**Summary**

Colonel Brandon cannot be in two places at once. Fortunately, he has friends.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes.

The children had finished their lessons and were playing outside; the housekeeper had received her instructions for dinner; Edward had not yet returned from his visit to the Franklins. Elinor retreated to her sitting room with relief and took up her pencil, but only had time to add a little shading to her sketch of Richard before the maid knocked on the door and announced that Colonel Brandon had come to call.

For a moment Elinor worried that this unexpected visit was to deliver ill news. Her fears were quickly banished, though, when the Colonel entered the room, aspect calm and cheerful. "Your sister continues well," he said immediately. "She begs your forgiveness for her absence and asks if you and Mr. Ferrars would come to dine tomorrow night."

Elinor smiled. "I would not dream of putting her to the discomfort of a long walk in her condition. And I believe I speak for Mr. Ferrars that we will gladly accept her invitation." She wondered whether Colonel Brandon had had some additional reason to walk over; while the Brandons were naturally frequent visitors at the parsonage, the Colonel normally took great care not to impose on their privacy, in spite of Elinor and Edward's repeated assurances that his presence was always welcome. "Did Rosalind accompany you? Young Elinor seems to find a seven-day too long to go without seeing her cousin."

"Not today, but I will be happy to bring her the day after tomorrow." He looked out the window at the children in the distance. "I am grateful for your offer to have her visit when Mrs. Brandon is confined. It will be best for her to be among friends, especially if...." He fell silent.
"Be assured that she may stay here as long as needed." She could not say to the Colonel what the midwife had told her, that Marianne would likely have an easier time with this child than she had with Rosalind; women still died after easy births as well as difficult. "Marianne's health this time seems excellent."

"Perhaps the season helps. She often says to me that she finds the gardens too enticing to remain indoors long."

Had Elinor not known the Colonel for so many years, she would have thought that Marianne's impending confinement was the only burden on his heart, but his frequent glances out the window and toward the door suggested that there was still more he wished to speak of. She picked up her sewing. "I received a letter from my sister Margaret yesterday. She and Mr. Lewis are both well, and she describes the Peaks in such a way to make me wish to see them myself."

"Do they still expect to return by Michaelmas?"

"Yes, she says she does not wish to leave my mother alone for too many weeks, though my mother says she has not been lonely at all due to Mrs. Jennings' kind visits."

The Colonel fell silent, and Elinor continued to stitch. She had only finished one short seam when the Colonel finally turned away and spoke.

"This morning I received a letter…. I would not pain Mrs. Brandon by raising the subject with her."

Elinor grasped his meaning at once. "Your ward Eliza? Or her child?"

He nodded gratefully. "Eliza has been taken ill. The physician says it is a bilious fever and that she is in great danger."

Elinor knew that even the joys of marriage and fatherhood had never dislodged Eliza's place in the Colonel's heart and obligations. "I am very sorry."

"And I cannot go to her, with Mrs. Brandon so near her confinement." He rose and walked to the window. "I am as a house divided against itself. My duty is here, with my wife, and yet…. I have written to her companion, to be sure that every possible attention is paid to her."

"And the boy?"

"He is still healthy and well. He wishes to go to sea, and I have inquired among my acquaintance about a suitable berth when he has attained the necessary age." The Colonel walked to the window. "But there are still two more years to wait, and I must provide a home for him in the meantime. I do not know what I should do if Eliza…. Were he anyone else's son, Delaford would be open to him as it was to his mother in her youth. But I cannot bring the illegitimate son of John Willoughby under the same roof that shelters my wife, nor even to this village. And I cannot go to them now." He sighed. "You are as ever a kind listener."

"It is no trouble at all. I am honored by your confidence." She resolved to speak with Edward before she made a suggestion that the Colonel would instinctively reject; if Edward was amenable to the idea, he could broach the topic.

"I must return to Mrs. Brandon."

"Give her my greetings and tell her that unless Mr. Ferrars is detained, we shall be there by quarter past four tomorrow."
The Ferrars children greeted their cousin gleefully, and soon the four of them were racing about the garden. The Colonel watched them, smiling, then turned to Elinor. "So Mr. Ferrars is on his way to visit friends in ----shire. I had not known he planned such a journey."

"Yes, he has not seen them these five years at least, and two nights ago he was overcome by the separation." When Elinor had told him of the Colonel's dilemma, Edward had immediately offered his own services, as she had expected. "I assured him that we would be well and that his curate would carry out his duties in his absence. He left early this morning and will write by the first post after he arrives."

"When he asked me last night if I had any commissions he might carry out…. You have… I did not ask, and I would not impose such a task on him."

"It is no imposition, as I am certain he has assured you. You cannot be there now, but you have friends who can, and who are delighted to offer some small return for your help and aid over the years."

The Colonel took her hand and grasped it quickly, then released her and turned back to the window. "Shall we have rain tomorrow, do you think?"

End Notes

As far as I can tell, Sense and Sensibility never specifies whether Eliza Williams' child was a son or daughter; while many sequels have assumed it was a daughter, I liked the idea of a son (and in my crossover-happy brain, can imagine him serving with Lieutenant Price or Captain Wentworth eventually).

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