

Aaran St Vines
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A Fortunate Mishap by Pamela St Vines

Chapter One

She was on the point of continuing her walk, when she caught a glimpse of a gentleman within the sort of grove which edged the park; he was moving that way; and fearful of its being Mr. Darcy, she was directly retreating. But the person who advanced was now near enough to see her, and stepping forward with eagerness, pronounced her name. She had turned away, but on hearing herself called, though in a voice which proved it to be Mr. Darcy, she moved again towards the gate. He had by that time reached it also, and holding out a letter, which she instinctively took, said with a look of haughty composure, "I have been walking in the grove some time in the hope of meeting you. Will you do me the honour of reading that letter?" – And then, with a slight bow, turned again into the plantation, and was soon out of sight.

With no expectation of pleasure, but with the strongest curiosity, Elizabeth opened the letter, and, to her still increasing wonder, perceived an envelope containing two sheets of letter paper, written quite through, in a very close hand. – The envelope itself was likewise full.

From Chapter 35 of Jane Austen's ***Pride and Prejudice***

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Chapter One

The letter from Mr. Darcy had shattered Elizabeth Bennet's peace, and her anxiety increased each time she read it. Almost everything she had held against him was a lie. Elizabeth blushed for shame remembering his marriage proposal and her choleric response. Poor Mr. Darcy. He had spoken of love and admiration. Elizabeth had denounced him in turn, saying that he was the last man on earth she would ever marry. How those words tormented her now.

Elizabeth fought to calm herself, but her misery was exceeded only by her mortification. Neither would be so easily dismissed. Although widely admired for her cleverness, Elizabeth knew she had been a fool. Justice now denied her the comfort of blaming Mr. Darcy. The fault here was truly her own.

Elizabeth had chosen to dislike him because of a silly slight. It wasn't even something public. She had been eavesdropping on a private conversation. Remembering that first meeting, Elizabeth was now dismayed by her own vanity. She had never given Mr. Darcy a chance. She had distained the man for his pride, because he had unintentionally wounded her own.

How many months had Elizabeth persisted in her dislike-- ignoring anything that might be to Mr. Darcy's credit? She had been delighted by Wickham's deceitful account of him. Elizabeth had not only believed Wickham's slander. She had repeated it-- defaming the man because he once refused to dance with her. Mr. Darcy-- of course, he was outraged when she accused him of cruelty to Wickham. Mr. Darcy was blameless, while Wickham was truly wicked.

Surely the gentleman was now glad of Elizabeth's refusal. It seemed likely he would never want to see her again. Yet, he had taken the time to write this letter challenging every barrier Elizabeth had erected against him.

Elizabeth slipped the precious correspondence into her pocket, wanting to protect it from her tears. The sound of flowing water drew her deeper into the trees. She would cry herself out and then wash her face before turning back.

Charlotte Collins was used to Elizabeth's morning rambles, but her friend had never been so late in returning to the parsonage. As the morning stretched on, Charlotte wore a path from her sitting room to the front door. Each time she went to the door Charlotte anticipated the sight of Elizabeth rushing breathlessly down the lane. With each disappointment, her anxiety increased. Charlotte was overwrought by the time luncheon was served. Elizabeth knew how rigid Mr. Collins was about meal times, and she was far too considerate to ignore the demands of her host.

"I am worried, Mr. Collins. This tardiness is quite unlike Lizzy."

"She has just wandered too far this morning, my dear Charlotte. I am certain everything is fine. Cousin Elizabeth will be along shortly."

Charlotte's sister Maria nodded her agreement. This was not surprising as Maria was timid by nature. She habitually agreed with the first opinion offered on any subject. Charlotte wisely held her tongue, but she was far from satisfied.

Charlotte found it increasingly difficult to eat as Elizabeth's place remained empty. She almost sighed audibly when Mr. Collins finally pushed back from the table.

"Perhaps we might walk out ourselves, Mr. Collins, in search of Elizabeth. I fear she may have been delayed by an injury. We could divide her usual routes among us so that it would take no more than an hour."

As he had nothing more important to do that afternoon, Mr. Collins agreed to his wife's suggestion. He volunteered to walk down the lane while Charlotte and Maria scoured the groves Elizabeth favored within Rosings Park.

Their search yielded no clue to Elizabeth's whereabouts. Charlotte was near tears by now, but Mr. Collins persisted in the opinion that no harm had befallen his cousin.

"Perhaps she encountered Lady Catherine during her walk and is happily visiting at Rosings even as we speak, my dear."

Lady Catherine had bestowed the living he enjoyed on Mr. Collins. She was also related to many other illustrious personages including Mr. Darcy. Yes, Mr. Collins was quite happy to imagine his cousin ingratiating herself to his patroness.

Eager that he see reason, Charlotte began, "Elizabeth is not so inconsiderate, Mr. Collins. She would have sent word--" Realizing her error, Charlotte caught herself. Mr. Collins would never admit he was wrong, unless it was to oblige Lady Catherine de Bourgh, of course.

Charlotte smiled at him as she tried again. "I am sorry, my dear. You are probably right. Would you mind calling on Lady Catherine to verify that all is well?"

Mr. Collins was always eager to pay homage to his noble patroness. "An excellent suggestion, my dear, and do not worry. I will be the soul of discretion. Lady Catherine will never know she has inconvenienced us by delaying Cousin Elizabeth."

By the time he returned, Charlotte had abandoned all pretext of normal activity and was anxiously pacing the front hallway. She knew Elizabeth was not taking tea at Rosings. It was Charlotte's hope that their neighbors would act when her husband would not. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam were still visiting their aunt Lady Catherine. They were both sensible men and Charlotte had long suspected Mr. Darcy was partial to her friend. Yes, Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam would know what to do.

When Mr. Collins strolled into sight, Charlotte rushed out to meet him.

"Well, Mr. Collins, what news of Elizabeth? Has a broader search begun?"

"Has she not returned, Charlotte? I was certain she would be home by now. That was Lady Catherine's opinion, too. We discussed the matter at length over tea."

"My dearest friend is missing and you stopped for tea with Lady Catherine? What of Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"Oh, I did not see the gentlemen, but Lady Catherine believes--"

For the first time in their married life, Charlotte interrupted her husband. "Never mind, Mr. Collins. I shall handle this myself."

Mr. Collins was speechless. He had never witnessed his wife in a full temper.

Charlotte clutched her shawl around her and stormed up the lane. She walked quickly toward Rosings and asked for Mr. Darcy. Darcy's heart skipped a beat when he heard that Mrs. Collins desired to see him. It was highly unlikely that Elizabeth would respond to his letter in writing, but perhaps Mrs. Collins had a message for him.

The anguish on Charlotte's face dispelled his hopes. Something was terribly wrong. Charlotte managed to speak collectedly, but Darcy could see the extent of her distress.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Darcy. I would not normally impose upon you, but--" Charlotte paused to regain her composure. "Elizabeth is missing and I had hoped you--"

"Miss Bennet is missing?" Darcy's own distress made it difficult to breathe, let alone speak. "Of course, you will have my full assistance, Mrs. Collins. How long has it been since you last saw her?"

"Elizabeth left for a walk early this morning, Mr. Darcy, and we have not seen her since. Maria and I searched the groves this afternoon and Mr. Collins walked down the lane, but we found no sign of her."

Darcy rang for the servants even as he spoke. "Then we haven't a moment to lose. I happened upon Miss Bennet in the park this morning, Mrs. Collins. I will return to that site and begin to search from there. In the meantime, Colonel Fitzwilliam will organize a full search party. Perhaps you should return to the parsonage, unless you would prefer to wait with my aunt."

"No, sir, while I appreciate your offer I had best return home." Charlotte wiped her eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

"No thanks are necessary, Mrs. Collins. I am glad you thought to consult me."

Darcy quickly apprised Colonel Fitzwilliam of the situation and ran off across the park. When he reached the gate where he had last seen Elizabeth, Darcy stepped out into the lane. His heart constricted in fear at the thought of how many hours it had been since their meeting here.

Certain that Elizabeth would have wanted privacy to read his letter, Darcy took the direction leading away from the parsonage. How he regretted writing that letter now. If he had not imposed upon her, Elizabeth might have followed her usual route and returned to the parsonage safely.

Knowing blame was useless now, Darcy forced himself to concentrate on finding her. Elizabeth must be injured or d-- Breathing deeply Darcy refused to contemplate that possibility. She was injured and he would find her. Darcy walked slowly, stopping occasionally to call her name and listen for a response. Confident that Elizabeth would have eschewed Rosings Park today, Darcy carefully examined the woods along the other side of the lane. He had been walking for some time when Darcy spotted something small and white back among the trees. He left the path and soon held Elizabeth's handkerchief in his hand. It had to be hers for Elizabeth's initials were embroidered on one corner. Darcy lifted it to his face and he could smell her perfume. Elizabeth had definitely come this way. Darcy traced the letters absentmindedly as he considered which way to proceed.

Although he attended services regularly, Darcy did not consider himself to be extremely religious. Standing there uncertain of which way to go, Darcy whispered his first heartfelt prayer in many years. "Dear God, please help me find her."

Instinct led him deeper into the woods, continuing along the same trajectory that had led him to Elizabeth's handkerchief. Darcy moved slowly, scanning from side to side for further evidence that Elizabeth had passed this way. It was nearing dusk and Darcy had begun to despair when he spied something up ahead. He broke into a run. It was indeed Elizabeth lying pale and still.

Every instinct urged Darcy to gather her up into his arms, but he dare not move Elizabeth without first determining her injuries. Darcy gently touched her face as he tried to rouse her.

"Elizabeth-- Miss Bennet, can you hear me?"

There was no immediate response, but her breathing assured him Elizabeth still lived. Darcy persisted in calling her name and stroking her cheek. After what felt like an eternity he was rewarded by a flutter of Elizabeth's eyelashes. Darcy took her hand and squeezed it gently.

"Please, Elizabeth, you must wake up. All will be well. Please wake up, dearest."

Elizabeth stirred slightly and then she opened her eyes. When she was able to focus on his face in the fading light, Elizabeth gasped, "Mr. Darcy?"

She immediately tried to sit up which was a mistake. Her head began to swim and she would have fallen back upon the ground had Darcy not caught her.

"Easy, Eliza-- Miss Bennet. You are injured. If you wish to sit up, please allow me to assist you."

Elizabeth was too disoriented to be embarrassed by Darcy's arm around her shoulders. She accepted his help and leaned into him gratefully.

Darcy's heart was pounding in response to her nearness, but he managed to speak normally. "Judging by that bump, I'd say you probably fell and hit your head, Miss Bennet. Do you have any idea how long you were unconscious?"

"I'm not certain, Mr. Darcy. It was already nearing sunset when I fell, so I don't think it was very long before you found me. There is a stream just a little farther on. I was drawn there by the soothing sound of the water this morning." Elizabeth felt herself blushing in the growing darkness.

Darcy was acutely aware of why Elizabeth would have been agitated. He merely nodded as he continued to support her.

Elizabeth sighed and went on. "After I-- after-- when it was time to go, I rose to return to the parsonage. It was so silly, Mr. Darcy. I slipped climbing up the bank and turned my ankle. I couldn't put my weight on it, so I waited all day in hopes that someone would come along. The lengthening shadows finally convinced me that I'd best attempt to reach the parsonage, but I only made it this far before I fell again. That's all I remember, Mr. Darcy, until I heard you saying my name."

Knowing she would not be able to see a smile in the fading light, Darcy gently patted Elizabeth's shoulder in reassurance. "Well, I am enormously relieved that you have not been unconscious all day, Miss Bennet, but I am still concerned about the bump on your head. As I cannot carry you out of here safely in the dark, it would seem that we are stranded until daybreak. Perhaps a cold compress would halt the swelling. How far is the stream?"

"Not far at all, Mr. Darcy. It's just over the rise."

Darcy nodded. He rose and lifted Elizabeth in his arms.

"Mr. Darcy?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Bennet, but I cannot leave you unattended. We must keep you conscious for some hours to be certain your head injury is not serious. I promise to step carefully. Just point me in the direction of the stream."

Elizabeth directed him. What Mr. Darcy said about her injury made sense; however, she had not been carried since she was a small child. It was oddly comforting, but disconcerting, too. When they neared the stream Darcy gently lowered Elizabeth to the ground under a large tree and wrapped his coat around her shoulders.

"There, Miss Bennet. Lean back against the tree while I brave the slippery slopes to dampen a handkerchief."

Elizabeth appreciated his small attempt at levity. "Thank you, sir, but please do take care. I would be of little assistance if you fell, too."

Darcy was soon back by her side. He had elected to use his own handkerchief for the compress reasoning that it was larger than hers and would therefore be more effective. The truth was that Darcy had no intention of parting with Elizabeth's handkerchief. It was safely tucked in his vest pocket. He folded the dampened cloth and carefully applied it to Elizabeth's brow. She shivered slightly in response.

"Here," said Darcy with seeming calmness. "We must get you warm."

With that he sat beside her and drew Elizabeth into his arms. She stiffened momentarily, but then found herself relaxing into his embrace. Her head instinctively leaned against Darcy's shoulder and her shivering ceased.

"Better?" Darcy asked.

"Yes," Elizabeth whispered. She had spent the entire day thinking about Mr. Darcy and all the things she wished to say to him. Now that she had the opportunity, Elizabeth hardly knew how to begin.

They sat in silence until it was quite dark. Feeling the quiet rise and fall of her chest against his side, Darcy feared Elizabeth was falling asleep.

"Elizabeth-- Miss Bennet?"

"Yes?" she responded.

"I know you are probably exhausted but I am worried about the repercussions of your injury. You mustn't fall asleep for at least several more hours. Please talk to me so that I will know you are awake."

"I do want to talk to you, Mr. Darcy, but I don't know how to begin."

"We need not speak of anything in particular. I just need to hear your voice to know that you are well."

"I must confess that I am very embarrassed, sir."

"There's no reason to be embarrassed. It was an accident."

"I was speaking of last night, Mr. Darcy. I am so very sorry. It was wrong of me to speak to you that way."

"No, it is I who owe you an apology, Miss Bennet. I understand now that my offer was very poorly done. I find it difficult to express my emotions. Last night was proof of that. I apologize for insulting you. I'm also sorry that I wrote that letter while I was still so angry with you."

"Your letter was not harsh or unkind, sir. In fact, I was most grateful for it. The letter helped me to understand you better. It was very disconcerting to realize just how greatly I had misjudged you. Please forgive me, Mr. Darcy."

"There is nothing to forgive, Miss Bennet. I have been in love with you from the earliest days of our acquaintance. But I ignored my affections and allowed my absurd pride to dictate my behavior. Even last night in the midst of proposing marriage to you, I was still battling the considerations of pride. I have been a fool. I hope that you will be able to forgive me one day."

Relieved that he was not angry with her, Elizabeth instinctively nestled into Darcy's shoulder as she said, "I do forgive you, sir, most gladly. Let us think on it no more."

She barely heard Darcy whisper to himself, "Would that it were that simple."

"I'm right here you know," Elizabeth said with a laugh. "What do you mean, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy sighed, "I'm afraid these circumstances have all worked to my advantage, Elizabeth. I should be most grateful for our present situation, but I would not wish for you to be unhappy even if it were to my benefit."

"Unhappy? How so, Mr. Darcy?"

"Do you not see, Elizabeth? After spending the night here alone with me, honor and duty will require us to marry."

"Oh--" Elizabeth had not considered the ramifications of their situation. Oddly, what had seemed so distasteful the night before was not displeasing now. Elizabeth felt as if she had never truly seen him before today. Yet being held by Mr. Darcy-- feeling his arm around her-- and now knowing his anxiety was for her happiness-- it was easy to think well of Mr. Darcy. Wanting to alleviate his worry, she spoke in a teasing tone. "I had not realized that your gallant rescue would demand such a commitment from you, sir."

"This is serious, Elizabeth. You know my wishes, but I regret that our circumstances force you into marriage when you so clearly despise me."

"But I do not despise you, sir."

"Last night--"

Elizabeth silenced him by placing her fingers against his lips.

"I thought we had agreed that last night was to be forgotten, Mr. Darcy. Most of what I said to you was based on false information. I realize now that I hardly know you, sir, but it does not mean that I cannot-- that I do not like you."

Darcy breathed his second heartfelt prayer of the day, a prayer of gratitude. Knowing she did not hate him was a vast relief. He was also reassured by Elizabeth's calm acceptance of the news that they must marry. It gave Darcy reason to hope that she would return his affections in time.

Elizabeth pulled away from him and proceeded to remove Darcy's coat from around her shoulders.

"Elizabeth," he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I appreciate your giving me your coat, Mr. Darcy, but since we will be here all night, I think it best that we share it. If our presence here has already compromised my virtue, it is silly to stand on ceremony and risk your taking a chill. After all my honor is in your hands, sir."

That said, Elizabeth returned her head to Darcy's shoulder and pulled his coat over both of them. Darcy wrapped his arms around her tightly, scarcely daring to dream this might come out all right.

"Then you are not unhappy, Elizabeth?"

"Strangely, no, Mr. Darcy. This morning I expected to spend the rest of my life wracked with guilt for my ill treatment of you. Guilt is very debilitating, so I consider this an infinitely superior solution. I cannot say that I love you yet, but you are most intriguing, Mr. Darcy. I would definitely prefer to have you as my husband over another Mr. Collins."

Darcy smiled before he fully absorbed the import of her words. "Collins? Do you mean he actually had the nerve to propose to you?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Yes, he did, Mr. Darcy. It was not the most romantic of marriage offers. I cannot imagine any discussion featuring Lady Catherine as being romantic. At the time I attributed its oddness to the quirks of the gentleman. However, more recent experience has led me to think that perhaps there is something about me that elicits such strange declarations. You do appear to be a sensible man after all."

"Elizabeth, since we are 'forgetting' last night, perhaps you would allow me to renew my addresses now."

"Very well, sir. I am listening."

Darcy found it much easier to voice his admiration this time. He gently kissed her hair before he spoke.

"Miss Bennet, you are truly the most beautiful woman I have ever known. I speak not only of your physical charms, but also of your laughter, your intelligence, your wit— For some months now, I have been in love with you, but it is such a novel sensation for me that I have not known how to act around you. Sometimes I look at you and I feel like a tongue-tied schoolboy. When I saw you again at Rosings, I was struck by the intensity of my feelings for you. Miss Bennet, I humbly ask you to marry me and be my wife."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. That is much more like what I had hoped for."

"And your answer, dearest?"

"Yes, sir. I will marry you."

"You are not very unhappy?"

"No, Mr. Darcy, I am strangely content. Even though I do not know you as well as I would hope, that is easily remedied, and even now I see that there are certain consolations to be had in our union."

Darcy could hear that teasing note in her voice again. "I am very glad you are content, my love. Might I ask you to share what these 'consolations' are?"

Having long admired the quickness of her mind, Darcy was eager for Elizabeth's response. She was equally eager to elaborate.

"Certainly, sir. I have always felt that paying one's debts is most satisfying, Mr. Darcy. After your heroic rescue of me this evening, it will be my pleasure to reciprocate."

"And just how do you intend to do that, my dear? My ankle is quite sound and I doubt you could carry me were it not."

She laughed delightedly. "I propose to rescue you, sir, by the very act of marrying you. In becoming your wife, I shall save you from the aspirations of all the Caroline Bingleys who have been making your life a torment."

Darcy chuckled appreciatively. His friend Bingley's sister was unbearable, and she was only one of the many fortune hunters determined to trap him into marriage. Curious to know what else Elizabeth had in mind, he prompted her to continue, "You mentioned consolations—plural, dearest. What else about our marriage will please you?"

"I know that you dance very well, Mr. Darcy, even though you dislike the amusement so very much. I, on the other hand, am very fond of dancing. As your wife I can make certain demands upon you in that regard."

"I see your point, Elizabeth. Marrying to secure a dancing partner is entirely logical. Is that the extent of the consolations you expect from our marriage?"

"Oh, certainly not. I have just begun, sir." Elizabeth was taking great delight in teasing the somber Mr. Darcy. "I understand that your estate is in Derbyshire."

"Yes, it is." Darcy was suddenly uneasy. Surely Elizabeth was not interested in his fortune. It had meant little enough to her last night.

"The location of your estate thoroughly delights me for two reasons, Mr. Darcy. Firstly, I have always longed to travel and see new places. My second delight in removing to Derbyshire is that it will be a considerable distance from Hertfordshire. As a wise man once observed, it is quite possible for a woman to be settled too near her family."

Darcy threw back his head and laughed. Who but Elizabeth would throw such a statement back in his face? "I see you have given this considerable thought, my dear."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy, I have spent the entirety of our engagement-- which is some minutes now-- thinking of all the advantages to result from our marriage."

"And is that your complete list, Elizabeth?"

"Most definitely not, I've saved the most important two for last. Shall I continue, sir, or do you grow bored with my conversation?"

Darcy's answer was most decided. "I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours, my love. Pray continue-- please."

"Well, I will be gaining a very handsome husband. It has not been a particular goal of mine, but it has certain advantages nonetheless. Would you not agree, sir? After all, our children may take after you. In this instance having children who look like their father would not be a hardship in the least."

Darcy felt his face flush, but he was not ready to desist. "And?"

"The most important consolation is that I will have a husband who dearly loves me, whom I will grow to love in return."

Darcy's heart began to pound as he gently lifted her chin. He kissed her-- hesitantly-- tenderly. When he felt Elizabeth's arms go up around his neck, Darcy drew her onto his lap and deepened the kiss. When he was nearing the limits of his self-control, Darcy gently pulled back. It was too dark to see her face, but he breathed a sigh of relief when Elizabeth did not draw away. In fact, she clung to him.

"I do love you, Elizabeth," he whispered. "And I promise you that I will do anything in my power to make it possible for you to love me, too."

"Anything, Mr. Darcy?" she asked breathlessly.

"Anything," he whispered with a fierce intensity.

"Then I think, perhaps, you should kiss me again."

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Chapter Two

From Chapter One:

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"Anything," he whispered with a fierce intensity.

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Chapter Two

All other considerations fled as Darcy pursued the only possible course of action for a man so much in love—he kissed her, but this time there was no hesitancy. Darcy loved Elizabeth in a way he had not imagined possible—dreams of Elizabeth had taunted him from the earliest days of their acquaintance—and now she was asking for his kiss. His carefully cultivated restraint was temporarily abandoned, swept aside by his love for Elizabeth, his need for her. Darcy kissed her lips again and again, he trailed kisses down the side of her neck and then returned to her mouth—all the while murmuring words of love.

Elizabeth was astonished by this demonstration of his passion. Darcy's first kiss had stirred her, but this --it was overwhelming. Her heart was pounding, her breath uneven, and Elizabeth felt that she would not survive if he stopped. Forgetting all else, she returned his kisses with rapidly increasing ardor, causing Darcy to rejoice in her responsiveness. His elation, however, was ephemeral. Suddenly cognizant that he had brought them to the cusp of disaster, Darcy knew that it was also his duty to draw them back before it was too late. He abruptly ceased to kiss Elizabeth, but pulled her even closer, cradling her head against his chest. Leaning back against the tree, Darcy took deep breaths as he sought to regain his composure.

He had known they were alone—that it was a compromising situation—but Darcy had not felt how truly alone they were until that moment. This was no drawing room or garden path where they would undoubtedly be interrupted at any moment. His arms tightened around Elizabeth, as Darcy silently swore to protect her, even from himself.

When it was possible to speak calmly Darcy quietly said, "I am eager to make you my own, Elizabeth, but not here, not like this-- We must be man and wife first. I only ask that you do not make me wait too long, dearest."

Darcy's voice was barely audible when he added, "I do not know how I could bear it."

Elizabeth ran her fingers lightly across his chest and Darcy instinctively tightened his arms around her. She sighed her contentment before speaking, "I must confess this has all taken me by surprise, but you are surely right. We must marry soon."

"Yes soon, Elizabeth," Darcy whispered as he nuzzled her hair.

Eager to lessen the tension between them and to distract herself from thoughts of Darcy's kisses, Elizabeth cast about for a suitable diversion. "Perhaps we should have a bit of conversation now, dear sir. There is so much we do not know of each other. For instance, how shall I address you in private? It seems ridiculous to call you Mr. Darcy after what we have just shared."

Elizabeth shifted away so that she was leaning back against the tree once more, but allowed her head to rest on his shoulder.

"Fitzwilliam--my mother's family name is my given name, Elizabeth," said Darcy as he reached for her hand.

"Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth whispered just to try it out.

Darcy growled with pleasure. "I like the way you say that, Elizabeth, but I warn you that I am already thinking of kissing you again."

She laughed appreciatively. "Although that is a delightful thought, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth said, whispering his name breathily to taunt him, "I suppose it is hardly sensible as we have the whole night before us."

Darcy could well imagine Elizabeth to be wearing her sauciest smile as she continued, "The degree of your admiration would indicate that you have comprehended my character perfectly, sir. It is therefore only fair that you tell me more of yourself in order to further my understanding of you, Fitzwilliam."

There it was again, the way she all but breathed his name. Darcy found himself happily anticipating a lifetime of being teased and tortured by his wife. Eager to return the favor he kissed her hand as he murmured, "At this moment I could deny you nothing, dearest--" Darcy paused to kiss her fingertips one by one, "loveliest--" His lips now played upon the inside of her wrist, "most beautiful--" Leaning so close that she felt his lips upon her ear, he finally whispered, "Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's shiver persuaded Darcy that he had, indeed, hit upon an effective means of exacting his revenge for her playfulness. However, realizing

that this variety of retribution might quickly lead them back into danger within their present circumstance, Darcy forced himself to resume his normal manner of speaking.

"I am sorry, my love, but when you tease me-- Well, I find it quite irresistible. I am eager to tell you whatever you would wish to know, Elizabeth, but I must confess I know not where to begin. I am unaccustomed to speaking of myself."

Elizabeth nestled happily back into his shoulder and considered what she would most like to learn of the man beside her. For a man who generally despised talking about himself, Darcy found it surprisingly easy to satisfy Elizabeth's curiosity once he had begun. Perhaps it was her sincere desire to understand him that conquered Darcy's reticence or perhaps, his own determination to secure her affections. Nonetheless, Darcy found himself anxious to answer any and all questions she might have. At Elizabeth's prompting he reminisced about his family, his boyhood and even his years at Cambridge. Darcy was astonished at his own loquaciousness, but pleased by Elizabeth's eager questions. It felt as if each memory were drawing her closer. When the conversation eventually lapsed into a companionable silence, it seemed that the last vestiges of awkwardness between them were vanquished.

Darcy's rambling narrative had indeed spanned the gap between them, for Elizabeth began to feel that she knew him--that she understood him. Whereas Darcy was universally considered to be an extremely fortunate man, the wealth and early independence envied by so many had come at a terrible price of responsibility and loss. Elizabeth now perceived that Darcy would happily forfeit it all to have his parents again, and this comprehension stirred a fierce longing in her to protect him from further harm--to help him find joy in equal measure to his sadness.

To Darcy's astonishment Elizabeth reached up and drew his head down toward hers. She kissed him gently, and Darcy almost held his breath. To have Elizabeth return his kisses was a joy, but to have her initiate the exchange was a gift beyond his expectations. Not wishing to frighten Elizabeth or make her self-conscious, Darcy carefully tempered his response to match the gentleness of her overtures.

Growing bolder, Elizabeth began to cover his face with soft kisses, interspersed with whispered terms of endearment and assurances that she would not leave him. She kissed Darcy's brow, his eyes, his cheeks, and then her mouth found his again in the darkness. With no forethought or design, Elizabeth lay back on the mossy ground pulling him down with her.

Darcy delighted in the feeling of Elizabeth's softness beneath him as he kissed her tenderly. He could no more refuse to return her kiss, than he could fly. However, being mindful of their previous narrow escape, Darcy endeavored to keep his desires under regulation this time. When his self-control seemed near its end, Darcy forced himself to lie back beside her. He took Elizabeth's hand and kissed it several times before clasping it to his chest.

"Oh, Elizabeth, what you do to me-- You must allow me to collect myself."

They lay there side by side gazing up at the stars in silence for some minutes before Elizabeth whispered uncertainly, "I am sorry if I have been unladylike, Fitzwilliam."

Darcy rolled up on his elbow and replied passionately, "Never apologize for kissing me, my love." He softly brushed her lips with his thumb as he continued gently, "I am so very happy, Elizabeth, but I am all too human, dearest--and I have loved you for a long time."

Darcy kissed her lightly and then lay back beside her with a sigh. Sensing there was more he wished to say Elizabeth waited silently, hopefully. To further reassure her, Darcy took Elizabeth's hand and gently stroked it as he sought the right words to alleviate her anxiety without offending her sensibilities.

Finally he continued his explanation, "While this is all new to you, dearest, you must understand that I have been in love with you and desirous of--making you my own for some months. Having dreamed of this for so long, it is easy for me to forget that we are not already married when you are in my arms--"

Darcy lightly kissed her hand before plunging on without dissembling, "Honor demands restraint, Elizabeth, but my passion for you would urge me to seduce you here and now. That must not happen, dearest. To dishonor you in a moment of weakness would be abhorrent, for you are what I love best in all the world. I must confess that if I loved you any less--I might be willing to forsake all my principles at the moment--"

Elizabeth understood him and was content once more. Her only concern now was for Darcy's obvious uneasiness, and she hastened to reassure him in kind.

"Thank you for--explaining it so well, Fitzwilliam, and for loving me so well. I was afraid I had erred egregiously, but I comprehend your meaning." Squeezing his hand, she continued, "Truly, I am vastly content to know that my life and my honor are in your safekeeping."

Elizabeth giggled with delight when she suddenly hit upon the perfect tactic to lighten his mood. In a clearly playful tone, she said, "So as to not be too great a trial to you, Mr. Darcy, I shall endeavor to be less tempting--at least until we are married. Although I do recall your saying I was not handsome enough to tempt you--"

Darcy groaned aloud although he could not help an appreciative chuckle at her cleverness, "So you did hear me. I wonder that you could be so civil after our acquaintance began in such a way. I did not mean it, my love. I am so--"

Elizabeth interrupted him with a soft kiss. "It is just a jest, my love. Your subsequent admiration has more than made up for your early resistance to my considerable charms. I do have one request of you, Fitzwilliam."

She could hear the smile in his voice when Darcy answered, "I am hardly in a position to deny you anything just now, Elizabeth. How may I atone for that appalling lapse of judgment and civility?"

"Please tell me about Pemberley, if you will. I want to see it first through your eyes."

Darcy was only too happy to oblige her and his penance was a pleasure to both. They finally drifted off to sleep side by side under his coat. When Darcy awoke he first thought the night had been just another dream, but Elizabeth's arm draped across his chest assured him it had really happened. He paused to admire her loveliness and whisper a prayer of gratitude before slipping from her side. By the time Elizabeth awoke Darcy had washed up as best he could in the stream and was straightening his clothing.

"Good morning, dearest," he greeted her happily.

"Good morning, M--Fitzwilliam," she murmured hesitantly, "I must confess I am a little groggy this morning."

"That is no doubt the result of your bump on the head and too little sleep."

Elizabeth nodded, "Surely you are right, but the rest--it is--not a delusion?"

Darcy briefly considered teasing her, but then he realized Elizabeth might be feeling vulnerable and exposed this morning. "If you are referring to our engagement and the fact that I am now the happiest man alive, that is decidedly true."

Elizabeth's smile was radiant until she attempted to rise.

"Wait, my love," Darcy cried rushing to her side. "Your poor injured ankle. I was too concerned over the bump on your head to pay it any mind last night. May I examine it now?"

Elizabeth nodded and Darcy leaned over to appraise the extent of her injury. "I am glad you had the presence of mind to remove your boot yesterday. I do not think it is broken, but it is very swollen. You must let me help you."

Darcy lifted Elizabeth in his arms and carried her down to a sheltered spot by the stream so that she might perform her morning ablutions as best she could.

"I will take a stroll to give you some privacy, but I will not go far." With that he kissed the top of Elizabeth's head and left her.

Elizabeth was touched by his consideration. That she had gone from abject misery yesterday to being happily engaged to Fitzwilliam Darcy was astounding. If she had read it in a book, Elizabeth would have thought it too fanciful, but it was true. She quickly attended the necessities and called for Darcy to join her. Elizabeth was sitting there enjoying the morning sun on her face and attempting to tidy her hair when Darcy returned. As most of her hairpins had fallen out in the night, Elizabeth was in the midst of removing the rest so that she might make herself presentable again.

With a murmured, "May I?" Darcy sat behind her and began removing hairpins. Once her hair was loose, Darcy combed through it with his fingers, gently easing the tangles. When he had restored relative order to her unruly curls, Darcy lifted a lock to his lips and kissed it.

"There," he said with unmistakable satisfaction, "while I have never aspired to be a lady's maid, my love, I must confess that this is very pleasant duty, indeed."

Elizabeth blushed with pleasure, "You have acquitted yourself very well, sir, considering that we have neither comb nor brush. Perhaps I should finish it myself."

Darcy smiled and sat back contentedly to watch as Elizabeth pinned her hair up into a simple knot at the nape of her neck and donned her bonnet.

"There, do I look respectable, sir?"

"How could an angel be anything less?" Darcy replied. "I realize it is time I saw you back to the parsonage, my love, but--may I kiss you once more before we go?"

Elizabeth smiled and lifted her face to him in response. Darcy's kiss was gentle, almost reverent and then he gathered Elizabeth up in his arms to begin the walk back.

Charlotte was eagerly watching out the front window of the parsonage hoping that dawn would bring news of her friend. Her relief was beyond words when she spied Darcy calmly walking down the lane, carrying Elizabeth as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Although Charlotte could not see Elizabeth's face for her bonnet, the movements of said bonnet indicated that Elizabeth was chatting with great animation.

Charlotte was quite overcome with joy at her friend's safe return, so much so that she hardly knew what to do first. It is, therefore, quite understandable that she initially mistook the source of their happiness.

"I am so grateful to you, Mr. Darcy," Charlotte began. She then proceeded to flutter and fuss in a way that was most unlike her. "We should put Elizabeth on the sofa in my sitting room. Yes, I think that is best, sir-- I am so relieved to see you, dear Lizzy. Please take her on back, Mr. Darcy. I must send word to the colonel so that they will not resume the search this morning and then I will join you."

"Mrs. Collins," Darcy asked before she could hurry away, "would you also summon the doctor to examine Miss Bennet? I do not think she is seriously wounded, but she took quite a bump on the head yesterday in addition to injuring her ankle."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy. I will tell Matthew to go straight for the doctor after he has delivered the message to the colonel. Please excuse me while I see to it."

Darcy was grateful for another moment alone with his beloved. "I am sorry you were injured, dearest, but I am most grateful for the outcome. If it is still agreeable with you, I will write to your father now before I return to Rosings."

Elizabeth smiled at him warmly, "Of course, but I trust you, Fitzwilliam. You may take the time to eat and change before writing my father, if you wish."

"I thought you knew what a selfish being I am, Elizabeth. I am anxious to secure you as soon as possible."

She laughed. "Very well then, Fitzwilliam, write my father as soon as you may. However, I should inform you that I do not consider your desire to be selfish, as it will secure my own happiness as well."

Realizing Charlotte could rejoin them at any moment, Darcy settled for kissing her hand, but Elizabeth knew he was thinking of other kisses and she blushed.

Once the servant was on his way, Charlotte made a pot of tea before rejoining her guests. No one else had risen yet and Charlotte used the time to reflect on how to best protect Elizabeth's reputation. Her note to the colonel had been deliberately vague simply stating that Elizabeth and Darcy were both safely at the parsonage. Charlotte trusted the colonel to be discrete. He would be as concerned for his cousin's honor as she was for Elizabeth's. Of course if they married, all would be well, but Elizabeth was stubbornly determined to marry for affection. She was also most decided in her dislike of Mr. Darcy. It seemed hopeless to Charlotte unless-- Surely Mr. Darcy had already given this matter considerable thought. Perhaps, he had arrived at a solution.

Charlotte soon discovered her worries were needless. Darcy and Elizabeth gratefully accepted her offering of tea and toast. Then before Charlotte could decide how to broach such a delicate subject, Darcy eliminated the need.

"Mrs. Collins, I am eager to write for Mr. Bennet's consent right away. Could I trouble you for paper and pen?"

Charlotte beamed her approval. "Certainly, Mr. Darcy, you will find both in the secretary there. Please use whatever you need."

Darcy continued speaking as he carried his tea to the desk. "Ordinarily I would not presume to announce our engagement without Mr. Bennet's express consent, but under the circumstances Miss Bennet and I feel that it is best we make it public as soon as possible. As you have known the Bennets a long time, I am interested in your opinion, Mrs. Collins. Do you agree that Mr. Bennet will understand and approve?"

"As Mr. Bennet is particularly protective of Lizzy, I believe he will understand your publicizing the engagement immediately. I would have to agree that it is the best course of action in light of the unusual events. May I wish you both very happy?"

Charlotte's relief was considerable, as she had despaired of Elizabeth's ever accepting him. Even more encouraging was the fact that Darcy and Elizabeth both seemed to accept her congratulations with genuine delight. Seeing the way Elizabeth smiled at him, Charlotte decided that her friend must have been hiding her true feelings for Mr. Darcy all along or she had undergone a very rapid change of heart. Either way Charlotte was pleased for both of them.

Darcy's letter was ready to go to the express office when Matthew returned with the doctor. Although Elizabeth seemed well, Darcy was relieved that Dr. Johnson expressed no serious concern over her head injury. In the doctor's opinion the twisted ankle would prove to be much more of a nuisance as it would take some weeks to heal. The doctor advised Elizabeth to stay off it as much as possible for several days and then to gradually increase her activity, as she was able. When the doctor had departed, Darcy insisted upon conveying Elizabeth to her room where Charlotte could help her get comfortably settled in her bed.

"I shall return this afternoon, my love. Until then I want you to rest--please," Darcy admonished as he carried her up the stairs.

Seeing the glow of his affection in Darcy's eyes and being very tired herself, Elizabeth did not protest. She simply murmured her thanks as she hid her face in Darcy's shoulder. Charlotte was impressed. When had Eliza Bennet ever been so docile? Yes, she thought smugly, Mr. Darcy might very well be the perfect man for her friend.

Fortunately most of the house was still abed when Darcy returned to Rosings, enabling him to reach his room without detection. Darcy was glad to defer his unavoidable encounter with Lady Catherine, knowing that he would be better equipped to deal with her ill humor after several hours rest. When he was safely sequestered, Darcy penned a note to his aunt, advising her that his fiancée was safely returned to the parsonage and that he would be available to speak with Lady Catherine after he had slept.

The uproar over Elizabeth's disappearance was nothing compared to the uproar over their engagement. Her disappearance had only necessitated Colonel Fitzwilliam rallying every man on the estate to search for her. The engagement, on the other hand, roused the ire of Lady Catherine. She was most put out and vented her spleen to Mr. Collins who called while Darcy was still sleeping. Mr. Collins could, of course, hold no opinion that disagreed with her ladyship's. With no dissenting viewpoint to forestall her outrage, Lady Catherine had worked herself up to quite a state by the time Darcy emerged from his room. Even the dimwitted Mr. Collins quickly apprehended that Darcy was not to be dissuaded. He murmured his excuses and fled back to the parsonage, eager to avoid the unpleasant scene that was sure to arise.

Lady Catherine, unfortunately, was too engrossed in her own agitation to notice the steely resolve in her nephew's face. As soon as they were alone she began to berate Darcy for his stupidity in falling for the wiles of one such as Elizabeth Bennet. Darcy would have willingly allowed her the relief of insulting his intelligence, but he would not tolerate her abuse of Elizabeth.

"That is enough, Aunt. Miss Bennet will soon be my wife and as such you will treat her with courtesy and respect."

"But, Darcy, she is nobody and I am certain that she engineered the whole incident--"

"I said enough, Aunt," Darcy interrupted her, "and I meant it. While the circumstances of Miss Bennet's injury may alter the timing of events somewhat, it has long been my intention to make her my bride. I will brook no slander of her--even from you. Is that clear? If you cannot control your tongue, I will remove myself from Rosings immediately, but be advised that if we part on such terms, I shall not return until such time as you are

prepared to treat Miss Bennet with the respect she is due."

Lady Catherine was driven into apoplexy. Darcy married to someone other than Anne--particularly this country miss--it was not to be borne, but he had the whip hand here. While Darcy could happily live out his life without setting foot on her property again, Lady Catherine had need of him. She might be mistress of Rosings, but without Darcy's assistance, Lady Catherine would have been forced to lease the estate to retain ownership of it. Lady Catherine's debts had been extreme when Darcy stepped in and assumed oversight of her financial affairs. Material considerations demanded that Lady Catherine cease voicing her opinion on the marriage--at least in Darcy's hearing. The considerable effort it took to restrain herself from further attacks on Elizabeth literally made Lady Catherine ill.

Only after she had quitted the parlor in silent fury, did her daughter Anne and Colonel Fitzwilliam dare to enter the room.

"Well, Cousin," began the colonel, "I am happy to see your head still atop your neck. I had feared our aunt might rip it off."

Darcy gave him a half smile, "No, I am still intact, as you see. I was just about to ring for tea as I missed breakfast and slept through lunch. Will you join me?"

"No, Darcy, I dare not stay as Mother's spies are everywhere," said his cousin Anne, "but allow me to have the kitchen prepare something more substantial for you. I seem to recall that you missed last night's dinner as well."

Darcy thanked her. It was unusual for Anne to exert herself in any way. Perhaps her solicitude had something to do with his engagement. Lady Catherine had long insisted that Darcy and Anne were to be married--something neither of them desired. Her ranting had irritated Darcy to no end over the years. How much worse it must have been for Anne who had to live with her every day.

She smiled as if knowing his thoughts and ventured to offer her congratulations, "I must say that I am very pleased for you, Darcy. I admire Miss Bennet and I hope you will be very happy together."

"Thank you, Anne. I appreciate your support."

"You most definitely have it," she replied. "I will order your lunch and then see to Mama. Please give my best to Miss Bennet, Darcy."

Colonel Fitzwilliam managed to hold his tongue until they were alone. Then he could restrain himself no longer.

"Good Lord, Darcy, why did you have to rush in and announce your engagement. Surely the whole matter could have been hushed up."

Darcy gave his cousin a piercing look and Fitzwilliam grew very uncomfortable.

"I am sorry, Darcy, but it just seems so unfair. You do something noble in rescuing the lady and then propriety punishes you by demanding that you marry her on top of everything else."

"It is not unfair, Fitzwilliam, and it is no punishment I assure you. It is what I want."

Fitzwilliam started to protest that Darcy need not pretend with him, but was stopped by the unfamiliar look in his cousin's eyes--was that elation? The colonel suddenly remembered how very adept Darcy had proven himself to be at avoiding unwanted entanglements. "I do believe you actually mean it, Darcy."

"Absolutely. The fact is that I proposed to Miss Bennet the night before she went missing and she--well, she refused me."

"The lady refused you?" Fitzwilliam was flummoxed. He could not name another woman of his acquaintance who would have rejected an offer from Darcy.

"Yes, she did--in no uncertain terms, Fitzwilliam. Wickham has been in Hertfordshire for some months and he had deceived her regarding my character. Miss Bennet was also very angry with me for separating Bingley from her sister."

Fitzwilliam recognized his own handiwork there. "Oh, Darcy, I must apologize. I told her about Bingley, never dreaming the lady was her sister. I simply thought to amuse Miss Bennet with a little gossip."

Darcy would have been incensed had he learned of his cousin's blunder a day earlier; however, now that his happiness was assured, Darcy merely shrugged it off. "It is really no matter how she found out, Fitzwilliam. Suffice it to say, Miss Bennet was terribly upset with me. Between that and Wickham's lies I had no chance with her. I was devastated when she refused. Therefore, I trust you will understand why I rejoice in Miss Bennet's mishap. That time alone with her gave me the opportunity to correct the misunderstandings between us and to apologize for past injuries."

"Do you mean to say that the lady has happily accepted you? This is not just about salvaging her reputation?"

Darcy's face lit up in a way his cousin had never seen before. "Yes, Fitzwilliam, that is exactly what I mean."

The colonel's relief was evident. "Well, this is excellent news then. I have always liked Miss Bennet. In fact, I suspected you to have some partiality towards her, but I never dreamed you had serious intentions. Congratulations, Cousin. When is the wedding to be?"

"The exact date remains to be decided, but soon. I have written to Mr. Bennet. Since the question of his consent was eradicated by the unusual circumstances, I left it for him to decide if his daughter should be married from home or if he would prefer that we marry in London. It was already planned for Miss Bennet to visit her relations there before returning to Hertfordshire. In fact, we will be escorting Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas to town when we leave tomorrow."

Fitzwilliam chuckled affectionately. "Well, that certainly make for a livelier trip. As I recall you were very glum on the drive to Rosings this year. Were you perhaps pining for Miss Bennet?"

Darcy smiled ruefully. "Let us just say that since I met Miss Bennet, she has never been far from my thoughts. Now, I do wish to ask your opinion on one point, Fitzwilliam. I would definitely prefer the whole world not know that Miss Bennet refused my first offer of marriage. However, it might be wise to let it be understood that I actually proposed before her accident."

Fitzwilliam agreed without hesitation. "I would agree, Cousin. Ideally, the episode will not be published abroad, but we both know how unlikely that is. It is too sensational a story for someone not to bandy it about. If it is believed that you were engaged to Miss Bennet before her disappearance, then it will be assumed that the incident merely hastened your wedding. That would make the whole story far less exciting and probably cause less gossip. Perhaps I might be of assistance, Cousin. Since I am known for my "lapses of discretion," it would not be out of character for me to let certain details slip. I would be most happy to aid your cause by shading the truth a bit."

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam, but I must discuss it with Miss Bennet first. I think she will see the wisdom of it, but I will not risk another misunderstanding between us."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was thunderstruck. Darcy rarely consulted anyone before making any kind of decision, and yet he would capitulate to Miss Bennet's judgment on something of this import. Such deference proved the depth of Darcy's attachment for the lady. This was not just some degree of admiration--Darcy was truly in love. Being of a sanguine disposition, the colonel immediately forgot that he had ever considered his cousin's engagement to be motivated by anything other than a strong mutual affection.

Feeling that discretion was definitely the better part of valor, Colonel Fitzwilliam accompanied Darcy to the parsonage that afternoon. He was eager to not only offer his congratulations to Miss Bennet, but to also evade being cornered by Lady Catherine. Darcy might have forced their aunt to bow to his decision, but she was not afraid of the colonel. Therefore, Fitzwilliam wisely planned to avoid his aunt for the rest of the visit unless Darcy was also present.

Charlotte welcomed the gentlemen pleasantly and offered her husband's apologies explaining that Mr. Collins was engaged in some personal business and would not be able to join them. Neither man was upset at this prospect, but they murmured polite regrets out of a desire to not offend their hostess. In reality, Mr. Collins was hiding. He dare not displease Lady Catherine by sanctioning the match, and yet he had not the courage to oppose both Mr. Darcy and his wife. Therefore, Mr. Collins had decided it was wisest if he remain in seclusion until the crisis had passed. Charlotte did not protest her husband's solution, as she understood his limitations all too well. She actually thought it one of the more sensible things Mr. Collins had done during their marriage.

Darcy was pleased to learn that Elizabeth was still above stairs, obediently awaiting his return. He was also somewhat surprised, knowing that his intended was strong willed and stubborn. Darcy chuckled to himself. Elizabeth was either up to something or she had decided it would be too much effort to venture downstairs on her own.

"Excuse me, Fitzwilliam, while I retrieve my injured bride."

Charlotte followed Darcy up the stairs. When they reached the landing Darcy turned to her and asked, "Might I have a moment alone with Miss Bennet? I will leave the door open, of course, but there is a private matter that I need to discuss with her, Mrs. Collins."

Trusting his intentions, Charlotte nodded and said, "Yes, Mr. Darcy, I think that is permissible under the circumstances, but only a few minutes, sir. I will wait here for you."

Darcy thanked her and continued down the hall to knock on Elizabeth's door. Hearing her soft, "Enter," Darcy gingerly opened the door. He was suddenly afraid to face her-- fearful that he had somehow misunderstood Elizabeth and that she still despised him.

Seeing his own anxiety mirrored in her face, Darcy immediately rushed to Elizabeth's side and took her by the hand.

"What is it, dearest? Are you feeling worse? Shall I send for the doctor?"

Elizabeth's face lit up with a relieved smile. "No, all is well. I must confess that after you left this morning I became quite apprehensive."

"Do you now have hesitations, Elizabeth? Do you regret our engagement?"

"No, Fitzwilliam," she whispered. The intimacy of hearing her address him so, reassured Darcy even as Elizabeth went on to confess her anxieties.

"I was worried that I might have misunderstood you. I thought that perhaps the blow to my head had confused me somehow. You really do have cause to despise me after I behaved so dreadfully."

"Hush, dearest," Darcy whispered as he took her hands and kissed them. "Never doubt that I love you, Elizabeth. While I am very sorry for your injuries, I am delighted at the prospect of our being married very soon."

Elizabeth smiled as she took Darcy's face in her hands and kissed him. Darcy savored the moment. Then remembering their time was limited, he took her in his arms and said, "I could kiss you all day, my love, but there is a matter we must discuss and I do not want to upset Mrs. Collins by lingering too long. I need to ask your opinion on a thought I had. If we were to publish the timing of my first proposal with no further details, it might help to prevent unfortunate gossip about our marriage."

"Are you suggesting we allow people to assume that we were already engaged before you rescued me, Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes, dearest. I generally abhor any kind of deceit but I think this is worth our consideration. An affianced couple hastening their wedding due to

unforeseen circumstances is part of the same circumstances. What is your view, Elizabeth?"

"You are asking me?"

"Of course, dearest. I would not presume to make such a decision on my own. We will soon be wed, and you are a woman of decided opinions, Elizabeth. In fact, I think that is one of the first things I admired about you."

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth said as she gently stroked his cheek. "I do understand your concerns, and it is not just my reputation at stake. We have your sister's future to consider as well. She will be coming out soon and I would not have such a shadow follow her. I think it is an excellent plan. We will mention your first proposal without any additional history and allow people to draw the wrong conclusion, but do you think that will suffice?"

Darcy grinned at her. "I think that is all that will be required of us. Fitzwilliam has already volunteered to take a more active role in spreading the story. He has no qualms about misleading the public on our behalf. After all, feeding false information to the enemy is considered acceptable military strategy."

Elizabeth laughed and Darcy was relieved that they had managed this discussion without a misunderstanding. He gathered her up into his arms and carried her out to where Charlotte awaited them. Seeing the two of them together, Charlotte relaxed. Yes, she thought, it will all turn out well.

Colonel Fitzwilliam pretended to be engrossed in viewing Mrs. Collins' garden through the window until Darcy and Charlotte had Elizabeth settled on the sofa with an afghan draped modestly across her legs.

"Please join us Fitzwilliam," Darcy urged as he pulled a chair up beside Elizabeth and took her hand. "Mrs. Collins, you mentioned that your husband is occupied this afternoon. May I inquire as to your sister? I trust Miss Lucas is well."

"Yes, Maria is very well, Mr. Darcy. I sent her into the village this afternoon. She should be back in time for tea."

Darcy nodded, satisfied that they would not be interrupted. "It is fortunate that we have you all to ourselves, Mrs. Collins, as we would like to consult you on a private matter. You are no doubt unaware that I actually proposed to Miss Bennet two evenings ago. Normally, I would consider such private details to be no one's business but our own. However, these are unusual circumstances. We have decided to make that fact common knowledge in hopes that it may lessen the gossip about Miss Bennet's unfortunate accident and my assistance to her."

Charlotte was shrewd and immediately grasped the nuances of the situation. She noticed Darcy said he had proposed, but nothing was said of when Elizabeth accepted him. However, being a very practical woman, Charlotte immediately saw the wisdom of this course of action and endorsed it whole-heartedly. "I do understand you, Mr. Darcy. It was entirely correct and proper that I not be informed of your engagement before Mr. Bennet had given his consent. Were it not for Elizabeth's accident, I would still be ignorant of my dearest friend's happiness. It certainly makes your anxiety to find Elizabeth even more understandable. What man would not rush off to find his missing fiancée?"

The colonel gazed at Charlotte with frank admiration. She was a worthy conspirator-- clever and devious. Colonel Fitzwilliam liked that in a woman. What a shame she was married to such a man.

Charlotte smiled as she smoothly continued, "As I told you this morning, Mr. Darcy, I think Mr. Bennet's concern will be what is best for Elizabeth. He will certainly understand your making your engagement public under the unusual circumstances. Now as to the specifics we have discussed-- would you like me to actively circulate this information or would you prefer I refrain from discussing the matter at all?"

Darcy was pleased to see that Mrs. Collins understood him perfectly. "It would seem out of character if I were suddenly too forthcoming about my private affairs. My cousin here has offered his services among our circles in London. Would you be comfortable sharing whatever information you think appropriate, both here and in your correspondence?"

"Certainly, I will not only be comfortable doing so, but I will also be happy to. I realize such attention is not what you would normally wish for, Mr. Darcy. However, I am confident the romantic tale of Lizzy's fiance racing off to rescue her will win you many friends in Hertfordshire."

Elizabeth smiled at her friend. "Thank you, Charlotte, and I thank you, too, Colonel. I am embarrassed that my silly misadventure might reflect poorly on your family."

The colonel gave her a warm smile. "Think nothing of it Miss Bennet. Any temporary inconvenience for the family is nothing compared to how happy you have made Darcy here. We are in your debt."

Since Lady Catherine was still quite put out, dinner at Rosings was a relatively silent affair that evening. Neither of her nephews minded. In fact, Darcy found himself wishing he had managed to silence her years ago.

Aaran St Vines
FanficAuthors.net

A Fortunate Mishap by Pamela St Vines

Chapter Three

From Chapter Two: Since Lady Catherine was still quite put out, dinner at Rosings was a relatively silent affair that evening. Neither of her nephews minded. In fact, Darcy found himself wishing he had managed to silence her years ago.

Chapter Three

Surprisingly Lady Catherine made it through dinner without letting her tongue and her temper fly, but even a very unwise woman will sometimes recognize her own limitations. Realizing her self-restraint was nearing its end, Lady Catherine complained of a headache and retired to her room as soon as the meal was concluded. All in all, Darcy thought she was taking the news of his engagement rather well. He was mistaken.

The three cousins decided to eschew the formal drawing room and withdrew to the library after dinner. It was easily the most comfortable room in the house, possibly because Lady Catherine did not care for books and had, therefore, never taken an active interest in the library's furnishings. Feeling it was her duty to attend her mother, Anne soon bid Darcy and Fitzwilliam a good night, promising to see them off in the morning.

As she was leaving the room Darcy said, "Anne, if you should ever have a desire to alter your circumstances, you would be more than welcome in our home--for as long as you would wish."

She gave him a wry smile. "Thank you, Darcy. I appreciate your offer of 'sanctuary,' but at present I will remain with Mama."

"The offer stands," Darcy insisted. "You will always be welcome."

Once the gentlemen had the library all to themselves, Fitzwilliam poured them each a brandy and they sat in companionable silence for several minutes before the colonel broached what was on his mind.

"I must admit, Darcy, it is difficult to adjust to all of this--"

"To all of what, Fitzwilliam?"

"To your getting married and so quickly, too--but even more surprising than your taking a wife is the thought of you so deeply in love, Cousin."

"Do you think me so cold as to make that impossible, Fitzwilliam?"

"No, I have never thought of you as cold or hard hearted, Darcy," the colonel answered with a smile, "but you are very reserved. It is, therefore, surprising that you would allow anyone to make such inroads into your affections."

"I think 'allowed' would not be an accurate description," Darcy responded. "If you must know, I foolishly spent a great deal of time trying to ignore my feelings for Miss Bennet. You might say I finally succumbed, but I do not think I consciously 'allowed' myself to care for her."

"To your succumbing then," the colonel proposed as he lifted his glass to his cousin.

Both gentlemen started when the library door was suddenly flung open and Anne bolted into the room, flushed and gasping for breath. Her expression was stricken as she whispered to Darcy, "She's gone--Mama has gone to the parsonage."

Darcy murmured his thanks as he rushed past her into the hall. It was a short walk to the parsonage and Darcy sped up the path.

Although he could not distinguish her words, Darcy could hear Lady Catherine as he drew near the house. Her voice was unmistakable even when muffled. Maria's relief was visible when she answered Darcy's knock.

"Mr. Darcy, thank goodness you have come--"

Following the sound of Lady Catherine's voice Darcy rushed past Maria, taking the stairs two at a time.

Charlotte, who was pacing and ringing her hands on the landing, stepped aside without a word and Darcy sped down the hall. Charlotte knew that there would be time for apologies and explanations later. Right now she was as eager for Lady Catherine's removal from her home, as Darcy was to accomplish it. Knowing that Mr. Darcy was by far the most proper person to deal with his aunt, Charlotte withdrew to the parlor. Unlike her husband, she was not afraid of Lady Catherine; however, Charlotte had proved to be no match for the irate, ill-mannered woman. She had attempted to protect Elizabeth by blocking the stairway, but Lady Catherine had roughly shoved her aside.

Charlotte had, of course, sped up the stairs after Lady Catherine, ready to intervene should she become violent with Elizabeth. Thus far, it had been a war of words, and Charlotte had remained in the hallway knowing that Elizabeth was more than capable of defending herself from a verbal assault. Now that Darcy had come, Charlotte wisely decided she could best assist him by staying out of the way until all was resolved.

Darcy had begun to make out what his aunt was saying as he neared the top of the stairs.

"You are a selfish girl--thinking only of yourself. I cannot believe that you refuse to oblige me."

"Lady Catherine, you have insulted me and my family whom you do not even know. I have not refused to oblige you. I have refused to accept your bribes or to bow to your threats."

Darcy was livid when he reached the door to Elizabeth's room. It was ajar which saved him the trouble of knocking. Elizabeth's fury appeared to match his own. She had somehow managed to rise and was standing on her injured ankle as she faced Lady Catherine. Darcy knew Elizabeth must be in considerable pain from the effort, but he admired her determination to demonstrate no weakness before his aunt. Elizabeth was relieved to see Darcy in the doorway, but Lady Catherine stood with her back to the door and did not realize he had come. She stiffened when she heard Darcy's voice behind her.

Feeling there had already been far too much shouting this evening, Darcy spoke very quietly. "Aunt, I believe I made my position clear this morning. Miss Bennet will be my wife."

Hearing the chill in his voice, Lady Catherine realized she might have gone too far. "But Darcy, she-- "

"Refused to accept your money, refused to break her word to me-- And pray, what is the price of a spurned nephew? Perhaps you should have doubled your offer with the stipulation that Miss Bennet not marry Colonel Fitzwilliam either. No, you have said quite enough. I suggest you return home now, Aunt. I will be leaving in the morning, but I will see your steward first to advise him of our new arrangement."

"Darcy, I--"

"Goodnight, Lady Catherine. If you wish to see me again, I would suggest you rise in time to join us for breakfast."

Lady Catherine managed to flounce from the room but her hands were trembling. Darcy immediately stepped to Elizabeth's side.

"Here, dearest, allow me to help you."

Her ankle was throbbing and Elizabeth thought she would have fallen if Darcy's arms had not been there to support her. His face was stricken as Darcy attempted to apologize for his aunt's bad behavior.

"I beg your pardon, Elizabeth. This was my fault. She seemed rather calm this evening, but I know my aunt. I should have expected something like this. I deeply regret that you--"

Elizabeth stopped him with a gentle kiss and then whispered, "It is not your fault, Fitzwilliam. I knew Lady Catherine would not be pleased. I was only surprised by the degree of her displeasure."

"But I should have--"

"Fitzwilliam, you know my family. They are, after all, one of the considerations that enabled you to resist my charms," she teased him, but her mien grew quite serious as Elizabeth continued. "Do you intend to blame me for every silly thing that my mother and younger sisters may do in the future?"

"Of course not, Eliza--"

"Neither do I blame you for your aunt's conduct. I must ask though, are you certain you still want to marry me?"

"Do you doubt me, Elizabeth?"

"No, Fitzwilliam, I do not doubt your integrity or your affections, but it is a very bad match for you nonetheless. I am certain that your aunt will not be the only one to think less of you for marrying me."

Darcy kissed her hand. "Elizabeth, I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Then I am satisfied--" Elizabeth's smile faded as she suddenly remembered her friend. "Oh no, poor Charlotte. I had quite forgotten her. She must be beside herself with worry."

"Of course, shall I summon her or shall I carry you downstairs?"

"Downstairs, I think," Elizabeth replied, "if you do not mind bringing me back up before you leave."

Delighted by any opportunity to take Elizabeth in his arms Darcy smiled. "As you wish, my love."

They found Charlotte and Maria waiting in the parlor. Maria appeared to be frightened out of her wits and Charlotte was anxious pacing the floor. She immediately began her apologies.

"Oh, Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, I must apologize to you both. I tried to stop Lady Catherine. I told her Elizabeth was indisposed but-- "

Darcy interrupted her as he moved to place Elizabeth on the sofa. "Please, Mrs. Collins, I know all too well the futility of trying to stop my aunt from speaking her piece about anything."

Darcy's first priority was seeing Elizabeth comfortably situated. Charlotte fluttered about trying to assist him and Maria slipped from the room with a whispered good night.

Once he was assured that the pain in Elizabeth's ankle had begun to lessen, Darcy turned his attention to her friend. "Mrs. Collins, I must apologize

for my aunt. She--"

"No, Mr. Darcy," Charlotte stopped him, "it is certainly not your fault, sir. Elizabeth is our guest and I--we should have prevented this unfortunate altercation."

"You are too hard upon yourself, Mrs. Collins. My aunt is not easily dissuaded from any course of action she has decided upon. I also understand that there are extenuating circumstances-- Please think no more on it. I hope that Lady Catherine will not punish you for her unhappiness after we are gone."

Charlotte flushed as she offered further apologies on behalf of her husband. All present knew that Mr. Collins would never dare refuse Lady Catherine anything. Still the forms must be preserved. "--it is most unfortunate that Mr. Collins was called away to visit an ill neighbor--just before Lady Catherine arrived."

Darcy nodded his understanding although he thought it more likely that the man had run out the back door as Lady Catherine was storming in the front. His guess was not far from the truth. Mr. Collins had heard Lady Catherine's approach while enjoying a stroll in the garden. In a blind panic, he had hastened away without a word to his wife. Even the unperceptive Mr. Collins had realized that this would not be a social call.

Darcy remained at the parsonage with the ladies for some time to assure himself that all was truly well with Elizabeth and her friend. When he did return to Rosings, Darcy found Fitzwilliam waiting for him in the library.

"I will not ask what Aunt Catherine was doing at the parsonage," the colonel began, "as even I can make that out, but how is your fair lady? I trust our aunt did no lasting harm."

"Miss Bennet is well able to defend herself against Lady Catherine's vitriol, and she most generously refused to blame me for not posting a watch upon our hostess. I fear the only lasting damage that was done tonight was to my relationship with our aunt."

"Does this mean no more annual pilgrimages to Rosings?" Fitzwilliam asked hopefully.

"Yes," Darcy answered dryly, "among other things. Actually I was hoping you would still be up and about, Fitzwilliam. I have sent a message to Anne asking that she join me here."

"Anne? What is so important that it cannot wait until tomorrow? I know that she is planning to see us off, Darcy."

"I am still hoping to persuade Anne to join us tomorrow."

"You seriously expect Anne to leave Rosings?"

"I have no such expectations, but I do hope that she will agree. I am prepared to offer Anne my protection and a permanent home if need be, for I think she has suffered under her mother's sway long enough. Tonight's episode clearly demonstrates how inconsiderate and selfish Lady Catherine is. Do you know that she actually had the effrontery to offer Elizabeth monetary remuneration to break our engagement?"

Fitzwilliam's laughter died on his lips when he saw the twitch in his cousin's jaw. "But surely you jest, Darcy. Even Lady Catherine--"

"I am quite serious, Fitzwilliam. I plan to have nothing more to do with our aunt and I hate the thought of Anne languishing in this mausoleum. I would have offered her a home years ago, but I feared Lady Catherine would use that assistance to manipulate the pair of us into matrimony. Now that I am betrothed, I can aid my cousin without any such entanglements if she will accept my assistance."

"I accept, Darcy."

The two gentlemen started. Neither had heard Anne enter the room.

"You accept--" Darcy quickly recovered from his surprise and crossed to take her hand. "That is good news, Cousin. I was prepared to spend some time in persuading you to come. Leaving you behind would be my only regret in severing my ties to your mother."

Anne sighed. "If you are sincere, I will put myself under your protection most willingly, Darcy. I hate the thought of being dependent on you, but after tonight I do not think I can continue here."

"Do not worry, Anne. You will not be a burden to us in any event, but I think it highly unlikely that your dependency will be of a long duration."

"How so, Cousin?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"I think it is possible that Lady Catherine has been skirting the terms of our uncle's will to maintain control of Anne's fortune as well as her own. With your permission, Anne, I would like to have my solicitor investigate the matter."

"Yes, of course, Darcy. To be independent and free is my greatest wish."

"Then I will endeavor to make that a reality for you. Do you wish to bring Mrs. Jenkins or one of the maids with you tomorrow?"

"No, Darcy, I think I would prefer to have nothing and no one along that will remind me of Mama."

"I understand," Darcy answered. "I am sorry it has come to this, Cousin, but you have lifted a great burden from me by agreeing to leave with us. Do you require any assistance with your preparations?"

"Perhaps you would like to have your man retrieve a trunk from the attic for me, Darcy. If he could deliver it to my chambers discretely, I will be able to pack what I need myself."

"Certainly, Anne, Hawkins is quite gifted at subterfuge. If anyone asks about it, he will gladly say that he is fetching the trunk for me."

The three cousins soon retired to their respective rooms. Darcy was still furious with Lady Catherine, but knowing Anne would now be freed from her manipulations was most gratifying. His glow of satisfaction quickly gave way to remorse when Darcy was thunderstruck by his own grievous error in this. He had offered a home--*their* home--to Anne without consulting Elizabeth. Darcy was appalled by his own lack of consideration for her feelings, but his grief was quickly compounded by a growing apprehension regarding Elizabeth's response to his transgression. Elizabeth was soon to be his partner in life and the Mistress of Pemberley. As such, she had every right to be furious with him. Darcy knew that he deserved her wrath and determined that he could bear it, if she would but forgive him in the end. However, the prospect that his thoughtlessness might decimate Elizabeth's burgeoning trust and affection unnerved him. Darcy did not think he could endure it. He had felt utterly wretched after Elizabeth rejected his first proposal, but to lose her now after experiencing the joy of having his affections reciprocated would be far worse.

Your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others-- Elizabeth had said that when she refused his first offer of marriage. How those words tortured him now.

Darcy determined that he must see Elizabeth at the earliest opportunity to apologize and entreat her forgiveness. He slept little that night, and arrived at the parsonage just after daybreak. It was far too early to announce his presence, so Darcy settled for walking up and down in front of the house as he awaited signs of life from its occupants.

When Charlotte opened the drapes that morning, she was astonished to see Mr. Darcy pacing the lane. He was clearly deep in thought and Charlotte naturally assumed those thoughts centered on Elizabeth. She opened the casement and leaned out to greet him.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy. Would you care to join us for breakfast, sir?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Collins, but no, I cannot stay," Darcy replied. "I am expected at Rosings for breakfast this morning. I realize it is far too early for a morning visit, but there is a matter I must discuss with Miss. Bennet. Would you be so kind as to tell her I am here?"

Darcy declined Charlotte's invitation to come inside and resumed his pacing. Elizabeth soon hobbled from the house, drawing a heavy shawl about her in the morning air.

"Dearest, I do apologize," Darcy began as he rushed to assist her. "In my abstraction, I completely forgot your injured ankle."

"Do not fret on my account. It is somewhat better this morning," Elizabeth reassured him with a smile. "Perhaps you would lend me your arm so that we might walk into Mr. Collins' garden. We can speak there without being overheard."

"Nonsense," Darcy said as he swept Elizabeth up into his arms and carried her into the garden, experiencing considerable relief in the occupation. The reality of Elizabeth in his arms confirmed that she was or soon would be his; however, the curiosity and concern reflected in her eyes reminded Darcy of why he had come.

When they were seated on the bench farthest from the house, Elizabeth gazed at him expectantly, but Darcy sat silently at her side with his eyes closed and his fists tightly clenched. As anxious as he had been speak to Elizabeth, now that she was beside him, Darcy did not know how to begin.

Elizabeth had easily discerned his distress, but she could not imagine what might be its cause. After some time of sitting together in silence, Elizabeth wearied of waiting for Darcy to begin and reached for his hand. She was somewhat reassured by his response to her touch for Darcy immediately clasped her hand as if it were his tether to life itself.

"Fitzwilliam," she began, "please tell me what calamity has occurred to distress you so? Please-- Will you not look at me?"

With a sigh Darcy opened his eyes and turned to face her. "Elizabeth, words are inadequate to express the depth of my ardor and affection for you. I love you, dearest, and I am here to beg your mercy. It grieves me to think that you may have been right about me, for I am a selfish being and I fear that--"

"Fitzwilliam, you are alarming me. Please tell me what this is about and quickly."

Darcy took a deep breath before answering, "I am afraid I have committed us both to a course of action without consulting you, and that was very wrong of me. That is what has me in such a state. I deeply regret my thoughtlessness, Elizabeth, and hope that you will be able to forgive me in time. I have been alone for a long time, and I did not even realize--"

"Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth interrupted him again, "please tell me what you have done."

Darcy hung his head as he murmured, "I offered my cousin Anne a home with us and she has accepted."

"Your cousin Anne is going to live with us?"

Darcy nodded miserably, and Elizabeth now began to understand him. He was worried that she would be angry and rightfully so. Were he not so genuinely contrite, she would be livid.

Misinterpreting her silence, Darcy hastened to make amends. "As much as I rejoice in her liberation, I wish it were not so. I will begin immediately to make other arrangements for Anne's protection and provision, but it would be difficult to completely withdraw my offer now. Please forgive me, Elizabeth."

She had not the heart to chastise him further when Darcy had obviously whipped himself soundly over his impetuous good deed--especially since it proved the depth of his kindness and generosity. Eager to relieve Darcy's distress and suspecting him to have strong inclination to brood, Elizabeth decided drastic measures were justified in the circumstance.

"It actually works out quite well, dearest," she said, "for I have decided to invite my younger sisters to live with us as well. They will be wonderful company for Georgiana and I am certain that it will be beneficial for them, particularly Lydia, and now what lively company they will be for your cousin."

Darcy was momentarily aghast and then he saw the gleam of mischief in her eyes. Elizabeth received her reward--gone was the face of abject misery and despair and Darcy actually smiled.

Elizabeth laughed aloud. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, I apologize for frightening you so, but I could not bear that stricken look another moment. You are forgiven *this time*, but I trust that in the future, you will discuss such things with me *before* you obligate us."

"I am truly sorry, Elizabeth," Darcy apologized once more. "I hope this will not make you terribly unhappy--that you do not regret our engagement."

"No, Fitzwilliam, I do not regret *you*. Everything has come about so quickly," she confessed, "that I am still at a loss to comprehend it all myself. Your lapse is understandable under the circumstances and I would hope that once we are wed I will not be so quickly forgotten."

"No, Elizabeth," he whispered hoarsely, "I could never forget you. Even last night, I had not forgotten you, but in the blush of my own happiness and relief, I forgot myself."

Darcy gazed upon her earnestly and was almost overcome by the light of affection still shining in her eyes. Hoping to divert himself from the overwhelming urge to kiss her, Darcy forced his attention to the matter of his cousin.

"But what of Anne, dearest? What are your thoughts? Should we allow her to remain with us indefinitely or would you prefer that I explore other possibilities immediately?"

"You need not renege on your promise to your cousin to appease me, dearest," she began. "In fact, had you consulted me, I would have readily agreed. I do not know Miss de Bourgh very well, but I understand your concern over leaving her here. I must confess that I have wondered how she bears the isolation and oppressive atmosphere. Perhaps her health will improve in a more cheerful environment."

Darcy lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I do adore you, Elizabeth. Thank you for being so understanding of me and so generous to my cousin. I am very happy to know that we will soon be man and wife." Darcy was sorely tempted to take her in his arms upon hearing the words "man and wife" from his own lips. Striving to regain his composure he forced himself to think on other things.

"Anne will be traveling with us today," he continued. "I hope that is agreeable to you."

"I think it a fine idea," Elizabeth said with a smile. "It will be an excellent opportunity to further our acquaintance. Now as for you, Mr. Darcy, you are forgiven for the moment, but I shall be thinking of a suitable way for you expiate this offense."

"I am delighted to be at your mercy, dearest."

Hawkins had surreptitiously removed the now packed trunk from Anne's dressing room in the middle of the night so that it would be loaded on the luggage cart along with the rest of his master's baggage. By so doing they succeeded in keeping Anne's imminent departure a secret.

Feeling it was his duty, Darcy went in to bid Lady Catherine farewell just before they left. He informed her that Anne would be accompanying him to London and planned to remain as a guest in his home for the foreseeable future. Lady Catherine squawked in protest but Darcy cut her off.

"--I am sorry that you will not be able to visit her there, Lady Catherine. You may, of course, write to Anne and she is certainly free to see you when you come to town if she chooses to do so. You will not, however, be welcome in our home in town or at Pemberley until you make the appropriate apologies to Miss Bennet. I have already seen Mr. Harris this morning and informed him that I no longer bear any responsibility for the management of Rosings. He knows that he is to consult you directly on all matters that are beyond his purview. Goodbye, Aunt. I wish you well."

"Darcy, you cannot marry--"

"I can and I will marry Elizabeth Bennet. I will convey your adieus to my cousins, but now I must take my leave of you, Lady Catherine. I would be delighted to hear from you when you have a change of heart and are willing to make amends to Miss Bennet."

Lady Catherine was astonished. It seemed impossible that Darcy would so completely distance himself from her, but she would not apologize--not to Darcy and certainly not to the likes of Elizabeth Bennet.

If Lady Catherine thought to punish Anne by remaining in her rooms and ignoring her daughter's departure, she erred. Anne was relieved to be spared a final scene with her mother and did not look back as the coach pulled away from Rosings.

It was a rather quiet group that left Hunsford that day. Anne was overwhelmed by the enormity of what she had done in leaving home, and Maria was simply overwhelmed by the prospect of traveling with Miss Anne de Bourgh and in Mr. Darcy's coach, too. Elizabeth was very grateful for the

colonel's company as they must have some conversation during their journey and he was extremely useful in that regard.

Darcy, for his part, was content to watch Elizabeth from across the coach. He said little but communicated much. Elizabeth was surprised and pleased by how quickly she had learned to comprehend the previously unfathomable Mr. Darcy. A certain restlessness about his person now screamed to her that Darcy was aching to touch her and his eyes communicated his affection and concern for her comfort. In fact, Elizabeth had never traveled in such comfort. Darcy's coach was luxurious, indeed, and the gentleman himself had secured a small trunk inside the coach so that Elizabeth might elevate her injured ankle during their journey.

Although she tried to converse normally, Elizabeth herself lapsed into silence occasionally, content to simply return Darcy's gaze. It was her hope that he could perceive her thoughts, even as she understood his. The colonel enjoyed the ride immensely. Every mile offered further confirmation that his cousin's affections were indeed returned and that pleased him enormously.

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A Fortunate Mishap by Pamela St Vines

Chapter Four

From **Chapter Three**: *The colonel enjoyed the ride immensely. Every mile offered further confirmation that his cousin's affections were indeed returned and that pleased him enormously.*

Chapter Four

Mrs. Gardiner sank into the kitchen chair with a sigh. Elizabeth was most assuredly her favorite niece, and she had always been full of surprises, but never so much so as today. It was simply too much to take in. Elizabeth had arrived a week earlier than expected to be sure, but her traveling companions were the source of Mrs. Gardiner's bafflement. In addition to Maria Lucas whom the Gardiners had expected, Elizabeth was accompanied by Mr. Darcy whom she had introduced as her betrothed and his cousins. It had also been a most unusual introduction as the gentleman was carrying Elizabeth at the time because of her injured ankle. Mrs. Gardiner still had not recovered from the sight of her niece quite contentedly cradled in the tall man's arms.

Elizabeth, who had maintained an adamant dislike of Mr. Darcy since the earliest days of their acquaintance, now appeared to be glowing with happiness over their engagement; and as for Mr. Darcy—the gentleman was certainly not what Mrs. Gardiner had expected. He was not at all the proud aristocrat of Elizabeth's anecdotes, but instead seemed to be a quiet, thoughtful man whose admiration and affection for Elizabeth was obvious. Although the gentleman had said little, his eyes rarely left Elizabeth's face and recollecting the very particular way in which he had looked at her niece made Mrs. Gardiner smile. Clearly there was much more to their history than Elizabeth had let on. Perhaps, Mrs. Gardiner thought, Elizabeth's vehemence against the man should have raised her suspicions; however, there would be time for questions later. Right now the entire party waited in the parlor and she must return to her duties as hostess.

Shortly after Mrs. Gardiner returned to her guests, the maid arrived with the tea and sandwiches she had requested. All the travelers partook of the refreshments gratefully. However, the lion's share of the conversation fell to their hostess and Colonel Fitzwilliam as Darcy and Elizabeth seemed content to merely gaze at one another and neither of the other young ladies seemed inclined to speak beyond the obligatory greetings and responses. In truth, Maria Lucas was still cowed by the exalted company in which she found herself and Miss de Bourgh was feeling excessively fatigued from the journey. Fortunately the colonel was truly amiable, and Mrs. Gardiner could not help noticing the gentleman's smile of satisfaction whenever he glanced at the young lovers.

In addition to neglecting the rest of the company in her preoccupation with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth committed another breach of etiquette when she extended an invitation to Miss de Bourgh on her aunt's behalf without first consulting her. Knowing that Elizabeth must surely have her reasons, Mrs. Gardiner smoothly reinforced the invitation so that no awkwardness occurred.

"Yes, Miss de Bourgh, we would be happy to have you spend the afternoon with us. You may rest from your travels here while Mr. Darcy assures that all is in readiness to receive you at his home."

Miss de Bourgh murmured her thanks as she accepted the invitation and the two gentlemen rose to take their leave.

"Thank you, my love," Darcy whispered into Elizabeth's ear after kissing her hand.

She blushed and smiled up at him happily from her seat. Darcy had insisted that Elizabeth keep her ankle elevated and not attempt to see them out, so Mrs. Gardiner walked the gentlemen to the door. They each thanked her for her hospitality and Darcy added, "Thank you for your understanding, Mrs. Gardiner. I realize that we arrived unexpectedly."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Darcy," she answered with a smile. "It was a pleasant surprise I assure you. Do not worry about Miss de Bourgh. She seems rather fatigued from your journey, so we will encourage her to rest this afternoon."

"I thank you for that, too, Mrs. Gardiner. Although I have no doubts of my sister's enthusiasm, I appreciate the opportunity to apprise her of recent events privately. We will return later this afternoon for my cousin."

"We shall look forward to it, Mr. Darcy." Mrs. Gardiner found herself liking the gentleman more and more. Yes, he was reserved, but she perceived no false dignity in him and was pleased by his patent regard for her niece. Knowing her husband would be curious to meet the man who was to wed their Lizzy, Mrs. Gardiner extended an invitation for dinner that evening.

"As Miss Darcy is not expecting guests, perhaps you would all be good enough to dine with us this evening—you are included in the invitation, too, Colonel."

The invitation was happily accepted and Mrs. Gardiner returned to the parlor hoping she would receive the answers she desired without having to actually ask too many questions. With Mrs. Gardiner's blessing Maria soon went in search of the children, and Elizabeth's aunt was considering how to best introduce the topic of Mr. Darcy, when Anne—feeling somewhat revived by the tea—spared her the trouble.

"Surely, you are ablaze with curiosity, Mrs. Gardiner," Anne began. "We have come upon you suddenly today and with no forewarning of your niece's engagement to my cousin. Would you like to discuss the matter alone with Miss Bennet or would you perhaps enjoy a third party's view of recent events?"

Mrs. Gardiner laughed at Miss de Bourgh's sly smile and Elizabeth's blush.

"Although we have just met, Miss de Bourgh, I am looking forward to our being related by the marriage of our kinfolk," she answered, "and I must confess that I would be most interested in anything you wish to relate of how this happy circumstance came to pass."

Anne de Bourgh, who had always been silent and wan in her mother's company, proved to have a lively wit and keen intelligence. She regaled her companions with tales of Darcy's silent, brooding admiration of Elizabeth and the jealousy Colonel Fitzwilliam intentionally provoked in him by paying those little attentions to Elizabeth that Darcy in his shyness could not.

"Of course, Fitzwilliam had no idea of the depth of Darcy's attachment for you, Miss Bennet," Anne hastened to add. "The colonel is truly good natured and he would never have tormented our cousin so, if he had realized Darcy had serious intentions toward you."

"I am not surprised that the colonel misread him," Elizabeth answered, "as Mr. Darcy did a very thorough job of concealing his regard from me also. He took me quite by surprise."

"Ah," her aunt said, "but it does not necessarily follow that such a surprise was unwelcome. In fact, subsequent events would seem to indicate that it was not."

In her happiness Elizabeth was tempted to confide all to her companions but then decided she could not. After all, it was not merely her private history but Darcy's as well. Her allegiance was to him now, as assuredly as if he were already her husband, and Darcy would certainly not appreciate her telling others of how she had refused him. In fact, upon further reflection Elizabeth realized that she did not want anyone to know how cruelly and wrongly she had misjudged him.

Instead she said, "Of course, we would not have published our engagement before speaking with Papa, had it not been for my mishap, but under the circumstances it seemed best to make that news public."

Elizabeth blushed as she continued, "While I would not have chosen to injure myself, I will confess that I am happy to have our plans accelerated by that event."

Anne's expression grew serious as she said, "I knew that Darcy held you in high esteem, Miss Bennet, but when I told him that Mama had gone to the parsonage last night-- Well, seeing the look on his face, I knew that he loved you very much. Having observed Darcy's alarm when he feared that Mama would injure your sensibilities, I shudder to think of his grief and distress when he feared you were injured or worse."

Elizabeth broke the resulting silence when she quietly said, "I know how fortunate I am to have secured your cousin's affections, Miss de Bourgh. Please know that I will do whatever is in my power to assure his happiness."

Anne smiled at her fondly as she replied, "I believe you, Miss Bennet, and I am happy for you both. You must not think that I begrudge you either my cousin or your happiness. Those silly plans were Mama's fondest wish, not mine."

Seeing Mrs. Gardiner's puzzlement, Anne explained as she crossed to the chair beside Elizabeth, "It was long my mother's wish that Darcy and I marry, Mrs. Gardiner, although neither of us was inclined to such a match. A marriage of convenience is not what I would wish for, and it is quite obvious that my cousin has been waiting all these years for something more, too--something he has found at last."

Anne took Elizabeth's hand as she continued, "So you see my dear Miss Bennet, by accepting Darcy you have given me a chance at happiness by setting me free from Mama's plans and schemes. Perhaps, it is just the physical manifestation of my vast relief, but I actually feel better. Usually I am fatigued all day long, but I feel curiously revived since our arrival here."

The two young women chatted amiably as Mrs. Gardiner slipped away to give instructions regarding dinner. Elizabeth was delighted to discover that Anne was also an avid reader, and they discussed literature for some time. At one point Anne confessed that it was her fondest wish to be a writer, and after some wheedling on Elizabeth's part, Anne allowed she might read some of her work. Anne rose to retrieve her journal from her reticule, but she immediately blanched and sank back into her chair complaining of a sudden ache. Concerned by her sinking spell, Elizabeth rang for assistance.

Mrs. Gardiner herself answered the summons. She quickly dispatched a servant for the doctor and then proceeded to assist Anne up the stairs with Elizabeth hobbling behind. By the time they had Anne changed into one of Mrs. Gardiner's nightgowns and tucked into bed, she was sweating profusely and shivering uncontrollably.

"My medicine," Anne managed to whisper.

Mrs. Gardiner looked to Elizabeth who explained, "I do not know what it is, Aunt, but there is some sort of tonic that Lady Catherine insisted Anne take regularly. I believe it was left behind in Mr. Darcy's carriage. Should we send a servant to his house?"

Mrs. Gardiner's suspicions were aroused, but she did not voice them. "Let us wait for Dr. Howard, Lizzy. He is an excellent man and a skilled physician. I think it best we give Miss de Bourgh nothing but water until he has examined her."

After he had examined the patient, the good doctor confirmed Mrs. Gardiner's fears. She and the doctor had adjourned to the parlor leaving Anne to Elizabeth's care.

"I would like to examine this 'tonic' myself," Dr. Howard began, "but based on her symptoms I think it quite likely that Miss de Bourgh is suffering from laudanum withdrawal. Prolonged laudanum use would also account for her pallor and lack of vigor."

"Shall I send a servant to her cousin's to fetch the bottle for you, Doctor?"

"Since you say Miss de Bourgh has just left home and placed under her cousin's protection, I believe I should call upon Mr. Darcy myself and apprise him of his cousin's condition." The doctor's expression grew very grave as he continued, "The laudanum treatment may have been begun with the best of intentions, but it is also possible that it was administered to Miss de Bourgh for more sinister purposes. As her protector, Mr. Darcy should be informed. I will either return or send directions after I have examined the tonic. In the meantime, a tea of catnip and feverfew will ease her aches without causing any harm. Give her that and as much water as you can get her to drink."

Mrs. Gardiner nodded and hastened upstairs to get the directions to Mr. Darcy's house from her niece. The doctor soon returned accompanied by both Darcy and his sister Georgiana. Mrs. Gardiner greeted them as Elizabeth was still above stairs with the patient. Darcy hastily introduced his sister to Mrs. Gardiner and then the conversation immediately turned to Anne.

"It is as we suspected, Mrs. Gardiner," Dr. Howard began. "Miss de Bourgh has been taking laudanum for some time. I am afraid she has a rough time ahead of her if we are to restore her health."

"I understand, Doctor," Mrs. Gardiner said. She then turned her attention to Darcy, "Lizzy and I have already discussed it, Mr. Darcy, and we strongly feel that it would be best for your cousin to remain here for the time being. We are both experienced with the sick room and your cousin will require constant attendance."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner," Darcy began, "but Anne is my responsibility--"

"Please forgive me, sir," the doctor interrupted him, "but I must agree with Mrs. Gardiner. Miss Darcy is young to be charged with such duties and your cousin will fare better with the loving care she will receive here than she would with the best of hired nurses. This is more than a physical affliction. Your cousin will be quite emotional and will require understanding as well as physical assistance. I have known the Gardiners and by extension Miss Elizabeth for many years. Your cousin could not have better care."

Seeing that Miss Darcy was clearly relieved and that Darcy himself was weakening, Mrs. Gardiner pressed, "Please, Mr. Darcy, our minds are quite made up on this, and I assure you that I am every bit as stubborn as my niece. Give Miss de Bourgh completely over to our care for several days and then perhaps you might assist us, Miss Darcy, by sitting with your cousin in the afternoons."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner," the shy Georgiana managed, "I would like to help if you will instruct me in what needs to be done."

Realizing that the women were united against him, Darcy acquiesced, "Very well, I gratefully accept your offer, Mrs. Gardiner, but only with the caveat that I might send one of our maids to help with the increased workload. She can either move in for the duration or I will have her come daily whichever you prefer."

Mrs. Gardiner appreciated his delicacy in not assuming she could house another servant; however, that was not a difficulty so she gratefully accepted Mr. Darcy's offer of a maidservant for the duration of Anne's stay in Gracechurch Street.

Pleased to have that resolved so well, the doctor prescribed camphorated tincture of opium explaining that it contained a much weaker concentration of opium and might be of assistance in lessening Anne's discomfort. They would substitute the weaker drug for the laudanum and then begin to slowly wean her from that as well, once Anne's condition had stabilized. Dr. Howard departed after promising to have the medicine brought round right away and that he himself would return tomorrow to check on his patient. When she had seen the doctor out, Mrs. Gardiner returned to Mr. and Miss Darcy who were waiting in the parlor.

"I do wish we had met under less upsetting circumstances, Miss Darcy," she began. "I am afraid tonight's dinner will be a little less elegant than I had intended. I hope you will not mind sharing a simple family meal with us in lieu of a more formal dinner."

"Not at all," Georgiana murmured with a smile. In truth she was somewhat relieved that her cousin's indisposition had precluded a more formal meeting. Georgiana was always nervous with strangers, but the unusual circumstances and Mrs. Gardiner's concern for Anne had caused Georgiana to feel easy with her right away. Georgiana began to hope that she would be as comfortable with her brother's future wife.

"Might I see Anne?" Darcy asked.

"Certainly, if you wish; however, I think it would be too upsetting for you, my dear Miss Darcy," Aunt Gardiner replied. "You might wait for us here, or perhaps you would care to meet my children. I must warn you though. They are not a shy lot and will probably talk your ears off."

Georgiana gave a delighted laugh and said, "In that case, I would love to meet the children, Mrs. Gardiner."

Georgiana was introduced to the young Gardiners and Maria Lucas. Sensing that Maria's diffidence was equal to her own, Georgiana was soon happily settled amongst them in the back garden, and Mrs. Gardiner accompanied Mr. Darcy upstairs. His heart caught in his throat when she opened the door to the room where his cousin lay. Darcy's first thought, however, was not for his ailing cousin, but for the young woman at her side. Elizabeth was adjusting a cool compress on Anne's fevered brow and the tender concern on her face was irresistible. For a brief instant Darcy irrationally wished he were the patient so that he might feel her cool fingers on his face, but then he exerted himself to control such wild imaginings.

Anne had fallen into a fitful sleep at last and they did not disturb her. Mrs. Gardiner quietly expressed her intent to stay with Miss de Bourgh and encouraged Mr. Darcy to assist Elizabeth downstairs so that she might meet his sister. Mrs. Gardiner could barely suppress her smile when Mr. Darcy immediately swept Elizabeth up in his arms and headed for the door without the least bit of hesitation or embarrassment. Elizabeth's cheeks flushed, but she was clearly not displeased. Surely this was to be a marriage of affection on both sides.

"Elizabeth," Darcy growled as he carried her down the front stairs, "might I ask how you managed to get upstairs in the first place?"

"Very slowly," she replied with a grin, clearly pleased by his jealousy.

"I am sorry if it pained you, my love," Darcy said with a smile, "but I must confess I did not like the thought that someone else might have carried you thusly."

Elizabeth said nothing, but she tightened her arms about his neck and buried her face in Darcy's shoulder. The picture they presented was something of a shock to Mr. Gardiner who entered the front door just in time to see his favorite niece in the arms of a stranger--a stranger who was carrying Elizabeth down the stairs as if it were an ordinary occurrence. Of course, the man's smile of satisfaction and the way Elizabeth's head was nestled into his shoulder were equally notable so Mr. Gardiner cleared his throat and awaited the explanation that was his due.

"Ah, Mr. Gardiner, I presume," Darcy began just as Elizabeth cried, "Hello, Uncle. This is Mr. Darcy."

These greetings did not set Mr. Gardiner's mind at rest as Mr. Darcy continued to hold Elizabeth and she made no attempt to remove herself from his arms.

"Lizzy, it is obvious that there is much I need to know," Uncle Gardiner began with a pointed look at Mr. Darcy.

"Oh, I am sorry, Uncle. Mr. Darcy is merely helping me downstairs because I injured my ankle," Elizabeth naively explained. "We were on our way to the back garden to see the children, but perhaps you would wish a private interview first."

Her uncle's curiosity and rising impatience were unmistakable. Knowing how improper this would appear to Elizabeth's kinsman Darcy hastened to explain.

"I am afraid we have made a mishmash of things, sir. Please accept my apologies for any perceived slight," Darcy said as he moved to return Elizabeth to the parlor sofa. "Miss Elizabeth's ankle is very swollen from a fall she took two days ago and your wife asked me to assist her downstairs. Carrying her seemed the simplest way to spare her ankle and as we are engaged I felt that such a liberty was permissible. I assure you that I intended no disrespect to either you or your niece."

"Engaged?" Mr. Gardiner echoed uncertainly. "Well, it does seem that I am quite behind on the news."

Elizabeth began by apprising her uncle of the furthering of her acquaintance with Mr. Darcy in Kent and their engagement. Then Darcy took up the tale and described Elizabeth's unfortunate accident, which had led them to make their engagement public without waiting for her father's consent.

"--We have left it for Mr. Bennet to decide if we should be married here in London or in Hertfordshire," Darcy concluded. "In fact, we hope to hear from him soon so that we might finalize our plans."

Satisfied by their account, Mr. Gardiner smiled and said, "As this regards 'his Lizzy,' I am certain you will hear from my brother Bennet soon, Mr. Darcy."

"I am afraid that there is one recent complication, sir," Darcy added and he went on to explain his cousin's presence in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

Mr. Gardiner was a kindly man and he offered his condolences for the young lady's sufferings and his assurances that she was welcome to remain in his home until such a time as everyone agreed Miss de Bourgh was quite recovered. Hoping that he might glean more information from his wife, Mr. Gardiner dismissed the pair to continue on to the garden while he went upstairs to see Mrs. Gardiner.

Georgiana's trepidation over her brother's engagement began to fade when she first laid eyes on Elizabeth Bennet. Although she would never have presumed to think ill of her brother's choice of wife, Georgiana had secretly feared that the lady would not be pleased with her. She had always felt so uncomfortable around the women who were constantly pursuing her brother and vying for his attention. Seeing Elizabeth laughing up at Darcy as he carried her like a child set Georgiana at ease and the sight of her brother's happiness as he gazed down at her warmed Georgiana's heart. She had never seen Fitzwilliam so happy or known him to display his feelings so openly. The children were at first shy of the strange man with Cousin Lizzy, but their shyness faded after several minutes of observing the tall man sitting happily by their cousin's side, holding her hand. They were soon swarming over Cousin Lizzy for she was a favorite and upon learning that Mr. Darcy was to marry Lizzy, the children quickly adopted him as a favorite, too. Little Betsy who was the youngest of the Gardiners' four children declared him to be very handsome and proceeded to climb up on Darcy's knee, from which position she began to ply him with questions as only a curious three year old can. Darcy had not held a child thusly since Georgiana was small, but he quickly warmed to Elizabeth's young cousins.

When Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived for dinner, he did not ring the bell, as a proper guest should, but rather followed the happy clatter around to the back of the house. There he beheld an amazing sight for the painfully shy Georgiana was animatedly chattering away with Miss Lucas and Darcy had two of the Gardiner children on his lap while the other two hung over his shoulders. He was evidently entertaining them with some sort of tale as Elizabeth looked on fondly. Seeing his cousin at the gate Darcy laughed and invited him in.

"Excuse me for not rising to greet you properly, Cousin, but I seem to be rather weighed down at the moment," Darcy said by way of apology.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was delighted to join the fray. Elizabeth introduced her cousins who quickly remembered their manners and greeted him quite properly. Upon learning that he was a military man, the boys promptly turned their attention to the colonel, eager for tales of peril and glory. When Mr. Gardiner came outside a short while later to summon the children, he paused to observe the happy scene before making his presence known. Seeing the reputedly proud Mr. Darcy so at ease with his children reassured Elizabeth's uncle that all would be well. He was also pleased by the easy, unaffected manners of Darcy's kinsman.

When Mr. Gardiner had led the children away to have their supper in the nursery, Darcy quietly informed Fitzwilliam of the particulars of Anne's indisposition. After all these years of hearing their aunt boast of her solicitude for Anne's welfare, the colonel was furious to realize that Lady Catherine--whatever her intentions may have been--was the cause of Anne's ill health. His expression was positively stony as he politely excused himself to take a turn about the garden as a means of collecting himself. Puzzled by the strength of the normally placid man's reaction, Elizabeth

raised a brow in an unspoken question.

"Fitzwilliam has always been the stalwart champion of anyone he perceived as weak or defenseless," Darcy murmured. "However, this is an unusually strong emotional reaction for him. I am unsure if it is occasioned by a particular regard for Anne or by his particular dislike of our aunt."

Darcy caught his sister's eye and with a slight nod of his head directed her attention to their cousin. Georgiana and Maria had been too absorbed in their own conversation to hear what was discussed regarding Anne, but Georgiana easily perceived her cousin's anger in the manner of his marching about the garden and quickly led Maria into the house. When the colonel was calmer, he rejoined Darcy and Elizabeth.

"It explains so much," he mused. "Remember, Darcy, how we would occasionally see sparks of life and personality in Anne, but then it would suddenly vanish as it had never been."

"Yes, the timing was fortunate," Darcy replied. "Had Anne not neglected to take her 'tonic' in all the upheaval last night, the doctor said she might have been incapable of exerting herself to leave Rosings and we would not have known that she required assistance."

"Yes," Fitzwilliam agreed, "she was quiet this morning, but did not seem lethargic. And as I recall she started to take her 'tonic' in the coach, but then did not. I suppose it was missing several doses in a row that brought her to her present state."

Both men lapsed into silence and Elizabeth knew that each was blaming himself for not realizing the nature of their cousin's plight sooner.

"You must not blame yourselves as that will not be of the slightest help to Miss de Bourgh," she encouraged them, taking Darcy's hand as she spoke. "We must apply ourselves to that which will assist and encourage her. Dr. Howard was insistent that your cousin will recover with time and care, so that is where we must concentrate our efforts."

The gentlemen smiled at her. Darcy completely forgot his abandoned misgivings over Elizabeth's suitability to be his wife, as he wondered what he had done to deserve her, and although the colonel had never been particularly eager to marry, he found himself envious of his cousin's happiness, for Darcy would surely be very happy with such a wife.

As the medicine sent by Dr. Howard had alleviated Anne's symptoms enough to allow her to fall into a more restful sleep, Mrs. Gardiner joined them for dinner leaving their maid Hannah to watch over the patient. Hannah had been with the Gardiners all their married life and had helped with nursing the little Gardiners through various and sundry illnesses. Mrs. Gardiner trusted her implicitly and assured the Darcys that they could, too.

The Gardiners were gracious hosts and everyone enjoyed the meal and the conversation. In fact, Georgiana could not recall when she had enjoyed a first meeting so much and found herself looking forward to repeated visits to the Gardiners' home. Darcy was simply content to be with Elizabeth, and Fitzwilliam thought the only possible improvement to the evening would have been the addition to their company of another single young lady of marriageable age, for Maria Lucas was too young and too skittish to be of any interest.

Aunt Gardiner reluctantly acceded to Elizabeth's insistence that she would stay the first night with Anne. Poor Anne tossed and turned in restless agitation when she slept and seemed incoherent when she was awake. She was not due for another dose of the tincture until morning, but Elizabeth had the herbal remedy Dr. Howard had prescribed at hand. She urged Anne to drink some each time she awoke, as it did seem to ease her pains and help with the fever. When Anne would fall back into her uneasy slumber, Elizabeth would stroke her hair or hold her hand in hopes that Anne would know she was not alone. Anne roused enough to note her unfamiliar surroundings once in the small hours of the morning.

"Where am I?" she asked in panic.

Elizabeth soothed her as she would a frightened child and whispered words of reassurance as she tenderly bathed Anne's face. For all of Lady Catherine's highly touted solicitude of her daughter's welfare, Anne had never been the recipient of such comfort. She clung to Elizabeth, as she sipped the herbal tea Elizabeth urged on her. Encouraged by Anne's response, Elizabeth climbed onto the bed. Sitting back against the headboard, she took Anne in her arms, cradling her as if she were one of Elizabeth's little cousins. She held her thusly, singing soft lullabies until they were both asleep. That was how Aunt Gardiner found them when she came to relieve Elizabeth just before dawn. Anne murmured her discontent, when Elizabeth shifted her onto the nearby pillow.

"All is well," Elizabeth quietly consoled her, "but you must sleep now."

Aunt Gardiner looked on with tears in her eyes as Elizabeth patted Anne's back and softly crooned her back into a sound sleep. When Elizabeth slipped from the bed entirely, Aunt Gardiner hugged her tightly.

"Now, off to bed with you, Lizzy," she whispered. "I do not expect to see you until after midday."

Elizabeth nodded and went straight to her room where she fell into bed most willingly. Whereas Elizabeth had lain awake much of her last night in Kent contemplating the surprise of finding herself in love with Mr. Darcy and betrothed to him, it now seemed as if she had loved him forever. That comforting thought allowed Elizabeth's exhausted body to slip immediately into a restful slumber.

It cannot be said that Mr. Bennet slept well that night. In fact, that gentleman hardly slept at all for he had received Mr. Darcy's express. Unable to conceive of such a material change in his stubborn daughter's opinion of the man, Mr. Bennet was haunted by thoughts of his Lizzy trapped in a loveless marriage. Mr. Darcy had written eloquently of his admiration and affection of Elizabeth, but even if he truly loved her, how long could such feelings endure unless requited and encouraged by their object? Mr. Darcy's letter had stated that his affections and wishes were returned, but Mr. Bennet assumed the gentleman was either deluded by his own desires or somewhat deceived by Elizabeth's attempt to make the best of a bad situation.

Although it was plain they must marry, Mr. Bennet had not been able to tell his wife. Of course, Mrs. Bennet would be delighted by the news no matter what the circumstances of their engagement or the prospects for their happiness together, but Elizabeth's deeply concerned father kept

thinking there must be some way around this situation--a way to preserve his daughter's happiness without sacrificing her virtue. Mr. Bennet rose from his sleepless bed before dawn and began preparations for a trip to London. Although his convictions forbade Sunday travel under normal circumstances, Mr. Bennet decided he could not wait another day. He simply must see Elizabeth before the news of her engagement was spread too far abroad.

After spending a good portion of the night awake with Anne, Elizabeth slept Sunday morning away. She was dressing when one of the maids came to say that Mr. Darcy was downstairs. Elizabeth instructed her to tell the gentleman that she would join him shortly and began to move as quickly as her injury would allow. After hastily finishing her toilet, Elizabeth hobbled down the hall, and her heart leapt when she saw Darcy standing at the bottom of the stairs impatiently waiting for her. He bounded up the stairs to assist her, and at the sight of her upturned face, it was all he could do to refrain from kissing her right then and there.

"Soon," Darcy whispered as he caressed her cheek before lifting Elizabeth to carry her down the stairs.

"I believe I could grow used to such attentions, sir," Elizabeth teased him. "I have always found immense satisfaction in a long walk, but you have made the inability to walk inordinately appealing, Mr. Darcy."

"I will happily carry you anywhere you want to go, my love," Darcy whispered as he carried her toward the sofa. "I hope that we will hear from your father very soon as I am anxiously awaiting our wedding day."

"I share your impatience, dearest," Elizabeth whispered and Darcy found himself forced to look away in an attempt to contain his emotion. Unable to meet her gaze, he knelt beside her and allowed his head to rest in her lap. Elizabeth gently ran her fingers through his hair as she soothed him.

"It will not be long, love. I am sure that Papa will answer your letter right away and all will be well."

"Actually," Mr. Bennet said startling them both, "your Papa is here."

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A Fortunate Mishap by Pamela St Vines

Chapter Five

From **Chapter Four**:

"It will not be long, love. I am sure that Papa will answer your letter right away and all will be well."

"Actually, your Papa is here."

Chapter Five

"Papa, you came," Elizabeth exclaimed in surprise even as a mortified Darcy quickly rose and began his apologies, "Mr. Bennet, I do apo--"

Recovering from her own astonishment, Elizabeth realized the cause of Darcy's embarrassment. She grasped his hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze even as she interrupted him. Knowing that her father generally followed the easiest course of action, Elizabeth was anxious to cajole him out of any ill humor before he injured Darcy.

"Really, Papa," Elizabeth scolded him with a smile, "it is more characteristic of Mama to prowl about in hopes of ferreting out my secrets. I begin to fear that I was wrong to think that one decoy diary was sufficient."

Elizabeth understood her father well. Remembrance of the diary escapade brought a reluctant smile to Mr. Bennet's lips, and he began to recover from the shock engendered by his walking in upon such a tender scene.

Seeing Darcy's puzzlement, Elizabeth said, "I suspected Mama of reading my diary several years ago, so I began making false entries--most of them were quite sensational--things I had read in one of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels. As Mama has never cared for reading in general, she did not recognize the episodes and believed them to be real. She finally went to Papa carrying tales that a sensible person would never have believed."

"Yes," Mr. Bennet took up the tale. Even though he knew his daughter was maneuvering him, he could not help but admire the skill with which she did so. He was also sincerely amused at the recollection. "Your mother was thoroughly convinced that the Longbourn attics were haunted and that Jane was being secretly courted by a dark and mysterious count from the continent. I think she would have been willing to put up with the ghosts, had the count only been real as well."

Darcy stifled a laugh at the thought of Mrs. Bennet stirred up over such nonsense.

Seeing the younger man's smirk Mr. Bennet added dryly, "Yes, Mr. Darcy, I must confess that I have a very silly wife. You on the other hand will have a very clever one."

Turning his attention to Elizabeth, he continued, "Well, Lizzy, I have not read your diary, but it seems now that perhaps I should have. I rushed to London despite my scruples against Sunday travel, hoping to save you from a terrible fate, but now it would seem that I have been totally misinformed. Surely you did not expect me to dispose of my favorite daughter by mail."

Mr. Bennet bent to kiss her brow and said, "No, you certainly cannot be married without your Papa in attendance especially to--"

Pausing, he turned his attention to Darcy and continued with a modicum of tact, "--well, I do not know exactly what type of man you are, sir, but I am confident that we do not know one another. I suggest we begin to remedy that, Mr. Darcy, with a private interview after I have spoken with Lizzy."

Having regained his composure, Darcy gave Elizabeth's father a proper bow and said, "I do apologize for any--"

"No further apologies are required at this time, sir," Mr. Bennet interrupted him. "I realize that you will soon be my daughter's husband and in truth, I find it very difficult to be angry with a man who is willing to kneel before my daughter. I do, however, expect you to exercise better discretion for the duration of your engagement, sir--however few days that may be."

"Yes," Darcy acknowledged with embarrassment, "of course, sir. Be assured that I will take care to avoid a repeat of this afternoon."

"I have no doubt of it," Mr. Bennet replied with satisfaction. He found it quite amusing to seeing Mr. Darcy--whom he had thought to be so rigidly proper--so totally discomfited. His amusement, however, was short lived and Mr. Bennet's expression quickly grew more serious as he remembered exactly why he had come to town.

"I will confess that your letter took me wholly by surprise, Mr. Darcy, but I will speak with you about that later. At the moment I am anxious for a private interview with my daughter. As Lizzy seems quite comfortable where she is, perhaps you would oblige me by leaving us for the time being."

It did not escape Mr. Bennet's notice that Darcy looked to Elizabeth to determine her wishes in the matter before acceding to his request. Only when she had smiled and nodded her assent did Darcy murmur, "As you wish, sir. I shall take a walk and call back in half an hour, if that meets with your approval."

Darcy's patent determination to please Elizabeth greatly pleased her father. He even gave the younger man a small smile as he replied, "Yes, that should be sufficient, Mr. Darcy. Thank you for your indulgence."

After bowing to her father, Darcy took Elizabeth's hand. "One half hour," he murmured, "I cannot promise to stay away any longer, my love."

His lips gently brushed her hand, and Darcy quitted the room, softly closing the door behind him. Mr. Bennet gazed at his daughter not knowing where—or even how—to begin their discussion. For her part, Elizabeth returned his gaze evenly with no embarrassment or self-consciousness. Her calm, collected submission to his appraisal banished any remaining doubts her father may have entertained. It assured him that Elizabeth did not consider marriage to Mr. Darcy to be an imposition in the least—it was what she wanted. Although he was relieved to know that he need not fear for Elizabeth's happiness, her father now comprehended that he had raced to London eager for answers, but had come armed with the wrong questions.

Mr. Darcy had written that their affection was mutual, but it had never occurred to Mr. Bennet that such might actually be the case. After all, his superior knowledge of his daughter's character and opinions insisted this could not be so. If he must bear the irritation of knowing he had been wrong, Mr. Bennet decided he was at least due the indulgence of have his curiosity satisfied. After all, it was very difficult to reconcile the tender scene he had witnessed upon his arrival with what he knew of the young couple's history.

"Elizabeth Bennet," he began, "I came here prepared to console you and even to see if there might be a way around this marriage. While I am delighted to learn that my fears for your future felicity were unfounded, I would also like some accounting for this material change in your opinion of Mr. Darcy."

Mr. Bennet began to pace as he continued, "You have constantly assured me—and everyone else of your acquaintance, I might add—that you despise Mr. Darcy and now I walk in upon a scene that would indicate otherwise. As your father, I would like to understand. I have never considered you to be frivolous, but this total change of attitude toward Mr. Darcy would seem to indicate the type of flightiness I might have expected from one of your younger sisters."

Although she had not been the slightest bit discomfited by her father's walking in on them, Elizabeth was extremely embarrassed by how grievously she had misjudged Darcy. Taking some small comfort in the knowledge that Papa found such human failings quite amusing, Elizabeth began her explanation.

"I trust you will find my folly most diverting, Papa, and as my father, you deserve to know the truth. I only hope you will not be too disappointed in me when you learn of how foolish I was—"

Elizabeth told her father nearly everything that had transpired between herself and Mr. Darcy including the unhappy history of Wickham's relationship with the Darcy family. She only omitted two particulars fearing that her father might hold them against Darcy as unconscionable liberties—that Darcy had written a letter to her after she refused him and that he had kissed her when they were alone for the night.

Mr. Bennet who had listened largely in silence asked pointedly, "Is that everything, Elizabeth?"

"Yes," she answered calmly, "I do believe that is everything you need to know, Papa."

Her father noted the subtlety of Elizabeth's reply. However, he was not foolish enough to press her. Obviously there was something she had not told him, but Mr. Bennet trusted implicitly in Elizabeth's integrity. He was confident she would have omitted nothing of true consequence. Clearly they must marry and Elizabeth was not at all dismayed by the prospect. As Mr. Bennet had already seen enough to convince him of Darcy's regard for his daughter, he decided there would be no purpose served in forcing her to confide what were probably embarrassing details.

He choose instead to address the material point, "My greatest concern has been for your contentment, Lizzy. Am I now to understand that you no longer find the thought of Mr. Darcy distasteful—that you actually like him?"

"I do not just like him, Papa," Elizabeth replied. "I love him."

Even as a great burden lifted from his shoulders, Mr. Bennet felt the sorrow of knowing Elizabeth would call Longbourn her home no more. Although he hated the thought of losing her to another, Elizabeth's father found himself surprisingly eager for Darcy's return. He must know the man who had won his daughter's heart. Mr. Bennet did not have to wait long, for Darcy returned promptly at the appointed time. Even as he greeted her father, Darcy was searching Elizabeth's face with concern, anxious to know that she was well. Her clear eyes and radiant smile reassured him of her happiness, but once his concern for Elizabeth had abated, Darcy felt no little trepidation regarding his own interview with Elizabeth's father. After the obligatory pleasantries, the two gentlemen retired to Mr. Gardiner's study for their discussion.

As the father of five, Mr. Bennet had long ago determined that the broadest enquiries often yielded the most interesting answers. "Well, sir," he began, "I would like to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"As I was walking," Darcy began, "I thought about your earlier comments, Mr. Bennet, and I feel I must begin by apologizing for the alarm my letter must have surely caused you. I was under the misapprehension that you were not aware of your daughter's previous low opinion of me. Had I realized that you knew of her former—," Darcy paused as he searched for the correct term, "her former—abhorrence of me, I would have shared more details with you in my letter. It must have been very distressing for you to think that Miss Bennet was to marry someone she so thoroughly detested. As my sister's guardian, I do have some understanding of a father's concern for a beloved child."

Darcy's directness and his sincere apology affected Mr. Bennet greatly. He felt his own foolishness, realizing that his former dislike of the man had been based solely on Elizabeth's hastily formed ill opinion, and Mr. Darcy's use of the word 'abhorrence' had engendered his sincere sympathy.

"I see that Lizzy was telling the truth when she said that her rejection of your first proposal was very thorough," he said softly. "It must have been a bitter blow for you."

"Yes, sir," Darcy said, his jaw involuntarily twitching as he recalled his distress. "I thought I could not possibly be any more miserable until Mrs.

Collins came to Rosings the following day to tell me that Miss Bennet was missing. As unhappy as I was over your daughter's rejection of my offer of marriage, it was as nothing compared to the anguish I felt when I feared for her safety."

Mr. Bennet nodded sympathetically but he was shocked to stillness by Darcy's next statement.

"I think I must also apologize for your daughter's injury, sir. I feel that I am to blame."

"How so?" Mr. Bennet inquired. "You cannot be faulted for her twisted ankle or the subsequent fall. I am grateful to you for finding Elizabeth and caring for her, sir."

"Still, I must bear some responsibility, Mr. Bennet," Darcy insisted. "If I had not presumed to write Miss Bennet that letter--which was very improper of me--I do not think she would have ventured so far from the parsonage--"

"I am sorry, but I do not understand you, sir," Mr. Bennet interrupted him. "What letter?"

Darcy was astonished, "Do you mean she did not tell you?"

Seeing Mr. Bennet's genuine puzzlement, Darcy explained his ill-considered decision to defend himself from Elizabeth's accusations and warn her of Wickham's true character in a letter, even as he berated himself for the impropriety of it.

"--I do apologize for confusing you, sir. I assumed your daughter would have told you everything. I cannot help but feel that if I had not erred in giving Eli--Miss Bennet that letter, her ankle would be whole and sound today," Darcy said. "I suppose my apology makes little sense for while I am sorry for being the cause of your daughter's injury, I must confess that I am eternally grateful for the opportunity that same injury gave us to put our misunderstandings behind us."

"Clearly Elizabeth 'forgot' to mention your letter," her father said dryly, "but I do appreciate your candor with me, sir. Knowing something of my daughter's former opinions and her temperament, it helps me to understand how so much changed in such a short span. Elizabeth is an intelligent girl. Knowing that she had all day to consider your explanation and defense of your actions, I can more readily understand how the two of you were able to resolve your differences so quickly and completely.

"No doubt Lizzy was trying to shield you from my wrath by not mentioning your letter," Mr. Bennet added with a smile. "However, as what's done is done and I am assured that my daughter truly wants to marry you, Mr. Darcy, I see little point in playing the affronted father now."

Mr. Darcy's willingness to be forthcoming even to his own detriment won him favor with Mr. Bennet and the two men lingered for some time in the study. Darcy even consulted his future father regarding the decision he and Elizabeth had made to let it be misunderstood that they were engaged before her accident.

"Normally, I would never stoop to deceit of any kind--"

"You need not justify yourself to me in this instance, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet interrupted him. "I believe you to be an honorable man and as it is my daughter's honor that is at stake, I wholeheartedly endorse your decision as sensible. I am also impressed that you consulted Lizzy in the matter. Most young men are not quite so wise going into marriage."

Feeling far more comfortable with Elizabeth's father than he had thought possible, Darcy went on to sheepishly confess his error in not consulting his bride to be about his Cousin Anne's situation. His expression grew grave as Darcy related his cousin's current state and his concerns that this might have been done to her deliberately. Mr. Bennet was shocked. Although he often complained about his youngest daughter being too lively and too loud, he could not believe that any parent would resort to such measures to control a child.

"Please be assured, Mr. Darcy," he said, "of my concern for your cousin and best wishes for her to make a full recovery."

When their conversation turned to the wedding itself, the gentlemen agreed it was time to return to the parlor and consult with Elizabeth. She was vastly relieved by the conviviality between her father and Darcy, having felt some anxiety herself as their absence lengthened. In fact, had it not been for her injury, Elizabeth would have been sorely tempted to listen at the door so great was her curiosity.

It was now a matter of course that Elizabeth and Darcy must marry in London. The prospect of their going into Hertfordshire was rendered unthinkable by Miss de Bourgh's indisposition, but they decided to delay the ceremony until the following week in hopes that she would be well enough to attend by then.

"I already have an appointment with my solicitor tomorrow morning regarding another matter of business," Darcy said, "and I will make the necessary arrangements for the marriage settlements then. Would you care to withdraw to Mr. Gardiner's study again, Mr. Bennet, so that we might discuss the terms I have in mind?"

His polite inquiry caused Elizabeth considerable bewilderment. Indeed, she could not help wondering exactly her father and Darcy had discussed for so long if the financial issues were not even addressed.

"No, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet replied, "that will not be necessary. I will be happy to read the settlements after your solicitor has finished them. I am assured of your affection for my daughter, and I know that you are more than capable of supporting a family. As I am willing to entrust Lizzy's future happiness to your keeping, it is a relatively small matter to trust that you will provide for her appropriately."

Darcy was both pleased and surprised by Mr. Bennet's answer. Very few fathers--including those whose daughters had independent fortunes--would have been so unconcerned with the details of their daughter's pin monies and household allowances. Realizing that Mr. Bennet was far more concerned with Elizabeth's long-term happiness than he was with her material advantage in marriage increased Darcy's respect for the man, and

understanding something of Elizabeth's father enabled Darcy to more readily comprehend why she was so unlike her mother.

It was decided between them that Mr. Bennet would call on the local clergyman the next morning to arrange a time for the ceremony and Darcy would secure the special license they required after seeing his solicitor. Although he would not have believed it possible, Darcy was much happier when he left the Gardiners' than he had been upon his arrival. Everything required for them to marry would be settled tomorrow. All that remained then was to inform his uncle of his marriage plans and wait for the day itself to arrive.

As Mr. Bennet intended to remain in London until after the wedding, he sent Mrs. Bennet an express after the ceremony had been scheduled to apprise her of the news. Now that he himself was sanguine regarding Elizabeth's future happiness, Mr. Bennet wrote a letter certain to delight his wife and assure her whole hearted endorsement of the union. Of course, he thought with some distaste there were already at least ten thousand reasons his foolish wife would rejoice in the match as that was Darcy's reputed annual income. He embellished the story without compunction, even to the point of deceiving his careless wife to ensure that her indiscrete ravings--and Mr. Bennet knew that he could count on her to be indiscrete--would cast a favorable light on all concerned and predispose Hertfordshire to view the match with a favorable eye

My dear Mrs. Bennet,

I have news that will gladden your heart. Our own Lizzy is engaged to Mr. Darcy. It seems that Mr. Darcy has thought highly of our daughter for some time, but is somewhat shy. Evidently the silence that we mistook for prideful distain was merely the awkwardness of a tongue-tied young man in love.

I have also learned that Mr. Wickham's tales regarding Mr. Darcy are outright lies. I will tell you more of Mr. Wickham in person, my dear, but for now know that he is never, ever to be admitted to Longbourn again. I also do not want the girls to attend any functions where they will be in his presence. I insist that you enforce these restrictions immediately.

(Mr. Bennet thought with some satisfaction that Wickham's reputation in Hertfordshire would be in tatters within hours of his wife's having read that.)

But back to the happy news regarding Lizzy and Mr. Darcy, it seems that they were much thrown together in Kent and that Mr. Darcy was more successful in expressing himself there. He has secured our daughter's affections and her hand. Of course, our Lizzy is our Lizzy and things do have a way of happening to her. The morning after Mr. Darcy's proposal Lizzy went on one of her rambles. In her distracted state she wandered far from her usual haunts in those environs. That would not be a matter of significance; however, Lizzy slipped and sprained her ankle so badly that she was unable to return to the parsonage.

Of course Mrs. Collins knew nothing of their engagement at the time so she did not seek Mr. Darcy's aid directly, but after Lizzy had been missing most of the day Mrs. Collins appealed to him for help. It seems she already suspected Mr. Darcy of some partiality towards our daughter. The gentleman immediately set out in search of Elizabeth while his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam organized a full-scale search of the neighborhood. By the time Mr. Darcy discovered Lizzy's whereabouts it was nearly nightfall and in attempting to walk on her injured ankle she had fallen and knocked herself unconscious. Fortunately Mr. Darcy was able to revive her and there are no lasting repercussions from the bump on her head. However, the doctor says it will take some weeks for her ankle to fully heal.

Being as Lizzy's location was quite remote and in a heavily wooded area Mr. Darcy determined that it was far too dangerous for him to attempt to carry her home in the dark, and they were forced to wait for dawn. I have talked with them both and I am assured that Mr. Darcy was a perfect gentleman; however, the situation in itself is compromising and to protect Lizzy's reputation from any unfortunate gossip we have decided to hasten their wedding. I am sorry you will not get to fuss and plan over this daughter's wedding, my dear, but surely you will understand that due to Lizzy's mishap it is best they wed quickly.

(Mr. Bennet chuckled as he thought that Mrs. Bennet would welcome any reason to hasten the marriage of a daughter to a man of such considerable fortune. Thinking of Darcy's fortune, Mr. Bennet realized it would be wise to reinforce that point before he ended the letter. In truth, Darcy had yet to return from his solicitor's and Mr. Bennet had no idea what the marriage settlements were to be; however, the purpose of this letter was not to inform his wife, but to manage her.)

Mr. Darcy has already been to his solicitor regarding the settlements, which are more than generous. Of course, that is not surprising considering how he dotes on our Lizzy. Mr. Darcy has also procured a special license for the ceremony, which will take place a week from Thursday. I will remain in London with Lizzy until she is wed. Unfortunately circumstances preclude my bringing the rest of the family to town at this time. Mr. Darcy's cousin Miss Anne de Bourgh accompanied them from Kent and she is staying with Lizzy at her aunt's house. Sadly Miss de Bourgh is recovering from an illness and needs quiet and rest. Please watch over our other girls with particular care until I return.

Sincerely,

TB

Mr. Bennet knew his wife well and his letter elicited just the response he had hoped for. Mrs. Bennet read it over several times with rapturous delight. She then had Jane read the letter aloud several times more while she dressed to go into town, for such news must be shared with their neighbors immediately. By nightfall, all of Hertfordshire thought warmly of the shy young man who had been so in love with Elizabeth Bennet all this time and despised the scoundrel who had dared tarnish the good Mr. Darcy's name. As for Elizabeth's mishap that had necessitated the hastening of her wedding-- Well, the good people of Meryton had known Elizabeth Bennet all her life and they chuckled affectionately at her latest escapade. Given her life long propensity for odd injuries occasioned by her love of physical activity, it was fondly dismissed as something that would only happen to Miss Lizzy of Longbourn.

Mr. Wickham immediately sensed the change in public opinion, but he could not determine its source, as the local populace now universally avoided him. His requests for credit were suddenly denied and any merchant's daughters disappeared the moment he entered a business establishment. His fellow officers knew that Wickham had fallen out of favor with the locals, but as they were also outsiders, no one confided to them why the young man who had previously been praised to the skies was now an anathema to the townspeople. In fact, Wickham's fellow officers were

now under constant scrutiny for even associating with such a blackguard. After several days of being shunned thusly, Wickham chanced to overhear two women who had not observed his approach talking about the engagement.

Wickham was shocked—Elizabeth Bennet was to marry Darcy. It could not be—certainly not after he himself had deigned to pay attention to her. How could Elizabeth settle for the prim and placid Darcy after enjoying the attentions of a more exciting man? Wickham resolved to visit the Bennets. He was, after all, a considerable favorite with Mrs. Bennet and the woman loved to gossip as much as she despised Fitzwilliam Darcy. Yes, Mrs. Bennet would be the very person to enlighten him.

Such foolish conclusions merely prove that George Wickham was far more adept at charming people than he was at understanding them. His view of the world and its other inhabitants was entirely shaped by his own desires with reality playing little part in it. Although he had admired Elizabeth, Wickham had never understood her and he had certainly misjudged her mother. Had he comprehended Mrs. Bennet's character, Wickham would have realized that Darcy's choice of her daughter would immediately assuage her earlier dislike of the man. As it was, Wickham was astonished when the servant refused him admittance to Longbourn saying that the family was out, for he could distinctly hear the ladies within. Surely Darcy was behind it. Wickham enjoyed plotting his revenge as he rode back to town; however, those schemes were quickly forgotten upon arriving in Meryton and finding a message waiting for him from Colonel Forester commanding his immediate presence.

As it would happen, the local merchants had called upon the colonel while Wickham was making his fruitless trip to Longbourn. Alerted by the rumors of Wickham's perfidy, these men had exchanged information regarding the credit each had extended to Mr. Wickham. When the sum exceeded his annual income in the militia, they had stopped tallying Wickham's debts and gone to his commander for assistance. The colonel was, of course, quite willing to intervene; however, Wickham never answered his summons.

Knowing he had fallen from favor in these environs, Wickham quickly concluded his commander's request did not bode well and that Hertfordshire was no longer a safe haven for him. Wickham hastily rifled through their billet, taking anything of value and rode away on his 'borrowed' horse. When he reached London, Wickham sold everything including the horse and booked passage on a ship bound for the Americas. He had briefly contemplated fleeing to Africa or the Near East, but Wickham had no ear for languages and a gentleman who lived by his wits was dependent upon his tongue to make his way. Acknowledging those realities, he decided that America was best. In the former colonies English was still the language of opportunity and yet he would also be beyond the reach of the crown. Little did Wickham know that he would arrive in the United States a mere two days before it declared war on Great Britain, but the further adventures of George Wickham are another story.

Meanwhile Anne was recovering slowly in London. Elizabeth continued to spend the nights with her, while Aunt Gardiner and the maids attended Anne during the day. The new medicine had eased the worst of Anne's physical symptoms, and after several days her former lethargy was replaced by irritability and a general sense of disquiet and discomfort. The special tea helped with the aches and the slight fevers, but it was soon discovered that diversion was the best way to ease her fractiousness. Someone reading aloud to Anne was most effective in drawing her attention away from her discomfort and to that end Georgiana proved to be quite as adept as the more experienced nurses. Since Mr. Bennet had little to occupy his time he soon volunteered to spell the ladies by reading to Anne with one of the maids in attendance as chaperone. It proved to be an agreeable change for the patient.

Anne had grown so easy with Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth that she often whined and groused when they sought to distract her, much like a weary child venting her frustrations on her mother. Anne exerted herself, however, to behave properly for her younger cousin and even more so with a gentleman in the room. Just as repeated physical activity strengthens the body, this exertion seemed to strengthen her self-control and Anne's fits and tempers began to abate. Once Mr. Bennet had led the way, the other gentlemen were eager to be of assistance and Mr. Gardiner and Anne's masculine cousins were soon taking turns entertaining her. Darcy and Fitzwilliam were relieved and gratified to actually be of use to their cousin.

The days passed quickly and by the following Sunday Mrs. Gardiner deemed Anne well enough to come downstairs for dinner. She and Anne conspired to surprise everyone else, and to that end Mrs. Gardiner sent the rest of the household off to attend church services. Once the family had departed she assisted Anne in bathing and then helped her to dress for the first time since she had been stricken. It had been decided the previous day that the Darcys and Colonel Fitzwilliam would meet the family for services and then return to the Gardiners' for the afternoon. Therefore, the hue and cry was great when everyone returned from church to find Anne waiting with Mrs. Gardiner in the parlor. In consideration of Anne's fragile nerves, the children were quickly shuttled off to have their meal in the nursery.

After luncheon the party moved into the back garden to enjoy the fine day and the children were permitted to join them. Anne was comfortably settled on a chaise and wondered at finding herself part of such a congenial group. Sundays at Rosings had been exceedingly melancholy—so much so that Anne had dreaded Sunday above all other days. Today, however, was anything but gloomy. When the general conversation was buzzing about them, Anne reached for Elizabeth's hand.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," she whispered. "I fear that you have taken the brunt of my ill humors, and I am sorry for the sleep you have lost on my account—"

"Do not think on it, Anne," Elizabeth quietly replied. Somewhere in the long nights formalities been them had been abandoned, and a mutual fondness had been birthed. "I have always been noted for my strong constitution, and I have certainly rested far better knowing that I would hear you if you needed me than I would have several rooms away."

"Still, it has helped me more than you can possibly understand," Anne insisted. "Just to know that I am not alone when I wake up is tremendously comforting. Thank you, Cousin."

"You are most welcome, Cousin," Elizabeth replied with a ready smile.

Having observed the familiarity between Elizabeth and her cousin, Georgiana watched for an opportunity when she might speak to them without being overheard. When Darcy left his place at Elizabeth's side to join the other men in a game with the children, Georgiana slipped into his former seat.

"I must confess--" she haltingly began, "that I am somewhat envious--"

"Envious," Elizabeth gently interrupted her. "How so, Miss Darcy?"

"Well, I have always wanted to have a sister," Georgiana continued not daring to look at either of her companions. "When I hear you addressing one another so fondly and with such familiarity, I wish--"

She found herself unable to continue, but Elizabeth had heard enough to understand her. She immediately moved to embrace the younger girl.

"Dear Georgiana," she said, "I, too, wish for us to be as true sisters, and I certainly never meant for you to feel left out. Please forgive me. I was afraid of pressing you. You are so gentle and soft spoken--so truly good natured-- Well, I was concerned that I might inadvertently force you into accepting a degree of intimacy beyond that which you would prefer."

Eager to also reassure her young cousin, Anne explained, "Little has been said of it, Georgiana, but Elizabeth has actually been sleeping with me so that I do not become fearful or anxious in the night. It has caused us to become close very quickly, but still she is only my cousin while she is to be your sister."

Georgiana gazed at them through tears of happiness as she asked, "Then might I address you both as would be fitting for sisters?"

"Of course, dearest," Elizabeth replied while Anne nodded with a smile. "It would make me very happy to know that you are my sister by choice as well as by marriage."

Darcy was somewhat puzzled when he happened to glance over and see the three of them obviously suppressing tears. But as the ladies were also smiling beatifically he did not dare venture to intervene. The afternoon afforded no opportunity for private conversation with Elizabeth, but Darcy's curiosity was somewhat satisfied when Georgiana made repeated references to "Elizabeth" on the ride home. He would not have thought it possible for his happiness to increase, but such burgeoning affection between the two people who were dearest in the world to him added immensely to Darcy's joy.

When Dr. Howard called the next morning he announced that he was very pleased with Anne's progress and encouraged her to spend as much time up and in company each day as she could tolerate. The doctor then asked for a private word with Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth. Although Anne was greatly improved physically, he cautioned them against allowing her to spend too much time alone.

"-- While Miss de Bourgh's physical recovery is well begun, she will be vulnerable in other ways for some time. A tendency toward despondency, for example, is not unusual. Therefore, I prescribe that she spend very little time alone. In addition to assuring that any drastic downturn in her well being is noticed right away, cheerful companionship will aid in keeping discouragement at bay."

Surprisingly it was Georgiana who offered a possible long-term solution. She had arrived at the Gardiners' shortly after breakfast and was included in the discussion as a matter of course.

"Perhaps it would help if Anne and I shared a room for a time after she comes to us. Elizabeth has been sleeping with Anne here and it helps her-- but after the wedding--," Georgiana trailed off momentarily embarrassed, but then she forced herself to continue. "If we were sharing a room, Anne would not have occasion to be alone too often, but it would happen naturally. I think she might become nervous if she felt like we were watching her too closely."

"But my dear Miss Darcy, are you sure this will not be too great a sacrifice?" Mrs. Gardiner asked. "After all you are used to having a certain degree of privacy."

"No," Georgiana answered with a smile, "you and Elizabeth have seen Anne through the most difficult days. I am ready to do my part to assist my cousin and I would not consider it a hardship to share my room with her."

Elizabeth found herself feeling unaccountably shy after Georgiana's veiled reference to "after the wedding," but she forced herself to meet Georgiana's gaze.

"Thank you, Georgiana," she said. "Although she has not said as much, I think Anne is dreading being alone again."

Dr. Howard agreed that it was an excellent notion. However, he suggested that Anne continue at the Gardiners for another week after the wedding to ensure that she was well on her way to recovery before she was subjected to the trauma of a change of surroundings and routine. Mrs. Gardiner assured him of her agreement that Anne must not leave them too quickly.

"--I think she should finish out a full three weeks with us. That will give my niece and her husband a week to settle in before Miss de Bourgh joins their household. Perhaps you would agree to come and stay with Anne here after the wedding, Miss Darcy."

Georgiana was delighted and relieved by the invitation as it was just what she had hoped for. She smiled shyly as she accepted.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. I would love to stay with you. I could take Elizabeth's place with Anne at night and I think it would be good for us to become better acquainted. Anne and I have spent so little time together."

"Thank you, my dear," Mrs. Gardiner said as she patted the blushing girl's arm. "It will work out well for all of us--"

Promising to call back in several days to see how Miss de Bourgh fared, the doctor left the ladies to work out the details. It was quickly decided that Georgiana's companion Mrs. Ainsley would be given time off to visit her daughter and Georgiana would move to the Gardiners' the day before the ceremony. Georgiana apprised Darcy of her plans that evening. While he was grateful for her consideration, Darcy was somewhat surprised that Georgiana had made all the arrangements without even consulting him. Her natural shyness had been compounded by a complete lack of confidence in her own judgment after the Wickham debacle. Such a change was exceedingly gratifying. It gave him hope that the damage done by Wickham would not be lasting.

Their brief conversation had the additional effect of causing Darcy's thoughts to turn in the heretofore dangerous direction of considering the reality of Elizabeth as his wife. Holding Elizabeth and kissing her seemed more a dream than a memory, but knowing that she would become his wife in three days time made it difficult for Darcy to think of anything else.

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A Fortunate Mishap by Pamela St Vines

Chapter Six

From **Chapter Five**:

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Chapter Six

Fitzwilliam Darcy found sleep elusive that night. A conversation with Georgiana had stirred his memories of being alone with Elizabeth in Kent and now Darcy's mind was whirling with thoughts of Elizabeth and their imminent marriage. He was not alone in his preoccupation. Having received a letter from Darcy earlier that day, Charles Bingley's mind was also much on his friend's impending nuptials.

Dear Bingley,

I write with what may be surprising news. Although my disposition tends toward melancholy, you may now consider me to be among the happiest of men for I have secured the hand of my chosen partner in life and we plan to be married in two weeks time. I trust that you will be pleased for both of us as my bride to be is one whom you number among your neighbors in Hertfordshire—Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I must confess that my regard for her began even in the earliest days of our acquaintance; however, I foolishly chose not to act upon my feelings. Miss Bennet happened to be visiting her friend Mrs. Collins in Kent when I paid my annual visit to Rosings Park this spring, and that serendipitous meeting has led to my present happiness.

My only pain at present is the recently gained knowledge that I have injured you, my friend. I mistakenly believed I was being of assistance when I encouraged you to quit Netherfield last autumn. I now deeply regret my efforts to dissuade you from acting upon your feelings for another young woman of Hertfordshire. I wish I had not intruded into your private affairs, not only because such actions on your part might have led to closer ties between us, but also because I now have reason to believe that I was entirely in the wrong in my assumptions.

Although my interference was kindly meant, it was interference nonetheless, and I deeply regret my actions. I hope that you will be able to forgive me as I highly value your friendship.

Miss Bennet and I have decided upon a small, private ceremony here in London. We shall remain in town a few weeks and then venture into Hertfordshire for a brief visit before continuing on to Pemberley. We are both most pleased that my cousin Miss Anne de Bourgh has agreed to make her home with us for the foreseeable future and it is our hope that the change of scene will improve her health. She and Georgiana will, of course, be accompanying us into the country. It is also planned that the eldest Miss Bennet will go into Derbyshire with us, so as you can see the ladies will have me quite outnumbered. May I prevail upon you, Bingley, to take pity upon me and to join us at Pemberley? I am confident that all of our party would be delighted to add you to our number.

I remain—

Your contrite and devoted friend,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Bingley had read the letter so many times that it was now firmly etched in his memory. He had been quite angry with Darcy after the first reading which was a novel sensation, as Bingley rarely lost his temper and then it was usually in response to extreme provocation by his sister Caroline. Several readings later Bingley realized he could not recall any prior instance in which Darcy had injured or provoked him. Bingley was not one to hold a grudge and his anger was soon conquered entirely by his belief in the sincerity of Darcy's apology. By the time Bingley had committed the letter to memory, his integrity had forced him to the painful acknowledgment that the fault was primarily his own. Darcy may have offered ill advice, but he had chosen to ignore his own opinions of Jane Bennet's character and motives, simply because his friend held a differing opinion. The decision to drop the acquaintance had ultimately been his own. It was an uncomfortable admission, but having always been of a sanguine disposition, Bingley was soon smiling at the prospect of renewing his friendship with the eldest Miss Bennet.

By Bingley's calculations Darcy would be married within the next several days as the letter had been dispatched almost two weeks ago. It had originally been sent express, but its delivery had been delayed by the recipient's rapidly changing address. Bingley had been traveling all spring. Although he would never be avidly sought among the first circles, Bingley was an amiable man of respectable fortune. As such he had many friends and his society was also solicited by numerous acquaintances. In an attempt to put thoughts of Jane Bennet behind him, Bingley had accepted one invitation after the other, necessitating that Darcy's letter be forwarded several times before it reached him in Wales. With his fondest hope restored, Bingley could not remain angry with his friend. He resolved immediately to accept Darcy's invitation to Pemberley and found himself eagerly anticipating the prospect of joining the Darcy party.

Bingley continued awake a while longer contemplating possible means of hastening this happy reunion. He swiftly dismissed the prospect of journeying to London straightaway, as his sister Caroline was there. Bingley had no desire to endure Caroline's sure displeasure over Darcy's marriage. Bingley smiled as he realized that foregoing London would also allow him to evade what would surely be a bitter argument with his sisters about accompanying him to Pemberley. After their continual harping all last winter on the many reasons for eschewing such a match, Bingley knew Caroline and Louisa would be far from helpful in his attempts to secure Jane Bennet's hand. Although his sisters would be most desirous of accompanying him to Pemberley, Bingley was determined that he would make this visit alone. To forestall their machinations to insinuate

themselves into his plans, Bingley decided to wait until he reached Pemberley before writing to advise Caroline and Louisa of his stay there.

Bingley dismissed the notion of meeting the Darcys in Hertfordshire almost as quickly, as it seemed highly likely his sudden return to the neighborhood would occasion considerable gossip. No, he thought, Darcy's suggestion veiled as an invitation was the best course of action. He would wait to renew his acquaintance with Miss Bennet at Pemberley. Bingley resolved to send a reply to Darcy's town address by express the following morning assuring his friend of his forgiveness and his delighted acceptance of the invitation. Perhaps if she were convinced of his intentions, the new Mrs. Darcy would smooth the way for him with her eldest sister.

It would have gladdened Bingley's heart to know that he required no such assistance to woo Jane Bennet. Although she had endeavored mightily to hide it, Jane had not forgotten Mr. Bingley, and since learning of Elizabeth's engagement to his particular friend, Jane had been able to think of little else. She was half in agony and half in hope that her sister's marriage would result in her seeing Charles Bingley again.

Although Jane was of a much quieter disposition than Elizabeth, her feelings were of no less depth and she still thought of Bingley with great admiration and a considerable sense of personal loss. It was impossible for Jane to think truly ill of anyone she held in high esteem. Therefore, she had long since convinced herself that she must have misunderstood Mr. Bingley's attentions and thus was solely to blame for her own unhappiness. Her affectionate heart had remained constant and Jane could not refrain from hoping that Mr. Bingley's feelings might grow to match her own upon further acquaintance.

Although Mr. Bingley was uppermost in her thoughts, he was not the only reason Jane happily anticipated her trip into Derbyshire. Longbourn without her dear Lizzy had already become quite difficult to bear. Jane had long respected Mr. Darcy's integrity and intelligence and having been assured by Elizabeth of their mutual affection, Jane was elated that all had worked out so well for her dearest sister--and for herself, Jane reflected. As Mr. Darcy's sister and cousin were to be living with them, Jane did not fear intruding upon the newly married couple as she might have under other circumstances, and it was planned that they would all remain in Derbyshire until the autumn demanded the Darcys return to town for the season.

Jane knew that the Bingleys usually made an annual visit to Pemberley as Caroline had certainly boasted of it often enough. Although Jane had no wish to see Caroline Bingley again, she would have willingly endured far worse than the sister's company for the pleasure of the brother's. Jane's last thought before succumbing to sleep was, "Perhaps if we meet again without all the gossips of Hertfordshire going on about a match, things will work out differently."

Meanwhile in Norfolk, Lord and Lady ---- were less preoccupied with thoughts of how the impending marriage would affect themselves than they were with concerns of what its ramifications might be upon Darcy and Georgiana's futures. Their knowledge of the impending marriage had been delayed by the simple fact that Lord and Lady ---- were not at home when Darcy's letter arrived. As they had originally planned to be away for some few days, the housekeeper had been instructed to simply hold any correspondence. Their visit to their friends in Cambridge had proven so enjoyable, however, that Lord and Lady ---- had extended their stay, and consequently had arrived home only that afternoon. Darcy's was not the only letter regarding the marriage that awaited them. It was unfortunate, yet not to be unexpected, that along with the letter of invitation from Darcy and letters endorsing the match from their son and Georgiana, Lord ---- had also received a letter denouncing the engagement from Lady Catherine. Had Lady Catherine managed to rein in her temper enough to cast dispersions only upon Elizabeth's character and lineage, the impact of her indictment would have been far greater. However, in her outrage Lady Catherine had made the significant error of also criticizing Darcy for his lack of judgment, an inclination to indulge his base passions and a total want of family feeling.

While Darcy's aunt and uncle had no first hand knowledge of Elizabeth Bennet, they had known Darcy all his life. He was certainly not without faults. After all, his temper and stubbornness were well known among their family circle, but Darcy could hardly be called self-indulgent or neglectful of his duty to his family. In truth, his uncle and aunt had often privately shared their fears for Darcy's happiness, as everything in his life seemed to consist of duty and obligation.

"I cannot believe Catherine's accusations of Darcy," his uncle finally ended their debate over the news. "However, we have no personal knowledge of Miss Bennet. If you can tolerate a long day's journey, my dear, we will be in London tomorrow evening. Then we will have the opportunity to at least meet Darcy's bride before the wedding."

With his wife's agreement, Lord ---- instructed the servants to have their trunks ---- and the carriage ready for departure at first light. There was nothing more to be done until they reached London.

Darcy's visage was grave, indeed, when he left his home shortly after breakfast the following morning on a matter of business. This would have been entirely unremarkable several months earlier, as Darcy had demonstrated a marked tendency toward solemnity since the loss of his father. Of late, however, Darcy's mien had steadfastly reflected his happiness at having procured Elizabeth's affections. Therefore, the servants were all uneasy, hoping that nothing had arisen to interfere with the master's happiness. In truth, Darcy's lack of cheer was precipitated entirely by concern for his cousin Anne's situation.

While visiting the Archbishop's offices two weeks earlier to procure a special marriage license, Darcy had also made a polite inquiry for assistance regarding a will validated by the church some years earlier. Darcy was very grateful that the cleric from whom he had purchased the marriage license had shown no idle curiosity regarding his request. The man simply referred him to Father William Henderson, adding that unfortunately the Father was currently away making a tour of the ecclesiastical courts on the Archbishop's behalf. Darcy had left his card in hopes that his message would be relayed and to his gratification it had been. Darcy had received a letter from Father Henderson yesterday, expressing his willingness to meet at Darcy's earliest convenience.

Darcy was surprised when he was shown into the priest's office. Not only was the large desk strewn with books and stacks of documents, but there were also books and papers in all but one visitor's chair and another stack of books on the floor nearby as if they had been hurriedly moved in anticipation of Darcy's visit. This was certainly the priest's private study as it was totally lacking in the formal, almost forbidding grandeur of the public rooms in the building. Father Henderson himself was also most unexpected. He was a small, wizened man who smiled cheerily and gestured for Darcy to have a seat.

"Thank you for seeing me, Father Henderson," Darcy began. "I understand you have been traveling and I appreciate your prompt response to my inquiry."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy," the priest said, "I was told you have some questions regarding a will that was validated by the church some time ago. We take any hint of irregularities in such matters very seriously. Would you please tell me what you know of the circumstances and why you are concerned?"

"I am here representing the interests of a female cousin, sir," Darcy said. "May I assume that any information I share regarding her circumstances will be regarded as confidential?"

"Of course, Mr. Darcy," the priest said as he sat forward in his chair. "I must confess that I had assumed you were acting for someone else. These inquiries are usually made by disgruntled ne'er-do-wells who have been disinherited. I share that information to explain why my assistant made discrete inquiries into your own character and situation as a matter of course, even before I returned to town yesterday. Knowing that you are a man of considerable fortune, I thought it highly unlikely that you would be instigating such an investigation on your own behalf."

The priest paused and stared at Darcy silently a moment before continuing, "I trust you are not offended by my having done what I deem necessary to protect the church and those who rely on it for justice."

Darcy was surprised by the priest's practicality and candor, but he was not affronted in the least. "Thank you for speaking frankly, Father Henderson. I would be equally frank, but I must be assured that this information will not be shared—even with your fellow clergymen."

The priest's eyebrows raised slightly as he wondered what was afoot, but he calmly replied, "I promise you, Mr. Darcy, that whatever you have to tell me of your cousin will be kept in the strictest confidence. I will guard that information as if she had confided in me herself as part of her confession."

Darcy nodded as he said, "I have reason to fear that my aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh has contrived to deprive her daughter Anne of her rightful inheritance. I do not know the terms of my late uncle's will, but he was a man of considerable fortune and it seems highly unlikely that he would not have taken steps to provide for his only child."

"I would admit that it is unusual for a man to overlook his issue in such matters," Father Henderson agreed, "but you intimated he died some years ago. Please tell me why such suspicions have arisen at this particular time."

"Although my aunt has always made a great show of her solicitude for her daughter," Darcy said, "she has never been particularly kind or thoughtful of anyone else's sensibilities, least of all Anne's. Recently I quarreled with my aunt over a matter of no little consequence—"

"Would that be your impending marriage?" Father Henderson asked quietly.

"I see that your assistant is thorough," Darcy said with a nod. "While it is her right to hold her own opinions, my aunt crossed the line of decency and behaved deplorably not only towards me but also towards someone I esteem highly. I felt I had no choice but to break off all relations with Lady Catherine, and I hated the thought of leaving my cousin behind with no other companion. At best my aunt is selfish and vindictive, but I have also begun to wonder if she is entirely rational. I offered Anne a home and my protection fully intending to provide for her myself if necessary. However, shortly after accepting my offer and leaving home my cousin became ill—"

Father Henderson could see that the young man before him was struggling to regain his composure. He rose and poured Darcy a glass of sherry and then waited patiently until he was able to continue.

"Thank you. I have no little difficulty controlling my temper concerning this situation," Darcy explained. He then sighed and continued, "The physician summoned to attend my cousin diagnosed her malady as—laudanum withdrawal. He could not say whether the laudanum was begun for a valid medical purpose or not, but he definitely affirmed there was no reason for her to currently be using it."

"How is the young lady now?" Father Henderson asked gently.

"Much better," Darcy answered with a slight smile. "She has been under the care of the young woman who will become my wife in two days time—and her family. While the doctor has encouraged us to be careful of Anne for sometime to come, she is stronger in every way. There are several pertinent details that have caused us to suspect my aunt's motives in the situation. I find it an extraordinary coincidence that this treatment was begun the summer before my cousin was to be presented to society. Equally notable is the fact that the doctor who prescribed this 'tonic' and has continued to provide it for almost ten years has never met or examined my cousin."

Gone was the merry, smiling man who had first greeted Darcy. Father Henderson also seemed taller in his fury.

"Mr. Darcy, please be assured of the church's cooperation in ferreting out the truth of the matter. When and where was the will validated?"

"My uncle died in 1801 in Kent," Darcy replied.

"Excellent," the priest replied with a sardonic smile. "The Diocese of Rochester has changed bishops twice since then which should help speed this along to a satisfactory conclusion. Although we are sometimes loathe to admit it, the clergy is made up of mere men and we are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge our mistakes. The current bishop is an excellent man. In the interest of discretion, I suggest all inquiries be made directly

to Bishop King and in person. I shall write a letter of introduction assuring him of the Archdiocese's particular interest in this case."

Although the matter was far from concluded, Darcy felt somewhat lighter when he left for Gracechurch Street with the letter of recommendation in his pocket. At Darcy's request the priest had recommended both Colonel Fitzwilliam and himself to the bishop. It was Darcy's hope that Fitzwilliam would be able to travel into Kent right away, but if not, he would manage it himself before leaving town for the summer.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had just finished dressing for his dinner engagement that evening when his batman announced the arrival of his parents. Hoping this sudden appearance was evidence of their excitement over Darcy's imminent marriage rather than a harbinger of something less pleasant, the Colonel checked his cravat, brushed imaginary lint from his sleeve and sallied forth to meet them.

After the obligatory greetings were accomplished, Lord ---- said, "I can see that you are going out, son, so we will not keep you, but please plan to drop round after you have kept your engagement. Your mother and I are very anxious to speak with you. We would have come to town sooner if we had known what was going on, but we were away from home. We only received your letter--yours and Darcy's--yesterday. "

Thinking it best not to dance around the matter entirely Fitzwilliam ventured to say, "I assume this is about my cousins. I will see all three of them at dinner and will happily convey the news that you have come to town."

"So it is true then? Anne has left Rosings?" Lady ---- inquired.

Fitzwilliam barely had time to nod before his father asked, "Are you having dinner at Darcy's?"

"No, sir, at the home of Miss Bennet's aunt and uncle--"

Lord ---- did little to hide his disappointment. As a close relation, he could take liberties with Darcy that would not be excusable with strangers. Rising he said, "Well, we had best not keep you then."

"Thank you for understanding, sir," Fitzwilliam said. He was pleased that their first inquiry had been regarding Anne. Interpreting this to mean that their concern for her overshadowed any worries regarding Darcy's marriage, the colonel was eager to allay his parents' fears. "However, I do think it is of great import that we speak now. Please sit down. There are some serious matters to be addressed that Darcy and I agreed were best not included in a letter. I will just send a note to Darcy explaining my tardiness."

Fitzwilliam poured each of his parents a glass of wine and rang for his batman, before dashing off a quick note.

Dear Darcy,

I am delayed on a matter of unexpected business. Please explain this to our hosts and insist that they not wait dinner for me. I hope to join you for dessert.

Fitzwilliam

The note was ready when his servant appeared and the colonel charged the man with delivering it to Darcy personally.

"--If he is gone from home, you will find him at the Gardiners' home."

His parents exchanged a quizzical glance. Obviously their son was well acquainted with these people if his servant required no other directions. Fitzwilliam saw the exchange, but felt no inclination to remark upon it. Instead he refilled his parents' glasses and poured one for himself. He noted the almost predatory expression his mother wore, a look the colonel knew from experience meant she was determined that her curiosity would be satisfied.

"I do apologize for not having been more forthcoming," the colonel began as he sat back with a sigh, "and I assume by your tearing to town immediately upon your return home that you also received a letter from my aunt."

Lord and Lady ---- nodded but neither said a word. They merely waited for their son to continue.

"I know not exactly what objections Lady Catherine expressed to you regarding the match, but I know the objections she raised in Kent and can assure you they are wholly unfounded. My aunt has long deluded herself that Darcy and Anne would eventually marry. However, that disappointment does not excuse her base accusations against Miss Bennet and my cousin."

Seeing the glance that passed between his parents, Fitzwilliam was certain that Lady Catherine's letter to his father had been every bit as ill-conceived and malicious in her railing against the marriage as he had feared.

"I do not even want to know how Lady Catherine has chosen to slander my cousin and Miss Bennet this time," he said pointedly. "I would simply like to tell you the truth. Darcy first met Miss Bennet last fall when he was staying with his friend Bingley in Hertfordshire. While Miss Bennet has neither fortune nor exalted connections, she is a young woman of excellent character and manners and the daughter of a gentleman. She is also extremely lively and intelligent, and the first woman for whom I have ever seen my cousin show any partiality or regard. I could see immediately that Darcy favored her, but I did not fully comprehend the depth of his feelings until he spoke with me after they had become engaged."

"So Darcy has elected to marry for love then?" Lady ---- asked.

"Yes, Mother, he has," Fitzwilliam replied, "and the only person to be displeased by this development is Lady Catherine. Anne made it very clear while we were still in Kent that she had no desire to marry Darcy and was delighted by his engagement. I have never been excessively fond of Lady Catherine, but I have now ceased to have any respect for her. Her deportment during the last several days of our visit was abominable. She demonstrated a complete lack of discretion and care for the honor of our family. It was her outrageous behavior that resulted in Anne fleeing Rosings and placing herself under Darcy's protection. Darcy himself was so grievously offended that he has completely severed all ties to our aunt and to Rosings."

The colonel was pleased to note a hardening of displeasure in both his parents' features, as he knew their displeasure was now properly aimed at Lady Catherine.

"I must admit that when Darcy first offered a home to Anne, I thought there was little chance she would accept, but I am very grateful that she did. We all left Rosings together--Miss Bennet, her friend Miss Lucas, Anne, Darcy and myself. When we reached London, it was deemed best that Anne remain with Miss Bennet at her aunt's while Darcy informed Georgiana of her arrival and had her quarters prepared."

"That is sensible, but hardly seems an important detail," Lady ---- brusquely interrupted.

Although she was not known for her patience, Lady ---- sincerely regretted her snappish remark when Fitzwilliam went on to relate how Anne had fallen ill shortly after he and Darcy had left the Gardiners' that day. It was all the colonel could do to remain relatively calm as he described the doctor's diagnosis and Anne's suffering as her body craved the laudanum she had taken regularly for years. His parents were stunned.

"--I think Mrs. Gardiner may have suspected what was wrong with Anne before the doctor examined the tonic," the colonel added. "From what Darcy said she and Miss Bennet had quite made up their minds that Anne was not going anywhere until she was well--even before Doctor Howard confirmed the source of her indisposition."

"But surely--" Lady ---- began.

"Surely, what, Mother?" Fitzwilliam interrupted her. "Georgiana is too young to bear such a burden and Darcy and I could not have cared for Anne as Miss Bennet and her aunt did during those first horrible days. For one, it would not have been proper, but a far more important consideration is that neither of us would have known how to comfort her."

"I will spare you the gruesome details, but Anne was extremely ill and those women tended her as lovingly as if she were their blood. You know how Darcy is. He initially insisted that Anne should be moved to his home and no expense would be spared--"

"That sounds wise to me--" his father began.

"Have you ever seen someone suffer opium withdrawal, Father?"

"Of course not," Lord ---- murmured.

"The doctor was equally insistent that Anne should remain at the Gardiners' because this is not like an ordinary illness. Although poor Anne has endured much physical suffering, it has also affected her mind and emotions. The doctor was adamant at the outset that she would need the support of friends and family, not the ministrations of hired nurses. I am fully convinced his counsel was correct, and I am everlastingly grateful that Darcy was able to put Anne's needs above our damn family pride."

"How does she fare now?" his mother quietly asked.

"Much better," Fitzwilliam said with a genuine smile. "Anne is still somewhat frail and prone to fits of despondency. The doctor cautioned us that her spirits will need to be supported for some time, but I see in her now the laughing girl I had all but forgotten. Like Darcy's ladylove, Anne is a wit, but her wit has a bit more barb to it. We can never repay Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Bennet for what they have done for my cousin."

"Once Anne's physical symptoms began to lessen, the rest of us were allowed to help amuse her and keep her company, but it was Miss Bennet and her aunt that saw Anne through the worst of it. Even now Miss Bennet sleeps with her because my cousin is prone to nightmares and periods of anxiety. I also think Miss Bennet has endured the worst of Anne's fits and foul tempers. Yet, she is not resentful. On the contrary when you see them together you will no doubt be impressed by their sincere regard and affection for one another. My poor cousin has led a very solitary life. I shudder to think what would have become of her if Darcy had not entreated her to come away."

Lord ---- reached for his wife's hand. Both their faces were grave.

"This is difficult to comprehend, Richard," he said. "I know Catherine is selfish and opinionated, but she always seemed so solicitous of Anne's health."

"Father, I would encourage you not to speak her name to Anne or Darcy at this point. It is entirely possible that this was done to Anne intentionally--"

"Surely you do not believe Cather--"

"I realize she is your sister, sir," Fitzwilliam said harshly, "but I fully believe that Lady Catherine is more than capable of subjecting her daughter to such treatment simply to keep Anne under her domination. According to Anne's recollection she began taking the tonic the summer before she was to come out--fortuitous timing if her mother's goal was to retain control of both Anne and her inheritance. It also strikes us as most unusual that the doctor who prescribed the tonic never examined Anne. Lady Catherine met with him, but Anne was never even introduced to him. I have been

somewhat occupied of late with attending to Anne and my duties as Horse Guards, but you may be assured that once Darcy has taken Anne into Derbyshire, I fully intend to get to the bottom of this."

After a long, heavy silence, Lord -- said, "Please let us know if there is some way we can be of assistance to you, Son, or to Anne."

"Thank you, Father," Fitzwilliam rose and took his father's hand briefly before leaning down to kiss his mother's cheek. "Goodnight, Mother. Since we have had our talk I will not plan to call later this evening, but if you like, I will call for you tomorrow morning and accompany you to the Gardiners' so that you can see Anne for yourselves."

"Good evening, Colonel," Mr. Gardiner exclaimed as Colonel Fitzwilliam followed Maggie into the dining parlor. "We are delighted you were able to join us. Now our party is complete."

The colonel had scarcely taken his seat when Maggie reentered from the kitchen with a tray bearing his dinner. He smiled even as he teasingly chided his cousin.

"I see love has so clouded your thinking as to make you an untrustworthy messenger, Darcy."

"Do not scold him, Colonel," Mrs. Gardiner answered before Darcy could attempt an explanation. "I am certain Mr. Darcy relayed your message faithfully. In this case the fault is mine. Please forgive my presumption, Colonel. Perhaps, it is the result of mothering a brood of young children, but I must insist that you eat something. I know that you were detained on business and, therefore, I assume you have had no dinner."

The colonel allowed Mrs. Gardiner was correct and thanked her sincerely. He then happily ate his meal while the conversation continued around him. Having served in the field, Fitzwilliam was used to temporary privation, but he was excessively hungry this evening. Perhaps it was the result of the exchange with his parents. Whatever the cause, he was ravenous and greatly appreciated Mrs. Gardiner's insistence that he eat. The colonel was also impressed by her methods. She had done it so well, as if he were obliging her by having his dinner while the others lingered over their dessert. Yes, she will be up to Mother's harshest scrutiny, he thought. Fitzwilliam pulled Darcy aside for a private word as the gentlemen were leaving the table and explained the exact nature of the business that had delayed his arrival.

"--I have promised to accompany Mother and Father on a morning visit on the morrow to introduce them to the denizens of Gracechurch Street. Should we mention that this evening or shall I just bring them around at the appropriate hour?"

After a quick whispered consultation the cousins decided not to make mention of the planned visit to the others. Darcy was confident that he need have no fears of what would meet his relations if they were to arrive at the Gardiners' unexpectedly, and he wanted to spare Elizabeth the anxiety and worry he suspected would be occasioned by foreknowledge of their intentions. While Darcy had every confidence in Elizabeth and those of her relations that were currently in town, he was not quite so sanguine regarding his own family's prospective behavior. While he had never considered his Aunt Catherine as an exemplary figure, her crass behavior had shaken his faith in the family as a whole. Although Darcy doubted his uncle the Earl would exhibit anything but correctness in his public behavior, his uncle's wife Lady Sarah could be somewhat scathing in her remarks and quick to judge. Darcy resolved that he would take care to be in Gracechurch Street tomorrow before his family arrived.

It had become Georgiana's custom to repair to the Gardiners' shortly after breakfast each morning. It had also become accepted as a matter of course that Darcy would follow later in the morning after he had attended to any necessary correspondence and matters of business. In the hope of devoting himself solely to Elizabeth in the first days of their marriage, Darcy was being most diligent to keep current in all his other obligations.

Georgiana, however, was not unduly surprised the following morning when Darcy expressed a desire to accompany her after breakfast instead of remaining behind, as had been his habit. She merely assumed that as the wedding drew near her brother was becoming more impatient to spend time with Elizabeth. Darcy was doubly glad he had eschewed other matters when they arrived in Gracechurch Street to find Elizabeth and Anne in the back garden with the children. Anne had initially been leery of the Gardiners' children, having never been around little ones. As her physical condition improved Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth had contrived seemingly natural ways to place Anne in the children's company. Anyone esteemed by Cousin Lizzy was considered a paragon as a matter of course, so the young Gardiners universally admired Anne. As her nerves grew steadier and her fears of saying or doing something wrong lessened, Anne became genuinely fond of them. That particular carefree joy which is unique to happy children and the children's unabashed admiration of her were as balm to Anne's injured psyche.

This particular morning Elizabeth had persuaded Anne to read to the children and a charming sight they made. Anne was comfortably situated on a chaise in the garden with the children scattered around her. It turned out that Anne had a gift for mimicry and her animated rendition of the familiar tale enthralled the children. Elizabeth sat nearby ostensibly sewing, but in reality she was on the alert for the first sign of fatigue or melancholy in her charge. Elizabeth's fierce protectiveness of Anne had done what Darcy would have heretofore believed impossible. It had increased his admiration and affection for her. When the story was ended Elizabeth insisted the children go play and allow "Miss Anne" to rest. They rose to obey albeit somewhat reluctantly. However, Anne's promise of another story in the afternoon quickly restored their smiles, and the young Gardiners were soon occupied with a game of tag on the far side of the garden.

Elizabeth and the three cousins were soon engrossed in conversation. Indeed, the time passed so quickly that Darcy was surprised when a servant interrupted them to announce that guests had arrived and they were all requested to join Mrs. Gardiner in the parlor. It was far too early for a morning visit, or so Darcy thought until a glance at his watch revealed that the morning was nearly gone. Having delivered her message, the servant took charge of the children and hustled them off to the nursery.

As the others wondered aloud who their callers might be, Darcy was suddenly uncomfortable with his decision not to inform them of his uncle's

intended visit. It had been Darcy's way to contain his emotions behind an inscrutable visage. Elizabeth was extremely grateful that he was not so reserved in expressing his ardor for her in private, but she had quickly grown accustomed to watching for and deciphering the almost indiscernible clues to Darcy's thoughts and feelings when they were in company. Hence, she alone observed his uneasiness.

"What is it, dearest?" she gently asked. "You seem preoccupied."

"I must apologize to you," Darcy began, wondering how it could be that she already knew him so well. He was not disturbed by Elizabeth's ability to seemingly read his mind, but it was still a novel experience for one who had habitually kept his deepest thoughts and feelings to himself. Meanwhile, Elizabeth waited patiently for Darcy to continue.

"I am truly sorry," he said quietly, "for I fear I have made another grievous error in judgment. The guests waiting in the parlor are undoubtedly Colonel Fitzwilliam and his parents. He told me last night they had arrived in town and were anxious to meet you, and I decided not to tell you before hand. I thought it might cause you to worry—but I see now that I should not make decisions for you particularly when they are based on nothing more than assumptions."

Elizabeth could not help wincing inwardly as she thought of her mother's everlasting nervous complaints, and wondered if that had brought on this attempt to shield her. Did Fitzwilliam really consider her to be so like her mother? The thought merely increased her irritation with him.

"While I appreciate your concern for my feelings, Mr. Darcy," she began coldly, "I am not such a delicate creature that you must fear for my nerves. Nor am I a child who requires someone else to make my decisions for me."

Elizabeth felt the desire to rage at him, but realizing Georgiana and Anne were awkwardly looking on, she took a deep breath and said, "Perhaps we should continue this discussion another time, Mr. Darcy. It would be rude to keep our guests waiting."

Sensing the anger behind her coldness, Darcy reached for her hand and said, "Please, dearest, I think it is important to discuss this now. Anne, Georgiana, would you be so kind as to go in and make our excuses? We will join you presently."

"Of course," Anne replied with considerable satisfaction. She was immensely pleased to know that Elizabeth would stand up to her cousin. Overall Anne thought very highly of him, but in her opinion Darcy had become far too accustomed to having his own way. Having one's own way was not evil, in and of itself. However, accepting that as the natural order of things was a step along the path to the very dangerous position of assuming it was one's right, and Anne did not want to see her cousin follow in her mother's footsteps. Yes, she thought, Darcy has chosen well. Elizabeth will not allow him to go so far wrong. Smothering a smirk Anne led a horrified Georgiana away by the arm.

"Come away, Georgiana," she urged. When they had reached the confines of the house, Anne stopped to reassure her young cousin.

"Do not worry," she said. "They are very much in love, but they are both strong willed and stubborn. That is bound to produce disagreement from time to time, particularly in the early days of their marriage, but you need not fear. Surely there have been times when you disagreed with your brother."

Georgiana blushed as she said, "Why, of course, but I never--"

When she did not finish, Anne supplied, "But you never told him? That is the difference in a younger sister and a wife. Remember Darcy initiated this discussion by owning he was wrong, and it was he who insisted it take precedence over the guests waiting in the parlor. He wants their marriage to be a partnership of equals as much as Elizabeth does. I would also warrant that Darcy will be able to offer a far more effective apology in private."

That elicited a giggle from Georgiana and the two were still smiling broadly when they reached the parlor. The cousins entered the room arm in arm as a matter of course. Colonel Fitzwilliam could not help feeling triumphant, as it was clear that his parents were taken aback by the changes in both their nieces. Gone was the look of anxiety that Georgiana almost habitually wore in any company beyond that of her guardians, and as for Anne--she hardly seemed the same person. Although Anne was still pale and thin, her complexion had lost its sallowness and she now moved purposefully. Gone was the languid air and her eyes--that change was most remarkable of all. They sparkled with a combination of intelligence and merriment. The contrast with Anne's former vacant expression was shocking.

As Lord and Lady ---- were clearly struggling for composure, Mrs. Gardiner quietly excused herself to allow them a more private family reunion. She could not help wondering why Lizzy and Mr. Darcy had not come in with the others as she firmly shut the parlor door and headed for the kitchen.

Sensible of their waiting guests, Darcy and Elizabeth were, in fact, quitting the garden at that moment. After all, it is entirely reasonable that a disagreement beginning with a confession of wrong and an apology would be settled quickly. After Elizabeth had the satisfaction of expressing her displeasure with his actions, she had been glad to conclude their quarrel by accepting Darcy's apology. Feeling somewhat overcome by an odd combination of relief at Elizabeth's forgiveness and admiration for her fiery temper, Darcy had dared to kiss her for the first time since they had left Kent. This resulted in their quarrel being all but forgotten as thoughts of tomorrow took precedence.

Mrs. Gardiner ceased her wondering at the young couple's delay when she met the pair in the back hallway. Their tightly clasped hands and abstracted smiles bespoke of a private moment of some sort between the two. Aunt Gardiner was not excessively concerned as they were to be wed the following morning, and she had full confidence in both their characters. However, she was anxious that nothing appear amiss to Mr. Darcy's relations.

Aunt Gardiner greeted them without the slightest trace of surprise or censure in her tone and then added, "Please join me in the kitchen for a cup of tea. I believe Lord and Lady ---- were quite overwhelmed by the changes in Anne. Do not worry. Anne did not appear to be the slightest bit disturbed by the reunion and she has Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam for support should she require it. No, I think it best we leave them alone for a few minutes before returning to introduce you, Lizzy."

Aunt Gardiner's purpose was, of course, two fold. Taking a cup of tea would also allow the young lovers an opportunity to fully return to earth lest someone else perceive the nature of their delay. Remembering the import of this meeting, Elizabeth gratefully accepted the offer and led Darcy into the kitchen. She knew a cup of tea would calm her nerves and allow enough time for her to recollect herself. Although it was not planned for such an effect, the result of Lord and Lady ---- spending a short while with Anne before meeting Elizabeth was immediate acceptance and approval of their new niece.

After seeing the changes wrought in Anne by their loving care, Darcy's highborn relations were no longer prepared to find fault in Elizabeth and her family. Knowing his parents' penchant for snobbery, Colonel Fitzwilliam was all but sniggering at the way they graciously greeted Elizabeth and expressed their delight with the match. His father congratulated Darcy repeatedly on his fine choice and his mother well nigh begged the privilege of hosting a family dinner party that evening so they might all become better acquainted. Mrs. Gardiner graciously accepted the invitation on behalf of her extended family and Colonel Fitzwilliam could not resist a surreptitious wink to Darcy as they took their leave.

Elizabeth was delighted by the invitation, but it was quite clear to Darcy that she did not apprehend its wider significance. He had long admired Elizabeth's fierce independence and her egalitarian views. Yet, Darcy found himself surprisingly affected by the realization that Elizabeth's pleasure in the event rested solely in the fact that these were his relations, not in their rank. He silently blessed her wholesome country upbringing and Elizabeth's resulting naivete as to the merciless duplicity of the upper classes. For his part, Darcy all but sighed his relief that she would not have to learn those lessons through bitter personal experience.

The mere fact that his aunt and uncle had hastened to town and then entertained Elizabeth's family before the wedding would constitute a public endorsement of the match, and if they were prepared to support the marriage, there was little that Lady Catherine could do to harm them. While Darcy had been prepared to brave the world's disapproval for Elizabeth's sake, it was far better to know that she would be spared the snubs and slights of London's fashionable society, for no one who valued rank and social standing dared offend Lady Sarah. As the daughter of a duke who had subsequently married an earl, Lady Sarah knew that only the royal family unequivocally outranked her and she made certain to remain on excellent terms with several members of that family as well. Tonight's dinner party assured Elizabeth would be properly respected as his wife. In a moment of self-revelation Darcy perceived that not terribly long ago he would have been worried about Elizabeth's acceptance in society for selfish reasons, but now his concern was almost entirely for her sake and the rest was for Georgiana's.

And so it was that when Georgiana remarked on his silence during the carriage ride home and asked if anything were amiss, Darcy was able to reply quite sincerely, "No, Georgiana, everything is as it should be."

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