

The Phantom of Pemberley

Chapter 1

“We should turn back,” Fitzwilliam Darcy cautioned as they pulled their horses even and walked them side-by-side along the hedgerow. They explored the furthest boundary of the Pemberley estate, near what the locals called the White Peak.

“Must we?” Elizabeth Darcy gave her husband an expectant look. “I so enjoy being alone with you—away from the responsibilities of Pemberley.”

Darcy took in her countenance. Hers was a face he once described as being one of the handsomest of his acquaintance, but now he considered that compliment a slight to the woman who consumed him. Her auburn hair, her fine sea-green eyes, her pale skin, her delicate features, and her heart-shaped face—a classic beauty within his reach, and Darcy thought himself the luckiest of men. “For a woman who once shunned riding for the pleasure of a long walk, you certainly have taken to the saddle,” he taunted.

“I have never said that I prefer riding to walking. Most would think me an excellent walker,” she insisted. “It is just that when I sit atop Pandora’s back and gallop across an open field, I feel such power—as if Pandora and I are one and the same.”

Darcy laughed lightly; he loved how she countered his every statement. “Do you call how you ride galloping, my Love?”

“And what would you call it, Fitzwilliam?” Even after a little over a year of marriage, he could still stir her ire, though she now understood his love for twisting the King’s English and his dry sense of humor. It was not always so. Her mother Mrs. Bennet once described Fitzwilliam Darcy as “a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing.” And Elizabeth herself told her friend Charlotte Lucas that she could easily forgive Mr. Darcy his pride if he had not mortified hers.

Darcy’s eyebrow shot up in amusement: He recognized that tone. They had certainly challenged each other often enough. Actually, shortly after their official engagement, Elizabeth declared it within her province to find occasions for teasing and quarreling with him as often as may be. She had playfully asked him to account for his having ever fallen in love with her. The scene played in his mind as if it were yesterday.

Elizabeth clearing her throat warned Darcy she awaited his response. “I believe, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he winked at her, “I call it a break neck ride from Hell.”

Elizabeth glared at him for but a split second, and then she burst into laughter. “You know me too well, my Husband. Of course, you must take the blame. It was you who taught me to ride to the hound.”

“Why is it, Mrs. Darcy, that all your bad habits came from my influence?”

“It is the way of the world, Fitzwilliam. Because God created Eve from Adam’s rib and breathed life into her form, a woman is a vessel for her husband’s generosity, but also his depravity.”

“Depravity?” he barked out a laugh. “I will show you depravity, Mrs. Darcy.” He reached for her arm, threatening to pull her from Pandora’s back to his lap.

However, Elizabeth anticipated his move and kicked her horse’s flanks, bolting away from him, across the open field toward the tree line. She lay forward along the horse’s neck cooing encouragement in her mount’s ear. Her laughter tinkled on the crisp morning air as it drifted back to where Darcy turned his horse to give chase.

He flicked Demon’s reins to send his stallion barreling after Elizabeth. Although Pandora was as fine a mare as he had ever seen, Elizabeth’s horse stood no chance of beating Demon in an out-and-out foot race. As he closed in on her, Darcy admired how she handled her animal—how she gave Pandora her head, but still knew when to exercise control over the horse. Elizabeth was a natural, and although most women of his acquaintance would not consider it a compliment—Elizabeth Darcy was as athletic as the animal she rode.

Darcy pressed Demon a bit harder, and the distance between them shortened. As he accepted his success as inevitable, horror struck. From nowhere and from everywhere at once sound exploded around him. Pandora bucked and then stood upright pawing the air. Elizabeth’s scream filled him, as Pandora first threw Elizabeth forward, nearly sliding over the horse’s neck, and then found her slipping from the saddle to smack her backside hard against the frozen ground; and from the tree line the screech of an eagle taking flight set Darcy’s hair on end as he raced to her side.

Sliding from his horse’s back, he was on the ground and running to her. “Elizabeth,” he half pleaded, “tell me you are well.” He brushed her hair from her face, tilting her head backwards.

She groaned but moved with only a few awkward movements. “I am most properly bruised.” She brushed the dirt from her sleeve. “And I fear my pride is permanently damaged.”

Darcy kissed her forehead, relief filling his chest, as he helped to stand. “Are you sure you can make it on your own?” He steadied her first few steps.

Elizabeth walked gingerly, but with determination. “Did you see him?” she asked cautiously.

“See who?” Darcy looked automatically towards the tree line. “I saw no one, Elizabeth; I concentrated on you.”

“The man . . . I swear, Fitzwilliam, there was a man . . . there by the opening between the two trees.” She pointed to a row of pin oaks. “A man wearing a cloak and carrying a hat.”

“Stay here,” Darcy ordered as he walked towards the copse, reaching for the pocket pistol he carried under his jacket.

Elizabeth watched him move warily to inspect where she indicated. “Be careful, Fitzwilliam,” she cautioned as he disappeared into the thicket.

Nervously watching for his return, Elizabeth caught Pandora’s reins as her horse nibbled on tufts of wild grass. Securing her horse’s bridle, she led Pandora to where Demon waited. “Easy, Boy,” she said softly as she took the

horse's reins, but never taking her eyes from where Darcy vanished into the shadows.

After several long moments, he emerged from behind an evergreen tree, and Elizabeth let out an audible sigh of relief. As he approached, Darcy gestured towards where he searched. "I am sorry, Elizabeth. I found nothing—not a footprint or any other kind of track. Nothing unusual."

"Are you sure, Fitzwilliam?" Still somewhat disoriented, she looked anxiously about her. "It seemed so real."

"Let me take you home." He moved to help mount.

Warily, she asked, "Might I ride with you, Fitzwilliam? I would feel safer in your arms. Plus, I do not think my backside cares to meet Pandora's saddle right now."

Darcy's smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "You cannot resist me, can you, Mrs. Darcy?" he teased playfully.

"I have always been of the persuasion, my Husband, to delight in the time when we should be removed from society, in which both of us take so little pleasure, to all the comfort and elegance of our family party at Pemberley."

Darcy slid his arms around her. "That is pure poppycock if I ever heard it." He brushed his lips over hers. "A logical fallacy perfectly executed."

Elizabeth's arms encircled his neck. "Yet, even with the façade found in my words, I speak the truth, my Husband." She lifted her chin to welcome his kiss. "I cannot resist you."

"I was simply uncomfortable," Elizabeth told Mrs. Reynolds, Pemberley's long-time housekeeper. They sat at the kitchen's butcher-block table; they had spent the last hour going over next week's menus and now shared a cup of tea.

"Ye be seein' one of the shadow people, Mistress," Mrs. Jennings, the estate cook, remarked although she had not been part of the initial conversation.

Elizabeth hid her smile behind her teacup; but her voice betrayed her skepticism. "Shadow people, Mrs. Jennings?"

"Yes, Mistress." The woman wiped her floured hands on her apron. "People be seein' shadow ghosts 'round here for years. It be a man. Am I correct, Mrs. Darcy?"

"Yes, I am relatively sure it was a man, although Mr. Darcy thinks it might have been some sort of animal—maybe even a bear."

Mrs. Reynolds tried to play down the supernatural rumors often shared by Derby residents. "I am sure it was a bear, Mrs. Darcy. Mr. Darcy would not minimize your concerns by placating to you."

"Of course, you are correct, Mrs. Reynolds. Mr. Darcy would never ignore a possible danger to anyone at Pemberley."