping from his seat to grasp the puppet of the dragon.

"Princess Mary, are these for me?"

"Yes, I made them special for you, Sir Little Bits. I thought they would make our stories more fun. You can have the dragon and Sir Kelvin can play with the prince."

Ronald took the prince puppet from Mary, a smile lighting up his face as he thanked her. Forgetting his previous reluctance, Ronald dashed off to join William in his play.

"Is there no present for me, Princess?" Fitzwilliam asked in low voice as not to be overheard by the boys or the nursery maid.

"I did not know that you enjoyed playing with puppets, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Mary replied with a grin, matching his tone.

"Is it Colonel now?" Fitzwilliam asked, his smile fading.

"Ah, you are right. Forgive me Sir Gallant," Mary smirked up at him as Fitzwilliam joined her on the settee.

Fitzwilliam grinned. "I suppose that shall do. When did you come up with that name for me, Princess?"

"I admit that I just thought of it today in order to convince Sir Kelvin to join my court," Mary blushed slightly as her brown eyes met his. "However, I think the name suits you well."
"Yes," Fitzwilliam agreed as he pulled a smug face. "I have been told by some that I do look quite dashing in my red dress uniform."

Mary laughed. "While I do agree that you are handsome both in and out of uniform…"

"Madam!" Fitzwilliam interrupted with mock alarm.

"Oh, you teasing man! You know my meaning," Mary replied, hitting Fitzwilliam lightly on the arm. "I was going to say that you are chivalrous, noble and valiant."

Fitzwilliam considered these descriptions for a moment, before leaning over to whisper huskily in her ear.

"Is not gallant another word for paramour, Princess?"

Mary swallowed thickly before nervously calling Ronald and William over for their story. Fitzwilliam chastised himself for discomfiting her, but he could only feel a modicum of contrition as he observed the becoming red flush that accented her brown cheeks. Twelfth Night could not come soon enough.

With the afternoon came the remaining houseguests for the Twelfth Night house party. Mary was especially excited to see Mr. Brambles again and to meet her cousins Mr. and Mrs. Peterson. Although she had never met them, Mary was confident that she would soon grow to esteem them both. From Mrs. Peterson’s letters, Mary already knew that her father’s cousin was a warm and generous woman with a good heart, although perhaps a bit prone to gossip. Her letter to Mary had been filled with warm greetings and her expectations for a lovely summer spent together in Brighton. However, she had also included a few tidbits about the personal lives of their Brighton neighbors. Mary already knew that a Mr. Gregory was exceedingly fond of wine, so much so that at a ball they all attended last summer, he had managed to fall asleep in the middle of a set. Mary also knew that Mrs. Peterson’s best friend Mrs. Darmont was now forced to wear wooden dentures as the last of her teeth had fallen out due to her addiction to drinking tea that Mrs. Peterson swore was two parts sugar to one part tea and her aversion to daily teeth cleanings.

"Mr. Brambles, Mr. Derek Peterson and Mrs. Beatrice Peterson," the footman announced the newcomers to the Darcy and Fitzwilliam family assembled in the sitting room.

"Welcome back to Pemberley, Mr. Brambles," Darcy stepped forward to greet him, grasping the elder gentleman’s arm firmly.

"It is good to see you all again," Mr. Brambles replied warmly. "And how are you my dear?"

"Very well, Mr. Brambles," Mary replied as she stepped forward to give her friend a warm hug.

Mr. Brambles laughed. "Good, good. You look very well, my dear. Let me introduce my friends and your cousins. Miss. Farthington, may I present Mrs. Peterson and her son Mr. Derek Peterson."

Mrs. Peterson was a short round woman of fifty some years with curly brown hair and kind grey eyes. Her dress was fashionable and well made, although not as ostentatious as that of Lady Letitia.

"Oh, it is lovely to finally meet you, dear," the woman exclaimed before engulfing Mary in a warm embrace, which was eagerly returned.
"It is lovely to meet you as well, Mrs. Peterson. I confess that I am quite anxious to know more of my father's family."

"We are your family too, dear. And I will not hear of you calling me Mrs. Peterson. You must address me as Beatrice."

Mary readily agreed and bid Beatrice to call her Mary. This won her another warm hug.

Mary had to stifle a gasp when meeting Derek Peterson. The young man of three and thirty was almost the splitting image of her father when Lord Farthington was a young man. He shared her father's bright green eyes and wavy blond hair as well as his tall broad shouldered frame.

Mr. Peterson was less intimate but no less warm in his greeting.

"Your father has told us so much about you, Mary, that I feel that I have known you these last nineteen years," the older man stated as he held her hand in both of his and smiled down at her gently. "I am sure that we shall get along famously."

Mr. Darcy completed the introductions of his family to Mary's relations. Mary noted with some distaste the indifferent greeting that the Viscountess and Lady Letitia offered. As soon as the introductions were complete, the ladies excused themselves begging the need to rest before dinner. The Viscount, however, was much more affable in his greetings to those assembled and expressed his desire to engage in a game of billiards with Mr. Peterson after he rested from his journey.

Fitzwilliam was just as cordial in his greeting as Mary expected. He decided to join his brother and Derek in the promised billiards match and cajoled Darcy into joining in as well. He even managed to make Beatrice blush prettily with a well-placed compliment.

"Oh, you young people," Beatrice exclaimed as she waved away the compliment on her appearance.

Mary noted with some degree of surprise the becoming blush that spread over Georgiana's features when she was introduced to Derek Peterson. For his part, the gentleman seemed to linger a bit longer than was proper over the lady's hand. Mary's eyes quickly found Elizabeth's, whose look of intrigue matched her own.

"Let me show you all to your rooms. I am sure you are anxious to rest and refresh yourselves. If you like, I could have tea brought up to you. However, I thought that you might like to have a light repast in the blue sitting room with Mary, Georgiana and myself when you are ready."

The party readily agreed to those arrangements and Mary thanked Elizabeth for her thoughtfulness. She was very eager to get to know her relations better. Elizabeth bid the Petepsons and Mr. Brambles to follow her to be shown to their rooms. Mr. Brambles, however, declined and requested a private word with Mr. Darcy on matters of business. Elizabeth consented to the scheme and informed him that she had placed him in the rooms he had occupied when he last stayed with them.

Mary watched the two men exit to make their way to Mr. Darcy's study with some concern. However, she was soon distracted by Georgiana's approach.

"The Petepsons are lovely people. I look forward to knowing them better. You must be pleased to meet your relations, Mary."

"I admit that I am beyond pleased," she replied as she turned towards her friend. "Did you not think Derek to be quite handsome?"

Mary smiled knowingly at her friend's becoming blush. "I had not noticed. But, now that you
mention it, he is quite well favored."

"Hmmm," Mary replied. "I believe he found you to be quite well favored, as well."

Georgiana looked as if she would reply with some retort before thinking better of it. "Do you think so?"

Mary smiled even wider. "Well, as I have only known the gentleman for five minutes, I cannot speak with confidence as to what his feelings may be," Mary paused and made note of the slight deflation of Georgiana's posture. "However, he did appear to be very reluctant to let your hand go."

Georgiana smiled at this, regaining some of her previous buoyancy.

"Now, you have not told me what you are planning to wear to the ball." Mary skillfully redirected the conversation as she took her friend by the arm and led her up the stairs to the family wing.

Mary was very happy to meet her relations but even more pleased to have the rift between herself and Georgiana begin to heal.
Mr. Darcy led Mr. Brambles to his private study. Darcy could not help but to be curious as to the nature of the business that Mr. Brambles wanted to discuss. He realized that it must have been of some import or urgency for Mr. Brambles to request an audience so soon after his arrival from town.

"Would you care for a scotch, Mr. Brambles?" Darcy offered the man once he was seated comfortably in an armchair by the fire.

"Why, yes. Thank you." Mr. Brambles accepted the drink gratefully before taking a generous draught from the glass.

Darcy sat in the chair across from him, clasping his hands in his lap.

"So, what is it that you would like to discuss, Mr. Brambles? Was your business in London accomplished to your satisfaction?"

"Yes…and no. It is my business in London that I wish to discuss," Mr. Brambles replied as he finished his drink and sat back wearily in his chair.

"As you are well aware, Lord Farthington, having no natural children of his own, settled the bulk of his estate onto his adopted daughter Mary. The estate in Sussex is not entailed and can thus be settled upon whomever Lord Farthington willed it to. As you can imagine, his decision to leave most of his property to an adopted daughter and the son of a close friend to whom he was nearly a stranger did not sit well with some members of Farthington's family."

"I confess, I had wondered about Lord Farthington's decision. Mr. Peterson and his mother seem like fine people. Could he not have left his estate and Mary's protection in their hands?"

"Yes, the Peterson's are good people and Lord Farthington left them a generous bequest. However, the Petersons have a substantial estate and several properties of their own. Lord Farthington had originally contemplated leaving Mary in the care of the late Mr. Peterson should anything untoward happen to him. But, the elder Mr. Peterson passed some ten years ago and Lord Farthington had some reservations about leaving Mary in Mrs. Peterson's care long term. Likewise, he thought it inappropriate for Mary's guardian to be a single man."

"I see. It does not appear that the Peterson's harbor any resentment regarding Farthington's decision."

"Oh, heavens no. They both have expressed to me that they think the Sussex estate is the rightful inheritance of Miss. Farthington. No, the trouble is from Farthington's American relations."

"American relations?"

"Yes. Sometime before the rebellion, Lord Farthington's great-uncle, Lewis Farthington went to the America's to seek his fortune as he was the second son. He settled in Virginia and married a wealthy tobacco plantation owner's daughter, a Miss Nancy Adams. As Nancy was the only child of Mr. Adams, upon that gentleman's death, Lewis Farthington inherited the Adams Plantation, which was quite extensive.

"Lewis's decision to move to the Americas and become a slave owner did not sit well with his brother Robert and the two did not speak to each other for several years. Upon his father's death, Robert Farthington inherited not only the estate in Sussex, but sugar plantations owned by his father in the Caribbean on the isle of New Sussex. Robert ended the practice on New Sussex and instead
instituted a landlord-tenant system in which his former slaves were given homesteads of their own where they grew sustaining crops in addition to sugar. In an effort to assuage the sins of his fathers, Robert also became a very vocal opponent of the slave trade in the colonies and of slavery here in Britain.

Matthew Farthington, being routinely exposed to the abolitionist speakers and activists whom his father financially supported and hearing the gruesome details of the accursed institution from a young age, was moved to do more than financially and politically support the cause, as you are well aware. He became an active abolitionist himself, choosing to settle permanently in New Sussex. Matthew Farthington petitioned his father to further reform the landlord-tenant system in New Sussex by giving the freemen ownership of the homesteads on which they worked and granting them equal status as the whites who worked on New Sussex. He brought in teachers and opened up a school and encouraged New Sussex to move from a plantation to a proper town. His vision was for New Sussex to be a model of the abolitionist movement, an experiment of sorts. He would create a community where the colored man and the white man lived as equals while still sustaining an agrarian based economy that was both profitable and equitable."

"That sounds quite radical indeed. The implications of such an experiment go beyond the issue of slavery," Darcy noted.

"Yes. Matthew's stance was radical for the time, and is still quite radical today. At times he was at odds with his father as the idea of New Sussex caused a bit of a stir in Parliament. However, his father gave Matthew a good deal of deference when it came to the management of New Sussex.

Upon Robert Farthington's death, Matthew came into his full inheritance and diverted more of his wealth to the abolitionist cause. All of the profits from New Sussex's crops went to the support of a ship, Liberty, and a team of abolitionists whose primary goal was to document the institution of slavery throughout the colonies and the slave trade itself, in order to provide the press with first hand accounts aimed at swaying public opinion toward abolition.

One of his first trips on the Liberty was to Virginia and the plantation owned by his cousin Jacob Farthington. Matthew contacted Jacob in an effort to heal the breach between the two sides of the family. He was welcomed to Adams Plantation. While there, he worked to gather first hand accounts from the slaves and learned all that he could about the institution in the American colonies. He even tried to convince his cousin to emulate the model of New Sussex or to at least commit to freeing his slaves in his will.

During the months of his visit to Adams Plantation, Lord Farthington met and befriended Dinah, Miss Farthington's mother, who worked as a slave in the Adams household.

Lord Farthington was unsuccessful in healing the breach in the family or in convincing his cousin of the rightness of the abolitionist cause. The cousins parted on less than amicable terms. However, Lord Farthington managed to purchase Dinah, who by the time of his departure was heavy with child. He intended to settle Dinah in New Sussex as a freewoman. However, she died in childbirth before reaching New Sussex. The rest of the history is known to you."

Darcy sat back in his chair and took a generous sip of his scotch.

"While I find this history to be fascinating, I fail to see the connection to Miss Farthington's legitimacy as Lord Farthington's heir. From what you have related, the estate was not entailed and Mary's closest relations, the Petersons, have not contested the will."

"Exactly. Jacob Farthington's son, Peter Farthington, through his agents, first attempted to challenge the will based on an argument that since Mary was not the natural legitimate daughter of Lord Farthington, any claim she had to the estate was second to Peter Farthington's. When they failed
based on this argument, they put forth an alternative. Peter Farthington's attorneys claimed that the
sale of Dinah to Lord Farthington was not legitimate and that at the time of her death, Dinah
remained the property of Jacob Farthington. However, even if the sale was legitimate, the purchase
price did not include Dinah's child, who had been conceived while Dinah was the undisputed
property of Jacob Farthington. Under this reasoning, Mary Farthington would be the property of
Peter Farthington and any property in her possession belongs to her master."

"Good God. Such arguments are insupportable! We are speaking of a woman, not a mare!" Darcy
interrupted, disdain evident in his tone.

"Yes, you and I both agree that such language is quite inappropriate. But to the slave owner, a slave
is merely another category of cattle and not a person.

Fortunately, I was able to persuade the court of the foolishness of such an argument and presented
the original bill of sale proving the legitimacy of Lord Farthington's purchase."

"I wonder that such proof was even necessary," Darcy exclaimed as he rose from his seat. "Slavery
was outlawed in Britain years ago. I would think that a slave owner has no rights which a British
court ought to respect."

"Yes, the trade has been outlawed, but the institution is still allowed to prevail in the colonies and
territories. However, there is no need to fear. Miss Farthington's status as a free citizen in Britain is
indisputable. I shared this information with you because, as her guardian, you should be privy to
every legal challenge that may arise concerning Miss Farthington. As this suit was quite sudden and
unexpected, and the exact nature of the challenge was not revealed to me until I had already arrived
in London, I took it upon myself to see to the matter as part of the final settlement of Lord
Farthington's estate. I hope that I was not in error in making such an assumption."

"No, your judgment was sound, Mr. Brambles. The successful settlement of the challenge is proof of
this. However, in the future I would like to be informed as soon as possible of any legal challenges
that impact Miss Farthington."

Mr. Brambles sighed in relief before giving his agreement.

"My audience with you today was not just to inform you of this legal situation, Mr. Darcy. I also
thought you should be made aware of the delicate nature of Miss Farthington's future. The rift
between Lord Farthington and his cousin was a great one, indeed. There was much animosity
between the two gentlemen that I fear may have also carried onto the son."

Darcy's brows rose in alarm at this statement. "Are you suggesting that Miss Farthington is in some
sort of danger?"

Mr. Brambles finished his scotch before answering, his brow creased with worry.

"I am not confident of the nature of the danger to which Miss Farthington may be exposed, but I fear
that this is not the last we have heard from Mr. Peter Farthington. Although the gentleman acted
through his lawyers and was not present at the hearings, I have received word from him. The
gentleman is in London and he was quite upset by the court's decision. I have no evidence of this,
but my feeling is that he could resort to means outside of the legal system to fulfill his objectives."

At this, Darcy took to pacing the room, his look dark.

"What 'means' do you suspect he would utilize?"

Mr. Brambles shook his head. "Of that I cannot know. However, there are more ways for him to get
his hands on Miss Farthington's inheritance than by a legal challenge. While she remains unwed, her fortune remains vulnerable."

Darcy stopped his pacing and regarded the man warily.

"Are you suggesting that Mr. Farthington would seek to wed Miss Farthington in order to gain her estate? I apologize, Mr. Brambles, but such a tactic seems rather farfetched."

"Have you not heard of fortune hunters, Mr. Darcy? Mr. Farthington, as far as I could determine, is unmarried. Also, Miss Farthington's estate makes her quite attractive to a certain set of men even if Mr. Farthington would not seek to marry her himself. The London gossip columns are already full of speculation about the new Farthington heir and her possible eligibility. I only bring this to your attention to caution you to take extra precautions in whom you allow to court Miss Farthington. Also, if you could arrange for a reputable gentleman to wed Miss Farthington, her estate would be secure."

Darcy mulled over this last bit of information. His cousin Fitzwilliam's intentions toward Mary began to look more desirable. While somewhat in need of a fortune of his own, Fitzwilliam was a good man and in no way a fortune hunter. Darcy was sure that his affection for Mary was genuine and that he had been honest in his pledge protect her. His objections to the match had been based on his desire to shield Mary from harm. He had not considered that encouraging the match could serve the same purpose.

"I thank you, Mr. Brambles. You have given me much to think on," Darcy stated as he firmly shook the man's hand. "Now, I am sure you are much desirous of the opportunity to refresh yourself after your long journey."

Darcy watched the gentleman depart his study before sitting behind his desk and refreshing his drink. While Darcy was still confident of the rightness of his objections to Fitzwilliam's suit, he began to realize that they were only one factor of many that he had to consider.

With the arrival of Mary's relations, the group for the house party was complete. Three days of planned activities and frivolity awaited them before the commencement of the ball. Upon meeting Richard's family, Mary had expected those three days to be quite a trial. Lady Letitia's animosity towards her and the Viscountess' scorn had been difficult to bear. Yet, the addition of the Petersons and Mr. Brambles to the party significantly lessened Mary's anxiety. After refreshing themselves briefly in their rooms, Beatrice and Derek joined Mary, Elizabeth, Georgiana and Fitzwilliam for tea and refreshments. They made quite a merry party, with Beatrice regaling a captivated Mary with stories about her late father from his childhood interspersed with anecdotes about Mary's escapades as a young girl that she had learned from Lord Farthington's frequent letters.

Elizabeth noted during this time how Georgiana's eyes often strayed from Beatrice and her animated story telling to admire Derek Peterson from who sat across the room debating politics with Richard. Elizabeth was pleased with Georgiana's apparent interest in the gentleman, as her sister had so seldom expressed any interest in eligible members of the opposite sex. While Georgiana was still young and Elizabeth had not inherited her mother's preoccupation with matchmaking, Elizabeth had begun to worry that Georgiana might be disinclined towards matrimony. She decided that she would do what she could to provide them both with ample opportunities to better know one another. Elizabeth made a mental note to alter the seating arrangements for dinner that night.

Mary sat in the music room at the pianoforte, leafing through the selection of music before her. The Peterson's had retired to their rooms over an hour ago in order to rest before dinner and each member
of the household appeared to be engaged in their own separate amusements. Mary knew that this would be her last opportunity to practice her music and enjoy a moment to herself before the events of the house party got into full swing. Finding a piece by Mozart that she knew by heart, Mary began to play. She soon found herself utterly relaxed as she lost herself in her playing. Mary had been so absorbed that she had not realized that she had gained an audience until their applause at the conclusion of the piece broke her from her reverie.

"That was very beautiful, Miss Farthington. You have very talented fingers."

"My lord, I had not noticed you," Mary exclaimed, startled by the presence of Richard's brother. She made to rise from her seat, but was stopped by the Viscount.

"Would you indulge me with one more song, Miss Farthington?" he asked as he crossed the room and came to stand behind her.

He busied himself with the music on the instrument before her, leafing through the offerings until he found a piece to his liking. Mary found herself growing uncomfortable by the closeness of the Viscount. She could feel the heat from his body on her back and the fabric of his coat brushed against her shoulder as he reached around her to select the music.

"Would you be so kind as to play this song, Miss Farthington. It is my particular favorite," the Viscount placed a few sheets of music on the stand before her, leaning down over her so that his breath fanned across her forehead.

"Of course," Mary replied, shuddering involuntarily.

"Thank you. I shall turn the pages for you," he announced as he sat at the instrument beside her.

"That…that is not necessary, my lord. I know this piece by heart," Mary offered, her voice catching strangely.

"Indulge me," the Viscount chuckled. "And please, no more 'my lord.' Gregory will do."

Mary stiffened at this request. There were very few gentlemen with whom she was so familiar. She did not feel comfortable addressing the Viscount by anything other than his title and she was scandalized by the request. Mary knew that she was expected to give the Viscount permission to address her in a similar manner, but all of her good breeding and intuition rebelled against the idea. Mary felt that the Viscount deserved a stiff reprimand at the insult, but she held her tongue and began playing instead.

Mary endeavored her best to attend to her playing, however she was ever conscious of the Viscount's close observation of her person. The gentleman gazed at her intently, his eyes moving from her own eyes to her lips before traveling lower.

"My lord, I feel that you are neglecting your duties as page turner," Mary informed him, keeping her eyes fixed on the keys before her.

The Viscount chuckled again, his face so near Mary that she could feel his bourbon scented breath on her cheek.

"You are performing admirably despite my inattention to the pages," he replied.

Mary could hear the leer in his voice and flinched involuntarily. Rather than recoiling at her response, the Viscount pressed himself closer to Mary.
"My lord," Mary pleaded, hoping to convey her discomfort but not knowing how to word her request that he cease his behavior. She felt as if she were frozen, confusion and a rising panic warring for control of her emotions.

"Gregory," he replied, abandoning all pretext of decorum and reaching towards her to fondle the simple necklace that adorned her neck. His fingers lightly grazed the top of her bosom, causing her to shudder in disgust.

"Are you cold, Mary?" he queried mockingly as he repeated the gesture, confusing her tremor for one of pleasure. Mary stopped her playing and stood abruptly from the instrument.

"You should not address me so, my lord," Mary stated, her voice surprisingly firm.

The Viscount simply smiled at her, his eyes suspiciously bright. He stood as well, effectively blocking her exit from the room.

"How should I address you, Mary?" he asked as he stepped toward her. "Call me Gregory and I shall call you by whatever name you wish."

"Gregory!"

The Viscount turned to regard his brother standing in the doorway. His complexion was high and both of his hands were curled into fists as he stalked towards them.

"Richard," the Viscount replied brightly. "Miss Farthington and I were just discussing music."

Fitzwilliam looked at his brother, anger burning in his gaze. "I believe that your conversation was finished," he ground out.

The Viscount smirked as he observed his brother's barely concealed rage. Richard's mouth was set in a thin firm line, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glittering dangerously.

"Thank you for a most enlightening conversation, Miss Farthington," the Viscount said, his eyes never leaving Fitzwilliam's face. "I hope to continue our discussion another time."

Fitzwilliam glared at his brother before stepping aside and allowing him to pass.

Once he heard the door shut behind him, Fitzwilliam strode towards Mary and caught her up in a crushing embrace.

"Did he touch you?" he ground out through gritted teeth.

Mary shivered. She was relieved by his timely entrance and felt somewhat avenged by his ire. However, she had never seen Fitzwilliam so angry before and his aspect frightened her. The look in his eyes told Mary that he would gladly inflict physical violence upon his brother in that moment. Mary was ashamed to realize that she would gladly watch such a display.

"No, he did not compromise me."

Fitzwilliam released his hold upon her to catch her face in his hands. He searched her face before asking her again.

"Did he touch you?"
Mary looked into his eyes, which had begun to cool from anger to deep concern.

"Yes," she whispered.

The fire returned to his eyes.

"Please, Richard. I am alright," Mary smiled a watery smile as she brought her hands to cover his.
"He merely touched my necklace, nothing more."

"He will not touch you again," Fitzwilliam stated firmly.

"No, he won't," Mary agreed.

She reached for him, twining her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck as she brought his face down to hers. She caressed his lips softly with her own, moving them delicately until he responded in kind. As the kiss deepened, Mary could almost feel his anger subsiding. His hands came to rest lightly on her waist and he pulled her flush against him as he feathered kisses across her cheek and jaw towards her neck. He stopped there, nuzzling her neck with his face.

"Forgive me, Mary."

"You are not responsible for the actions of others," Mary countered as she caressed his scalp with her fingers.

Richard sighed as he relaxed under her administrations.

They held each other for a few moments longer. Mary would have gladly remained in Fitzwilliam's embrace until the disgust and anger caused by the Viscount's actions had completely fled her.

"How do you do it?" Fitzwilliam questioned as he pulled back slightly from her embrace in order to look her in the eye.

"What do you mean?" Mary replied, a soft smile lighting her features.

"I had meant to comfort you and instead I am the one being consoled," he explained as he tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Why would you think that this does not comfort me?"

Fitzwilliam smiled gently down at her before capturing her lips in another kiss.

"Are you truly well, Princess?"

"I will be."

Richard dressed for dinner with efficient haste. The image of a frightened yet determined Mary being accosted by his brother was firmly fixed in his mind's eye, causing his blood to boil anew. Richard had been aware of his brother, Gregory's past dalliances. When they were still young men living at Matlock, Gregory had taken a few maids to bed, one of whom had become with child and had to be sent away. Their father had been furious. However, his fury was not for the reasons Richard would have liked. Rather than punishing Gregory harshly, Lord Matlock had instead taken them both to London were he engaged the services of courtesans for each of them. Gentlemen of quality, his father had told them, do not force their attentions on lowly maids and instead engaged the services of
professionals. Dealing with the bastard children that resulted from trysts with servants and the daughters of tenants caused unnecessary entanglements. However, courtesans knew how to plan for such risks of the trade.

Despite this lesson and Gregory's regular use of courtesans, stories still reached Richard's ears of his brothers continued dalliances with maids and young women who were similarly unprotected. Enraged over having to arrange for another young girl to be sent to Scotland and their family paid to remain silent, Lord Matlock had forced Gregory to marry or suffer the ignominy of being disinherited. Within six months Gregory was married to a woman of significant fortune and status who understood that the marriage was one of convenience. Gregory continued his affairs, although now he was much more discrete.

After checking his reflection in the mirror and determining that his appearance was acceptable, Colonel Fitzwilliam left his rooms with determined strides. After inquiring about the whereabouts of his brother from a servant, Fitzwilliam made his way to the billiards room.

"So, have you come to lecture me, little brother?" the Viscount questioned as he took a shot at the billiard's table, his eyes never rising from his task.

"I have come to do no such thing as it would only be a waste of breath," Fitzwilliam replied darkly as he stepped more fully into the room.

"You were always so self righteous when it came to such matters," the Viscount continued as if Fitzwilliam had never spoken. "You always behaved as it you were above such 'base' desires while you simpered and made love to half the ton."

"I have come to warn you, brother," Fitzwilliam spit out. "It would be better for you if you left Miss Farthington alone."

"And why would I do that? These house parties and balls are always such tedious affairs. I must have something with which to amuse myself and Mary is an obliging diversion."

"You are only to address her as Miss Farthington. I am sure that the lady made that very clear to you this night," Fitzwilliam stated firmly.

The Viscount let out a bark of laughter. "Lady Mary, indeed! I do not understand why you and Darcy are so keen to play along in this farce. Farthington was a bewitched fool to make slave his heir and attempt to make her a proper lady. It is all quite singular. Even my son is caught up in the delusion. Do you know he and the Darcy moppet call her a princess?"

"Brother, you would be wise to hold your tongue."

"You know, the only proper explanation that I have been able to come up with these past few days is that the chit is really his by-blown. I can hardly blame the old fool. The negro is known to be quite passionate..."

"You forget yourself, Gregory!" Fitzwilliam cut him off angrily as he stepped close to his brother, his color high. The Viscount regarded his brother closely, a conspiratorial look soon overtaking his features.

"It seems that I have struck a nerve. Perhaps this is not your usual prudishness, is it brother? No, it is not at all. I take it that you already know of what I speak. You always did have trouble sharing your toys as a child."

Fitzwilliam's fist connecting with the Viscount's jaw soon ended the discussion. Caught off guard,
the Viscount fell to the floor from the force of the blow. Fitzwilliam stood over him, rage radiating off of him like a furnace.

"If you so much as think of touching her again, I shall forget that we are brothers. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," the Viscount snarled.

Without another word, Fitzwilliam turned and left to join the others for dinner leaving his brother to nurse a sore jaw and ruminate over his brother's uncharacteristic behavior.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

I have finally recovered from my seven year long case of writer's block. I am working on Chapter 20 now and hope to post mid January. I am posting old chapters now as I realized I had only posted 9 of the 19 chapters that have been written.

The next day saw the house party in full swing. Various activities were planned to amuse the party throughout the day. The men were scheduled to indulge in a fox hunt with the ladies riding out to observe the proceedings. Darcy, Fitzwilliam, the Viscount and Mr. Peterson were to join a few gentlemen from neighboring estates. The ladies of the house were to accompany the gentlemen on horseback, save for Mary who did not ride, Beatrice who found hunting rather tiresome and Elizabeth, who had learned to ride since her marriage to Mr. Darcy but felt herself too poor a horsewoman to navigate her mount through the snow. Mary contented herself with sitting in Georgiana's room as she donned her riding habit in preparation for the morning's activity.

"You must be sure to tell me if anything interesting happens," Mary stated as she fiddled with a bit of ribbon. "I wish that I could ride out with you all."

Georgiana smiled at her friend. "It is I who envy you, Mary. I find watching the men hunt to be rather boring myself. Truly, I think we are only to accompany them to massage their egos and praise them for their masculine efforts."

Mary laughed at this, although she had to admit that she would not mind watching Richard ride through the snow, his mind bent to the task of capturing prey for the evening meal. Mary was broken from her thoughts by Georgiana's laughter.

"Hmm, I wager that I can guess the bent of your thoughts, Mary," Georgiana said smilingly, causing Mary's cheeks to warm with embarrassment. "I promise you, although it sounds rather romantic, there really is not much too it. I shall have to suffer the simpering of Letitia and the haughtiness of the Viscountess all on my own."

Mary frowned. Lady Letitia's attentions toward Richard were becoming a source of annoyance for Mary. She was thankful to be spared the spectacle of Letitia's insincere praise of Richard and her barely veiled insults towards herself.

"Well, at least you will have the opportunity to ride out with Mr. Peterson," Mary offered after a time. "And I am sure that some of the wives of the neighboring gentlemen will accompany you."

Mary was pleased to see Georgiana smile shyly at this.

"I am sure I will have little opportunity to converse with Mr. Peterson. Yet, perhaps the other ladies will provide some sort of buffer to Letitia and the Viscountess. If anything interesting should happen, I'll be sure to tell you of it."

Mary accompanied Georgiana down to the foyer where the party was assembling before the hunt. She smiled as her eyes met those of Richard. He returned her grin with a wide smile of his own and made his way towards her.
"It is unfortunate that you will be unable to join us, Miss Farthington."

"Yes, but as you are well aware, I do not ride and it cannot be helped."

"I suppose that it would be improper for you to share my stead as we did once before? I assure you that Beauregard is up to the challenge," Richard whispered, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Mary grew warm at the memory of being held securely to his body as they rode towards Pemberley, her fear of falling overriding any maidenly reserve that would have put distance between them.

"I fear that it would be quite difficult to maintain your grip upon your gun and my person," Mary replied in hushed tones.

Richard's heated look was Mary's reward for her boldness.

"It would seem that you have become quite the accomplished flirt, Princess," Richard whispered as he stared at her lips. "Lucky for you that the company and hour prevent me from delivering the punishment you deserve."

Mary gasped in genuine shock, earning a triumphant smile from Richard.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam," the honeyed voice of Lady Letitia sounded out, "Will you be so kind as to escort me to my mount?"

Richard winked at Mary surreptitiously before turning towards Lady Letitia.

"But of course, Lady Letitia. May I say how lovely you look?"

Letitia blushed and fluttered her lashes in a manner she thought becoming.

"You are too kind," she replied as she smoothed down her dark red riding habit. She threaded her arm around Richard's before pulling him towards the door, ignoring Mary's presence entirely.

Mary frowned as she watched them walk away.

"Oh, why the long face dear?" Beatrice asked as she came to stand beside Mary to watch the hunting party depart. "Trust me, we girls shall have a grand time here in the warmth of Pemberley. I couldn't give three straws about missing the chance to watch the men muck about in the snow."

"I am sure you are quite right," Mary replied with a small smile before taking Beatrice by the arm to walk to the solarium. Elizabeth had organized a late morning of painting for those who would not be attending the hunt. Mr. Brambles had been kind enough to offer to pose for them all. Mary and Beatrice were quite delighted at the sight that greeted them upon their arrival. Mr. Brambles stood by the fountain in the center of the room arrayed in the costume of a Roman god, a crown of ivy upon his head, a false beard upon his face and a staff in his hand.

"Apparently I am to be Zeus to Miss April's Hera," Mr. Brambles announced with a laugh.

Beatrice and Mary exchanged glances before erupting into laughter.

During luncheon, Mary sat and listened to Lady Letitia wax on about that morning's hunt. The ladies were all gathered in the Green Drawing Room to partake of the meal while the men talked of sport elsewhere.
"Yes, it was a most impressive display," Lady Letitia went on. "Colonel Fitzwilliam is quite the accomplished rider and huntsman. Why, he caught two foxes himself and I am sure that he would have had even more success had it been earlier in the season."

"Well, enough talk of shooting things, Letitia," the Viscountess interrupted. "I should like to hear how you all entertained yourselves while we were away."

"We had a grand time of painting and indulging in hot chocolate," Beatrice supplied. "It was infinitely more pleasing than riding about in the snow."

"I take it that you don't ride, Miss Farthington," Lady Letitia addressed her, ignoring Beatrice's statement and her cousin's attempts to change the conversation.

"No, I never learnt," Mary replied with a smile. "The carriage and my own two feet were always sufficient means of transport in New Sussex."

Elizabeth chuckled. "I was of the same opinion, Mary, until I married Mr. Darcy and was cajoled into taking lessons. I still prefer to walk, but I must own that there is much enjoyment to be had in a good brisk ride."

"Every lady of breeding knows how to ride, Miss Farthington," Lady Letitia continued, insensible or uncaring of the insult to her hostess. "It is regrettable that your guardian overlooked that aspect of your education."

Mary felt her anger rise from deep in her belly at this insult to herself and her father. She made to reply but was cut off by Beatrice's conciliatory tones.

"When you come to us in Brighton this summer, I am sure my Derek would be delighted to teach you, Mary. I have the gentlest mare that would do quite nicely."

"I thank you, Beatrice. I shall consider it."

Lunch continued much in the same vein with Lady Letitia offering various thinly veiled insults towards Mary with Beatrice, Georgiana and Elizabeth doing their best to deflect the barbs. Mary was quite relieved when the luncheon was concluded and the ladies were permitted to separate and indulge in individual amusements.

Being much desirous of fresh air, Mary took the opportunity to take a walk. As snow still covered most of the grounds, Mary was obliged to confine her walk to the rose garden paths that had been cleared of snow. Donning a heavy wool cloak, Mary set out for the gardens at a fast pace delighting in the feel of the cold air against her cheeks and the warmth of exertion that spread through her person. After walking for a short time, Mary was delighted to encounter her cousin Derek Peterson on the path ahead of her. Mary called to him and Derek turned to regard her with a delighted smile.

"Cousin! What an unexpected pleasure," Derek stated happily as he offered his arm. "I had thought that you would be indulging in an afternoon of beauty sleep like the rest of the ladies."

Mary smiled brightly at the appellation. She still found herself inordinately pleased to be someone's cousin. "Are you suggesting that I am in need of beauty sleep, Cousin?"

"Heaven's no," Derek responded with mock horror. "Indeed, if you took much more rest your beauty would be so great as to render us all blind and dumb."

Mary laughed. "Did you have much success in the hunt, cousin? According to Lady Letitia, Colonel Fitzwilliam shot the entire pack of foxes single handedly."
Derek grinned sheepishly. "Well, I fear that the lady exaggerates. But, no, I did not have much luck in the hunt. Can I share a confidence with you, Mary?" He whispered, looking around him dramatically for eavesdroppers.

"Of course. I trust it is not so dastardly as all that."

"I hate the sight of blood. Indeed, I abhor hunting altogether. Except for the necessity of putting meat on the table, I cannot understand the amusement one is supposed to derive from running down some poor frightened creature."

"That is not so very a bad thing. Actually, I think it quite noble. It shows that you have a kind soul and a good heart."

Derek blushed. "Well, it is a not a thing to be so proud of if you are striving to be a proper gentleman. It seems that every amusement designed for gentleman centers around fisticuffs or pistols of some sort."

"Well, your secret is safe with me," Mary laughed as she patted her cousin's arm.

"It is fortunate that we should meet on this path," Derek began after a few minutes of amicable silence. "I was just lamenting the lack of opportunity to converse with you properly. I fear that my good mother has selfishly kept you to herself our entire visit."

"Beatrice is a dear sweet woman. I am so happy to have had the opportunity to meet you both. I know so little about my father's family. On New Sussex it was just the two of us. Granted, my father spoke of you and your mother, but not in great detail and he did not mention other family members. I could not even get him to speak much of my mother. I suppose the subject brought him too much pain."

"Well, I shall endeavor to rectify that. Ask me any question at all and I shall answer to the best of my ability."

"I know that your mother is Lord Farthington's first cousin. However, I have not heard him speak of any other cousins or siblings. Does your mother have brothers or sisters?"

"Well, Lord Farthington was an only child, so it is only natural that he did not speak of any siblings," Derek began. "I believe he had a sister Caroline that died in infancy after whom you were presumably named. My mother had a brother who passed away without a family of his own. My mother is your father's first cousin, as you know. She was born to Lady Gertrude Lawrence, the sister of Lord Farthington's father Robert. Robert Farthington had another sibling who moved to the America's and started a family there. However, I do not know much about that branch of the family tree."

Mary looked thoughtfully at her cousin for a moment. "Do you know where in the America's my father's uncle settled?"

"If my memory serves me, I believe he settled in the colony of Virginia."

Mary gasped. "My mother was born in Virginia."

"Indeed? It could be possible that she was connected to the family somehow...other than through your father, of course. However, as I said, I know very little about that branch of the family; only that there exists a great deal of bad blood between their side and ours."

They walked in silence for a while as Mary considered all that Derek had told her. She knew from
her father that her mother had been a slave but he had never said from whom he had liberated her. Before Mary could consider the puzzle much longer, Derek began to ask her questions about her life on New Sussex and her time in England so far. Interspersed were subtle inquiries concerning Miss Darcy, which Mary answered with enthusiasm. They were thus happily engaged until the cold weather and the hour bid them return to the house.

Dinner that evening found Mary again separated from Fitzwilliam, much to her displeasure. He was seated to the left of Lady Letitia at the far end of the table. Upon looking toward Elizabeth, Mary noted her own confusion as to the arrangements that evening. However, she was heartened to be seated near Georgiana who offered her an encouraging smile when she caught her eye. They both conversed happily with Mr. Peterson and Mr. Brambles until the end of the meal and the separation of the sexes.

The interval between their separation and the men rejoining their party was blissfully short. Elizabeth had planned a series of entertainments for the evening. The party was to engage in a round of charades, a game to which Mr. Darcy appeared strangely adept. Mary could barely control the fit of giggles that sought to overtake her at the sight of Mr. Darcy attempting to act out The Marriage of Figaro. Following charades, the party broke off into various card games while Mary and Georgiana made silhouettes of whomever was willing to sit for them. Mary made no effort to suppress the smile that crossed her features upon noting Georgiana's becoming blush when Mr. Peterson sat for his silhouette.

"Miss Farthington," Colonel Fitzwilliam addressed her as she finished taking Elizabeth's silhouette. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to take your silhouette?"

"I thought that silhouette making was a woman's occupation?" Elizabeth teased as she quitted her seat before the screen.

"As my brother can attest, growing up in a house full of unruly brothers were our antics often found us confined to the nursery, we learned to take up a number of pastimes usually thought of as being fully in the province of women."

"Good God, Richard. There are some stories from our childhood that should not be bandied about," the Viscount protested from his seat at the whist table across the room.

"Now I am intrigued," Elizabeth laughed. "I must hear all!"

"My brother would have me swear to secrecy, but I will confess a few exploits if it will please Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam offered as he took Mary by the hand and led her to the seat Elizabeth had just vacated.

"I must confess that I am intrigued as well. Do tell us one story if it would not bring your brother too much pain."

Fitzwilliam squeezed her hand briefly before planting a kiss on her fingers. "If it will bring my Princess pleasure than I am obliged to comply."

Mary ducked her head in embarrassment, so sure was she that the entire room heard his comment. When she looked up her eyes met the narrowed gaze of the Viscountess.

"When we were quite young, I but six years old to the exalted Viscount's twelve years, we took much delight in terrorizing the scullery maids by secreting frogs, snakes and other creatures obnoxious to females into the kitchens. These deeds often found us confined indoors during choice spring and summer weeks with most of our toys taken from us. So, to pass the time we took up
needlepoint and embroidery of cushions."

The room broke out in laughter at this pronouncement.

"Next you shall declare that we took up lace making," the Viscount protested with mock outrage.

"If I remember correctly, your work was quite good," Darcy commented. "I remember one occasion when I mistook one of Richard's pillows to be Anne's handiwork."

"And I am not ashamed to accept the compliment. I was quite accomplished for my age," Fitzwilliam replied as he seated himself in Mary's former chair. "I do not think my skills at the silhouette are quite as refined and I have been out of practice these last fifteen years, but I shall make a go of it. Besides, this provides me with an excellent excuse to closely observe an example of feminine beauty without fear of censure."

Mary's cheeks heated anew at this pronouncement and she was unable to mask the pleased smile that broke out over her face. Mary's face did not return to its normal temperature for the duration of her sitting. Fitzwilliam made a great show of correcting her posture and adjusting the tilt of her chin or the set of her shoulders with his hand. Whenever she happened to move out of position in the slightest he would make a great deal of protest about her movements reducing the quality of his work and how he was obliged to begin again. This would lead to another round of posture and position adjustments that most of the party found quite diverting. In total, Mary's silhouette took a full hour and a half to complete. Elizabeth and Georgiana declared the finish product to bear an uncanny resemblance to their friend.

The party dispersed to their respective quarters after the eleventh hour. Mary went to bed pleasantly tired and filled with expectation for the coming day of amusement.

Darcy sat in bed watching his wife brush out her long chestnut locks by the fire. They were still wet from her bath and the heat of the fire slowly dried them as she worked the boar bristled brush through the strands. While her maid could have easily and happily handled the task, Elizabeth insisted on completing it herself especially as she knew that her husband derived much pleasure from watching the activity.

"Fitzwilliam. I was wondering if you could solve a conundrum that has been perplexing me all evening."

Darcy did not have to see the arch of her brow to know that his wife was not pleased with the alleged conundrum and that said conundrum was not perplexing in the least.

"I am at your service," Darcy replied as he sat up straighter in the bed.

"This house party and upcoming ball has been the work of many weeks. The planning of where to house whom, what to serve for the meals and teas, what flowers to have brought in from the hothouse and where to place them, the choice of dinnerware, the entertainments…Well, I am sure you can begin to see how much work and detail has gone into this event."

"Of course, my dear. And may I say that the party has been a splendid success so far."

"Thank you, my dear. I know. You can understand then, that any derivation from the plan does not go unnoticed and can in fact cause a great deal of distress. Why, this very evening the seating arrangements during dinner were different from what I had so carefully planned. Lady Letitia was
Darcy squirmed slightly under the covers. "Well, as I am sure you have already determined, I altered the seating arrangements."

"Yes, I know. What I do not understand is why you chose to do so. Was not the planning of the house party and ball to be completely under my direction?"

"Yes, you are quite right and I apologize for not consulting you before I made the changes."

"Well, I cannot determine if I should accept your apology, husband, until I know why you changed the seating."

Darcy sighed. He knew that Elizabeth would not like his explanation.

"I placed Richard next to Letitia because I did not think it proper for Richard to be always seated next to Mary especially given our expanded party."

Elizabeth stopped her brushing and turned to face her husband, her aspect anything but pleased.

"And why would it be improper for Mary to merely sit next to Richard during an evening meal?"

"Come, Elizabeth. You know my objections to the match. While I promised to consider it further, I did not promise to encourage them," Darcy explained as he quit the bed and walked towards his wife. "Besides, Lady Letitia would be an excellent match for Richard and I thought that he should be given the opportunity to consider his options before making his choice."

"Lady Letitia is vapid and spoiled, as you well know, and Richard merely tolerates her for the sake of his brother."

"Elizabeth!"

"Well, it is the truth! That would be a horrible match no matter the amount of fortune or connections Letitia would bring to the union. Richard would be miserable."

"Well, it does not signify because it is clear to me that Richard has already made his choice and from his behavior tonight he shows no signs of concealing his preference from his brother's family," Darcy continued as he took the brush from his wife's hands to complete the task.

"Oh, Richard was just engaging in some harmless fun for which I am grateful. Everyone found it very diverting. Mary did not appear to enjoy herself very much today until after dinner, which is a shame because this party is really for her."

"Is it merely for her amusement, Elizabeth, or are you engaged in some matchmaking scheme of your own?"

Elizabeth made to protest but Darcy merely waived her off.

"What is done is done. I begin to see that my interference will do little to dissuade him and Mary seems to accept his attentions with pleasure. I have also begun to reconsider my opposition to the match..."
Elizabeth clapped happily at this pronouncement and made to embrace her husband.

"Please, Elizabeth, hear me out. I have only begun to reconsider; I have not yet decided to grant Richard the permission he seeks. I still maintain that should they marry they will face a great deal of opposition from our relations and society at large. It would not be an easy marriage and Richard would have to give up much to which he has become accustomed. What I had not considered is the sort of protection Richard might bring Mary through their union. There is some information that Mr. Brambles shared with me the other day of which you should be made aware."

Elizabeth listened to Darcy's explanation with increasing alarm.

"Is Mr. Brambles quite certain that Mary would be in danger from these relatives?"

"No, he only speculates. He fears that her estate rather than her person would be the likely targets of their ill will. There is no need to be alarmed. Now that we are aware that there exists those who would do Mary harm, we can take steps to protect her and her estate," Darcy sighed as he ran the brush through her curls.

"I had considered that Mary would be the target of fortune hunters once she is introduced in London but I admit that this did not factor into my reasoning regarding Richard's intentions. We know Richard to be an honorable man who has sincere affection for Mary. Also, while he has no fortune of his own, he is not desperate for funds."

"You must also allow that the union would make Mary and Richard very happy indeed," Elizabeth.

"Of course. Yet, all this still does not outweigh the trouble such a union would bring them both. And besides, I am sure there are a few honorable gentlemen of our acquaintance whom would be adequate matches for Mary whom also have the benefit of a relatively inconspicuous social status."

Elizabeth thought to argue the point with her husband but chose to hold her tongue. The very fact that Fitzwilliam was considering the advantages of a marriage between Richard and Mary was a great deal of progress.

"Fitzwilliam, can you please promise not to alter the arrangements I have made for this house party or the ball without consulting me first?"

"Yes, dear," Darcy replied as he leaned towards his wife to give her an apologetic kiss. He was grateful that this seemed to be the end of the discussion.

Mary ran through the halls of Pemberley with as much dignity as she could muster. The party was engaged in a game of sardines and she did not have long before Elizabeth would be done with her counting. Mary was determined to find an excellent hiding place and emerge victorious. She knew this would not be an easy feat, as Elizabeth surely knew the best hiding places in her own home. They had the entire house save for the servant's quarters, kitchens and laundry at their disposal. Here and there she could see the other partygoers ducking into various rooms and broom closets. Even the children were allowed to partake in the afternoon's entertainments. Sir Little Bits and Sir Kelvin had chosen the more obvious place of Mr. Darcy's study to hide.

Mary ran up several flights of stairs to hide in the less used fourth floor guest rooms. She was very surprised that none of the other players were choosing a similar hiding place. Making sure that she wasn't being followed, Mary ducked inside a vacant guest room and made for the armoire in the corner of the room. After several minutes of hiding, Mary heard the door to the room creak open and
shut. Sure that she would be found, Mary held her breath so as not to make a sound.

"Really, I do not know why we have to participate in these childish amusements."

"We must strive to be obliging guests, Letitia. Besides, what did you expect from a woman who has spent all of her life in the country? I am sure in Meryton or whatever hamlet Darcy found her in that this is the height of sophisticated entertainment."

The Viscountess and Lady Letitia shared a bit of derisive laughter.

"Besides, soon this family will be your own family and you know that the Colonel is inordinately fond of Darcy and his country bride. You shall have to learn to endure these family gatherings a few times out of the year."

Mary gasped audibly before quickly covering her mouth with her hand.

"Of course you are right, Daniela. However, when we are finally wed I hope to limit our attendance of such gatherings. I do wish that Richard would hurry and speak with papa. This long understanding is so tiresome. I do not understand his need for delay or secrecy."

"Oh, Letitia dear, I do understand your impatience. However, you must understand the ways of the world. Richard is still relatively young and a military man. I am sure that he is just indulging in his last bit of fun before settling down in a life of respectability. Besides, few men are able to resist the allure of an exotic."

"Yes, it is quite abhorrent how he carries on with that Farthington girl," Letitia replied with a huff. "You would think he would be more discrete with his arrangements."

"I am sure that he usually is, my dear. Darcy would not knowingly allow him to carry on a flirtation with his ward. He is such a stickler for decorum. Perhaps he just had a bit too much to drink while the gentlemen were separated."

"Perhaps you are right, cousin. You are always so wise about such things. However, I shall speak to him about his behavior. If we are to marry he must know what I expect of him."

"Come, Letitia. Let's find another hiding place. I fear that we shall be at this game forever if we remain here."

Mary listened as Lady Letitia and the Viscountess exited the room. Once she was sure that she was alone, Mary stepped out of the armoire on shaky legs. Gathering as much composure as she could muster, she quietly made her way from the room towards her own by way of the servant’s stairs so as she would not be found. She no longer cared much for participating in the game. When she arrived, she rang for April and instructed her to tell Elizabeth that she was not well and would be resting for the remainder of the afternoon in her rooms.

Once she was alone, Mary allowed herself to give way to her tears. She could not credit what she had heard but she could not discredit it either. What purpose would Lady Letitia and her cousin have in concocting such a story to tell among themselves. She did not think that the ladies were delusional and there was no way they would have known she was secreted away in the armoire. Mary was sure that she was not followed when she chose her hiding place.

However, Mary could not believe that the alternative was true: that Richard had deceived her so completely. All of his actions and words to her where made with such sincerity and depth of emotion. He had pledged his heart to her. Yet, it had been several weeks and he had not spoken to Mr. Darcy to seek his consent to the match. They did not have a formal courtship arrangement and
there had been no proposal. If his heart were truly her own, why the need for secrecy? Elizabeth’s warning and Georgiana's accusation returned fresh to her memory.

Mary flushed with shame at the liberties that she had allowed him. While he had not taken her as a mistress outright, if their activities were known she would be thoroughly compromised. How foolish she had been!

Mary wept for many minutes before she was interrupted by a knock at the door. Mary hastily wiped her face dry before bidding her visitor to enter.

"Mary, April said that you are unwell," Elizabeth said as she made her way to the bedside, Georgiana and Beatrice in tow. "Should I send for the doctor?"

"No, Elizabeth. I…I just have a headache. I merely need to rest," Mary replied truthfully. She had wept herself into quite a nasty headache.

"Have you been weeping, dearie?" Beatrice inquired, her face drawn in concern.

Mary shook her head in denial. "I just need some rest, that is all."

Elizabeth and Georgiana exchanged a doubtful look.

"I will have cook send up some tea and I will check on you in a few hours. If you are not much improved, I will call Dr. Roberts no matter what you say."

Mary sighed before nodding her acceptance.

"Rest well, Mary." Georgiana kissed her friend on the forehead before leaving the room with Elizabeth.

Beatrice shared a discrete nod with Elizabeth before moving towards the side table where she wet a cloth with the pitcher and basin before seating herself on the bed beside Mary. She silently took the cool cloth and gently wiped Mary's cheeks, brow and eyes. Mary sighed under the ministrations.

"I shall be fine, Beatrice. You should not miss out on the rest of the afternoon's amusements on my account."

"Pish, posh," Beatrice tutted as she set aside the cloth to stroke Mary's head. "I would much rather be up here with you. Elizabeth and Georgiana are lovely women, but I will gladly avoid the pleasure of the Superior Cousin's company any day."

Beatrice laughed lightly until she noticed that Mary had begun to cry anew.

"What is the matter, dear?"

Mary shook her head in the negative, finding it too difficult to speak.

"I may not have had any daughters of my own, but I was once a young lady of not quite twenty myself. Come, child, you can tell me what is wrong. I promise to keep everything in the utmost confidence. I cannot be easy knowing that you are so miserable."

"Oh Beatrice, I have been so foolish!" Mary sobbed.

Beatrice merely coaxed Mary to rest her head in her lap and tell her everything as she continued to pat her head and back. Mary revealed the entire tale, from her first meeting with Colonel Fitzwilliam to the overheard conversation that shattered her entire world. Beatrice listened without interruption
and refrained from speaking until Mary's sobs had quieted and she lay limply in her lap. She dared not offer any admonishments for Mary's behavior as Mary heaped plenty upon herself.

Lady Letitia practically floated into the Viscountess' rooms.

"Oh, Daniela, your plan worked better than you anticipated," Letitia trilled as she fell upon the settee.

"Do comport yourself with some dignity," the Viscountess chided her cousin as she dismissed her maid and finished placing her jewelry herself.

"Miss Farthington has become unwell and shall not be joining us for dinner. She must have believed every word we said!"

"As I knew she would. She is really just a simple girl and too trusting by far. I must give you some credit, Letitia, for seeing what I had refused to notice until last night. You can rest easy now knowing that the chit won't presume to aspire to catch the Colonel's interest. If his intentions towards her were honorable, she will now have none of it being convinced he is a cad."

"It is all so perfect," Letitia laughed before sobering quickly. "But, are you very sure that he won't learn of our trickery?"

"How would he know? Miss Farthington will most likely be too ashamed to confront him and if she does, she would hardly admit to eavesdropping."

The Viscountess rose and smoothed out her skirts.

"Now everything is up to you, Letitia. You must secure him."

"Oh, but the house party is almost over and even if Miss Farthington is no longer a concern, there is still no guarantee that he will take notice of me. Stupid man."

"Now, now Letitia. That is no way to speak of your fiancée. You still have one more day of the house party and the ball to secure him. Mrs. Darcy had planned a few activities perfect for matchmaking. Tomorrow we shall just do a bit of arranging of our own to throw you into each other's company."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter picks up on the evening of the events at the end of the last chapter.

Beatrice held her tongue as she listened to Mary's account of her courtship with Colonel Fitzwilliam and the conversation between Lady Letitia and the Viscountess that she heard that afternoon. Any admonishments she may have given were wisely kept to herself as they would offer little comfort and less value.

"Oh Mary, my child. I do feel your pain," Beatrice soothed as she continued to stroke Mary's hair. "However, everything might not be so terrible as you have thought. I may not know Colonel Fitzwilliam very well, but he strikes me as an honorable man who is very much enamored with you. I just cannot imagine such a pleasant man betrothing himself to such a harpy! There must be another explanation."

Mary's lips formed a brittle smile at Beatrice's choice of words. While Lady Letitia may not have quite been a harpy, she was a rather unpleasant and mean sort of woman and Fitzwilliam had never shown much interest in her. Mary's heart also rebelled at the very notion that Fitzwilliam would purposefully use her in such a way.

"Lady Letitia did say that the engagement was long standing and secret. Perhaps Richard pledged himself to her when he was very young. It may be that Lady Letitia was much more pleasant then."

Beatrice gave a very unladylike snort at that. "I have met women like Lady Letitia before. If they are vicious harpies at five and twenty they were also ill tempered as youths! No. I wouldn't trust a single word that passed through those painted lizard lips."

Mary laughed out right at this, lifting her head from Beatrice's lap.

"Beatrice, you are quite wicked," Mary replied as she wiped her wet cheeks and shook her head. "I would like to believe that every word she spoke was a lie. Indeed, I would. However, I cannot see why they would speak in private to each other in such a way. Richard has also made his intentions towards me quite clear yet he still has not proposed nor spoken with Mr. Darcy."

"I told you that I have known harpies like Lady Letitia and the Viscountess before. When they are in pursuit of a husband there is no limit to their schemes."

Beatrice turned to face Mary, taking both of her hands into her own.

"However, I must be frank with you, Mary. It is not proper that you continue this clandestine courtship with the Colonel. I know that you mean well and that your love for him is sincere. I also believe that he may sincerely care for you as well. Do not loose all faith just yet. I advise you to speak with him and ask him when he plans to speak with Mr. Darcy. If he continues to prevaricate or gives some excuse as to why he cannot do so, then you must do what is right and end things then and there."

Mary nodded her head in acceptance. She knew that Beatrice was right. She only prayed that she
would have the strength to walk away if the situation called for it.

"Please do not tell Mr. Darcy, Beatrice. I've only spoken with you and Georgiana about Richard. I know I have acted foolishly. I could not bear for Mr. Darcy to know and look on me with disappointment."

"I will not speak with Mr. Darcy, Mary. You have my word. But please, I cannot bear to hear you speak so harshly of yourself. You are still a young woman and you have had to handle your first love without the benefit of a mother to guide you. On top of all this, you have had to deal with two harridans."

Mary smiled again.

"So, no more self abuse, dear girl," Beatrice continued as she hugged her close. "If you have need of me, you only need to ask. I do enjoy giving advice."

With that, Beatrice quit the bed and went to her own rooms to prepare for the evening meal. Although speaking with Beatrice improved her spirits somewhat, Mary did not feel up to the task of enduring another dinner with Lady Letitia's smug looks and thinly veiled insults. Nor could she endure Richard's heated glances or compliments. She would take sustenance in the comfort of her rooms before joining the party for the evening's entertainments.

"Princess," little William cried as he ran towards Mary. "Momma said that you had a hurt head and that you needed to sleep. Is your head all better?"

Mary laughed as she stooped down to hug the small child. "Yes, my head is all better, Sir Little Bits. I would not miss fireworks for the world!"

Fitzwilliam watched in contentment as William led Mary into the room, pulling her along by the hand towards the windows where the rest of the party was gathered. As the evening's entertainment was special and the noise would have woken the children anyway, William and Ronald were allowed to enjoy the spectacle with the adults.

He smiled as he walked towards her and offered her his arm.

"I am pleased that you are well enough to join us, Miss Farthington. Your presence was missed at dinner."

His smiled slipped from his face as Mary mumbled her thanks and continued to walk with William, her eyes downcast.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam," Lady Letitia purred as she made her way towards him. "Is this not a lovely bit of amusement?"

Fitzwilliam swallowed a groan before turning towards her and offering a placid smile. "Quite."

"Shall we join the others?" Letitia asked as she threaded her arm through his.

Fitzwilliam nodded absently as he continued to watch Mary. She stood surrounded by the children and her relations. Mrs. Peterson noticed his perusal and met his stare with one of her own. She frowned at him most openly before turning back towards the window and wrapping one arm about Mary's shoulders in a motherly fashion. Before Fitzwilliam could wonder at the action, the fireworks
began and he found himself pulled hurriedly towards the windows by Lady Letitia.

Despite the spectacle of the fireworks display before him, Fitzwilliam's gaze remained fixed on Mary. For her part, she endeavored to ignore his pointed stares, looking at him once, only to blanche as her eyes came to rest on Lady Letitia who clutched unpleasantly to his arm. He wondered where had gone his teasing girl of the day before. He longed to speak with her privately but found no opportunity that evening to do so. Yet again he lamented the fact that he lacked the privileges of a fiancé.

After the fireworks, the party gathered to partake of hot cider and cakes with the exception of the children as Elizabeth despaired them ever falling asleep should they be provided sugar to further fuel their excitement.

"I find that I am quite tired," Mary announced to the room as a maid gathered the children for bed. "If Sir Little Bits and Sir Kelvin so wish, I could tell them one story to usher them off to bed."

"Oh, yes please! A story would be most wonderful," Ronald pleaded as William bounced up and down.

"Are you sure that you are quite up to it, Miss Farthington? Perhaps you should rest instead," Fitzwilliam offered with genuine concern. He could find no other explanation for her peculiar behavior.

"I am quite fit for a story, I assure you," Mary replied in a clipped tone, looking him in the eye for the first time that evening.

Fitzwilliam was stunned by both her tone and the look of anger in her eyes. He was about to make another protestation before Mrs. Peterson interrupted him.

"I could do with a bit more rest myself, dear. Let me help you with the young gentlemen. I should like to hear one of your famous stories myself," Beatrice said with a smile.

Mary smiled at her gratefully before taking William by the hand. Fitzwilliam watched dumbfounded as Mary and Beatrice bid them farewell for the evening.

The Viscountess Daniela examined herself in the mirror, adjusting her nightgown and pinching color into her pale cheeks. Her auburn hair was loose about her shoulders and down her back, the thick curls arranged in such a way as to appear most enticing. Her bosom was freshly powdered and her best perfume delicately applied to her wrists and behind her ears. As she examined the pleasing picture before her, she sighed dramatically. She hoped that her cousin came to appreciate the depths of her affection for her. She disliked asking anything of her husband almost as much as she disliked sharing his bed. However, Letitia was not getting any younger and she had to marry. For reasons that the Viscountess still could not understand, Letitia was determined to have Richard Fitzwilliam, despite his position as a second son with average looks. While her plans to remove the threat of the Farthington chit had been a splendid success so far, more drastic intervention was needed to secure the Colonel. So, as a devoted cousin, the Viscountess felt it was her duty to do all that was in her power to secure the future happiness of her beloved Letitia. After adjusting the scandalously low-cut bodice of her nightgown one last time, she made her way towards her husband's chambers.

The Viscountess bore the caresses and vigorous attentions of her husband with feigned impatient desire. Thankfully, her husband's attentions were of a short duration. As they lay in bed, her husband
content in the afterglow of their activities, the Viscountess made her move. She sighed dramatically.

"What is the matter, Poppet?" the Viscount asked sleepily as he fondled one of her silken locks.

The Viscountess cringed inwardly at her husband's endearment. "I am simply worried about our dear Letitia. She has been so despondent lately. I had hoped that this little party would cheer her, but I fear that it has just brought her pain."

"How so?" the Viscount asked distractedly as his wife lazily traced patterns on his chest.

"I had thought that being in the company of our dear brother would cheer her. You know how she admires him so. But I am afraid that he has quite ignored her, much to Letitia's regret."

"Ah. Miss Mary does provide an enticing distraction. I daresay my brother is quite besotted with her. He absolutely refuses to share."

The Viscountess' movements stilled for a moment. She had not known of her husband's interest in that slip of a girl. However, she had known his tastes to always venture into the exotic and new. Of course he would desire to pluck a hothouse flower. The Viscountess resumed her languid attentions to her husband. His interest in the girl could prove useful.

"If only Miss Farthington were somehow out of the way, I know Richard would pay Letitia the attention that she so craves."

"What can be done for it?" the Viscount asked as he grew restless under his wife's traveling fingers. "My brother has never shown any interest in your cousin."

"I know," the Viscountess replied as her questing hands slipped beneath the covers. "However, if we gave them a moment alone, Letitia would at least have an opportunity to catch his eye. And perhaps…"

"Yes?" the Viscount prodded, his voice roughened with reawakened desire.

"Ad perhaps you could have a moment alone with Miss Mary. Away from prying eyes and uninterrupted."

"What would you have me do?"

Mary dressed herself with care for the afternoon's planned entertainments. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had arranged for the party to take part in a sleigh ride tour of Pemberly's grounds and of local points of interest in the vicinity. Mary hoped to use the sleigh rides as a chance to speak with Fitzwilliam. She would take Beatrice's advice and learn the truth for herself. After breakfast, Beatrice had informed her that Elizabeth had arranged the groupings for the sleigh rides so that Mary would be paired in a sleigh with Richard with Beatrice acting as their chaperone. Beatrice conspired to delay their sleigh so that it would be the last to depart and then to make herself scarce at the last moment before their departure so that she and Richard could speak in private. Mary thought the plan was rather clever.

The party was all gathered in the foyer being assisted by various staff members in donning warm attire for the afternoon's sleigh ride. Young William and Ronald chatted excitedly as they shrugged into their winter coats. Mary accepted a hug from each boy as she entered in the foyer.
"Will you ride with us, Princess?" William asked excitedly. "I can show you my favorite hiding places in the spring, but I think the snow may have hidden them all."

"I would love to see your hiding places, Sir Little Bits, but I think that your mother has assigned me to another sleigh. But, when the weather is warm and the grass is green, I promise to go with you to all your hiding places."

William pouted dramatically before running over to his mother to ask that Mary be put in his sleigh as the Princess would need the protection of her knights.

"Does not your queen require your protection, William?" Elizabeth replied, with a smirk.

"You will have Papa to protect you. But who will protect the Princess from bandits and thieves?"

"You and Ronald are surely not the only knights pledged to the Princess?" Elizabeth replied.

"No," William answered as he looked down thoughtfully. "Sir Gallant can protect the Princess!"

Elizabeth watched William run over to his uncle with a bemused expression before walking over to Mary who stood laughing as she watched the scene unfold.

"I suppose that Colonel Fitzwilliam is Sir Gallant?" Elizabeth asked smilingly.

"Yes," Mary replied, her cheeks warm with embarrassment. "As a knight of my realm he required a proper name. I thought that Sir Gallant suited him."

"Indeed it does," Elizabeth agreed as she squeezed Mary's hand fondly.

Shortly thereafter, the entire party made their way to the carriages. Mary looked around for Fitzwilliam as she was handed into the equipage by a footman. Beatrice stood by the sleigh engaged in a similar search. Soon, all but Mary's sleigh and that of Lady Letitia remained.

"I'll go and see what's keeping him, dear," Beatrice offered before walking back into the house.

Mary sat in the sleigh for several moments, snuggly wrapped in furs. She used the minutes alone to think over what she planned to say to Fitzwilliam and to steady her nerves. Her stomach rebelled at the fearful thought that Fitzwilliam would only confirm what Lady Letitia and the Viscountess had said. She wondered if she would indeed have the strength to let him go if that was the case. The feel of the sleigh dipping under the weight of a new occupant broke her from her reverie. Mary turned expecting Fitzwilliam before starting at the sight of the Viscount entering the sleigh.

"Your Lordship!" Mary exclaimed.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Mary," said the Viscount as he settled into the seat across from her. "And, we agreed that you would address me as Gregory."

"Where is Richard?" Mary asked, looking around frantically as the sleigh began to move.

"Ah, he is riding with Lady Letitia," the Viscount replied with a smile. "He asked me to switch places with him as he needed to discuss some private matter. I confess that I leapt at the opportunity of being in your fair company, Mary."

Mary regarded him with a look of contempt and disbelief.

"Richard would not do such a thing," she retorted hotly, remembering his anger following her previous encounter with the Viscount. "I demand that you turn this sleigh around at once!"
"Oh, but we have barely left sight of the house, Mary, and I so looked forward to your company."

Mary began to grow uneasy under the Viscount's rapacious smile. "Driver, please return us to the house at once!"

"That will never do," the Viscount replied after the driver ignored Mary's demand. "You see, Sam is under my employ and I do not wish to end our lovely ride so soon."

Mary sat with her mouth agape, disbelieving the Viscount's audacity.

"Well, I do wish to end our ride. If you are a gentleman, you will instruct your servant to return us to the house at once."

The Viscount laughed. "Oh, I am afraid that your notion of what makes a gentleman is woefully limited, Mary. I am a gentleman, but I have no intention of returning you to the house just yet."

The Viscount quit his seat across from Mary to sit beside her in the sleigh. Mary's anger soon gave way to fear and she clutched the furs tightly to her body.

"What do you want with me?" Mary asked, her voice wavering slightly.

"Only to spend time in your lovely presence, Mary."

"You do not have leave to call me by my Christian name, my lord," Mary replied as she inched further away from the Viscount.

"Gregory, Mary. Gregory. I do not wish to tell you again," he replied as he closed the distance between them.

"If I call you Gregory will you return me to the house?"

"Perhaps," he replied distractedly. "It is quite cold, Mary. Will you not share the furs with me?"

"That would not be proper, Gregory. There are furs enough for you on the other side of the sleigh."

The Viscount smiled at Mary's capitulation. "Oh, but I prefer to share with you, Mary."

The Viscount lifted a corner of the furs from Mary's body and slid underneath as he pulled Mary against him.

"Much better," he commented. "I begin to see my brother's fascination with you. You are so bewitching in your feigned innocence. But I know that passions run deep in your people."

"I…I don't know what you mean. Please, release me. This is not proper," Mary pleaded.

"Whatever my brother has offered you, I can more than double, Mary. Come to me this season in London and I will lavish you with luxuries and attentions that my staid and poor brother could never offer. I have a little house in London with servants who are paid to be discrete. I will arrange everything."

"You…you think I am his mistress," Mary gasped. "What you propose is despicable! I have no need for money and would never degrade myself in such a way."

"I can offer you more than money, Mary," the Viscount continued, his questing hands moving from her shoulders to caress her form. "My brother is so prudish and unschooled. I could teach you things and show you pleasures that he could not imagine."
"I demand that you release me at once," Mary commanded through gritted teeth.

"Who knew that you had such fire?" the Viscount laughed as he turned Mary forcibly so that she was pressed against his chest. "But you will not deny me."

With that, the Viscount crashed his lips down onto Mary's. She screamed and pushed against his shoulders forcefully, but he would not release her. Mary felt his tongue seeking entrance into her mouth. She allowed him in before biting him firmly on the tongue. The Viscount yelped as he pushed Mary away from him. Hearing his master's cry of pain, the driver stopped the sleigh to attend to him. Sensing her chance, Mary quickly climbed down from the sleigh, falling to her knees as she hit the snow covered ground. Before the Viscount could follow her, Mary picked herself up and ran into the woods.

"Should I follow her, my lord," the driver asked as he leapt from the sleigh.

"No, leave the blasted chit," the Viscount bit out as he spat blood from his mouth. "Return to Pemberley without her.

Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped into the foyer angrily shrugging off his coat followed by a sheepish Lady Letitia. He disliked being bamboozled. He had been looking forward to the sleigh ride with Mary and was quite put out when he found himself placed alone with Lady Letitia instead. He immediately suspected that his brother's sudden desire to have a private word with him just as they were due to embark on the tour was related. He spent the entire sleigh ride seated as far from Lady Letitia as possible. He had been in no mood to indulge her mindless chatter and rebuffed her flattery with a coldness that he seldom displayed to the fairer sex. His ire had been further stoked when Letitia mentioned that his brother Gregory was riding with Miss Farthington. In response to his uttered curse at that bit of news, Letitia became angry herself and began abusing Mary abominably.

"I do not know why you are so concerned after the chit," Letitia went on. "She is hardly better than a servant and not worth your concern. She's such a dark coarse thing, no more than a bastard parading around like a proper lady."

"That is quite enough, Letitia," Fitzwilliam barked out, stunning Lady Letitia into silence. "You have no right to speak of Miss Farthington in such a way. The lady is everything that you are not. Miss Farthington possess more true grace and beauty in her little toe than you do in your entire body. Despite all your breeding and education, you are nothing more than a vapid shell of a woman who pales in comparison."

"How dare you speak to me in such a manner!"

"I dare say that you deserve far worse, but I shan't waste my breath," Fitzwilliam replied. Ignoring Letitia's indignant splutters, Fitzwilliam instructed the driver to return them to Pemberley at once.

As soon as Fitzwilliam divested himself of his coat, he was approached by a concerned Darcy.

"Richard, have you or Lady Letitia seen Miss Farthington?" Darcy asked, his brow knit with worry.

"Not since this morning," Fitzwilliam replied. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Your brother returned to the house without her. He claims that she jumped from the sleigh for no reason claiming that she had to return to the house. But that was over an hour ago."

"I hardly believe that she leapt from the vehicle without provocation," Fitzwilliam replied darkly.

"Do you think that he imposed on her in some way?" Darcy replied, his tone matching his cousin's.
"I do not know, but I would not put it past him. He has demonstrated an unsettling interest in Miss Farthington," Fitzwilliam replied before calling for his coat. "We can deal with my brother later. It will soon grow dark and Mary is hardly attired for a trek through the snow."

"You are correct of course," Darcy replied, ignoring Fitzwilliam's familiarity with his ward. "I have already called for every available footman to gather to form a search party."

"I will join the search as well."

Fitzwilliam turned to see Peterson already dressed in his coat and riding boots. "She is my cousin, afterall."

Fitzwilliam clapped him on the back. "Good man."

"Well, lets be off then," Darcy announced as he donned his hat and headed for the door.

Mary shivered as she sat on a rock deep in the woods surrounding Pemberley. She was completely lost and began to despair of ever finding her way back to Pemberley before it became too dark to see in front of her. As it was a new moon, Mary knew that she would have no source of light to guide her steps. The coat she donned that afternoon had been sufficient for a two hour ride in an open sleigh complete with furs and warming blocks, but it was woefully inadequate for an impromptu nighttime hike through snow covered woods. She began to regret her decision to run into the woods rather than along the road when she made her escape. However, Mary had been too bewildered and frightened for rational thought. She only wanted to get away from the horrid Viscount.

Mary rose from her perch and continued to trundle through the woods, hoping to come across a road or a stream that would lead her to civilization. She wondered how such a man as the Viscount could be the brother of her Richard? He was such a vile and presumptuous man. She recalled the taste of his mouth upon hers with a shiver of disgust. However, if what Lady Letitia and the Viscountess had said was true, then their being relations was not quite so surprising. Oh, but Richard was nothing like the Viscount. She knew this in her heart. He had not approached her as if he was entitled to her favors nor handled her so roughly. Richard was a good man and Mary hoped that it was all just a great misunderstanding.

Mary was heartened when she came upon a clearing that bordered a lake. If this was indeed the lake she was familiar with, she knew that if she walked along its bank, eventually she would come upon a familiar path that would lead her to the house. That is, if she found the path before the sun completely set. Mary began to wonder if she was near the place where she had first met Richard. How long ago that seemed! So much had transpired since then. Mary longed for those simple carefree days before the Viscount and his awful family darkened Pemberley's doors. Well, not all of his family was awful. Ronald was a dear sweet boy whom she hoped would grow to be a fine gentleman despite his parents. Mary sobered at the realization that if the desires of her heart came true, she would have to name the Viscount as brother.

Panic began to overtake her as she began to despair of ever finding her way before nightfall. The sun was rapidly setting and Mary found her path becoming more and more difficult to determine. Panic began to overtake her as she began to despair of ever finding her way before nightfall.

Richard rode through the woodland paths surrounding Pemberley at a moderate pace, calling for Mary as he made his way. He had been occupied with his search for three quarters of an hour and had no luck. Daylight was becoming scare and he despaired of finding Mary before he was due back at the house to reconvene with Darcy and Peterson to modify their search before redeploying with lantern bearing servants. Pain gripped his heart at the idea of Mary lost and frightened in the woods. The picture of her shivering and helpless in the snow was the only thing holding back the rage he felt
for his brother. He knew that Mary would not take flight without provocation and he knew his brother's disposition well enough to be confident that he had tried to impose himself on Mary in some way. He had hoped that his last conversation with Gregory on the subject would have dissuaded him from continuing with his unwanted advances. Richard concluded that a more serious lecture was in order.

All too soon, the sun disappeared from the sky and Richard was forced to make his way back to the house. He directed Beauregard back to the house, calling for Mary all the way back in the off chance that she had wondered near to his route within the past hour. As he approached the house, he was heartened to spy Mary being helped down from a horse by Peterson. Richard swung down from his horse, tossing the reins distractedly to a nearby footman before trotting towards her.

"Mary…Miss Farthington, I am so glad that you are alright," Fitzwilliam exclaimed, taking Mary's cold hands into his.

"Yes, I am well, thanks to Derek," Mary replied, smiling brightly at her cousin as she pulled her hands from his embrace.

"Thank heavens you are found!" Beatrice exclaimed as she hurriedly made her way down the steps towards them, Elizabeth and Georgiana hot on her heels.

Richard soon found himself separated from Mary, as Elizabeth bundled her off into the house with Beatrice and Georgiana fussing over her along the way.

"She is in good hands," Darcy said as he patted his cousin on the back. "I am sure that between the three of them Mary won't be allowed to even blow her nose unassisted."

Richard nodded his head in agreement as he watched the ladies' retreat. While he longed for the privilege of taking Mary into his arms to assure himself that she was well, he was too relieved at her having been so quickly found to offer any complaint.

"Thank you for finding her, Peterson," Fitzwilliam said, his voice thick with gratitude and relief as he held out his hand to the man.

"It was my duty and my pleasure, Fitzwilliam," Derek replied as he shook the offered hand.

"Now to deal with my brother."
Chapter 17

Mary sat on her bed surrounded by Elizabeth, Georgiana and Beatrice, who were busily fretting over her, true to Darcy’s word. Mary was relieved to be back at Pemberley surrounded by friends, but she was anxious about relating the story of what sent her running into the woods to her friends. She had managed to keep the tale from Derek during the ride back to Pemberley. He had been so relieved to find her unharmed, that he had not persisted in his questioning. However, after much gentle and earnest pleading by Elizabeth, Mary was persuaded to tell them what happened. The ladies responded with equal measures of shock and anger.

“That serpent!” Elizabeth fumed. “To think that he would ask you such a thing!”

“Well, bravo for you, Mary,” Beatrice added. “I dare say he deserved worse than a bitten tongue! Why, had my Derek been there he would have called him out!”

Mary started at this exclamation. She remembered Richard’s barely contained fury after her previous encounter with the Viscount. She feared that Richard would very well engage his brother in a duel if he ever found out.

“My husband must be informed at once,” Elizabeth said as she rose from the bed. “I won’t have that man one more night in my house!”

“No,” Mary exclaimed as she made to follow her. “Richard must not know. He will be so angry, I do not know what he will do.”

Georgiana came beside Mary and wrapped her arms around her friend protectively. “Do not worry, Mary. My brother shan’t let him do anything rash.”

Peterson and Darcy followed an incensed Fitzwilliam into the foyer. Richard walked past the footmen waiting to divest him of his coat without so much as a backwards glance. As he began to make his way up the stairs to the Viscount’s rooms, Darcy forestalled him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Richard, wait,” Darcy pleaded as Fitzwilliam attempted to shrug out of his hold.

“There is no time. I should have taken care of this days ago,” Fitzwilliam replied as he took the stairs two steps at a time.

“Taken care of what?”

“This is not the first time that my brother has made advances on Miss Farthington,” Fitzwilliam replied as he turned to face his cousin.

“A few days ago I came upon them in the music room. He had her cornered by the pianoforte and Mary looked quite frightened. I had words with my brother and made it clear that he was not to impose upon her again.”

“Why did you not share this with me?”

“I thought that my brother would not want another meeting with my fist so soon after the first,” he
replied.

“Well, it would seem that he did not heed your warning,” Peterson added.

Darcy shook his head in disbelief before running one hand through his hair in frustration. “Let us first speak with Mary, then we shall know what must be done. I do not want to confront him without all of the facts.”

Fitzwilliam sighed before replying mirthlessly. “Very well. At least I can be assured that I will know to pummel him sufficiently.”

The three men made their way to Mary’s rooms only to be met part of the way there by a fierce looking Elizabeth.

“Husband, something must be done! Your cousin has imposed himself upon Mary quite abominably!”

“Tell me what happened,” Darcy replied.

Elizabeth glanced warily at Derek, silently communicating her concern over the propriety of his inclusion.

“It is alright, Elizabeth. Peterson is Mary’s cousin and he has already involved himself a great deal in finding Mary. I am sure that we can rely on his discretion,” Darcy replied.

After Fitzwilliam’s terse nod of agreement, Elizabeth recounted all that she had been told. Soon the men’s faces mirrored Elizabeth’s look of outrage and anger. Darcy paced the hall silently, his fist at his mouth in his usual posture of fevered contemplation. Peterson stood with a pained expression, shaking his head in disbelief of the Viscount’s audacity. However, Fitzwilliam’s look gave Elizabeth pause as she began to understand Mary’s concern. His face looked as if it were carved from marble, his lips pressed tightly in a thin unforgiving line and his eyes narrowed in anger.

Fitzwilliam turned abruptly and started down the hall, his long legs carrying him swiftly in the direction of the Viscount’s chambers. After sharing a mild look of alarm, Darcy and Peterson set off after him with Elizabeth hurrying to catch up with them. After a few moments, Fitzwilliam burst into his brother’s rooms calling for his brother as he stalked about the chamber. He was met by the Viscount’s nervous valet.

“Where is your master?” Fitzwilliam bit out.

“He…he is not here, sir. I believe that he is in the green drawing room taking refreshment with the Viscountess,” the wide-eyed man stammered.

Fitzwilliam hastily exited the room to make his way to the green drawing room, as Darcy and Peterson entered.

“Please begin to pack the Viscount’s belongings as he will be leaving Pemberley this evening,” Darcy ordered the bewildered valet before following his cousin.

“I can’t believe that she bit you,” the Vicountess tittered as she helped herself to another pastry.

“She is practically a wild beast,” the Viscount exclaimed before downing another glass of sherry.
“Really, Gregory. Your task was a simple one. Why on earth did you have to attempt to force
yourself on the girl? I am sure you have made quite a mess of things. She may be a nobody, but she
is Darcy’s ward. You know how serious he is about such things. You could have at least waited until
she came to town.”

The Viscount’s reply was cut off as the door to the drawing room burst open revealing an enraged
Colonel Fitzwilliam with Darcy, Peterson and Elizabeth following behind.

“My word, Richard! Have you gone quite mad?” the Viscountess exclaimed as she clutched at her
breast as if frightened.

Fitzwilliam ignored her outburst as he stalked over to his brother and punched him squarely in the
face.

“Pistols or swords, Gregory. What shall it be?” Fitzwilliam asked, his voice remarkably calm.

“Good god,” the Viscount replied as he recovered, gingerly rubbing his jaw. “This isn’t about that
Farthington tart, is it? A mistress is hardly worth calling out your own brother.”

Fitzwilliam flew at the Viscount, heedless of the shocked cries of the other occupants of the room.
The Viscountess screamed as she watched the two men tussle.

“Elizabeth, please see the Viscountess to her chambers,” Darcy calmly requested.

“Are you not going to stop him?” the Viscountess cried disbelievingly as Elizabeth attempted to
usher her from the room.

“Do not concern yourself, madam. We shan’t allow him to inflict too much damage,” Darcy replied
without sparing the Viscountess a backwards glance.

Peterson and Darcy stood to the side for a time, watching Fitzwilliam repeatedly punch the Viscount
in the face and stomach before deciding that both men had had enough.

“Its about bloody time,” the Viscount snarled, spitting blood as Darcy and Peterson pulled a
struggling Fitzwilliam off of his prone form.

“You are lucky that I did not allow him to finish the job!” Darcy retorted.

“I warned you, Gregory,” Fitzwilliam growled as he shrugged off Darcy and Peterson’s hold on his
arms. “The choice is yours: swords or pistols! Whatever your choice your chances of survival are
slim.”

“You wouldn’t dare kill me! You’d hang long before you could reclaim your whore!”

Fitzwilliam quickly set upon his brother again, throwing him back against the wall and beating him
ruthlessly until blood flowed freely from his nose.

“If I were you, Viscount, I would hold my tongue,” Peterson spat as they pulled Fitzwilliam back
once more.

“He’s broken my damned nose,” the Viscount cried as he held his face.

“You are lucky that is all he has broken,” Darcy replied before turning towards Fitzwilliam. “Calm
yourself, cousin. We both know that dueling is illegal and it will aid no one if you are hung and
Ronald is made an orphan.”
Fitzwilliam shook his head as he glowered at his brother. “He must pay for what he has done.”

“Think of Mary,” Darcy reasoned. “Would you see her hurt if you are imprisoned for dueling?”

Fitzwilliam turned to look at him, his blue eyes filled with pain. “I would never hurt Mary,” he replied hoarsely.

“I know,” Darcy replied before patting his cousin on the back. “Let me handle your brother.”

“Peterson, can you see to Richard? His hand appears to be bleeding. Inform one of the footmen to send for the doctor to see to him,” Darcy requested as he gave Peterson a significant look.

“Of course. That does look like a nasty gash. You must have caught it on a tooth,” Peterson replied before leading Fitzwilliam from the room.

“I daresay that I am the one in need of a bloody doctor,” the Viscount ground out.

“Perhaps you can send for one from the inn this evening,” Darcy replied, his voice tight. “I would add to your injuries myself if Richard had not done such a thorough job for me!”

Darcy eyed his bleeding cousin with disgust before walking over to the table and retrieving a napkin.

“Here, make use of this. I’ll not have you staining the carpets. They are deuced difficult to clean,” Darcy said as he tossed the cloth at the Viscount.

“Now see here…”

“No, you see here!” Darcy shouted, cutting off the Viscount’s complaint. “You have dishonored my ward, my home and my family with your despicable actions. I do not know what you hoped to accomplish by assaulting Miss Farthington, as she is under my protection and as you can see, she is not without friends. In addition to imposing yourself upon her, you have besmirched the honor of a respectable lady.”

“You are such a hypocrite, Darcy,” the Viscount replied unchastised by his cousin’s rebuke. “You allow my brother unfettered access to the chit yet judge me for doing the same. You and Richard were always thick as thieves. So self righteous and…”

Darcy cut off his response with another blow to his face.

“You will leave this house this instant,” Darcy ground out. “A carriage with your things will follow you in the morning. Your wife, son and Lady Letitia may remain for the duration of their stay, but you shall never darken Pemberley’s doors again. From this point on we are as strangers.”

Darcy strode to the door and called for an unmarked carriage for the Viscount and for two strong footmen to escort the Viscount to the vehicle the instant it was made ready.

Darcy turned back briefly to regard his cousin. “If I ever hear of you so much as speaking Miss Farthington’s name again, I shall finish what Richard began.”

Dinner was a stilted affair. Mary took her meal in her rooms with Georgiana. The Viscount was notably absent from the meal, having been unceremoniously tossed from the house. The Viscountess was absent from the meal as well, claiming fatigue and a headache brought on by the indignities of the day. The remainder of the party ate a near silent meal, the gentlemen still angered over the events
of afternoon and Fitzwilliam so concerned about Mary’s well being that his meal remained uneaten. Lady Letitia sat silent and pale, picking at her food morosely and avoiding eye contact with the other diners. The rest of the party was grateful, finding her silence a drastic improvement over her normal loquaciousness.

Georgiana silently watched her friend listlessly consume her meal. She had refused to leave Mary’s side since that afternoon, despite Mary’s protestations that she was quite well.

“What are you thinking, Mary?” Georgiana asked after Mary had absent-mindedly poked her lamb with her fork for the umpteenth time.

“I could have avoided all of this,” Mary replied after a pause. “Had I not plotted with Beatrice to ride unattended with Fitzwilliam, I would not have been alone when the Viscount climbed into the carriage. Had Beatrice been there, I am sure he would not have attempted such a thing.”

“You are not to blame,” Georgiana replied fiercely. “The blame is entirely Gregory’s. He is the one that attacked you, Mary.”

“But it is my fault that he had the opportunity.”

Georgiana regarded her friend silently for a moment. “May I tell you a story, Mary?”

Mary looked up at her friend incredulously. “I am afraid that I would make a poor audience, Georgiana. I am in no mood for stories.”

“I promise you that you’ll want to hear this one. It is a true story about a girl that was in a situation not quite so different from your own.”

At Mary’s nod of acquiescence, Georgiana began her tale.

“There was once a young girl a few years younger than you are now. She was a very proper girl, well bred and polite. She was also very wealthy. The young girl was raised by her brother, whom she dutifully obeyed. However, one day the young girl was not so obedient. You see, a very handsome man who had always been kind to her professed himself to be very much in love. He bade the young girl to keep their love secret because her brother would not approve because he was very poor. The young girl, believing her love to be true, agreed.

“One day the handsome man asked her to elope with him, reasoning that her brother would understand once they were married. The girl was hesitant, but again she agreed. The day that they planned to run away together, the brother surprised the young girl with a visit. Unable to keep such a secret much longer, the young girl told her brother all. He was furious with the handsome man and they argued. The young girl learned that the handsome man did not love her but only wanted to marry her for her fortune.

“For many years the young girl blamed herself for what had happened. If she had not been so foolish or if she had examined the handsome man’s actions rather than his words, she would not have been nearly ruined. Then one day she learned how the handsome man had lied to another young girl and lured her away from her family and her home ruining her. Then the young girl realized that she was not to blame. The handsome man alone was to blame for his actions. He was an evil man who had shown that he would act in such a barbarous way again and again.”

Mary regarded her friend, who sat looking off into the distance, her jaw taut. Mary quit her seat and sat on the settee next to her friend. Georgiana turned and gave her a rueful smile.

“I wasted so much time being miserable and blaming myself for the sins that Wickham had
committed against me until I came to realize that his actions had very little to do with me. I was but a means to an end and if it had not been me, he would have imposed upon another girl as he later did.”

Georgiana pressed Mary’s hand with her own before leaning her head to the side to rest on Mary’s own.

“Please do not make a similar mistake. Gregory is not worth your wretchedness.”

Georgiana hugged her friend before leaving. Mary sat thinking about all that Georgiana had said. She knew that she was right. There was no good to be had in blaming herself for the Viscount’s actions or for Fitzwilliam’s. While Georgiana had thought to comfort Mary by sharing such a personal story, Mary could not help but to ponder handsome men and their pretty words and lack of action.

Fitzwilliam excused himself from the company soon after the conclusion of the meal. He was in no mood for card games or billiards even if the atmosphere of the drawing room had been more conducive to such amusements. He made for the privacy of his rooms, but instead found himself outside of Mary’s chambers starring fixedly at the doors as if he could will them to be transparent. The house party had been frustrating in that he seldom had an opportunity to be alone in Mary’s company. He longed to hold her against his chest so as to ensure himself that she was well and to beg her forgiveness for failing to protect her. His brother’s accusations and Lady Letitia’s scornful words troubled him. The idea that Mary would stoop so low as to be anyone’s mistress was laughable, but he knew that in society’s eyes, the appearance of evil was far worse than its actual existence.

He wondered if his own actions had colored his brother’s perception of Mary. He had played the part of fiancé without the title. If they had been betrothed, she would have been protected from such accusations. He could have told his brother plainly that Mary was his intended and under his protection. Were it within his own power, he and Mary would have been engaged. And were he a different man, they would have long been off to Gretna Green to be made husband and wife despite Darcy’s objections. However, he would never disgrace Mary with an elopement.

Fitzwilliam was shaken from his contemplation by the approach of his cousin Darcy. He regarded his cousin wearily, leaning next to him against the wall and making no attempt to explain his presence there.

“Do not worry, Richard. She will be well,” Darcy said as he came to lean against the wall beside him. “Mary is a brave girl. She will recover.”

“I know,” Richard replied in a low tone. “I wish that I could comfort her all the same. I should have been there to protect her.”

A long silence stretched between the two men as they both looked off into the distance unseeing.

“I have been thinking about your desire to ask for Mary,” Darcy began after a time. “While I still worry for Mary’s reception by our family and by the ton, especially after the events of the past few days, I know that you would protect her with your life. I can see that you love her deeply, perhaps even as fiercely as I love Elizabeth.”

“I do,” Fitzwilliam replied brokenly.

“Then I grant you permission to ask for Mary’s hand,” Darcy said, turning to face his cousin for the
first time. “If she will have you, then you have my blessing.”

Fitzwilliam regarded his cousin in mute shock for a few moments before a broad smile broke out over his tired features.

“Cousin, you do not know how happy you have made me!” Fitzwilliam exclaimed as he caught up Darcy in a fierce hug.

“I can imagine,” Darcy laughed as he clapped his cousin on the back.

“I shall ask her this moment,” Fitzwilliam declared once he released his cousin.

“No, let the girl rest,” Darcy replied, a small grin gracing his lips. “There will be plenty of time to make your suit tomorrow. I find that privacy is astonishingly easy to find when the house is packed to the gills during a ball.”

“You are right of course,” Fitzwilliam said with a smile. “Thank you cousin.”

Fitzwilliam hugged Darcy again, causing the man to chuckle wryly.

“If I had known this would have been your reaction, I would have informed you by letter!” Darcy clapped his cousin on the back before bidding him a good sleep and pleasant dreams.

“They shall be quite pleasant,” Fitzwilliam said to himself as he turned to look at Mary’s door once more. “Very pleasant indeed.”

The Viscountess sat in her chambers comforting a weeping Lady Letitia.

“Everything is positively ruined,” Letitia sobbed. “The Colonel shall never ask for me now and I have your lecherous husband to thank.”

The Viscountess glared at her cousin. “Oh, stop your sniveling. If you had taken my advice and not abused Miss Farthington to his face then perhaps your chances would not look so bleak. But, no, you can never manage to control that fishwife’s mouth of yours!”

Lady Letitia spluttered indignantly before dissolving into another wave of dramatic sobs.

The Viscountess rose and paced the room in agitation.

“I cannot believe that he tossed Gregory from the house or that Darcy allowed the Colonel to beat him so ruthlessly. Why, his right eye was almost swollen shut! He shall not be fit to be seen for weeks. Gregory will be very much mistaken if he thinks that I shall miss out on entertainments staying home to nurse his split lip, foolish man!”

“I don’t give a two figs about Gregory’s swollen eye,” Letitia declared as she beat her fists petulantly against a cushion. “I have been made a laughing stock and will die an old maid!”

The Viscountess ignored her cousin’s complaints as she paced the room deep in thought. There had to be some way to salvage the situation and regain some of her dignity.

“Perhaps things are not so hopeless as you think, Letitia,” the Viscountess began, a calculating smile spreading over her lips. “If you hush your sniveling and do as I say then you may yet have your
colonel, whether he likes it or not.”
Mary rose early with the sun. She found sleep difficult given the events of the previous day. Although she knew she should emulate the members of the household and sleep late in preparation for the evening's masquerade ball, she could not remain in bed a moment longer. She dressed herself in a simple morning gown and tied her hair into a messy bun that rested at the nape of her neck. She quietly made her way to the breakfast room, greeting maids and footmen that she passed along the way who had long since risen from their beds to prepare for the ball. A few footmen stopped to tell her of their relief that she was well which earned them her earnest thanks and a gentle smile.

Mary was relieved to find the breakfast room empty. She did not yet feel up to facing certain members of the household and she looked forward to the chance to enjoy a light breakfast in solitude. There were no tea things or breakfast foods arranged on the sideboard as Mrs. Reynolds rightly did not expect any of the family or their guests to stir before noon. Mary thought to make her way towards the kitchens in the hopes of finding a sweet roll and a bit of cheese, not wanting to add to the workload of the staff. However, she had not gotten far from the breakfast rooms when a harried April appeared before her.

"Miss Mary," she curtsied, her voice a bit breathless, "Lucy told me that you were up. I'm sorry that I was not in your rooms to attend to you this morning. I thought that you'd be wanting to rest more."

"Please, don't be anxious on my account, April," Mary replied with a smile. "I was quite capable of dressing myself. At least I think so. I don't look a fright, do I?"

"Oh no, miss. You look lovely as usual. I didn't mean to imply…"

"It is alright, April. I was just teasing you. I was just on my way to the kitchens for a bit of breakfast. Don't let me keep you from whatever you were doing."

"Oh, it is no bother, miss. Why don't you have a seat in the breakfast room? I'll see that some food is brought up for you."

Mary made to protest as she was shepherded back into the breakfast room, but April would hear none of it. Mary walked towards the window to look over the eastern woods that stood bare of vegetation and covered in snow. She recalled the fear and panic that she felt as she tried to make her way through the woods back to the warmth and safety of Pemberley. Her feet had been numb from trudging through the snow-covered ground in naught but her slippers and she shivered due to her lack of wool wrap, forgotten in her haste to escape the sleigh. While her physical discomfort and anxiety had been great, it had not compared to the ache in her heart. Even the morning after, her mind reeled with shame and disgust over the Viscount's attack and presumption. His words had been as hurtful as his actions. While Georgiana helped Mary to dismiss the Viscount's aspersions to her character, she could not so easily disregard the implications he made regarding Richard's attitude towards her. Georgiana had told her of Fitzwilliam's response to the news of his brother's actions. He was as enraged as she expected him to be and his ire served as a rebuttal to the Viscount's claims that she was nothing more than a flirtation. The last several days had been fraught with doubt and sorrow and Mary felt herself to be nearing her limit.

Mary turned at the sound of the doors being drawn aside, expecting to find servants laden with trays of tea things and pastries. She was surprised to find Richard entering the room instead, his dark blue eyes immediately coming to rest on her figure. Mary noticed the dark circles under his eyes, bearing witness to his own inability to find rest the evening before. His lips broke out in a smile at the sight of her and in two long strides he was before her wrapping her in a tight embrace.
"Mary, it has been far too long since I've held you," he murmured into her hair as he tightened his hold upon her.

"Richard," Mary sighed as she relaxed into his arms. She thought to say more, but found that her words caught in her throat. She pressed herself tighter against him, taking comfort in his familiar scent and strength.

"Are you well, Princess?" Richard asked after a time. "You cannot begin to know how I've worried after you."

"I am uninjured."

Richard released her and brought both of his hands up to cup her face. "He did not hurt you?" he asked as he searched her face.

"No, Richard. As I said, I am well."

Richard looked at her closely for a moment more, nodding once he was sure of her health, his eyes suspiciously wet.

"I have scarcely known such fear as when you were lost, Princess. Nor have I known such fury as when I heard how my brother imposed himself upon you. I beg your forgiveness for exposing you to such treatment."

Mary sighed and stepped away from him. "You are not responsible for your brother's actions."

"Perhaps not, but I am responsible for my own. I fear that my brother assumed that you...that you were without protection," Fitzwilliam explained. "I have played the role of fiancé without the title and as a result made you vulnerable to the cruel imaginations of wicked people. I allowed my desires to get ahead of the demands of duty and honor. For that I beg your forgiveness."

Mary sharply inhaled and struggled to blink back tears at the words "duty" and "honor," her doubts suddenly confirmed. She felt as if a hot poker had been thrust into her side.

"Oh God," she whispered, stepping back and turning from him as she shut her eyes tightly. "Its true."

"What is true, Mary?"

"You are secretly engaged to Lady Letitia. You have been long before I met you. I didn't want to believe it, but you have admitted it to be true," Mary choked out as she worked to keep her tears at bay.

"Mary," Fitzwilliam exclaimed as he approached her, catching her about the shoulders. "Who has told you these things?"

"I heard it from your fiancé's own lips," Mary cried as she shrugged out of his grasp and turned to face him, her eyes accusing. "Do you now presume to deny it?"

"Yes, I do deny it," Fitzwilliam replied fiercely as he grasped her arms once more. "I have never been engaged to Letitia and I never shall be. It is you whom I love."

Mary shook her head in denial. "No. You claim to love me, yet you have not spoken to Mr. Darcy to ask for me. Your family thinks that I am your whore. Even Georgiana doubted my honor." Mary swallowed thickly at the memory of her confrontation with Georgiana and her staunch defense of
Fitzwilliam. "Elizabeth warned me to guard my heart, but I did not listen. What a fool I've been."

Mary tried once more to free herself from his hold, but Fitzwilliam only wrapped his arms around her, bringing her close to his chest once more.

"Please, let me go," she begged as she pushed against his chest, her tears now falling steadily. "You don't have leave to hold me so intimately."

"Mary! Please hear me," Richard pleaded, his voice desperate. "Letitia has told you a lie. The only woman whom I would ever wish to marry is you. Indeed, I've fought for weeks to gain Darcy's blessing. If not for that, I would have long ago claimed you as my wife."

Mary stopped her struggles and fist her hands into the fabric of his waistcoat as she processed his words. Fitzwilliam held her close, his hold now gentle as he murmured his love and devotion into her hair as she continued to weep. April chose that moment to enter the room with a tray of foodstuffs but soon reconsidered when she realized the intimate moment on which she had intruded. She silently backed from the room at Fitzwilliam's look of dismissal. Soon Mary's tears quieted and she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"Then you are not engaged."

"No, and I have never been."

"And you wish to marry me."

"Nothing would please me more," Richard replied with a gentle smile.

Mary began to cry again causing the smile to drop swiftly from Richard's lips. His brow wrinkled in concern as he looked down at her.

"Princess, what is wrong?"

"Oh, I have completely ruined it," Mary cried.

"Ruined what, my love?"

"This moment! I shouldn't be standing here crying like a blithering idiot. I must look a mess."

Richard tried and failed to suppress the merry laugh that bubbled up from his chest.

"You have never looked more beautiful, Mary," Richard replied honestly before kissing her briefly on the lips and laughing once more. "You have yet to answer my question, Princess."

"I don't believe you asked me properly," Mary smiled as she wiped at her cheeks.

"Then let me try one more time."

Richard dropped to one knee then thought better of it and kneeled on both causing Mary to giggle. He took her right hand in both of his and kissed her knuckles before clearing his throat.

"Miss Mary Caroline Farthington, I have loved you almost from the moment I nearly trampled you with my horse."

Mary laughed again through her tears earning herself a pleased grin from Fitzwilliam.

"We have not been long acquainted, but it only took me a moment to realize that the beauty of your
face and form could only be outshone by the beauty of your spirit. Your bravery, kindness and grace have made you the mistress of my heart. I once pledged my fealty to you as a knight of your realm and offered you my heart, now I offer you my hand and all that I am. I know I have wronged you and been a fool. Indeed, the knowledge that I ever gave you cause to doubt my devotion pains me like a mortal wound. I know that I do not deserve your regard, but I beg your grace all the same. Will you make me the happiest of men and consent to be my wife?"

Mary gazed at Richard's earnest face, taking in the sight of his moist eyes and furrowed brow. She wiped her eyes with her free hand and tried and failed to stop her tears of relief and joy.

"Yes. Yes, I will marry you Richard Fitzwilliam," Mary replied with a huge smile before falling to her knees to pepper his face with kisses.

Their combined laughter soon gave way to silence as they employed their lips to better pursuits.

Mary could barely make it through tea with her composure intact. Richard was speaking with Darcy about their engagement at that very moment. She was finally engaged to Richard and she would soon be Mrs. Mary Fitzwilliam. Mary thought that the name had many fine qualities, not the least of which was the happy coincidence that she would not have to re-embroider the initials on her handkerchiefs. It would be a very convenient union. So great was her joy that not even the disdainful stares of the Viscountess and the thinly veiled insults of Lady Letitia could dampen her mood.

"My dear, I am so happy to see you so well recovered," Mr. Brambles whispered to her as he sat down on the chaise beside her, a plate of finger sandwiches balanced in one hand and a cup of tea in the other.

"You are too good," Mary replied with a wide smile as she gently relieved him of his teacup to place on the small table beside her. "There have been enough pleasures today to ensure my good mood for a decade."

"Yes, the ball should be a most singular event," Mr. Brambles replied before he bit into a cucumber sandwich. "I'm going as a Moorish sheik! What will your costume be?"

"You shall just have to wait and see," Mary declared before taking a sip of her tea.

The opening of the drawing room door drew Mary's attention. She set down her cup, expecting to find Mr. Darcy and Richard returned from their conference to announce the happy news. Mary had to swallow her disappointment when a servant entered the room instead. The footman made his way over to where Mary and Mr. Brambles were seated.

"Miss. Farthington. Mr. Brambles. Mr. Darcy requests your presence in his study."

"Thank you, Walter."

Mary rose from her seat and quickly but calmly left the drawing room, Mr. Brambles trailing in her wake.

"I wonder why Mr. Darcy asks to speak with us," Mr. Brambles stated once he had caught up with Mary on the stairs.

Mary remained silent, suppressing a wide smile as they made their way to Mr. Darcy's study.
"Mr. Brambles. Mary," Darcy greeted as they entered his study. He was leaning against his desk, his ankles crossed and his arms resting on his chest. "Please, have a seat."

Fitzwilliam rose from his seat and was at Mary's side in three long strides. He took her hand and kissed her knuckles before turning to face a surprised Mr. Brambles.

"Well, I suppose I should just come right out with it," Darcy replied, somewhat amused by Mr. Bramble's open-mouthed stare. "My cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam has proposed to Miss Farthington. She has accepted him and I have given them my consent."

Mr. Brambles sat speechless for a moment, before bounding up from his chair, his face split in a smile.

"Congratulations, Colonel," Mr. Brambles said as he vigorously shook the young man's hand. "Oh, what a wonderful turn of events."

Mr. Brambles then shook Mary's hand before grasping her in a warm hug. "Congratulations, Mary. Your father would be pleased with your choice, I daresay. You have chosen yourself a fine young man."

Mary squeezed Mr. Brambles' hand before releasing him, conveying her appreciation. "I only wish that father could have met him. I am sure he would have liked him very much."

Fitzwilliam smiled down at Mary warmly, before grasping her hand tightly in his.

"Well, I expect you'll be announcing the engagement at the ball tonight? Capital!"

"No," Darcy replied as he went to take his seat behind his desk. "Which is why I wanted to speak with both of you in private."

Mary looked questioningly at Fitzwilliam who smiled at her sadly before leading her to a chair. He stood behind her, one hand clasped reassuringly on her shoulder.

"We…Richard and I have spoken at length and we both agree that it would be best to keep your engagement secret for a time. After we have removed to London for the season and you've been introduced to the ton, then we will announce your engagement to his parents prior to a general announcement," Darcy explained.

"I do not understand why we must delay," Mary replied. She turned to look up at Fitzwilliam, confusion writ over her features. "Is not the ball meant to be my first introduction into society?"

Richard gave her a searching look before turning angrily towards Darcy. "Blast! This was your condition, you explain it to her!"

He quit his place behind Mary's chair to stand by the fire, a pose Mary had come to equate with his being anxious or upset.

Darcy glared at his cousin's retreating form before sighing and turning to Mary once more. "I simply think that it would be better to delay the announcement until you have had the opportunity to mingle with more of the ton. Then, once you've made a reputation for yourself amongst the ton, we would introduce you to Lord and Lady Matlock. This would give them the opportunity to come to know and admire you on your own merits. Then, after a reasonable passage of time, we would announce the engagement to the family and in the papers. Once they see how society has welcomed you, they can have no objections to the match."
Mary looked from Richard to Darcy to Mr. Brambles, a frown marring her features as she began to understand their meaning. This was an obstruction that she had managed to allow herself to forget. Had she not told Georgiana that this very impediment made her an unlikely candidate for Fitzwilliam's affections? However, she allowed herself to be so swept up in the thrill of new romance that she had dismissed the objections of the rest of the world, that is until the Viscount and his family darkened Pemberley's doors. They daily ensured that she would not forget how proper English society viewed her prospects.

"Ah, I see," Mary sighed as she rose from her seat to come to stand behind Richard. "It is my person that your parents would find unsuitable."

Richard turned to face her, grasping her gently by the shoulders. "I don't care one jot about what my parents may or may not think. It is I who do not deserve you. If I had my druthers, I'd tell all of England of my intentions to make you my wife."

"Lord Matlock is quite steeped in his notions of family rank and status," Darcy explained. "They had strong objections to Mrs. Darcy when our engagement was first announced. They felt her family lacked the status and wealth common to our circle. But they soon overcome those objections when they came to know her. It is my hope that with a bit of judicious delay, they will come to welcome you into the family as well."

"Lord Farthington did not lack for status or wealth," Mary replied as she eyed Fitzwilliam sadly. "But, unlike Elizabeth, I am not the daughter of a gentleman and I am not white. Status may be overcome with a few well-planned soirees and appearances at St. James. The hue of my skin and the accident of my birth cannot."

The men all looked very grave, causing Mary to smile mirthlessly.

"Come, now. I may be naïve about many things, but I am not a simpleton. My father sought to keep me ignorant of many of the less pleasant things of this world, but these past few months in England have been quite an education."

Mr. Brambles stepped towards Mary and patted her hand gently. "Your father was a good man, Miss Mary. He loved you a great deal, but I fear your assessment is correct. Perhaps, in seeking to protect you so completely he did you a disservice."

"No, I would rather have disappointed hopes than none at all," Mary replied kindly.

"Mary," Mr. Darcy began, his voice grave. "You must understand what you may be exposing yourself to by aligning yourself with Fitzwilliam. The ton can be cruel and society may not welcome the news of your upcoming union."

"I have done well enough without such society so far," Mary replied. "I shan't regret the loss of their favor."

Fitzwilliam took her hand from Mr. Brambles and kissed her fervently on the knuckles. "Nor shall I with such a wife by my side."

Darcy regarded them somberly. "I know that this is an imposition, but I believe it is for the best. You shall have to wait a few months at the very most. You could marry in the spring."

Mary squeezed Richard's hand. A few months seemed like quite a long while, indeed. However, they were finally engaged. For now, that was all that mattered.

"I can accept your conditions, Mr. Darcy, if Fitzwilliam can."
Fitzwilliam smiled at Mary sadly, before turning to face Darcy. "I must insist that we announce our engagement to our immediate family before the ball. There must be someone to share our joy."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "Beatrice and Elizabeth must know and it would not be fair to keep Georgiana in the dark."

"I see no problem with that scheme. The Petersons, Georgiana and my wife will be told. However, I think it best not to inform the Viscountess or Lady Letitia."

Richard squeezed Mary's hand at her sigh of disappointment.

"There is another matter you should be made privy to, Darcy," Richard began. "The Viscountess and Lady Letitia have been spreading false rumors as to my engagement to Lady Letitia. It is my belief that they may have even had some hand in the debacle with my brother last night."

Darcy's eyes widened in surprise. "Spreading rumors? To whom?"

Mary stood numbly, barely hearing Richard's explanation of the Viscountess and Lady Letitia's deception and his suspicions regarding how his brother came to share her sleigh in his place. All Mary could think about was their scheme to delay the announcement of their engagement. Mary feared what might occur if Lord Matlock did not approve of her and refused to recognize their engagement. While legally his parent's objections would have little meaning, would Darcy rescind his blessing? Suddenly she longed for nothing more than to remain at Pemberley with Richard, far from prying eyes, scornful words or judgmental parents. If only they could marry now and avoid the coming trials of the season.

Mary's levity was soon restored when they returned to the drawing room. Thankfully, Lady Letitia and the Viscountess had already retired to attend to their preparations for the ball. Georgiana was just about to make her way from the room to do the same, when they entered. Darcy stayed her exit with a gentle touch to her back.

"If I could, I would like to make an announcement of some import," Darcy began once Georgiana retook her seat. "This morning my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam proposed marriage to Miss Farthington. She happily accepted and I have given them my consent."

Richard took Mary by the hand as they awaited the reaction of their friends and family. The company was stunned into silence for a short moment before Beatrice's cry of delight and Elizabeth's enthusiastic clapping provoked the room into action. Mary and Richard soon found themselves swarmed by their friends. There was much laughter, slaps to the back, vigorous handshakes, warm embraces and kisses to the cheeks and hands. Mary found her disappointment quite overwhelmed by the joyful response of her family. Georgiana's affectionate embrace and heartfelt smile further warmed Mary's heart. She glanced over Georgiana's shoulder to see Derek watching them, his green eyes warm. Mary hoped that she would be in the position to offer her friend similar congratulations in the near future.

"Before we all retire to our preparations," Darcy continued once the expressions of felicity died down, "I would like to make one request. Please keep your knowledge of the engagement private. We will make a formal announcement to the family and in the papers sometime before the spring."

Elizabeth regarded her husband with a look that expressed her intention to have more words on the subject at a later time. Beatrice looked confused for a moment before she stepped forward and patted Mary's shoulder reassuringly.

"Well, you can be assured that I'll keep my own counsel, Mr. Darcy," she replied as she looked from
Darcy to Mary. "I am just so happy for you, dear. Have you both thought of when you'd like to marry?"

"As soon as humanly possible," Fitzwilliam replied, earning himself a delighted laugh from Beatrice and a grin from Mary. "By the end of the spring, at the very latest."

"Oh, then that would mean you could not summer with us in Brighton," Beatrice replied, genuine disappointment turning down the corners of her lips.

"I must admit that I have not even thought that far ahead," Mary confessed. "I still cannot believe that we are actually engaged! I fear it is all a dream and I shall wake on the morrow a disappointed woman."

"Forgive me, Mary. I fear I am just a selfish old woman," Beatrice smiled. "Of course you have not yet considered such things. Oh, you shall be Mrs. Mary Fitzwilliam. How well that sounds!"

"You and Mr. Peterson are more than welcome at Darcy House this season," Elizabeth offered. "I am sure that Mary would appreciate your presence and advice when it comes to all of the wedding planning."

"Oh, yes, Beatrice," Mary enthused. "I would so love the chance to know more of you and Derek even if we are to be parted this summer. Consider it, please."

After several assurances from Beatrice and Derek that they would do just that, the party dispersed to their respective chambers to begin their personal preparations for the ball. Mary lingered behind with Fitzwilliam, inordinately pleased that they could now conspire to have a moment alone without fear of censure. As soon as Elizabeth exited the room, a pleased smirk playing about her mouth, Mary grasped Fitzwilliam by the lapels to bring him close for a proper kiss.

"I hope you believe me when I say that this is not what I would have wished," Fitzwilliam began once they parted. "I would rather we both be away to Gretna Green than abide by these conditions. I have been a very patient man as it is."

Mary ran her fingers through the black curls at the nape of his neck. "And I would gladly go with you to Scotland. But, it will all be worthwhile when we are finally wed with our friends and families in attendance."

Richard closed his eyes and sighed at Mary's gentle attentions, before dropping his chin to rest his forehead against hers.

"I suppose that you are correct, my lady," he murmured, causing Mary to chuckle. "But once we are wed, I reserve the right to abscond with you to whatever foreign land I please."

"I've always been curious to visit India," Mary mused.

"Perhaps, but I fear I am less curious about the heat and mosquitoes," he quipped. "I was thinking more about a lovely villa on the Greek isles far from the rush and noise of London and the ton. We'd go swimming everyday and I'd have my wicked way with you every night."

Mary gasped and hit him playfully on the chest. "We could go to New Sussex," Mary replied after a time. "The sands are just as white and the waters just as clear. We could walk the shore every day and sleep in the open air."

Richard cupped her face as he gazed at her, his blue eyes bright with affection.
"I would find such a scheme more than agreeable. Perhaps we could go there and leave England far behind."

"Are you sure this plan will work, Daniela," Lady Letitia whined as her cousin worked to gently loosen the stitching along the bodice of her gown.

"For the hundredth time, yes," the Viscountess replied, her tone thick with irritation. "If you follow my instructions to the letter the plan cannot help but be successful."

The Viscountess stepped back and observed her handiwork with her hands resting on her hips. "Now, that should do nicely. With one good tug the fabric should rip cleanly and leave you sufficiently exposed."

"Really, Daniela, is this necessary?"

"You are the one who insists on having the Colonel, not I," the Viscountess replied as she donned her brightly feathered mask. "Since you could not hold your tongue long enough to seduce him properly, we are forced to act as pirates. Now, tell me what you are to do."

Letitia sighed dramatically before rolling her kohl-lined eyes. "Just prior to the supper set, I am to make my way to the library which should be quite deserted. You will have a servant call Colonel Fitzwilliam to the library. When he arrives, I fall into his arms and rip my dress."

"And then I arrive with Darcy to discover my brother-in-law's scandalous behavior. Darcy is outraged and forces him to offer for you."

"And we live happily ever after," Letitia finished with a flourish.

"Hmmm," the Viscountess replied as she moved to examine her costume in the mirror. "Something like that. Just be sure that you are not seen when you make your way from the library."

"How I am supposed to manage such a thing as that?" Letitia complained.

"Goodness! I can't do everything for you. You'll just have to manage. Do your part, dear cousin, and you'll get what you deserve."
Chapter 19

Mary grunted and increased her grip of the bedpost as April finished tightening the laces on her stay. She did not know how women bore the restricting confines of such a garment. Mary was fairly certain that they were not good for the constitution. One's innards were not meant to be pushed and prodded about on a whim.

"There, miss," April noted with a sigh. "The worst bit is all done."

Mary tried to take in a deep breath to fill the lungs she had just emptied in their effort to tighten the corset.

"April, this shan't do," Mary panted. "I cannot be expected to dance when I can barely breathe."

"But miss, all ladies wore corsets with such a dress as this."

"Well, I shan't," Mary huffed.

April flinched and Mary instantly regretted her petulant tone.

"Forgive me, April. My nerves are in such a state."

April nodded in understanding. "Perhaps I can loosen your stays, ma'am? You have such a pretty figure, I am sure you don't need them pulled quite so tight."

"Thank you, April. Perhaps then I won't faint in the middle of my first set."

The two shared a smile before April moved to oblige her mistress. When Mary could draw a full breath, they then moved on to her gown. She observed herself in the mirror afterwards, smoothing down the pink silk of her embroidered bodice as April adjusted the fabric of her skirts to fall correctly over the hoops. It was an old fashioned gown more suited to the ballrooms of forty years ago rather than a modern soiree. However, it was perfect for a masquerade. Mary adjusted her feathered eye mask as April placed a thin gold circlet atop her braided locks.

"Oh, miss," April breathed as she stepped back to admire her work. "Don't you look grand?"

Mary smiled at her reflection. She could not help but to agree.

Before going down to join the rest of the family to take her place in the receiving line, Mary stopped by William's room. She knew the young boy would just be preparing for sleep. As soon as she stepped into the room, William jumped down from his bed to run to her, ignoring the protestations of his nurse.

"I had just managed to get him into bed," the nurse sighed as she rose to follow William who was hopping in a circle around Mary uttering exclamations about her costume.

"I'm sorry Susan. I merely wanted to say goodnight to William."

Susan nodded curtly in reply before busying herself with tidying up the room. Mary frowned but was soon distracted by William's excitement.
"You look beautiful, Princess Mary," William exclaimed as he reverently stroked the fabric of her skirt.

"Do you think I look the part of a proper princess, Sir Little Bits?" Mary asked as she turned in a slow circle.

"Oh yes," he replied with an emphatic nod of his head. "You have a crown and everything."

"I am glad that you approve. Now, I am off to the ball and you should be off to bed."

William pouted. "Won't you stay and tell me one story, princess?"

"No, William. I…"

"Please, princess. A short one?"

Mary bit her lip before glancing up at Nurse Susan who stood watching the scene with a pinched look. She supposed that William would give Susan no peace should she leave without obliging him.

"Very well, Sir Little Bits. I will tell you a short one if you promise to listen to Nurse Susan and go to sleep directly."

William opened his mouth to protest.

"Your lady demands it."

William mumbled his consent, executing a shallow bow before Mary escorted him back to his bed.

One half hour later, Mary was making her way down the main stair towards the hall. She could already hear the excited murmur of the assembled crowd waiting for the start of the ball. Mary paused on the landing to watch the entrance of a few of their guests. Everyone was dressed very finely, ball attire embellished with large feathers, bejeweled turbans and fanciful masks. Mary smiled and bounced slightly on her toes in excitement.

"There you are Miss Farthington," Mr. Brambles greeted her from the bottom of the stair. "My don't you look lovely."

Mary smiled down at her friend before resuming her descent.

"You are looking very handsome yourself, Mr. Brambles," Mary replied as she took in his turban, cloak and gilded scabbard. "You look the very part of the sheik."

Mr. Brambles laughed before taking her hand to assist her down the final step.

"And you every part the princess." Mr. Brambles looked down at her fondly as he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "Your father would be very proud of you, Miss Farthington; very proud indeed. How far you have come from practicing your steps from your perch atop his feet."

Mary ducked her head and smiled wistfully.

"Since he is not here to escort you in, my dear, I hope that you would afford me that honor?"

Mary squeezed his arm. "I should like that very much."

Fitzwilliam stood off to the side of the drawing room observing the ball guests partaking of refreshments as he nursed a sniffer of brandy. Richard usually loved a ball, but he found himself to
be full of nervous energy. His blue eyes eagerly scanned the crowd behind his black half-mask looking for his fiancée amongst the mass of people. Mary had not told him her intended costume or mask, but Fitzwilliam was confident that he would easily spot her among the costumed crowd. He, however, relished his temporary anonymity. There were already several gentlemen of a similar height and build to himself. He was sure that he would not be so easily spotted.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam!"

Richard shut his eyes against the sharp voice of Lady Letitia who had suddenly appeared at his side. He turned to greet the woman with a tight smile.

"Lady Letitia. You are looking…” Fitzwilliam pause as he took in her brightly colored mask and feathered bodice. "Quite colorful."

"Thank you," Letitia cooed. "I quite adore peacocks. They have such a feminine grace and beauty."

"Did you know that the brightly colored peacocks are males? The female of the species are actually quite drab in comparison."

Letitia's smile fell. "Oh. I did not know that, Colonel. However, I suspect that in all of your travels it is only expected that you be knowledgeable of the exotic."

Fitzwilliam's smile grew tight. "Peacocks can hardly be considered exotic, madam, when they can be found traipsing about the garden of every nouveau riche socialite."

"Well, I don't know what can be keeping Miss Farthington," Letitia sniffed. "Mr. Darcy refuses to let the dancing commence before she graces us with her presence. With her presumptuous behavior you would think she was the guest of honor."

Fitzwilliam's lips quirked as she worked to prevent a smile. "Why Lady Letitia, this ball is in Miss Farthington's honor."

Lady Letitia's mouth gaped and Richard could not suppress his smile. Just as Letitia appeared to recover, Richard spotted Mr. Brambles escorting Mary into the drawing room. He managed a mumbled "excuse me" before making his way through the crowd to Miss Farthington's side. Several masked women, whom Richard soon identified as his fair cousins and Mrs. Peterson, surrounded her. The clutch of women eyed him curiously and parted as he approached. Fitzwilliam smiled before taking off his Cavalier's hat and dropping into a low bow.

"My Lady," he rumbled, deepening his voice as he took one of Mary's hands and pressed his lips against it.

Beatrice and Elizabeth giggled as Mary looked on in surprise at the "stranger's" audacity. Richard rose from his bow and replaced his hat with a satisfied smirk.

"A fitting costume choice, Princess," Richard continued in his normal voice as he pressed her hand.

Mary recovered from her shock and laughed brightly.

"One could say the same about you, Sir Gallant. Ever the soldier, I see."

"Yes. However, I do not make half a lovely soldier as you do a princess, Miss Farthington."

Elizabeth cleared her throat causing Richard to finally look away from Mary to greet the others.
"Mrs. Darcy. You look very becoming," Fitzwilliam greeted as he kissed her hand. "Gold certainly suits you."

Elizabeth laughed. "If I were not so sensible, I'd be quite in danger of having my head turned."

"Mrs. Peterson," he greeted with a bow. "What a lovely goddess you make."

Beatrice smiled.

"And Miss. Darcy," he continued as he turned towards his cousin. "I do believe that heaven is missing one of their most beautiful angels."

Georgiana blushed prettily.

"You certainly have not lost your silver tongue," Darcy said as he joined them. He was dressed quite simply, his normal ball attire adorned with a silver half-mask. "If you are done charming the ladies, I have come to fetch Mary and my wife to assist me in opening the ball."

"Then I shall await you for the first set, Princess," Fitzwilliam said as he bowed once more to Mary.

"Ah, I am afraid that you will have to wait until the second, Richard. I have claimed Mary for the first."

"Then I shall await Miss Farthington for the second," Fitzwilliam replied before turning to Elizabeth with a smile. "May I have the honor of your hand for the first, Mrs. Darcy?"

"You may, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth answered with a slight curtsey before joining Mary and her husband to walk to the front of the ballroom.

Fitzwilliam stood beside Georgiana and Beatrice as Darcy welcomed his guests to Pemberley and bid them all a merry Twelfth Night.

"As some of you may be aware, the Darcy household has recently welcomed a new addition. My godfather, Lord Matthew Farthington recently passed from this world and has sent his daughter to live under my care and protection."

Darcy paused and turned towards Mary, holding his hand out towards her. Mary shyly stepped towards him, lightly grasping his fingers as she joined him at the head of the assembly. Fitzwilliam looked on with approval as Mary held her head high amongst the whispers and murmurs that broke out over the crowd. Darcy tucked her hand into the crook of his arm before addressing the assembly once again.

"This remarkable young woman has been a most welcome addition to our household and our family. I ask you all to join me in welcoming Miss Mary Caroline Farthington to Pemberley."

A brief silence followed before Mr. Peterson began clapping. The entire room soon followed suit. Fitzwilliam noted the brief drop in Mary's shoulders as she turned to bestow her guardian with a small smile. Darcy returned her look before covering her hand with his own and facing the crowd once more.

"Let the dancing commence!"

With that the doors to the ballroom were thrust open and the opening strains of the orchestra filled the air. Mr. Darcy led Mary out onto the dance floor followed closely behind by Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth. Shortly, the dance floor was filled with lines of couples eagerly waiting for Mary and
Darcy to begin.

Mary smiled politely as she grasped the hand of her partner, Mr. Evans. The ball was well under way and Mary had danced every set. She had danced two with Mr. Darcy, one with Derek, one with Fitzwilliam, one with Mr. Brambles and her dance card was already filled for the rest of the evening with gentlemen with whom she was not previously acquainted. She supposed that having a full dance card meant that the evening could be considered a success.

However, Mary would have been quite happy erasing all of the strangers from her dance card and limiting herself to her own intimate party. Being introduced at the start of the ball by Mr. Darcy and her natural complexion made it so that all in attendance knew her identity while she remained ignorant of theirs. As her dance with Mr. Evans was currently proving, anonymity would have been the preferable situation. As Mary's presence at Pemberley was largely unknown outside of the great estate and those who attended their parish, everyone in attendance was very curious to know more about the famous Lord Farthington's mysterious negro daughter. Mary had answered the most impertinent questions as vaguely and politely as possible. Mr. Evans made very little effort to conceal the fact that he was most curious about the size of her inheritance and whether or not it included a great deal of land. Once he had gained some satisfaction as to the size and limitations of her inheritance, Mr. Evans then moved on to other matters which Mary found just as offensive.

"And how came you to be under Lord Farthington's care, Miss Farthington?" Mr. Evans asked.

Mary opened her mouth to form a reply only to be prevented by Mr. Evans.

"I heard the most extraordinary tale about a negress who had been given to a ships captain by an African king as a gift..."

Mary smiled tightly as Mr. Evans continued his "extraordinary tale" until their dance had ended. As Mr. Evans escorted her off the dance floor, Mary looked up to see Fitzwilliam waiting for her on the sidelines. She was most grateful that Fitzwilliam had thought to engage her for the dinner set.

"Enjoying yourself, Princess?" Fitzwilliam asked as he bowed over her hand.

"Quite, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Mary replied as she dropped a curtsey. "But I admit that I will enjoy the ball much more now that we are paired once more. I am already somewhat fatigued."

"Then, we shall sit out this dance so that you might recover."

"No," Mary replied somewhat more loudly than she intended. "I mean, I am sure that I will have plenty of time to get my second wind during supper."

Fitzwilliam smiled. "I am glad to hear it. I have a feeling you shall enjoy this next dance, Miss Farthington."

"And how can you be so sure, Colonel?"

Fitzwilliam smiled as the orchestra began to play the opening strains of a waltz.

"Because you shan't have to share me with the other ladies," Fitzwilliam stage whispered as he led her out onto the dance floor.
ladies had adjourned from the dining room for tea and conversation while the gentlemen sat down to partake of supper.

"This ball is quite tedious," Letitia began. "The night is nearly over and I have yet to dance with the Colonel. Plus he had the audacity to dance two dances with that trollop. I could barely keep my countenance during supper, cousin. What could he have been thinking standing behind her chair with his chest puffed out. And her costume, Daniela! What nerve…"

"Letitia, please moderate your tone," the Viscountess hissed from behind her raised teacup. She smiled beatifically at Mrs. Darwymple who stood watching them curiously. Mrs. Darwymple sniffed and covered her face with her fan before resuming her circuit about the room.

The Viscountess rose from her seat and calmly walked to a fairly vacant corner of the room. Lady Letitia remained seated, staring at her in confusion. The Viscountess rolled her eyes before tersely waving her cousin over. Letitia started before rising and walking to join her cousin.

"Would I be correct in assuming from your outburst that you are too scandalized by the Colonel's behavior to go through with our scheme?"

Letitia's eyes widened and she shook her head in the negative.

"Good. Now then listen and try to do as I say, Letitia. I have paid a servant to fetch Colonel Fitzwilliam during the lull following the first set after supper. He will direct him to report to the library immediately. You shall be waiting in the library and will do as we discussed. Do you remember?"

"Of course. Rip my bodice and faint into his arms," Letitia whispered. "But where will Mr. Darcy be? Surely Fitzwilliam will think it odd if Darcy is there in the ballroom as well."

"I know, cousin," the Viscountess sighed. "I will have Darcy well in hand. Just concern yourself with getting to the library and playing your part."

Colonel Fitzwilliam returned to the dining room from his sojourn to the water closet and scanned the room for Mr. Peterson. Derek caught his eye from across the room where he appeared to be trapped in conversation with the toady Mr. Evans. Mr. Evans was a shameless fortune hunter and, from his earlier encounter with Mary, Fitzwilliam presumed that the gentleman was currently pumping Derek for more information about his cousin. Fitzwilliam grimaced and made his way over to the pair in order to rescue his friend when a gentleman stepped in his path. Fitzwilliam made to step around him before he took note of the gentleman's costume choice.

"It would appear that I have acquired a twin," Fitzwilliam said by way of greeting.

"Good evening, Colonel Fitzwilliam," the man replied with a quick bow. Fitzwilliam suppressed a grimace as he realized that the man was none other than Parson Geoffries.

"It is I, the parson," he continued as he lifted his half mask to wink conspiratorially at the colonel.

"Yes, I had gathered as much. Is it not singular that a man of the cloth should dress as a man of arms?"

The parson laughed. "Well, it is a masquerade and I should think that even ministers of the faith are do a bit of mischief now and then. Besides, what harm could I do with a blunt rapier?"
The ringing of the bell signaling the resumption of the dancing spared Fitzwilliam the trouble of devising a polite response.

"Oh, we cavaliers must not keep the ladies waiting," the parson exclaimed as he adjusted his half mask and made to depart the room.

Fitzwilliam stayed behind and watched the parson's retreat.

"Saved by the bell, eh?" Derek commented as he came to a stop beside him.

Fitzwilliam snorted. "I suppose that we both were."

Mary curtsied to her partner, her cheeks pleasantly flushed and her chest heaving from exertion. The last dance had been a very lively number and her partner, Mr. Fulton, was pleasantly entertaining. What little chance the spirited dance gave for conversation was spent in amusing intercourse. Mr. Fulton was a very mirthful gentleman of no more than five and twenty who was determined to be pleased with everything and everyone. Mary thought it was a shame that her dance card for the night was already full. She would have very much enjoyed dancing with Mr. Fulton once more.

"I think that we both deserve a libation after that romp," Mr. Fulton said as he escorted her off of the dance floor. "What say you, Miss Farthington?"

"I am in complete agreement."

"Good. Then rest here, Miss Farthington and I shall return with a restorative," he said with a press of her hand.

Mary watched his retreat to the tables across the room before her attention was caught by the rabbit like movements of Samuel, one of Mr. Darcy's footmen. Mary thought it odd that he should be present in the ballroom. By his dress, she knew him not to be one of the many servants assigned to see to the needs of the ball guests. They all wore matching porcelain masks and powdered wigs in keeping with the masquerade theme. Samuel's movements steadied as his eyes came to rest on the figure of a gentleman in a large feathered black cap. She watched Samuel as he approached the cavalier. Samuel appeared to whisper something into the gentleman's ear after which the cavalier followed him from the ballroom. Something about the situation struck Mary as peculiar and she thought to follow before she was distracted by the return of Mr. Fulton carrying two glasses of punch. Mr. Fulton sat on the settee beside her and began chatting merrily about the horses he raised. Mary mentioned that she was to have her first riding lessons in the spring and the two were soon caught up in such a lively discussion that Mary soon forgot the oddity of Samuel's appearance.

"I believe that I was quite clear last we spoke, Lady Daniela," Darcy explained. "Your husband is no longer welcome at Pemberley or my London home. However, should you or your son wish to call upon us, you are welcome, of course."

The Viscountess rose from her seat and graced Mr. Darcy with her most plaintive look. "I believe that this sad business was all just a misunderstanding. Will you not at least permit the Viscount to explain his side of the story before you banish him from Pemberley?"

"Your husband admitted his indiscretion to myself and two witnesses. Furthermore, Miss Farthington is a reliable and honest woman. I trust her account completely. I have spoken my peace. Your husband will never be granted entrance to any of my homes."

Darcy rose from his perch atop his desk. "Now if you would excuse me, I have guests to attend to."

The Viscountess picked up her skirts and hurried to step around him, blocking his path to the door.
"I implore you to reconsider," she cried. "Think of the scandal that would be created if word of this unfortunate event were made public?"

"Are you threatening me?" Darcy asked incredulously.

"Heavens, no! Whatever gave you such a ridiculous notion…"

A piercing scream interrupted the Viscountess' hasty explanation.

"Good god! Whatever could that be?" Darcy exclaimed before hurrying from the room.

The Viscountess ran into the hall after him, pausing when she realized that a small audience had gathered outside of the library doors.

"Heavens, that sounds like Letitia," the Viscountess declared as she clutched at her breast.

The handful of partygoers looked on in wonder before parting to allow Mr. Darcy through. He flung open the doors and stepped into the room to find Lady Letitia clutched in the arms of a cavalier, her gown ripped cleanly across the bodice.

"What is the meaning of this?" Darcy cried.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam! What have you done?" the Viscountess demanded as she pushed past Mr. Darcy.

The cavalier dropped Lady Letitia and began to back away from the pair.

"I…I assure you, Mr. Darcy that this is not what it appears," the cavalier replied as he hastily stripped off his hat and half mask to reveal a quaking Parson Geoffries.

"You're not the Colonel!" Letitia exclaimed as she held her tattered dress to herself.

Mr. Darcy slowly turned from the trembling parson to regard Lady Letitia. "I take it that you were anticipating the presence of my cousin?"

Letitia bit her lip and looked anxiously from Mr. Darcy to the Viscountess.

"I…I was not…that is to say," Letitia stammered as her cheeks reddened. "Oh, Daniela! I am ruined!"

The Viscountess rolled her eyes. "Stop your blubbering, Letitia, and get up off the floor. There is nothing for it now."

Letitia quieted at her cousin's harsh tone before slowly getting to her feet as a pair of footmen entered the library.

"Thomas. Ben. Excellent timing," Darcy said as he shrugged off his coat and wrapped it around Lady Letitia's shoulders. "Thomas, would you please escort the Viscountess and Lady Letitia to my study and ensure that they are not disturbed until I arrive."

"Yes, sir," Thomas replied before leading a hiccupping Lady Letitia and a fuming Viscountess from the room.

"And Ben, please fetch Colonel Fitzwilliam from the ballroom and have him join the parson and myself here in the library. Tell him it is most urgent."
The footman bowed before turning to do as his master bid.

"Oh, and Ben," Darcy called after him. "I think you will find that he is the only remaining cavalier in
the ballroom."

Mary stood beside Richard watching the departing carriage of the Viscountess, Lady Letitia and young Ronald make its way along the lane. While Mary was sorry to say goodbye to Ronald, she could only mark the departure of the conniving cousins with relief. Lady Letitia was now engaged to Parson Geoffries and the Viscountess had been thoroughly embarrassed when her ill-conceived plan had fallen apart. To think that they intended to trap Richard! Mary could only wonder why one would think it advisable to ensnare an unwilling man into matrimony. If their plan had succeeded, neither party would have found happiness in the union. However, Mary supposed that Letitia had not been seeking happiness. Mary could not conceive what Letitia had hoped to truly achieve.

"If you had told me three weeks ago that I would be obliged to Parson Geoffries, I would have
called you a fool," Richard said once the carriage had finally rolled out of sight. "And I would have
laughed if you told me that I would pity him."

Mary turned from the window to gaze up at her fiancée. She reached up and brushed an errant strand
of hair off of his forehead before wrapping her arms around his waist.

"I do not think that I could have imagined such a situation," Mary sighed.

Fitzwilliam drew her closer to himself and dropped a kiss onto her forehead.

"And if someone had told me two months ago that I would be happily engaged to a princess, I would
have said that they were mad."

Mary smiled. "Well, you are quite mad, because I am clearly not a princess."

"Then I suppose that you are right. You should ship me off to Bedlam because I declare that you are
a princess."

Mary laughed. "Do you know that I used to get quite cross when you called me 'princess'? I thought
you called me that to mock me."

It was Fitzwilliam's turn to laugh. "Well, I must admit that I called you a princess in part to tease you,
but never to mock you. I got a perverse pleasure from ruffling your feathers and causing you to
blush. You are rather alluring when you are put out."

Mary frowned which earned her a chaste kiss upon the lips.

"I know that you are quite normal," Richard continued after they had parted. "However, I would not
call what I feel for you to be common."

"Nor I what I feel for you."

"'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red."

Fitzwilliam grasped her right hand in his and spun her around the landing as he continued to quote the Bard.

"'I love to hear her speak, yet well I know that music hath a far more pleasing sound..."
Mary snorted at this. "Why thank you."

"I grant I never saw a goddess go," Fitzwilliam continued as he pressed her hand. "'My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.'"

Fitzwilliam stopped suddenly and pulled her back into his arms. "'And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare as any she belied with false compare.'"

Fitzwilliam looked down at her earnestly, his gaze moving between her eyes and her mouth. Mary's amused smile fell from her lips.

"I don't know whether I should swoon or hit you," Mary sighed.

"Then let me propose an alternative."

Mary's eyes fluttered close as Richard lowered his mouth to hers. Fitzwilliam grimaced as a loud cough interrupted his pursuit.

"Yes?" Fitzwilliam tersely asked as the servant as he released Mary.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Colonel," the footman replied. "But this letter just arrived for you."

Mary watched as Richard took the note from the servant's hand and ripped open the seal. A frown creased his brow as he read the letter. Mary's anxiety grew as he looked up from the missive with a look of dismay.

"I am called back to London."

Mary took a quick breath as she stepped towards him. "All is well, I hope? Your family?"

"No. I mean, yes. My family is well. It is not my parent's who call me to London, but Command. I am to ride to London to meet with my general."

"When must you leave?" Mary asked.

"At first light."

Mary bit her lip. "We are to be parted so soon?"

Richard stuffed the letter in his pocket before taking Mary by the shoulders. "It will only be a temporary separation, Mary. You and the rest of the family will be coming to London in February. That is less than a month away."

"That is quite a long while, Richard. It is half the time that I have known you."

A sad smile quirked Fitzwilliam's lips.

"Come, Mary. We will write each other often and before you know it, we shall be together once again."

"I will write you every day."

Fitzwilliam chuckled at this. "If you write everyday, then you shan't have an opportunity to receive my reply before another letter is already on its way to London. And I do not think Darcy will be keen on sending riders daily between Pemberley and London to ferry our love notes back and forth."
"I suppose he would not," Mary sighed. "Then I shall write you as often as possible. With scented paper and pressed flowers from the hot house."

"And I shall reply to each letter. I doubt that I'll have access to any hot houses, but my letters will be bursting with sweet nothings."

Mary stepped into his embrace. "I don't require sweet nothings, although they are nice. Just write to me about your day and your thoughts. That will be enough for me."

"My sensible Princess," Fitzwilliam replied with a smile.

Mary rose on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips.

"Come, let us inform Mr. Darcy so that we might prepare for your departure. Then we can spend as much time together as we can manage before you leave. While your letters will have to suffice while we are parted, I should like to look at you as much as possible before then."

Fitzwilliam frowned. "You just want to look?"

Mary laughed and slapped him on the arm before leading him to Mr. Darcy's study.

Chapter End Notes

I should have chapter 20 up by the end of next week. My seven year writer's block has ended :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!