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**Trembling Hands**

by **CathyKing**

Summary

Fitzwilliam Darcy must face the consequences of living in a world devastated by World War One. He must face the consequences even if it means giving up the life he once enjoyed, and any and all dreams of Elizabeth Bennet.

Notes

AN: This is a trial chapter, which is still a little unpolished, in order to test the waters - will polish off this story and continue if people seem interested!
Chapter 1

Trembling Hands

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Prologue
September 1914

The abandoned barn that had once belonged to the Pemberley wheat stores before the land had been sold had become a smutronståle for the lovers. Insensible, as lovers are, to the reality of the cold and wind-drifted barn, they found comfort in the hazy smell of old wood, barley, and the warmth of each other's bodies. As Fitzwilliam laid Elizabeth out and ran his fingers through her hair, he never thought of the bits of hay stuck into the locks, or of the chill spiking against his back. He only thought of her, and them, and a time where making love wouldn't occur on precariously old timber or under a roof where Orion was visible through the cracks.

He had planned. Of course he had. He was going to marry the country girl who, a year earlier, had helped re-set his arm after a riding accident left him dependent on the hospitality of a family in Hertfordshire. The family lived in an old Elizabethan styled house, and the perfectly wonky roof gave a vivid depiction of the family themselves. He couldn't, and wouldn't, forget the look that passed over her face as he hobbled up the lane, leaning heavily on his disgruntled horse. There was that mocking smile to her parted lips, and an expression so carefully executed with a single lift of a brow that said: 'Look. Look at the poor gentleman who couldn't stay on a horse even though he was practically born on one'.

It continued thus. Fitzwilliam Darcy's courtship of Elizabeth Bennet proved to be more painful than the re-setting of his arm. The agonising process resulted in more tears, too. He had begun, as a gentleman should, tentatively.

He had started with jewellery, taking inspiration for the first necklace that his father had ever had made up for his mother. The necklace had cost him an absolute fortune and was far too inappropriate for a woman he knew little about. When Elizabeth with her fiery passion ignored his delicate offering and mailed it back to him – standard class at that – he was forced to improvise. He had learnt that the best of modern women weren't bought over by such things, but where had that left him? Jewellery was out, his Victorian bound The Meaning of The Flower, he assumed should also be counted out, and that left him uprooted from all his conceptions of how to woo his lady. The summer and autumn months of 1913 were a disastrous wash of languages, new music, art, and travel inspirations; but culture wasn't working – nothing seemed to be working and at a time when Fitzwilliam was on the brink of tearing out his hair, a saviour came.

That saviour was in the form of Pemberley.

Pemberley. That fabled cream washed house set between two valleys in the most luscious of England's counties; Derbyshire. The original house, built by Charles Alexander Darcy for his French wife had been veiled and augmented over time. Charles's grandson had extended the house westwards, and his roguish great-grandson had spent frivolous years building the large stables that nestled comfortably between the gardens and orchards on a soft peaked slope. Each generation of Darcy had brought their new visions (except the black sheep of 1721, but that wasn't spoken of) to the grand estate until the alcove work in the great hall was the only visible original
Perhaps Fitzwilliam shouldn't have given the house too much credit. It was true that there had been an affectionate serenity to Elizabeth's eyes as he led her, particularly, through the gardens; but her decision to embrace him into her soul was also ensured by the people carved deeply into the building's soul.

Although the below staff with their volumes and volumes of praise for the young Master Darcy had entranced her. Although the girlish and petit Georgiana Darcy set something inside of her positively aching, it was in George Darcy where she found the answer to all her concerns. George Darcy, that awe-inspiring gentleman, was everything she saw in Fitzwilliam and more. She had been certain that she loved Fitzwilliam, but George Darcy had given her ample proof to justify her feelings. He was tall and dark like his son, they had the same constant entrapping look in their brown eyes, the same expressions; and it had been often remarked that if you stood both Darcy's in opposite corners of a room one wouldn't quite know in which direction to look. Most importantly, George provided Elizabeth with a vision of constancy.

Elizabeth knew the stories, she had seen it in her own parents, of young sprightly couples that augmented and bended out of shape with age. She loved Fitzwilliam with his surly looks and disregard of almost everything trivial. She loved how he cared for people, and when he was passionate he threw his whole soul into any matter. But she had been scared and timid. She now saw in George Darcy that nothing, not even time itself, would take those traits away from the man she dreamed of being beside. The man she dreamed of always being beside.

That was, of course, until war changed their path; in the same way it would change so many others.

It was in this atmosphere that Fitzwilliam Darcy, in that old wood sanctuary began with a simple "Elizabeth." He looked down at where her head was pillowed in the curve of his arm and waited until she looked up at him; her eyes tinted as they were she was incandescently happy. "I have enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps. I leave on the 24th."

Leaving had not featured in any shape or form in her imagined future life with Fitzwilliam Darcy. Leaving conjured up imagines of despair, pain, and even more seriously: loss. In the stillness that followed Elizabeth had sat herself up, her long hair pooling to cover her shoulders and breasts. "You… what?"

The stunned shock evident in Elizabeth's voice continued through the conversation. From Fitzwilliam's rapid explanations to his defences, Elizabeth's entreaty that he couldn't possibly go, stung deeply. More absurd than just leaving was his leaving to join the Royal Flying Corps where he was sure to be shot down and killed within a month. Fitzwilliam's please and declarations of duty and honour did nothing to stop Elizabeth, roughly throwing her lover's bundle of clothes at his chest, swearing revenge on Lord Greycote who contacted Darcy in the need of fair fliers. "Why couldn't you have just waited? You could have secured a cabinet job, I know you could have, and then you wouldn't have to leave at all. You should have at least waited until Christmas and everything would be over." Elizabeth hissed at him venomously, roughly tucking her blouse into her skirt and jamming her feet so harshly into her shoes that it took all her courage not to cry out in pain.

"I couldn't have possibly waited. What am I supposed to do, stalk around Pemberley's darkened rooms and contribute absolutely nothing?" Fitzwilliam was on his feet, too, kicking his legs into his trousers and throwing his arm out against the wall when he stumbled. Elizabeth watched him and even in that moment of all moments allowed a little mocking smile to escape her parted lips.
She took the steps remaining between them and stood by him, her hands clasped together.

"Fitzwilliam… you can't. Please… stay." He fixed his eyes upon her for a long moment then his gaze dropped in sync with the plummeting of Elizabeth's stomach. He gave a shake of his head, slipped his shirt across his broad shoulders and turned away. He simply couldn't stay, this was bigger than any of them realised and he knew that everyone needed to sacrifice; even them.

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Fitzwilliam did leave. He didn't stay wrapped up in the warm cocoon of his childhood, oblivious to the raging torments and agonising howls of warfare. The chatter of guns, the seconds gap between life and death. But whilst he was still at Pemberley, living out the last few weeks of his life as it was, that future remained a distant dream. Elizabeth, expectantly, remained mad at her lover for many days before the killing of a boy (three days before his eighteenth birthday – the bitter ironies) from the village snapped her to her senses, and from that point onwards every moment was lived in dedication to the man she had dreamed of marrying. To her it seemed impossible that he could survive his fate, it was being realised that perhaps jingoism and The Game of War wasn't all that terribly thrilling.

Elizabeth tried on many occasions to voice her doubts but Fitzwilliam simply held her close and ran his fingers tenderly through her soft hair; the chocolate brown streaked with copper and indigo. They were just as they had always been but everything had changed all at once. The barn had become a place from a long forgotten summer's dream. The young lover's nest had been acceptable to them when they were one step away from engagement and a pregnancy wasn't going to be a large thorn in their sides. Now that Fitzwilliam would soon be away, anything significant was out of the question.

Engagement had long been on the minds of both the couple, Fitzwilliam had even had brought up from London his great – great grandmother's engagement ring which had been stored in a vault after the death of his mother and was unquestionably priceless. The ring was now to sit in its small black box until a time where it would be stumbled across quite by accident. It will be Elizabeth who discovers it, not during the long years' wait at Pemberley, but in 1919 when Darcy will be utterly unattainable to her.

Now that the wished-for engagement was off the table and out of play, everyone at Pemberley prepared for, not only, Fitzwilliam's departure, but also for Pemberley's temporary transformation into a military hospital and a rich agricultural plot to be used for the war effort. Any pair of hands available was roped in to help, and the terms 'make do and mend' and 'solidarity' seemed to have originated from those tiresome weeks spent buried in the Derbyshire hills. With the departure of the majority of the male staff, scullery maids helped turn the soil, the head gardener, too old for virtually anything, dragged the reluctant horses to the fields, and even George Darcy had rolled up his sleeves and mucked in until Georgiana, too gentle for her own good, persuaded him to go and rest himself; terrified for second heart attack.

For the most part George Darcy graciously stepped down from his duties as master of the house and spent a great deal of time outdoors and achieved, among other wholesome pleasures, a becoming tan. As a result, Elizabeth found herself spending most of her days with Fitzwilliam in his study. She would be settled behind the old knotted desk at 9am sharp, staring wondrously at the mountains of estate documents whilst he stood behind her explaining the intricate details of everyday life. Darcy, very early on, had extracted a promise from her that she would "For God's sake stay at Pemberley, if you do nothing else you must stay at Pemberley as much as you can" instead of becoming something useful like a VAD in London; a promise to which Elizabeth only agreed to keep because of her affection. She started accompanying him to meetings to the Home Farm, the bailiff, the solicitor, the tenants, the everything-else-under-the-sun, all for the purpose of
preparing her to become the mistress of Pemberley. It was never said specifically that that was the role that she was being prepared for, but she had managed to gather as much when George Darcy first asked her to arrange a seating plan for a large dinner party, great the guests, and chose the menu.

Mrs. Bennet, as you could imagine, with the telephone pressed tightly against her ear, was ecstatic at all this news and remained oblivious to the war raging to the South.

"I never wanted anything adventurous." Elizabeth murmured gently the night of Fitzwilliam's departure. Her palm was carefully laid flat against the beginnings of stubble on his cheek, his arms wrapped so protectively around her that they seemed to become one flesh. "I only wanted to fall in love and be happy… there was never any separation, well perhaps only for a few days to intensify your feelings – but never any war, never any of this."

Fitzwilliam looked down at her, her wide gentle eyes flickering rapidly with the tears threatening to pour; a treachery signifying how deeply she worried but had resisted showing. He thought how much difference there was between this woman and the woman who re-set his arm. He thought about how the flame had somehow managed to be contained but at the same time managed to burn brighter than ever.

"We'll still have that." He heard his own voice, husky even to his ears. "We just have to wait, and then we'll forget about the war, and our stupid fights, because it won't matter anymore." It didn't convince either of them so Fitzwilliam bent his head down and brushed their lips together very gently.

"I truly want to believe you, I do, but I'm scared everything will change."

The harsh clipping of Mr. Cote's immaculately polished shoes against the stairs forced them to part prematurely, the drumming of their pulses connected right until the very last second as their entwined fingers were forced to pull away.

The final thing Elizabeth remembered of that dreadful dreadful last evening was the silhouette of his face as he came to a rest halfway down the corridor. The shadows threw the cape of darkness across his back but he paused… he paused for what seemed like a forever and then his head dropped and turned slightly… not enough for him to be looking at her, but similar to someone listening for a unheard something. So absorbed was Elizabeth in tracing the angular lines of his profile that she missed the catch in his throat and the tremble of his hands.

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The next morning he had gone by the time Elizabeth woke. As she pulled herself back to her dreaded reality, her unfocussed eyes landed on a scrap of paper containing his neat looping script:

*Things change, but we won't. I'll return to you.*

*I'll always return.*

However, he had joined the Royal Flying Corps.

He would simply not survive.

But, Fitzwilliam Darcy, born from that bluest of blood, did survive.
“It will have to be sold, sir.” Darcy turned, unfortunately expecting nothing less, to Mr. Oakham, solicitor and long-term overseer of the family’s accounts. Mr. Oakham hovered in the middle of the room, taking refuge on the Turkish carpet, amongst the gnawed furnishings, eroded as mountains are.

“All of it?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so, sir.” Oakham’s pronounced chin led the bow of his head. Darcy shuffled, shifting his weight between both of his legs stiffly.

“It is not all as bad as it seems, surely?”

“I’m afraid so.” He repeated, and then found the need to elaborate, “It is the way with so many of these great houses —”

This was interrupted by Darcy – “It served in the war effort,” – who was looking around the place. Although not likened to the dark tunelled, white tented, or brown grassed medical centres of France, the chore of the past few years was visible in every part of the house. Whole rooms had been shelled out to accommodate beds, and forgotten wisps of bandages and that smell fractured the floors like artillery shells. The result was reminiscently distasteful.

“Even so,” Oakham touched delicately, aware of the weight of the beast behind him. “It grieves me to say that not enough surplus to secure the continuation of the property’s operation was considered and accounted for in your absence.”

“Is there any way to save the house, the lands, the people?”
“The land is worn-out, the house over-worked, and the staff – there are not the… it will take a great deal of financing, Mr. Darcy…” Oakham said – flicking through his portfolio with a precision only a tense pause could bring. “One I am not sure your finances can produce.”

“No.” Darcy thought of the blooms of the years before. The ripe fruits, losing oneself, and the hazy harvest afternoons: workers smoking along the horizon, the tarring scent rising and merging with the pregnant sun. The succulent apple, begging to be bitten again, soured as he looked out over the wasted earth, turned up against the blades of the plough and pushed back into itself. “I don’t think they can. There are savings, but they must be protected.”

“Then I am sorry. I will return to the office and draft up the papers before the end of the week.”

“The week? We wouldn’t survive the winter?”

“Perhaps… You understand, I am sure you do, Mr. Darcy, that it may be a while before a suitable buyer becomes available. No one in England, I’m sure, but perhaps an American.”

Darcy swung his face back towards him, and he had become very creased. “… And what – What would be needed to keep it?” He asked.

Oakham grappled for an answer, very much wanting to offer assistance. The Darcy family had been tremendously good to, and for him over the years. They, of course, could have afforded to take their business down to London, but hadn’t. Many business men Oakham knew of could only wish for such a family. “Selling off a great deal of the remaining land would soften the blow slightly.” However, despite his intentions, this was a very small conciliation to hear.

“What would be needed for the house?”

“For the house… a miracle, sir,” Then, sotto voce, “A bloody great gesture from God should do it.”

Darcy, hearing, tipped his head, “Understood. Thank you for your time, Mr. Oakham.”

“I will try to do something.”
“Thank you, you’ve been exceptionally good..” to me, to us, these years, left unsaid – squashed before it could even rise in the throat. Oakham dipped his head again, remembering and aware. As Darcy gestured towards the door, Darcy’s stillness rose to the forefront of Oakham’s mind once more. Throughout their tour of the house, Darcy had walked from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ almost stoically, and with most certainly an agonising amount of pain rippling below the surface (almost too intense to watch), then stood as rooted as an oak – except the curious shuffle of weight between each leg. It was noted that perhaps it wasn’t all to do with the darkening of the mood, but as no attention was drawn in this direction by Darcy, the solicitor remained mute on the matter.

Oakham followed Darcy’s sweeping gesture towards the door, stepping away and placing one hand on the handle. “One more thing,” He paused itchingly, thinking of bunting and flags and of a good slice of cake, “London and the parades – was it –”

“Was it what you’d hoped? I’m the wrong man to ask.” Came Darcy’s carefully placed reply.

“You weren’t there?”

“They charged extra for cots-with-a-view. Good day, Mr. Oakham – Mrs. Reynolds will see you to your car.” With that, the conversation was dead.

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Georgiana held the receiver to her ear, listening to her brother’s voice, faint and crackly – as in her nightmares – down the line. “Are aunt and uncle looking after you?”

“Yes, Fitzwilliam – I am fine here, I wanted to ask –”

“ – Lord Ferndean is still visiting you?”

“He comes often,” She confirmed, her cheeks rosed. “He’s very nice.” Darcy nodded, letting his weight sag against the wall. Good – at least his sister would be well looked after and provided for. He knew that she deserved nothing less for her perseverance. It pained him that he had missed the transition from girl into woman, but thought her marvellous none the less.

“And a gentleman?”
“Yes.” Georgiana sighed – tied of dancing around the topic, “Now please tell me about your meeting with Mr. Oakham.”

There’s a long pause, with Georgiana listening to the static, and his voice is solemn when it comes. “Georgiana, Pemberley won’t survive, there isn’t enough to save it.”

“Nothing?”

“No…” He breath hitches in her throat. They all knew it was bad, but this… The loss of the house, the history of the place was too much. “Oh, no, Georgiana. Please, don’t be upset. We all knew this was a long time coming.”

“I know,” She whispered, “But it’s still my home, and for a period when you were gone I was sure that everything would be as it should.” As with Mr. Oakham – her words are carefully loaded which gives Darcy pause. He lets his eyes close, and takes a deep breath. He imagines himself looking back over his shoulder and finding himself standing at the bottom of a huge suspended wave. He’s helplessly trapped, and other’s must whisper, and tiptoe ever so quietly for fear that the water plunge and engulf him.

*Is that how I’m seen, even by you, Georgiana,* he almost asks but doesn’t.

“As Mr. Oakham said, this is often the way with great houses.”

“With great houses… but oh, brother, I must talk to Robin. I am sure he would –”

“No, Georgiana, you mustn’t.”

“He –”

“No, it would be unacceptable to place this sort of burden upon another. I *know* he cares deeply for you, and I know that there estates are… as safe as they are numerous, but this is *our*… our – ours.” His voice is firm, unyielding, which makes Georgiana shrink back into herself. “Promise you will not mention it to him. I will come to London, see what can be done, but Mr. Oakham is drawing up papers for a sale.”
“What about father?” Georgiana’s brow crinkles and her eyes soften. Darcy can read her expression from her voice, which is touched and quiet.

“I haven’t told him.”

“He knows, Fitzwilliam.”

“He knows something, he does not know the full extent.”

“I want to come home.” She whispered, but unafraid to say it now.

“I will be in London soon. I can take you back with me?”

“Okay.” Glancing at the time. “You have to go.”

“I do… Don’t worry, and I’ll be with you soon.”

Once they’ve said their goodbye to each other, Georgiana buttons her coat and steps out into the cold. The streets are quiet as she walks, but small groups huddle together as they scuttle about – collars draw up against the thick wind. She thinks of Pemberley as she walks, as she often does in London. She finds a strange parallel between the city and the house, and when lonely, imagines walking the gallery instead of the street, seeing every window replaced with one of their paintings. There’s Charles Darcy, and her mother – there’s the black sheep, larger than life in a shop window, and the thought makes her smile.

A car horn sounds behind her, forcing her to turn – her eyes almost hidden by her cap. A car pulls up, full of laughter – topless and shiny. There are three figures in the car, and it takes a moments squinting to realise it’s Lord Greycote driving – and in the back, alarmingly, are the two eldest Bennet sisters. The laughter dies immediately, and as Georgiana doesn’t know how to behave in this situation, remains silent but steps closing to the car.
“I thought it was you, Georgiana!” It’s Daniel, jovial as always. “I said, I bet that is Georgiana Darcy – but they didn’t believe me.”

“Hello, Daniel. It’s good to see you again.” She goes for politeness, although it sits a little off kilter.

“Hello, Georgiana,” Comes a soft voice from the back seats and it’s Jane, lovely, kind Jane who has always said nice words to Georgiana. Her soft voice washes over her, and she can’t help a weak smile. “Are we able to give you a lift somewhere? Daniel is driving us back to Hertfordshire, but I’m sure we can give you a lift as far as we can.” She said earnestly, her lips pursed at the thought of Georgiana in the wind, looking like one gust could blow her away.

Georgiana shook her head, pointing with numb fingers down the street. “No, thank you. I’m going to my aunt and uncles, they live just around the turn.” Her eyes flicker to Elizabeth before she can stop them. Elizabeth is looking away, her gaze fixed on father and his child on the other side of the street, and if she notices Georgiana’s lie, she has the grace not to let it be known. No one quite knows what happened – but Georgiana thinks of her brother’s first injury, Elizabeth returning to Pemberley, her bags being packed after a few days, and her departure. Georgiana thinks of her brother’s return in October, determination to not – under any circumstances, or pain of death – mention the drama, and can’t help but feel a little possessive of him.

“It wouldn’t be any bother.” Daniel promises. Georgiana turns her eyes back to see him smiling with beseeching eyes.

“Thank you very much for your offer, but I’ll walk. I’m sure that my – that… You would be most welcome at home, Daniel, if you were to ever come up.”

“I will, I promise.” Daniel nodded earnestly. “I’ll come soon.”

Georgiana leaves and Daniel and Jane watch her until she’s out of sight. Once she’s gone Jane turns to Elizabeth, but Elizabeth leans over, says something to Daniel and the trance is broken.
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