

Chapter 1

From the carriage's rear-facing seat, Darcy insisted, "Elizabeth, we cannot."

Elizabeth Darcy clung to the coach's strap out of necessity, but despite her husband's reasonableness, she objected to his order. "But, Fitzwilliam, we must be home for Christmas."

"Christmas or not, you're too precious for me to risk your injury under such appalling conditions." He eyed her expanding waistline, but he made no direct reference to the strong possibility that she carried his heir. Darcy gestured to the icy roads they had encountered outside of Harrogate.

With exasperation's deep sigh, she said, "I shall bow to your wishes."

She inherently knew him correct, but Darcy realized that even after two years of marriage, it still hurt Elizabeth's pride to allow him dominance over her in any way. They had always had a friendly "contention" between them, a well-developed twisting of language and logic. The former Elizabeth Bennet had attracted him as such. "Verbal sword play," he had termed it. He rapped on the roof and gave Mr. Simpson orders to find appropriate lodgings.

Through the trap, his coachman shouted over the elements. "There be a small inn slightly off the main road. Maybe three miles, Sir."

"Take your time, Simpson," Darcy ordered.

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"There is no need, Uncle," Georgiana Darcy assured the Earl of Matlock. "Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth shall be home tomorrow. My brother wouldn't miss Pemberley's Christmas. It's his favorite festivity. Fitzwilliam takes his seasonal duties quite seriously." The girl tried not to flinch with her Aunt Catherine's customary snort. If Georgiana had any inclination that her formidable aunt had called on her brother, the earl, Georgiana would never have traveled to Matlock on a day trip. Lady Catherine De Bourgh had always frightened the girl, and recently her mother's older sister had all but disowned the Darcy family when Fitzwilliam had chosen Elizabeth Bennet as his wife over Lady Catherine's frail daughter, Anne. In fact, Lady Catherine's condemnation of the new Mrs. Darcy had created a permanent split in the family tree. Darcy had refused to acknowledge the woman he once revered.

"And have we any news of the colonel?" Georgiana's attempted nonchalance sounded contrived even to her. Information regarding Edward Fitzwilliam's inevitable return was the true reason for Georgiana's visit. The colonel had traveled to America nearly a year prior, and she had counted the days, praying for his early return: It was her secret Christmas wish. Along with her brother, Edward served as Georgiana's guardian. It was he to whom she had turned when she felt intimidated by her brother's sense of propriety and her aunt's demoralizing mandates. And Georgiana cherished every moment she had spent with the man. The recent difficulties the army had face in the Americas had brought her more than one sleepless night.

"We expect Edward's return some time after the New Year," the countess shared. "We had hoped he would be able to share the festive days under our roof, but the colonel's last letter indicated otherwise."

Georgiana let out relief's sigh: He would return soon. "I am pleased, Countess." She had set her teacup on a nearby table. "Fitzwilliam shall rejoice in the news."

Lady Catherine had held her tongue longer than anyone expected. Now, disdain laced her words. "At least, the colonel's return will force your brother to see to your Come Out. You're nineteen and haven't made your appearance in London's Society. It makes sense that Darcy

would need to protect you from his wife's influence," she said with a snarl. "I'm certain that my nephew regrets his mate's choice, but who am I to bring that to his attention?"

Georgiana noted that both the earl and his countess rolled their eyes. She wanted to defend her brother's decision, but she would not betray the fact that Pemberley had suffered with Elizabeth's two previous miscarriages. Lady Catherine would see Mrs. Darcy's inability to carry to term proof of Elizabeth Bennet's inferiority. Her aunt would have no sympathy for the grieving parents. "We've been busy at Pemberley establishing my brother's imprint on the estate," Georgiana lamely offered.

"Nonsense." Lady Catherine ignored her niece's explanation. "Darcy's been the Master of Pemberley since his father's passing."

The earl interceded. "It takes a young man years to replace his father's legacy. My nephew's marriage has opened new doors for Darcy's separate identity. People considered the late Mr. Darcy one of the best. It's no fault if Darcy has taken his time in creating his own hereditament."

A second contemptuous snort filled the room. "Either way, Child, you should have made your Society entrance. Edward will see that Darcy no longer shirks his duties. The colonel may not have been able to prevent Darcy from denying his familial duty to Anne, but Edward has the legal right to insist upon your Presentation. Thank goodness someone in this family understands decency and comportment."

Georgiana wanted to scream that her aunt's narrow view had nothing to do with correctness and everything to do with redress. Instead, Georgiana stood to make her exit. "We hope soon to see you at Pemberley, Your Lordship. My brother always appreciates your pragmatic advice, and I shall look forward to a chess rematch."

The Matlocks followed Georgiana to their feet. Lady Matlock caught Georgiana's hand. "We shall see each other with Edward's return if not before then. Give Fitzwilliam and Mrs. Darcy our affection."

"Yes, Ma'am." Georgiana turned to Lady Catherine. "As always, Aunt, it's a pleasure to see you. I pray that you have a safe return to Kent." Out of respect, Georgiana dropped a quick curtsy.

"Come," the countess said. "I am certain that your carriage and Mrs. Annesley await."

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"It is not much, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth observed as her husband assisted her from his traveling coach. The small inn on a secondary road obviously lacked the amenities to which they had become accustomed on this journey. No one hustled forward to help Mr. Simpson or Jasper with the coach.

Darcy followed her gaze and tried not to frown. "If the place is clean, dry, and warm, I will be thankful." Icy rain pelleted the umbrella he held over their heads. "Let us see what the man has to offer weary travelers."

They entered the building to find a small common room with a full fire in the hearth. Darcy released Elizabeth to the blaze's warmth while he met the jovial innkeeper who bustled in from the kitchen. "Good day, Sir," the man called as he approached. Glancing at Elizabeth, he added, "I see that you and yer missus rightly decided to seek shelter from this storm. I be Josiah Washington, and this be Prestwick's Portal."

"A very alliterative name." Darcy observed the inn's simplicity.

"Me wife's idea—said it sounded like an expensive painting."

"Would you have a room to let for Mrs. Darcy's and my safe harbor?"

The man laid a book upon a tall table serving as the registry. “Darcy?” Mr. Washington smiled merrily. “I know of the Darcys who live in Derbyshire. You be kin to them, Sir?”

Noting the man’s age, Darcy said, “Likely my parents.”

“It be a great estate. I sees it once for me self,” the man said as he handed Darcy a pen and ink.

Darcy smiled, but he preferred not to allow Pemberley define him. At least, he had not done so since meeting and wooing Elizabeth. His wife had taught him a difficult lesson on pretentiousness.

Elizabeth stepped beside him. “I hope Hannah and Mr. Lucas are not stranded some place along the road.” Darcy had sent his valet and Elizabeth’s maid ahead.

“As they left a day before us, I am certain they have missed the storm’s worst. I’m sorry that we didn’t.” He spoke softly to her alone.

“It’s five days to Christmas Eve. We shall see Pemberley for the celebration.”

Darcy thought of the surprise he had arranged for his wife for her Christmas pleasure. He prayed it wasn’t for naught. Although she pretended otherwise, Elizabeth had suffered greatly from her untimely births. The losses had played havoc with his wife’s normal playfulness. The first miscarriage had come mere months into their marriage. At the time, Mrs. Reynolds, his housekeeper, had assured Darcy that such lapses were common, and that his wife likely did not even realize her condition until it was over.

The second had occurred nearly a half year later. With that gestation, Pemberley had celebrated Elizabeth’s happiness, but some three and a half months into her term, the bleeding began. Darcy had immediately summoned a physician, but the man could do nothing for the child. Saving Elizabeth became the treatment’s focus, and although she had recovered physically, he often saw the longing displayed in Elizabeth’s eyes. For example, when her sister Jane Bingley mentioned motherhood’s joys, *his Elizabeth* died a slow, lingering death.

It explained why Elizabeth had refused to acknowledge her current condition. If she didn’t form an attachment to the child she carried, its possible loss couldn’t bring her pain. So, they—he, his staff, and Georgiana—had participated in a silent dance—one where those who attended his wife ordered new dresses for her quickly changing body without her approval and who placed foot stools close to her favorite chair, as well as who catered to her cravings for chocolate and herring, thankfully not at the same time. No one mentioned his wife’s condition, but they all tended to it.

“If you could do something to brighten Mrs. Darcy’s spirits, it would better your wife’s chances of carrying to term,” Doctor Palmer had suggested less than a month ago. *“The more Mrs. Darcy dwells on her losses, the more likely a repetition will occur.”*

That very day, Darcy had sent a letter to Longbourn asking the Bennets to join him and Elizabeth for Christmas. His wife hadn’t seen her parents since the day she and Darcy had left Hertfordshire for Pemberley. Darcy had refused to allow her to travel following each of the two prior miscarriages, and then Elizabeth had spent two months with Mrs. Bingley’s delivery of her twins. Kitty Bennet had visited Pemberley several times, but Elizabeth had bemoaned her father’s absence, and even her insensible mother. Therefore, he had dispatched the invitation, and the Bennets had readily accepted. He had carefully planned his Christmas surprise, but Darcy hadn’t considered the weather.

“If Mr. Parnell hadn’t been so obstinate, we might already be at Pemberley,” he observed. In truth, Parnell had snubbed Darcy’s offer, claiming it was too generous to Darcy’s smaller investors. *“You are a fool, Darcy, if you think I might involve myself in such a weak scheme. You*

would give away the cow before you had one drop of milk.” Darcy had refused to do business with such a tight-fisted man. He was all for making a profit, but not at the expense of those less fortunate than him. He had sought out Parnell because Darcy had heard that the man was an astute businessman, and that Parnell understood what it took for success. Instead, he had found a bitter, conniving entrepreneur, who spoke venomous words to his employees. Darcy had been glad to leave the negotiations behind.

“I should’ve left you at Pemberley, but I was sore to spend my nights alone or my days without the pleasure of your laughter,” he had told Elizabeth as they waited for Mr. Washington to arrange their room. “Quite selfish, but I find myself hopelessly addicted to your closeness.”

“I thought you admired me for my impertinence.” Darcy relished the fact that she had teased him, a welcomed change from Elizabeth’s recent melancholy. Perhaps, his taking her with him on this journey would promote her healing.

“Impertinence was your estimation,” he murmured close to her ear. “I sought the liveliness of your mind.” A raised eyebrow lodged her objection. “But I lied,” he said huskily. “It was for your skin’s creamy satin and that sprinkling of freckles across your nose.”

Elizabeth flushed. “Mr. Darcy!” she protested with a gasp.

“Yes, my Elizabeth,” he whispered seductively into her hair. “I am here to please you, my Love.” His smile became positively smug. “You should also know that I admired your easy playfulness, the uncommonly intelligent expression of your beautiful eyes, and your light and pleasing figure.”

Although she blushed again, and her voice was tremulous, Elizabeth beamed with joy. She laughed, genuinely and fully, and Darcy’s heart opened further to her. It was the most delightful sound he had ever heard. “Fitzwilliam Darcy,” she began, “I cannot fathom how I ever thought you a prig.” He recognized how Elizabeth had chosen her words to evoke a reaction from him, so Darcy schooled his response. “You are an absolute cad!”

“True, my Dear, but I’m your cad,” he taunted.

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“Welcome to Pemberley,” Georgiana greeted Elizabeth’s family. A time had existed when the prospects of acting as her brother’s hostess would have brought her to tears, but under Elizabeth’s tutelage as well as her companion’s, Mrs. Annesley, guidance, Georgiana had developed more confidence.

Kitty Bennet boisterously caught Georgiana in a quick embrace. “I’m so happy to return to Pemberley. Hertfordshire is positively humdrum.”

Georgiana smiled warmly. She and Elizabeth’s sister had fashioned a companionable relationship over the last two years. Although Kitty didn’t share Georgiana’s interest in music and art, they both held questions about marriage and love and men, and for Georgiana, sharing their uncertainties had a calming effect. It said that she was not an aberration. Since the weakness she had displayed at age fifteen, she had often questioned her own curiosity. Finding Kitty Bennet equally at a loss for what to do to find love had served as a revelation to the awkwardly demure Georgiana. “It is always a pleasure to see you, Kitty. You’ve been sorely missed.”

Georgiana turned her attention to the Bennets. “Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet. We’re pleased you joined us in Derbyshire.”

She followed the man’s gaze as he said, “The house is all Lizzy said it was.” The man sighed deeply. “Where is Lizzy? I expected her to greet us with opened arms. It’s not like Elizabeth to avoid the cold. Has life at Pemberley made my daughter soft: a real lady of leisure?”

Georgiana blinked away the comment. If she had not heard her sister Elizabeth use a similar teasing tone, she might've believed Mr. Bennet's words held true censure. At first, she had often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm at Elizabeth's lively, sportive manner of talking to Fitzwilliam, but now Georgiana accepted Elizabeth's sharp wit as the woman's charm. In fact, Georgiana secretly missed Elizabeth's barbed humor. Since Elizabeth's last disappointment, her brother's wife had lost her sparkle. "Fitzwilliam is away on business. He and Elizabeth shan't return until tomorrow. My brother had wanted your presence at Pemberley to be Mrs. Darcy's surprise. You shall have time to settle in before my sister arrives."

Mrs. Bennet caught at her daughter's hand. "Show me Pemberley's grandeur, Kitty. That's all of which you've spoken for months. Although neither Lizzy nor Mr. Darcy saw fit to greet us, we shall persevere. I imagine an estate as grand as Pemberley will have a fair cup of tea to warm my bones and to settle my nerves."

Kitty shrugged good-naturedly as she assisted her suddenly frail mother along the entranceway.

"Miss Darcy," Mr. Bennet interrupted Georgiana's thoughts. "You remember my daughter Mary?"

Georgiana curtsied. "Of course, I do. Welcome to Pemberley, Miss Bennet."

"Thank you, Miss Darcy, for your hospitality."

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat. "And this young man is Mary's intended, Mr. Robert Grange. Mr. Grange is a clerk in my brother's Philips's law firm."

Georgiana's eyes widened. Mr. Grange was not on Darcy's guest list. "I extend our Pemberley welcome, Mr. Grange."

"Thank you for receiving me, Miss Darcy." The spindly young man with a boyish face bowed stiffly to Georgiana before placing Mary on his arm.

Mr. Bennet bowed formally to Georgiana and then took her hand to walk with her. "Mrs. Bennet *insisted* that Mr. Grange join us. After all, Robert will soon be part of the family. Is that not right, Grange?" Mr. Bennet said jovially over his shoulder. He leaned closer to Georgiana. "I might require something stronger than tea to warm my old bones, Miss Darcy. Besides a fair cup of tea, I pray Mr. Darcy also serves a respectable spot of brandy."

Mr. Bennet grinned conspiratorially at her, and all of Georgiana's apprehension fell to the wayside. "Mr. Bennet, a smooth brandy and my brother's library await you."

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"Miss Darcy," Jane Bingley apologized. "How do I express my regrets for thrusting an uninvited guest upon Mr. Darcy's household? I realize your brother designed this Christmas celebration for Elizabeth's benefit, and my sister Miss Bingley is not among Lizzy's devotees, but I appreciate your accepting Caroline's presence so graciously."

Georgiana had accommodated a second unexpected guest with as much elegance as she could. Although her brother would have relayed *his* dismay about people imposing on the Pemberley household's goodwill, Georgiana couldn't follow suit. For her, serving as Fitzwilliam's hostess spoke of how far she had come from that girl who had foolishly consented to an elopement. "Miss Bingley has a long-standing relationship with my family. It's not an imposition, Mrs. Bingley." Georgiana motioned a waiting footman forward. "Please show Mrs. Bingley's nurse to the children's rooms and ask Mrs. Reynolds to prepare a room for Miss Bingley."

"You're too kind, Miss Darcy. My husband and family are in the blue drawing room." With a curtsy, Elizabeth's older sister disappeared into the house's interior.

Feeling the agitation of being Pemberley's "mistress," Georgiana let out a slow breath. She would have liked to spend private time at the pianoforte—to secret herself away from the world, but Fitzwilliam had asked her to organize Elizabeth's surprise, and Georgiana would do her best. So, despite wondering whether she was designed to run any man's household, Georgiana straightened her shoulders. She loved Elizabeth, and her sister had suffered enough. With a deep breath to steady her resolve, she followed Mrs. Bingley toward where her brother's guests waited. "Does anyone require fresh tea?" she asked as she swept into the room.

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"Elizabeth, may I present Sir Jonathan Padget and Mr. Horvak. Gentlemen, my wife, Mrs. Darcy." Both men bowed their greetings. "Sir Jonathan and Horvak are stranded also," Darcy explained as he possessively placed Elizabeth on his arm.

Smiling politely, she said, "I am pleased for the acquaintance, Sir Jonathan. Mr. Horvak." Both men possessed a strong aristocratic look about them. Besides his clothes' fine cut, Sir Jonathan had chiseled, square jawed features. Horvak, tawny-haired and with roguish good looks, maintained a powerful ease, which Elizabeth recognized in her own husband. Wealthy and titled men held many of the same qualities.

"Please join us, Mrs. Darcy." Horvak held her chair.

"Your husband was just explaining his difficult negotiations with Mr. Parnell." Sir Jonathan gestured with an ale glass in his hand. "It is not surprising. Both Horvak and I have tangled with Parnell previously. A man wishing to ship out of Newcastle or Middlesbrough has to go through William Parnell."

"Parnell is as tenacious as they come," Mr. Horvak reported. "But one cannot totally blame the man. Brought himself to prominence with hard work and diligence."

"Does Mr. Parnell have a family?" Elizabeth asked in curiosity. When Darcy had related conversations with the man, Elizabeth had wondered what had made Parnell so negative in his responses.

Horvak shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't say for certain, Mrs. Darcy. Parnell spends countless hours at his office or down by the docks. The man neglects his wife if he's taken wedding vows; that would be a fact."

"It's also a fact that Parnell is one of the area's richest men. If he's married, Parnell's wife wants for nothing but his company."

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"And you shall leave me stranded in Derbyshire without family with less than a week before Christmastide?" Lady Catherine argued with her brother.

The earl expelled exasperation's sigh; he had tried repeatedly to reason with his sister. "Catherine, the eventual heir to this title is about to be born, and I plan to be with my son when his child comes into this world. Rowland has sent word that it is only a matter of days before Amelia delivers forth her first child. The countess insists that we travel to William's Wood. You could always journey with us. I am certain that Rowland would welcome you and Anne."

"But not Mr. and Mrs. Collins," she declared. "I have promised the Collinses return transportation to Kent. Collins visits a cousin in Warrington. In fact, I have asked the Collinses to join me here. I am ever attentive to my duties."

The earl's jaw set. "You invited your clergyman's family to my home?" His voice increased in volume. "Catherine, sometimes you forget yourself. I had thought that you simply arranged their journey as you're common to do," he said through gritted teeth. "Dear Sister, you

may rule Rosings Park in lieu of Lewis De Bourgh, but Matley Manor is under my domain. I invite the guests!"

Lady Catherine's eyebrow rose in disbelief. "You'd deny the Collinses? This was my childhood home, Martin," she asserted.

"The house will be closed while the countess and I are in Lincolnshire. I planned to release the staff on Christmas Day anyway. You may choose to accompany me and Her Ladyship to William's Wood, or you may return to Kent." He slammed his fist on a nearby table's edge, sending china and silver to the floor.

"Well, I never!" Lady Catherine sputtered.

The earl shoved to his feet. "Never what, Catherine?" he accused. "Never considered anyone else's opinions? Never showed true condescension? Never offered your genuine condolences? Never expressed love? There are so many things that you've never done, that I'm at a loss as to which one you mean!" He strode from the room without looking back.

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"We had planned to wait for Mr. and Mrs. Darcy's return," Charles Bingley announced to those gathered in Pemberley's small dining room, "but I cannot keep a secret." Bingley lovingly reached for his wife's hand. "In June, Mrs. Bingley and I will welcome a new addition to our family."

The Bennets immediately congratulated their eldest, but Georgiana withheld her felicitations. She recognized how this news would "kill" Elizabeth, especially if her brother's wife failed in her own delivery; and even though she desperately wished for her brother and sister's speedy return, Georgiana was happy that Elizabeth didn't have to witness this display.

"Oh, Jane, how smart you are," Mrs. Bennet declared. "You've already given Mr. Bingley an heir and a daughter. "Now, you will give your dear husband his spare. Another son. I just know it shall be another son."

"I note your lack of enthusiasm," Caroline Bingley whispered conspiratorially. "I thoroughly understand your disdain. My brother has aligned our family with an inferior bloodline, and, unfortunately, so has yours."

Irritated that Miss Bingley had thought her so debased as to wish Elizabeth's sister not to know happiness, Georgiana warned, "Be careful, Miss Bingley. Your speech smacks of disappointment." As soon as the words escaped her lips, Georgiana would've taken them back. They were uncharacteristic.

"My," Miss Bingley began. "I see Mrs. Darcy's lack of decorum has permeated your normally sweet nature, Georgiana," Caroline sweetly hissed.

Georgiana stiffened. "If I could have even half of Elizabeth's courage or her intelligence, I'd consider myself a fortunate being." She shot a glance at Mrs. Annesley, who nodded her approval. Needing to escape an embarrassing situation, Georgiana stood. "If the ladies will join me in the music room, the gentlemen may see to their cigars. Miss Bennet has agreed to entertain us this evening. Mr. Grange, I shall charge you with seeing that Mr. Bingley and Mr. Bennet do not tarry."

Her notice brought embarrassment. "Of course, Miss Darcy."

"Ladies," she intoned and led the way from the room.

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"If you gentlemen will excuse me," Elizabeth said as she stood. The small inn possessed only six rooms to let, and different gentlemen, each driven to seek shelter from the elements, occupied four of them. Two farmers, Mr. Betts and Mr. Dylan—strangers before the storm—had

agreed to share the last available room, meaning she remained the single female. Feeling quite conspicuous, Elizabeth had chosen to withdraw to allow the men some freedom. There was no private room where they might take up their cards and cigars and drink. Instead, the eclectic group shared the common room.

Darcy reached for her hand. "I will accompany you, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth smiled at him. She knew he worried for her health, and she fooled no one regarding her condition, but it was important to her to take control of this pregnancy. She had to deliver on her own terms. And so she had tolerated Darcy's oscillating presence. Her husband meant well, and she counted herself a lucky woman. What female would deny a highly intelligent and caring man's company? Besides, Elizabeth considered her husband more than just a bit attractive: Fitzwilliam Darcy was a fine specimen, and she often found herself with unladylike wanton thoughts. In fact, she considered him roughishly beautiful and heart-stoppingly seductive, and even after two years, Darcy's charms—the same charms that she once adamantly denied—made her vulnerable. "You may, most assuredly, escort me, but I would encourage you to join the gentlemen in cards or talk of sport."

"I will consider it, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth simply nodded her understanding. They had traveled together because Darcy had refused to permit her being out of his care. Her husband had portrayed his business trip as an opportunity for Elizabeth to see a part of England she had never experienced, as well as a means to purchase unique Christmas gifts. He even subtly suggested that she might visit with her sister Lydia when they stayed in Newcastle. And although she appreciated her husband's attentiveness, she wouldn't believe that Darcy was unaware of the fact that Lydia and Mr. Wickham had left Newcastle for Carlisle some three months prior. More than likely, her husband had had a hand in Mr. Wickham's transfer. Darcy had seen to Lydia's marriage when no one else could assist the Bennets in locating Mr. Wickham. Unabashedly aware of her sister Lydia's propensity for profligacy, Elizabeth did what she could to keep her youngest sister from the poor house. The Wickhams were extravagant in their wants and heedless of the future. They were always spending more than they ought. By practicing what might be called economy in her own private expenses, Elizabeth had frequently sent her sister additional funds, but it was not enough to prevent the Wickhams from moving from place to place in quest of a cheaper situation.

Darcy stepped into the room with her before gathering Elizabeth into his embrace. Without prelude, he kissed her thoroughly. "I've been wanting to do that for the last two hours." He trailed a line of wet kisses down her neck. "I never tire of touching you," he rasped.

Quickly enticed by his heat, Elizabeth's eyes fluttered closed as she whispered huskily, "For too long, I tried to keep my heart safe."

He teased, "You could not. Not even when you were wretchedly blind to my finer qualities?"

Elizabeth chuckled ironically and pressed herself to him. "I did once gratify my vanity in useless mistrust. I've courted prepossession and ignorance, and I once drove reason away." She felt her husband's deep steadying breath and his instant hardness along her thigh. *I wish I'd known before how gullible men are to words of loyalty*, she thought. "In essentials, my Love, you are very much what you ever were."

"And you love me that way?" he rasped as his mouth slid along her collarbone.

"I love you in every way possible, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth snaked her arms about his neck.

Darcy kissed her deeply before reluctantly releasing her. "I shan't tarry long." He straightened his coat's lines. "I was never a card player." He glanced about the room to see that

the maid had stoked the fire as he had instructed. "Keep the door locked," he instructed. "I'll knock upon my return. One never knows how a man will act when he has nothing to do but to drink."

"Do you expect trouble?" she said with a touch of concern.

Darcy shook his head in the negative. "Just trying to anticipate the possibilities," he mumbled. "Trying to protect my wife."

"You have my permission, Mr. Darcy, to cater to my needs as often as you please." Elizabeth went on tiptoes to kiss his chin line while a slight smile crossed his face.

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"Thank you," Kitty whispered as Georgiana passed her in the drawing room.

Georgiana's eyes scanned the room, making sure her brother's guests found adequate refreshments. "I gladly accept your gratitude, Miss Kitty," she mumbled. "But I'm at a loss as to what I've done to earn it."

Kitty observed Georgiana's countenance closely. She had admired Mr. Darcy's sister from the beginning of their acquaintance. With Lydia's speedy marriage, Kitty had been left with no confidant and little confidence in her own ability to attract a man. Fortunately, Jane and Elizabeth had stepped in—had brought Kitty to Pemberley and to Mr. Bingley's estate in neighboring Cheshire. Her elder sisters had introduced Kitty to young women and men of quality. While at Pemberley, Kitty had found a copemate in Georgiana Darcy. "I overheard your conversation with Miss Bingley regarding Lizzy."

Georgiana kept her eyes on the room, but she said softly, "Elizabeth is my sister, and as a Darcy, her name is mine to protect. However, even if it was not so, I would defend Elizabeth. It is the least I could do for all she's given me: acceptance, understanding, compassion, conviction, and you, Kitty." She finally looked at her friend. "Yes, Kitty, Elizabeth's gift of her own sister was one of her greatest. I desperately needed someone with whom to share my childhood musings. Luckily, for me, you, too, sought such consociation. We've done well together, and, for that, I owe Elizabeth my allegiance."

Kitty flushed from the notice. "You honor me, Miss Darcy." Emotions washing through her, Kitty's eyes filled with tears. "Those early days were awkward for us, but our amity pleases me. We've come quite adept at recognizing the best in each other."

"That we have." Georgiana smiled reassuringly. "As such, until Elizabeth's return, would you assist me in seeing to everyone's needs. You're familiar with Pemberley's inner workings."

"I'd be pleased . . . very pleased."

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"Have you recently spent time in London, Miss Bingley?" Mrs. Bennet had cornered the woman near the pianoforte.

Caroline's eyes hardened in disapproval. "I'm often in London, Mrs. Bennet, as well as Edinburgh. I travel to my friends' country seats when Society is not in Season," she intoned aristocratically.

"I certainly would have no objection to time in London, but Mr. Bennet hates town." Mrs. Bennet announced a bit louder than necessary.

Caroline smiled mockingly. "If you were to spend time in London, Mrs. Bennet, where might you stay? If Mr. Bennet despises London, it's not likely that he maintains a home in the city."

Mrs. Bennet ignored the woman's tone. Although she was well aware of her social abyss, she let nothing dissuade her, and unlike those who thought themselves above her, she had

succeeded where others had failed. Despite her financial situation, she had married off three daughters and a fourth had made a respectable match. Only Kitty remained unattached. Jane and Elizabeth had married well, especially Elizabeth. “My brother and sister Gardiner maintain a London home,” Mrs. Bennet declared.

Miss Bingley replied with feigned graciousness. “Oh, yes. That would be the brother in Cheapside, would it not?”

“And you find Cheapside below you, Miss Bingley? If I recall, you once called upon my Jane at my sister Gardiner’s home. Did you find it lacking?”

Miss Bingley said through gritted teeth, “It was a most pleasant house for that part of the city, but you must understand, Mrs. Bennet, that the Gardiners’ home cannot be compared to those in Mayfair. A man who lives where he might oversee his warehouses wouldn’t be accepted in the finest homes.”

“As your father earned his money in trade, and your brother maintains those connections, I’m surprised, Miss Bingley, that you receive invitations to *ton* events. Perhaps that’s why you cling so tightly to your Pemberley association.” Having the upper hand, Mrs. Bennet strode away.

Claiming a cup of tea, she took a chair close to where Mary rifled through sheet music. She would never tell anyone how out of place she felt as she took in the Pemberley’s splendor: the spacious lobby, the elegantly decorated sitting rooms, the large, well-proportioned dining room, and the family portrait gallery. She’d known from Jane’s and Elizabeth’s descriptions that Mr. Darcy held extensive wealth, but even she couldn’t have conceived of the disparity between her own existence and that of her least-favorite daughter. She loved Elizabeth, but her second child had defied her at every turn. Elizabeth was Mr. Bennet’s daughter: Her husband and Lizzy had shared a love for reading and a fondness for twisting the King’s English. Neither of which she cared to think on.

Taking a sip of tea, she settled smugly into the chair’s cushions. At least, between Jane and Elizabeth, she wouldn’t live in poverty when Mr. Bennet passed. It was that particular fear that had driven her to beg Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins. Longbourn was entailed upon the man, and she’d thought it might remain in her control if the clergyman had chosen one of her daughters. Collins had eventually proposed to Elizabeth, but her daughter had vehemently refused the man—leaving the family in limbo. She had cajoled and threatened, but Lizzy had persevered. Now, it seemed that her second child had proven herself most astute in her denial of Collins. “Mr. Darcy holds Elizabeth in deepest regard,” her husband had assured her when he had announced their daughter’s impending marriage. She hadn’t believed it, at first. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had appeared to scorn each other. *How was she to know that the man possessed a tendre for Lizzy? How was she to know any of it when no one thought her worthy of his trust?*

The gentlemen joined them in a timely manner, and everyone prepared to enjoy Mary’s performance. Yet, before they could begin, Georgiana stepped forward. “By this time tomorrow, Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth will have returned to Pemberley. My brother wished to surprise his with your presence. Our Elizabeth has missed you deeply, and she speaks of her Hertfordshire family with fondness. Traditionally, we decorate the Pemberley’s halls the evening before Christmas, but I’m hoping that you’ll join me tomorrow as I undertake that task a few days early. I wish for my family to return to a fully bedecked household—to step into a Christmastide fantasy.”

Jane piped up. “I love gathering greenery. Mr. Bingley and I shall join you, Miss Darcy.”

“As will I,” Kitty added.

“Miss Bennet and I are at your disposal,” Mr. Grange said from his waiting position behind Mary. He would turn the pages for his intended.

“I’m not as young as I would like, but I can still use a saw long enough to cut evergreen branches.”

Mrs. Bennet dropped her eyes. Never very athletic nor one to enjoy the outdoors, she didn’t want to tramp across the lawns. “Perhaps, I might better serve by adding my expertise to your housekeeper’s efforts.”

“Of course,” Georgiana said earnestly. “Mrs. Reynolds will appreciate your ideas.”

Caroline snickered, drawing attention to the fact that she had made no commitment. “What?” she snapped.

“Will you join us, Caroline?” Jane asked softly.

“I think not,” she said with indifference. “I rarely rise before noon, but, more importantly, domesticity is not my forte.”

Kitty noted Georgiana’s disappointment. “As you wish, Miss Bingley,” Kitty said pertly. “Now, Mary, what will you play for us?” She wouldn’t permit Miss Bingley to destroy Georgiana’s plans. “Come, Miss Darcy, you’re to sit with me. When Mary finishes, we shall make a list of what we need to give Pemberley a festive look.”

* * *

Left alone, Elizabeth instinctively sought her small traveling box. Changing into a nightgown and dressing gown, she curled up in a chair before the fire and unwrapped a beribboned bundle of letters. When Darcy spent the time away from the estate, she often reread his letters. It was her way of keeping him close. Of course, the bundle held that infamous first letter, the one he had written to Elizabeth after his Hunsford proposal. She had once promised to burn it, but would fight anyone who thought to truly do so. It was the letter that changed her life—gave her a true understanding of the man so necessary to her existence.

Sitting before the blaze’s warmth, Elizabeth easily remembered how with his second proposal, Darcy had mentioned his letter. “*Did it,*” said he, “*did it soon make you think better of me? Did you on reading it, give any credit to its contents?*”

She had tried to allay his fears. She had explained what its effect had had on her and how gradually all her former prejudices had been removed.

“*I knew,*” said he, “*that what I wrote must give you pain, but it was necessary. I hope you have destroyed the letter.*” Of course, she had not. Elizabeth had read and reread it so often that she could recite it by heart. “*There was one part,*” Darcy had continued, “*especially the opening of it, which I should dread your having the power of reading again.*” It was so typical of her husband to worry that his words had brought her mental suffering. She loved him dearly for his compassion. “*I can remember some expressions which might justly make you hate me.*” As if she could hate a man who had unselfishly saved her family from ruin.

Elizabeth had seized the opportunity to protect him—to let Mr. Darcy know that she welcomed his renewed attentions. “*The letter shall certainly be burnt, if you believed it essential to the preservation of my regard; but, though we have both reason to think my opinions not entirely unalterable, they are not, I hope, quite so easily changed as that implies.*” Yet, she had not burnt that first letter or any of the others that followed. For a man who was abashedly silent at the most social of times, her husband was absolutely eloquent when he put pen to paper. Starting with the morning after their wedding night, Darcy had marked poignant moments with personal notes left on her pillow. She would wake to find what he couldn’t say in person.

Tonight, she began her reading with that wedding night homage to their love: “My Dearest, Loveliest Elizabeth,” she read aloud.

Chapter 2

My Dearest, Loveliest Elizabeth,

As I sit at this desk in awe of the most splendid of gifts that you have offered me this night, my heart overflows with love. The loneliness has dissipated, and I do not speak of the physical closeness we shared last evening—as exquisite as it was—I speak of the happiness that you have brought to my life and to Pemberley. From the beginning, you destroyed my hard-earned peace, and many times I found myself spiraling out of control, but I would, willingly, suffer the pain again to know you for one day—one hour, even. You are everything—firmly planted are my hopes—you are the coming chapters of my life’s book.

☽

A tear slid down her cheek, but Elizabeth didn’t whisk it away. He had rattled her senses that night. Rattled. Shaken. Turned her world upside down in the most tantalizing ways. Her heart had pounded so intensely when she’d looked upon her husband for the first time: It had mimicked the cadence of his as Darcy drew her into his embrace. Unbelievable desire had coursed through her—ricocheted through her body and devoured her soul. Luckily, she’d spoken quite frankly with her Aunt Gardiner prior to the wedding night. If not, his power over her might have frightened Elizabeth. Instead, she’d viewed it as a challenge, and although she’d allowed Darcy to lead, she’d learned to exercise her own power. Elizabeth loved it when he surrendered to her—when he couldn’t deny her.

A smile turned up her mouth’s corners. They were good together—the absolute best. Her hand instinctively rested on her abdomen. “Please God,” she whispered. “This time . . . please.” She wanted so desperately to prove to Darcy and to the world that she was worthy of being the Mistress of Pemberley—worthy of his love.

For the next hour, Elizabeth thumbed through the various notes and letters. Two of them, she’d left folded—letters Darcy had left after each miscarriage. Ignoring them didn’t mean that she’d never read them—quite the reverse. They were two of her favorites, but she held the strong belief that this gestation would prove successful if she could control all the outside forces—neither too much gaiety nor too much hardness nor too much melancholy. She would keep an evenness—an equable, systematic, methodical order. Maybe then, God would see fit to reward her with the child she desperately wanted.

“Maybe it’s my punishment—for pride’s sin. I once thought too highly of my own intelligence and not enough of Fitzwilliam’s inherent goodness.” Mr. Darcy’s constancy had never ceased to amaze her. She could not think of Darcy without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd. Fixed there by the keenest of all anguish and self-reproach, she could find no interval of ease or forgetfulness. “Punish me, God,” she whispered. “Not him. My husband is the best of men.”

Swallowing back her tears, Elizabeth put the letters away. A few moments later, Darcy’s knock announced his return. He kissed her cheek upon his entrance. “I see you’ve managed without my serving as your maid,” he remarked as he strode past her.

“I didn’t realize you wished to assume Hannah’s duties, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said teasingly as she closed and locked the door behind him.

Darcy turned toward her, a smug smile gracing his lips. “I’m more adept at removal of garments, Mrs. Darcy.”

She crossed the room and crawled into the bed. “I’ll keep that in mind, Sir, in case you ever need a reference letter.”

Darcy watched his wife carefully, trying to take his cue from her. “Did you find something entertaining to do?” He removed his jacket and draped it over a chair’s back and then turned his attention to his cravat.

“Just some quiet time,” she said as she draped the blanket across her lap.

Darcy continued to undress before stoking the fire again with more coal and kindling. “We may be here a couple of days, Elizabeth,” he informed her as he joined her under the wool blankets. “Two more gentlemen have taken shelter. They came north from Manchester. They said it was just beginning in the south when they left, but it turned icier the further north they traveled.” He blew out the lone candle.

“How in the world did Mr. Washington accommodate them?” she asked with some surprise.

“Mr. Horvak and Sir Jonathan graciously agreed to double up.”

Elizabeth turned into his embrace as Darcy slid his arm under her pillow. She rested her head upon his shoulder. “Then I’m still the only female among Mr. Washington’s guests.”

Darcy heard the tentativeness in her tone. “I will protect you, Elizabeth.”

“I know, Fitzwilliam. I’m just being foolish.”

* * *

“Mother, we cannot,” Anne De Bourgh offered her weak protest. She’d have liked to say more, but Anne had never taken a stand with Lady Catherine—with anyone, for that matter. Never rendered formidable by silence, whatever Lady Catherine said was spoken in so authoritative a tone as marked her self-importance. Anne often wished she could replicate even a quarter of her mother’s unflappable nature.

“And why not, may I ask? We cannot travel to William’s Wood. Observe the roads, Child.” Anne peered through the frosty coach window at the sand-like peppering of the ice pellets on the roadside. A sheen of frigid crystals accumulated in every rut and opening. “Mr. Swank’s an excellent coachman, for I’d have none without his expertise, but even he’s having difficulty keeping the coach on the road. Martin has released the staff at Matley Manor. Where else would you have us seek shelter?”

“An inn,” Anne rationalized.

Lady Catherine chortled. “You wish to spend Christmas in a common inn? Sometimes I wonder if the midwife didn’t switch out my child with one of lesser born, but then I recall Sir Lewis’s reticence, and I know you to be his. The poor man nearly had an apoplexy when he asked my late father for my hand. As dear of a man as ever walked the earth, but he’d have allowed the lowest laborer to walk away with Rosings Park if I hadn’t insisted otherwise.”

“Yes, Mother,” Anne said obediently.

“Yes, you wish to spend your Christmas at an inn or yes, your mother is correct about your father’s faintheartedness.”

“Yes to the dire situation that the roads present,” Anne said—the closest she’d ever come to defiance. Her mother’s frequent remarks about Anne’s father always irritated her. Anne’s world of love and carefree acceptance died with the late baronet.

Lady Catherine said smugly, "Then you agree that we should seek Pemberley's shelter?" "What if Mr. Darcy refuses us admittance?" Anne asked apprehensively.

Lady Catherine sighed deeply. "Were you not listening to Georgiana when she announced that Darcy and that woman he calls his wife were away from Pemberley? Even with that touch of mettle that I noted on this last visit to Matlock, your cousin lacks neither civility nor good manners. She'll welcome us."

"And when Mr. Darcy returns?"

Lady Catherine smiled knowingly. "The man's a Darcy. Like his father, Fitzwilliam will snidely deliver a lecture regarding my duty to his wife, and then he'll welcome the inconvenience. He shall wear his triumphant over me as honor's badge."

Still seeking a way to change her mother's mind, Anne reasoned, "I wouldn't wish you to feel Mr. Darcy's contempt, Your Ladyship. A common inn would be better than your losing face within the family."

Lady Catherine laughed softly. "Do you think I'd permit any man dominion over me? All the time Darcy lords his condescension, I shall have the knowledge that I managed to walk uninvited into his home, and there was nothing he could do about it, except to allow me the choice of where I wish to spend the festive days. Darcy is bound to receive me by *duty*; I'll stay at Pemberley by *choice*."

Anne observed, "The Mistress of Pemberley may have other plans."

A snarl of her aristocratic nose signaled Lady Catherine's distaste. "The former Miss Bennet shall never defy Mr. Darcy." Even as she said the words, Lady Catherine recalled Elizabeth Bennet's obstinacy. "*Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy?*" she had argued with the girl. "*Have you not heard me say that from his earliest hours he was destined for his cousin?*"

And Elizabeth Bennet had stood there—defiant as ever when she said, "*Yes; and I had heard it before. But what is that to me? If there is no other objection to my marrying your nephew, I shall certainly not be kept from it by knowing that his mother and aunt wished him to marry Miss De Bourgh. You both did as much as you could in planning the marriage; its completion depended on others. If Mr. Darcy is neither by honor nor inclination confined to his cousin, why is not he to make another choice? And if I am that choice, why not I accept him?*" "Oh, yes," Lady Catherine thought, "the girl was quite capable of defying Darcy. And what better way to put a chink in their reportedly marital bliss?"

She'd done her best to align Anne with Darcy, but her daughter had always feigned illness rather than to interact with the society. In the early days, she had fought her only child, but her efforts brought Anne such physical pain that after awhile, she'd abandoned her efforts to bring Anne to heel and had concentrated her administrations on her sister's only son, trying to reason with Darcy—to make him see the match's advantage. However, her nephew foiled the best of Lady Catherine's plans.

"Despite her poor connections, Mrs. Darcy holds social graces. She'll extend her welcome to her husband's family."

Anne wanted to argue further. To convince her mother of how incogitant it was to impose themselves on the Darcys, especially at Christmastide. To speak of Her Ladyship's own poor manners. But Anne could never find her voice when meeting her mother's close inspection. She truly possessed her father's personality, and as much as Anne missed him—missed the feeling of

belonging that Sir Lewis provided his only child, moments existed when she wished more for Mrs. Darcy's ability to thwart Lady Catherine's plans.

Although she desired her own home and family, Anne had understood that her marrying Darcy was never a reality. The man intimidated her. Even as a boy, Darcy had tormented her shyness, claiming it a weakness. Despite being more than a bit humiliating, Anne actually found that amusing. Better than anyone else, she recognized diffidence in both Darcy and Georgiana. She'd always thought Darcy amplified her faults in order to disguise his own tendency along those lines.

"It'll be agreeable to spend Christ's birthday with family," Anne observed. "To have Mr. Darcy's good favor again. To know an end to this feud. I've truly missed Fitzwilliam and Georgiana."

"Do not fool yourself, Child," Lady Catherine warned. "Mr. Darcy's forgiveness shall be late coming, and if you imagine that I'm of the persuasion to guard my usual frankness in reference to my nephew's marital nearsightedness, you'll be sadly disappointed. Only when Mr. Darcy admits his mistake shall I extend my forbearance."

Silently, Anne groaned. She knew from private moments with Georgiana at Matlock that Mr. Darcy violently loved the former Elizabeth Bennet. Add that fact to his reluctance to admit any weakness. Therefore, it wasn't likely that he would give Lady Catherine any satisfaction. They'd intrude on the Darcys' Christmas—ruining the day for everyone.

* * *

"Do you suppose that Georgiana is safe?" Elizabeth asked as she and Darcy shared breakfast in the inn's limited seating area.

"Georgiana is fine," he assured. "She was to return to Pemberley two days prior, but even if my sister was delayed, my Uncle Matlock would see to her safety."

Elizabeth looked longingly at the snowy landscape through the icy laced windowpanes. "Might we take a short walk, Fitzwilliam?" she asked, lost in her own world.

Darcy recognized her need for daily exercise. Traveling for two days had left Elizabeth confined to his traveling coach. More often than he should, Darcy recalled how Charles Bingley's sister, Caroline, had criticized Elizabeth for his wife's preference in walking. "*To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.*"

Darcy smiled knowingly. "I would love some time outdoors," he responded genuinely. "Especially with you." He teasingly waggled his eyebrows.

His amusing attempt to ease her qualms spoke of Darcy's love. Elizabeth drew in a deep-determined-definitive breath. "Why is it?" she whispered. "Why, after two years, do I still see you as I did on our wedding night?"

Darcy felt his groin tighten: She had that effect on him. And Elizabeth had just uttered the most provocative thought wrapped in a cloak of sentimentality. Something else she did with regularity. It kept him akilter—topsy-turvy. He would be going about his duties as Pemberley's master, and his wife would say something inviting, and his thoughts were lost to her. It had been that way from the beginning: Elizabeth would challenge him with a pert curve turning up her mouth's corner. Lord, help him! The woman had no idea how crazy she drove him!

"Because I love you. From the day I met you, I saw *us—Us* the way life should be," he murmured close to her ear.

He noted the memory of heated sensations in his wife's eyes as his breath's warmth caressed her neck. "I may return to my bed before the walk," she seductively said.

Darcy warmed from the inside out. He stood slowly. "A man should see his wife to their chamber." He held out his hand. Elizabeth placed her fingers into his palm, and his grasp closed tightly about them.

* * *

"Does everyone have a hat and gloves?" Bingley asked as he surveyed the group gathered in Pemberley's main foyer. "Last evening held an icy mix. Watch your step and stay close together."

"Do not forget the mistletoe," Kitty taunted good-naturedly.

Georgiana motioned toward the house's rear. "If we exit through the upper gardens we can reach the woods in half the time and distance."

"Lead on, Miss Darcy," Mr. Bennet proposed. "You know the best way."

* * *

Elizabeth waited patiently as Darcy spoke to Mr. Washington about the area surrounding the inn. They had spent the last hour in bed, and now they would walk off the remainder of their 'being stranded' frustrations. Although the facilities were adequate, Elizabeth would prefer her own home at Christmas. With Mrs. Reynolds's assistance, she'd planned the decorations. Her first Christmastide at Pemberley, she was still a bride-less than two months married, and Elizabeth had bowed to Pemberley's long-time housekeeper's wishes. Having celebrated her second wedding anniversary in November, this was to be her third Christmas as Pemberley's mistress and her first at planning the Tenants' celebration. She'd hate to leave final preparations to Georgiana.

Christmas in this dreary inn would be a sorry excuse for a holiday if the roads didn't clear soon. Looking about the room, Elizabeth's eyes fell on Darcy. She sighed deeply. At least, they were together. Being at Pemberley meant nothing if her husband was elsewhere.

"A copper for your thoughts," Darcy said as he approached.

Elizabeth bestowed a brilliant smile upon him. "I'd just considered how fortunate I am to be your wife. To be at Pemberley would be heavenly, but not without your presence. Though I must admit that sometimes when we're there, I imagine our hearts beating in tandem." Her frankness always appeared to have the oddest effect Darcy. His eyes devoured her.

"Even when I thought I'd lost you forever, I lived with hope. Thankfully, you became my *forever*, Elizabeth," he murmured softly.

"You have me now, Mr. Darcy," she said, keeping her voice light.

His steely gray eyes turned onyx. "And I bless each day because of your love."

As they stared lovingly at each other, the innkeeper's wife hustled toward the kitchen, and Elizabeth impulsively turned to the woman. "Mrs. Washington."

"Yes, Mrs. Darcy?" The pleasingly plump woman brushed a hair's strand from her flushed face.

Elizabeth caught Darcy's hand to pull him along with her as she approached the harrowed-looking woman. "I realize you're terribly busy and probably haven't considered how close Christmas Day might be."

The woman sighed deeply. "Me and Mr. Washington planned a quiet day, but the English weather be having other ideas."

"Would you mind, Ma'am, if Mr. Darcy and I cut some greenery and brought it back to the inn? A bit of the festive days?"

“Are you sure, Elizabeth?” Darcy asked. She knew he worried she might over do it.

“Please, Fitzwilliam. I want Christmas; I really want Christmas at Pemberley, but if that proves impossible, I want Christmas here. I cannot tolerate bare rooms and nothing recognizing the day’s meaning.”

Darcy nodded. She noted something secretive-like passed over his countenance, but Elizabeth assumed he had bought her something expensive, and it awaited her at Pemberley. “I’ll see if I can recruit several of the other gentlemen. We’ll cut the branches while you supervise, Elizabeth. I’m sure Padget and Horvak will want some exercise.” He started away to where the men sat playing cards.

“See if any of the gents be interested in some hunting,” Mrs. Washington said to Darcy’s back.

He turned to her. “Why is that necessary, Ma’am? Is there something we should know?”

“Well, Mr. Washington be unhappy with me mentioning it, but we didn’t plan for so many guests for the days before Christmas. Supplies be getting’ a bit low. Feeding ten folks, yor help, plus our workers and arn selves takes a bit of doing.”

“I will ask,” Darcy assured her. “Are there guns available if anyone is interested?”

“I sees to it, Mr. Darcy.”

* * *

“Lady Catherine!” Mr. Nathan blustered as he helped the woman with her cloak. “I was unaware of your arrival, Ma’am.”

Lady Catherine ignored Darcy’s servant. “Where is my niece? I must speak to Miss Darcy. Is there no one to greet me in this great house?”

A woman Her Ladyship didn’t recognize stepped into the hallway from the morning room. “May I be of assistance, Your Ladyship?”

Lady Catherine menacingly said, “Who might you be, and why are you serving as hostess in my niece’s stead?”

Obviously disconcerted by her question, the woman flustered. “Bingley . . . I am Miss Bingley,” she stammered. “Charles Bingley . . . Mr. Darcy’s friend is my brother. Charles and Mrs. Bingley have joined Miss Darcy in the nearby woods to gather greenery for the holiday decorations.”

“I see,” Lady Catherine scowled. Although she was well aware that the woman standing before her had once held aspirations of being Mrs. Darcy, Her Ladyship had never met Mr. Darcy’s friend. Normally, Lady Catherine would consider making the woman an ally in convincing Darcy to be civil during her intrusion; however, despite Miss Bingley’s social graces, Lady Catherine considered the woman below the current Mrs. Darcy. Miss Bingley may have more money and a better education than the former Elizabeth Bennet, but Mr. Bingley’s father had dealt in trade. Miss Bingley was a Cit! Disregarding the lady’s offer of assistance, Lady Catherine instructed Darcy’s staff. “Miss Anne and her companion shall require an adjoining suite, and I shall have my usual chambers.”

“I have already sent word to Mrs. Reynolds, Your Ladyship. Would you care to join Miss Bingley in the morning room?”

Lady Catherine glanced at where Miss Bingley waited patiently. “I think not, Mr. Nathan. We had an early breakfast at my brother Matlock’s. Some tea and biscuits shall be sufficient. Anne and I shall await Miss Darcy in the small drawing room.”

Mr. Nathan bowed obediently. “I will have someone see to the hearth and send a footman to find Miss Darcy.” He led the way to the room. “I will serve the tea myself, Ma’am.”

* * *

Kitty mischievously scooped a handful of snow into a tight ball. She hid her icy creation under her cloak's flap and waited for Mr. Bingley to step away from Jane. She had thought to hit Mr. Grange, but neither Mary nor the gentleman possessed a sense of humor. "Look," Kitty whispered to Georgiana. "Let's see if Mr. Bingley can protect himself. You make one also, and we shall attack together."

Georgiana smiled easily. Gathering the evergreen branches and holly had gone well. "Do you suppose it would anger Mr. Bingley?" Without waiting for an answer, Georgiana formed a ball from the snowline sitting on the fence rail.

"Mr. Bingley?" Kitty chuckled. "As amiable as my sister's husband is? Not likely."

Georgiana giggled. "Then let's have some enjoyment."

Mr. Bingley bent to gather an armful of branches, but as he turned his back, two snowy spheres found his right shoulder. Plop! Splat!

Surprised, he turned to see Kitty and Georgiana hugging each other tightly while stifling bursts of laughter. "Ah!" he smiled largely. "So, that's how it's to be. A man labors to please a woman's whims, and then she turns on him," he taunted. As Bingley spoke, he dropped his stack of pine boughs on a horse blanket they had earlier spread on the ground, and then he armed himself. Playfully tossing the icy ball into the air, he teased, "You leave me no other choice, Sisters, but to defend myself."

Jane Bingley stepped before her sister. "Kitty was just playing, Charles."

"Oh, no, my Wife," he continued his banter, "our sisters have declared *war*."

Kitty peered around her eldest sister. "No war, Mr. Bingley. Just men against women."

Bingley's hands flitted in large circles above his head. "Oh, woe! We are beset upon! Come along, Grange; you're with me, as are you Father Bennet."

"Charles!" Jane warned.

"No reasoning permitted, Mrs. Bingley," he mocked. "You're now one of them." To prove his point, Bingley lobbed his snowball in his wife's direction.

Laughing, Jane made an attempt of returning his attack, but her icy missile actually fell apart before it made contact.

Totally enjoying the play, Kitty and Georgiana hastily squeezed fist-sized snow sausages and flung them in the direction of the three men. Mary's efforts were less stellar, but even she became caught up in the spontaneous fun.

"Sorry, Papa," Kitty called as one of her efforts slid down her father's neck and into his cravat.

"Careful with my wife," Bingley cautioned the other men. "Remember she's carrying my child."

"Then my eldest shouldn't put herself in the way of my best pitch." Mr. Bennet purposely barreled a loosely packed snowball at Jane.

"Papa!" she protested, but returned a strong lob, landing a solid hit in his chest's middle.

Laughter filled the frosty morning air. Soon, it was no longer men versus women. Each person fought everyone else, and snow drenched cloaks and great coats. Just as Mr. Bingley caught his wife and planned to dump her in a nearby snowdrift, a clearing of a deep voice brought them all up short.

"Yes, Thomas?" Georgiana fought to catch her breath.

"Pardon, Miss Darcy. Mr. Nathan asked me to fetch you. Your aunt, Lady Catherine, is waiting for you in the small drawing room."

Georgiana gasped, "Lady Catherine?"

"Yes, Miss. She and Miss De Bourgh."

Georgiana swayed in place. "Oh, Lord," she murmured. "What could Her Ladyship mean with her visit?"

"Do you wish for me to accompany you, Miss Darcy?" Mrs. Bingley came to stand beside her.

Georgiana shook off the idea. "No, I should see my aunt alone." She took off at a trot in the house's direction.

Mrs. Bingley turned to her husband. "Charles, you and Mr. Grange should oversee bringing the greenery to the house. Papa, could you intercede with my mother until after Miss Darcy has the opportunity to address Lady Catherine's needs."

"I'm on my way, Jane." Mr. Bennet followed Georgiana toward the side door.

"Kitty," Jane continued. "I know Miss Darcy needs to tend to Her Ladyship alone, but you might be available to support her—even if she thinks she doesn't need it."

"Certainly." Kitty rushed to catch up with her father.

"Caroline's at the house," Bingley assured his wife.

Jane glanced quickly to where Mary assisted Mr. Grange. Assured of some privacy, she said, "That's what I fear. Lady Catherine knows nothing of Elizabeth's problems in carrying to term. I would prefer that she didn't learn of Lizzy's anguish from either my mother or your sister. Neither would realize the pain such knowledge in Lady Catherine's hands would give Mrs. Darcy."

"Then you should speak to Caroline," Bingley observed.

"It might be better coming from you, Charles. Caroline has no true affection for Elizabeth. She would disregard my pleas on Lizzy's behalf."

Bingley accepted the task immediately, as his wife gave orders to the waiting footmen. He certainly didn't look forward to speaking to Caroline about such a private matter, but he would for Darcy. Although as a man, Darcy didn't display his feeling, but Bingley knew his friend had suffered as much as Mrs. Darcy, but Darcy had felt compelled to protect Elizabeth—to be strong for her. Bingley would do whatever was necessary to divert Caroline's spitefulness.

* * *

Georgiana tucked in several wisps of loose hair as she rushed to where Lady Catherine waited. A thousand errant thoughts rushed through her head. She couldn't send Lady Catherine away, but what could she do about having both her aunt and Elizabeth's family under the same roof. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, I wish you were here," she groaned. Opening the room's door, her fears jumped to the forefront: Mrs. Bennet jabbered away, and Lady Catherine didn't look pleased.

* * *

"Why, Lady Catherine. Imagine my surprise when Mrs. Reynolds and I received word of your arrival." Mrs. Bennet swept into the room. "I immediately made my way to greet you properly. You're aware, I am certain, that Mr. and Mrs. Darcy are away, but are expected by this evening." She sat without being given leave to do so. "I'm surprised that Miss Darcy didn't mention your arrival, Your Ladyship. What a grand surprised it'll be for Mr. Darcy! Oh! I'm ahead of myself. Certainly, Mr. Darcy must have invited you to Pemberley also."

Lady Catherine bit her words. "My nephew . . . Mr. Darcy invited you to Pemberley?"

"Of course. You didn't think me here uninvited?" Mrs. Bennet helped herself to tea. "Even with my Elizabeth as mistress of this great household, I'd wait for an invitation." Mrs. Bennet thought of how long she had waited to be a part of Elizabeth's life, but she certainly

wouldn't disclose that fact to a woman who had maligned her daughter. Plus, she recalled quite well Lady Catherine's Longbourn visit. She'd tried to make the best of an awkward situation, but Her Ladyship had been less than pleasant.

In fact, Mrs. Bennet had thought she'd outshone the great woman. Lady Catherine had arrived at an early hour—one too early in the morning for visitors. Her Ladyship had entered the sitting room with an air more than usually ungracious, had made no other reply to Elizabeth's salutation than a slight inclination of the head, and had sat down without saying a word. Mrs. Bennet admitted to being flattered by having a guest of such high importance and had received Lady Catherine with the utmost politeness, but Her Ladyship had rudely questioned Elizabeth, had criticized Mrs. Bennet's favorite sitting room, and had marked their lack of a proper garden. All she could do was to valiantly defend her home by reminding Lady Catherine that she possessed more than Sir William Lucas, of whom Her Ladyship openly approved.

Now, the same formidable aristocrat sat before her, and Mrs. Bennet had an opportunity to rise once again above Lady Catherine's censure. However, before Her Ladyship could respond, Miss Darcy rushed into the room. "Lady Catherine," she gushed as she dropped a curtsy. "I was unaware you planned to join us at Pemberley. If so, I would've been here to receive you." Georgiana fought the urge to wipe her sweaty palms on her day dress.

"I've seen to Her Ladyship," Mrs. Bennet announced.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Georgiana took a few tentative steps forward. "The others are bringing in the greenery," she improvised. "I heard Mr. Bennet asking for you. I'm afraid we let our mirth carry us away. Your husband needs your assistance to ward off a chill . . . dry clothes and hot tea." Georgiana realized how she rambled on, but she couldn't seem to stop.

Just then Kitty stepped into the open doorway. "Oh, there you are, Mama," she said as if she had looked for her mother elsewhere. "Papa sent me to find you." Awkwardly, she turned to Georgiana. "Excuse me, Miss Darcy. I didn't mean to interrupt your conversation."

"It is well, Miss Kitty," Georgiana said with a thankful smile.

"Men are so helpless, are they not, Your Ladyship?" Mrs. Bennet stood to make her exit.

Lady Catherine glowered from the familiarity. "I'm certain I'd have no notion of such a weakness," she hissed.

"Come along, Mama." Kitty said firmly from the doorway. She offered a respectful curtsy. "Lady Catherine. Miss De Bourgh." Then she led her mother from the room.

Lady Catherine waited to hear the receding footsteps before saying, "Mrs. Jenkinson, would you see to our rooms and our luggage?"

"Certainly, Your Ladyship."

"And close the door on your way out."

Lady Catherine paused until Anne's companion departed, and then she turned her anger on her niece. "Your brother—my nephew—saw fit to invite that woman and her daughters to Pemberley!" she accused. "In my sister's house that witless excuse for a mother presumes to serve as hostess! Lady Anne Darcy must have turned over in her grave. It's bad enough that Darcy places that obstinate, headstrong girl in my dear sister's stead, but to welcome a houseful of people of inferior birth is inconceivable—people of no importance in the world and wholly unallied to the family."

Georgiana flinched, but the litany fell from her shoulders. Her fists clenched, and her cheeks flushed, but she held her composure. She had not learned how to control her aunt's venom, but she had learned how to allow the woman her censure without taking it personally.

Elizabeth had taught her. Her sister, in a moment of pure abandon, had once described Lady Catherine's attack—the one leading to Fitzwilliam's renewing his proposal to Elizabeth. Georgiana had experienced one of her numerous diffident moments, which had ended in tears and in Elizabeth's embrace. To highlight her explanation, Georgiana's sister had acted out the scene between her and Darcy's aunt. It brought giggles of disbelief, but it also demonstrated to Georgiana not to allow Lady Catherine—or anyone else, for that matter—to define her. Therefore, despite her aunt's reproach, she didn't believe that Fitzwilliam displaying his affections would upset their mother. Georgiana had few direct memories of her parents' reported love affair, but every story spoke of their devotion.

"Lady Catherine," she began tentatively, "as Pemberley's master, Fitzwilliam may invite whomever he chooses to his home. My brother wished to share his holiday with his wife's family. It's not for me to criticize." Georgiana left the implication for her aunt to interpret.

Frost dusted Her Ladyship's countenance, and as if she'd not heard her niece, Lady Catherine continued, "To complicate the matter, Darcy has opened his door to that family of Cits."

Georgiana blinked away her confusion. "Do you speak of Mr. Bingley's family, Aunt?"

"Who else, Child?"

Georgiana shot a pleading glance at her cousin, but Anne remained seated with downcast eyes. The rebellious part of Georgiana's mind screamed that she was no longer a child, but one look at her aunt's outraged countenance squashed that urge. "Mr. Bingley and my brother have been acquaintances for several years. The Bingleys have often shared Fitzwilliam's hospitality. I don't understand your sudden objection, Lady Catherine."

"My objection," Her Ladyship snapped, "is that I'm to be subjected to an array of commonality. From those who seek positions above their reach by using their dirty hands to throw about their wealth to those who possess airs beyond their low connections!"

Georgiana could no longer accept her aunt's dictatorial attitude without an argument. It was all of a piece with Lady Catherine. "Let me see, Your Ladyship, if I understand. As a *child*, I may lack the capacity to comprehend. You've invited yourself to my brother's home and now object to those with whom Fitzwilliam has chosen to spend the festive days. If it's such a wholly dishonorable situation, I'll ask Mr. Nathan to arrange for your safe passage to Lambton or wherever you choose to seek lodging." Georgiana turned on her heels to leave.

"Have you gone batty, Georgiana?" Lady Catherine charged.

Her aunt's words stung. Hers was a false bravado covering a very fragile self-confidence, and for a fleeting moment, Georgiana wondered if she played dangerously with her brother's good will. Yet, a small voice—Elizabeth's voice—said Fitzwilliam would celebrate his sister's liberation. Her spine stiffened. "Have I omitted some fact, Your Ladyship?"

Lady Catherine chortled. "The abominable roads, Georgiana." She reminded her niece. "If the conditions were acceptable, and I wasn't to meet Mr. and Mrs. Collins, Anne and I could have returned to Kent or London or even have chosen to spend our days with Matlock and Lindale. They await Lindale's heir to the earldom. Under these horrendous conditions, you cannot mean to send me out on the icy roads."

"I wouldn't have you injured in any way, Your Ladyship." A twinge of guilt ricocheted through Georgiana's resolve. "But neither would I have you subjected to unacceptable company."

"Your Ladyship, maybe we should return to Lambton," Anne ventured. "Surely, Mr. Swank can maneuver the coach safely the five miles to the village."

Lady Catherine glared at her only child. “First, the likelihood of finding appropriate rooms with the current road conditions would prove impossible. Plus, there’s the issue of Mr. and Mrs. Collins. I sent word to the man yesterday that we would wait for him at Pemberley.”

Georgiana felt another surge of seething anger. She presented a calm exterior, but every nerve ending stood on alert. Despite her best efforts, a mulish set locked Georgiana’s jaw. “If I understand your current disapprobation, Your Ladyship, you disdain my brother’s chosen house guests. Yet, you cannot leave Pemberley because of the road conditions and because *yesterday* you invited Mr. and Mrs. Collins to join you here. Without Fitzwilliam’s knowledge!” Georgiana could no longer conceal her frustrations. Her aunt’s actions defied comprehension.

Lady Catherine’s defiant chin rose another half inch. “That is an accurate summary.”

Wishing nothing more than a hasty retreat, Georgiana dropped a curtsy. “I must inform Mrs. Reynolds of the Collinses’ arrival. I’ll leave it to you, Your Ladyship, to determine whether you can maintain civility under such dire circumstances. Please keep in mind that Fitzwilliam shall require nothing less.”

Lady Catherine’s upper lip curled in what could only be described as a snarl. “I always thought you a wisp of a girl. You may have a backbone, after all. Although I must admit, I preferred the kinder, gentler Georgiana Darcy.”