

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter One

*Love wakes men, once a lifetime each.*  
COVENTRY PATMORE, *The Revelation*

### Chapter One

Elizabeth Bennet was shocked when the housekeeper announced, "A Colonel Fitzwilliam is without, ma'am. Shall I show him in?"

Seeing her mother's confusion, Elizabeth hastened to explain. "He is Mr. Darcy's cousin, Mama. We met in Kent."

Mrs. Bennet merely nodded for Hill to admit the man, but Elizabeth could see the gleam of anticipation in her eyes. With Elizabeth's mother, a visit from an eligible bachelor was never just a visit. She was probably already contemplating the marriage of Elizabeth and the colonel. While Elizabeth liked Colonel Fitzwilliam very much, she knew they were simply friends. As the second son of an earl, he was all but obligated to marry very well indeed.

Before Elizabeth could woolgather any further, the colonel was bowing before them. She made the necessary introductions and then sat back to wonder why he was here.

"It's so nice to see you again, Miss Bennet. I was passing through Hertfordshire on an errand for the general and could not resist the temptation to stop in."

The other Bennet ladies accepted this explanation, but Elizabeth thought it suspicious. Whatever the reason for the colonel's visit, his pleasant conversation and ready smiles impressed her mother and sisters, much as they had impressed Elizabeth herself in Kent.

Thinking of Kent brought other memories to mind, memories that made Elizabeth far from comfortable. She could hear Mr. Darcy's voice telling her he loved her, followed by her own tirade as she refused his proposal. Yes, for all the colonel's good manners and affability, Elizabeth was most uneasy in his presence, remembering how she had upbraided his cousin.

The colonel noticed Elizabeth's blush and hoped she was thinking of Darcy. Turning to her mother he politely asked, "Mrs. Bennet, might I have the pleasure of Miss Elizabeth's company for a turn around your garden? I have been sitting in the coach all morning and find myself in need of exercise."

Her nerves all a flutter at the prospect of Lizzy engaged to the son of an earl, Mrs. Bennet readily gave her permission. "Why certainly, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I am sure that Lizzy would enjoy a walk as well. It is a beautiful morning."

Once they were outside and out of hearing, Elizabeth could not resist teasing him, "So Colonel, how extraordinary that your general should have business so near Meryton of all places."

Fitzwilliam did not appear the least bit affronted. In fact, he laughed. "Ah, Miss Bennet, I had forgotten just how clever you are. Yes, you have caught me. I have not chosen the most direct route for my travels on the general's behalf."

"And just where are you supposed to be, Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"I am actually on my way to Plymouth, via Meryton. It's not the route one would usually follow between London and Plymouth, but I am taking precautions to avoid enemy agents. Of course, upon arriving in Meryton, I realized that a letter would do just as well for the general's commission, so I shall return to London tomorrow."

Seeing how pleased the Colonel was with himself, Elizabeth could not help laughing. "Well, then for King and Country, may I welcome you to Meryton. We are amazingly free of French agents here in the countryside so I think you are safe for the moment, sir."

"That is a relief, Miss Bennet." Suddenly Fitzwilliam's expression became quite serious. "I hope you will not think me an impudent dog when I divulge my real reason for calling on you."

Although she was anxious, Elizabeth managed to maintain her calm exterior as she waited for him to continue.

"I am not on a commission for my general, Miss Bennet, but rather for my cousin."

"Your cousin, sir?" Elizabeth had wondered if this visit had anything to do with Mr. Darcy, but she was shocked that the colonel would admit it so openly. "It is not my intention to be rude, Colonel, but I do not comprehend your meaning. Mr. Darcy and I are not the best of friends; therefore, I cannot understand your presence here."

"Forgive me, Miss Bennet. I did not speak plainly. I am sent to you by my cousin Georgiana."

"Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth was astonished. "But we have never met."

"That is why Georgiana thought it might draw unwelcome attention if she were to write to you openly. She trusted in my discretion to find a way to give you this."

The colonel slipped a letter into Elizabeth's hand before she realized what he was about. She looked at him questioningly and the colonel continued.

"I have not read it, Miss Bennet, but I do know something of its contents. Georgiana suggested I give you time to read her letter and reflect upon it before asking for your reply. Perhaps I might call again tomorrow before I hasten away-- on the general's behalf, of course."

Elizabeth was nearly overwhelmed with curiosity and anxiety, but she managed a polite response. "Yes, you may call tomorrow, Colonel. I am confident my family would enjoy seeing you again before you depart."

"Thank you, Miss Bennet."

For just a moment, Colonel Fitzwilliam dropped his guard and Elizabeth saw genuine compassion and concern in his eyes.

"Please give my compliments to your family, Miss Bennet. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Mrs. Bennet was disappointed that the colonel had not proposed to Elizabeth in the garden, but she was content to know that he would return tomorrow. If Lizzy did not suit him, then perhaps Colonel Fitzwilliam would fall in love with one of her other daughters. Maybe Lydia would do for him. Lydia was, after all, her own particular favorite.

Elizabeth lingered with her family long enough to be certain she engendered no suspicions toward herself. Although she managed to behave normally, Elizabeth could think of nothing but the unopened letter in her pocket. What could Miss Darcy mean by writing to her? Surely, she didn't know of her brother's proposal. Elizabeth could hardly envision the proud Mr. Darcy telling his sister, or his cousin for that matter, of her refusal. But what of that one moment when Colonel Fitzwilliam had looked so concerned? It seemed as if he knew something of her history with his cousin.

The family conversation finally turned to some local gossip, and Elizabeth felt secure that her mother and sisters suspected nothing. With murmured excuses she left as if going upstairs and then slipped away from the house. Elizabeth walked some distance before settling herself under the shade of an oak to read Miss Darcy's letter. Her hands were actually shaking as she broke the seal.

Dear Miss Bennet,

Please forgive me for daring to write this letter. I realize we have not been introduced and it is presumptuous of me to impose upon you so. However, I must as I do not know where else to turn. I am most distressed for my brother, Miss Bennet. Fitzwilliam has not been himself since his return from Kent. At first he was merely silent and unhappy. Now he is also unwell. Our cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam finally resorted to spirits to pry the truth from him. Please do not fear any reproach from me, Miss Bennet. While I love my brother dearly, I know that he is often misunderstood by strangers. In fact, Fitzwilliam gave us to understand that he had behaved very badly towards you, your family and your neighbors. Therefore, it was entirely understandable for you to refuse him.

When Cousin Richard finally got him to talk about his unhappiness, Fitzwilliam confessed that you rightfully despised him. He has always been so strong and confident. Now it would seem that he despises himself. My brother's low spirits have affected his health. He came down with the fever several weeks ago. With youth and general good health in his favor, our physician initially expected Fitzwilliam to rally quickly. The fearful truth is that his condition has deteriorated at an alarming rate. Last night Dr. Abercrombie advised me to prepare for the worst. I must confess that his warning is what gave me the courage to write you.

I fear Fitzwilliam has simply given up. I do not expect you to accept a man you do not love, Miss Bennet. In fact, I admire your courage in refusing his offer of marriage. Yet I know you are a kind and compassionate woman. My brother could not love you so if that were not true. He may sometimes be proud and stubborn, but Fitzwilliam is no fool.

Could you find it in your heart to let my brother know that you do not despise him? I think that if Fitzwilliam knew you were not thinking ill of him, he might be able to rouse his once formidable will and fight to survive. I do not ask you to offer him false hope, but merely to let him know that his bad behavior has been forgiven. We will remain in London for the present. I have insisted that be so, as my brother is truly not well enough to travel at this time. It is also my secret hope that you might be able to come to London. I understand from my brother that you have family here.

I would so like to meet you, Miss Bennet, for I have long suspected my brother's attachment for you. I first guessed it when he was at Netherfield last fall as Fitzwilliam's letters never failed to mention you.

Please have pity on me. Fitzwilliam is my family. I shudder to think what my life would be like without him. My cousin will be at your disposal should you be able to journey to London at this time. It is my fervent hope that we might meet soon. May God bless you.

Sincerely,  
Georgiana Darcy

The plight of Mr. Darcy and his sister moved her to tears. Yes, Elizabeth wanted to assist them and perhaps make up for the wrong she had done Mr. Darcy in judging him so harshly. But how could it be done? Elizabeth could not possibly leave Hertfordshire tomorrow with Colonel Fitzwilliam. It was unthinkable that Mr. Darcy's proposal and her refusal become common knowledge. That would be too cruel. Yet to travel to London on such an errand without explanation would cause a great deal of gossip. It might irreparably damage her reputation.

How Elizabeth wished it were possible to write her aunt and receive a response in the same day. If only Aunt Gardiner invited her to Gracechurch Street, then Elizabeth might be able to call on Miss Darcy. Little did she know that such an invitation was already en route and would arrive that very

day.

Two of the Gardiner children were also down with the fever that was raging through London. The Bennets received a letter that afternoon asking leave to send the other children to Longbourn. The Gardiners also requested sanctuary for two of their servants. If it met with the Bennets' approval, the Gardiners would send them to Longbourn to assist with the children. Finally, Aunt Gardiner's letter begged Elizabeth's assistance in London, since she was the only one of the Bennets to have had the fever.

Mr. Bennet dispatched an express right away so that the young Gardiners might be removed from contagion as soon as possible. The question remained of how Elizabeth could travel to London most expeditiously.

As this was being debated, Elizabeth mentioned Colonel Fitzwilliam's plan to return to London the following day. Perhaps if one of the maids went with her, she could travel to London under the colonel's protection. Everyone could see the merits of this solution, as Elizabeth would be at the Gardiners' tomorrow afternoon. It was soon decided that their maid Sally would accompany Elizabeth as chaperone. Sally had also had the fever and would be able to help with nursing the young Gardiners. Elizabeth was sent upstairs to pack and Mr. Bennet left straightaway to call upon Colonel Fitzwilliam at the inn and ask his assistance.

To say that the colonel was delighted to be of service to the Bennets would be something of an understatement. Colonel Fitzwilliam was relieved, as would his cousin be, when he assured her of Miss Bennet's presence in London tomorrow evening. Fitzwilliam had thought Georgiana's scheme had little chance of success, but the fortuitous timing of events gave him hope for both his cousins.

\*\*\*\*

Colonel Fitzwilliam was at Longbourn early the next morning, as Mr. Bennet had invited him for breakfast. Talk around the Bennets' table was usually quite animated. Today, however, they were preoccupied with worry for the Gardiners. The meal was eaten in relative silence and it seemed no time before the colonel was handing Elizabeth and Sally into the carriage. He would ride alongside the coach to afford Miss Bennet room and privacy.

Sally had been with the Bennets for many years and understood Miss Lizzy's moods well. The maid remained silent throughout the journey staring out the window when she wasn't dozing. She could tell Miss Lizzy was too worried for small talk.

Elizabeth was completely unaware of the passing countryside. She was concerned for her dear relatives, of course, but in reality Elizabeth's thoughts were fixed on Mr. Darcy. It was frightening that such a strong, healthy young man could lie near death. Elizabeth was worried for Mr. Darcy and his poor sister. In truth, she was also anxious for herself. What would she say to him if given the opportunity?

Elizabeth was filled with remorse for losing her temper with Mr. Darcy in April. She could not regret refusing him, but she was very sorry for wounding him. She had been filled with regret since reading Mr. Darcy's letter refuting her accusations. Almost everything she had held against him was untrue. Elizabeth's face glowed with shame just to think of it. If Mr. Darcy died without ever knowing that she believed him-- if he died without knowing how sorry she was for her unkind words, it would be more than she could bear.

Elizabeth was so wrapped up in her own misery that she did not notice their entry into the city. Her reverie continued uninterrupted until the carriage stopped in front of the Gardiners' home. Elizabeth had written a note to Georgiana late last night. She surreptitiously handed it to the Colonel as he helped her alight from the carriage. "For your cousin, sir," she whispered.

Aunt Gardiner herself met them at the door. Her fatigue was evident; however, she was extremely grateful to Colonel Fitzwilliam for bringing her niece to town. She rallied to greet him courteously and expressed a sincere wish that the colonel would call on them in the near future when all the Gardiners were well again. Colonel Fitzwilliam thanked her warmly.

Before departing he said, "I am on leave at present and will be staying with my cousins, Miss Bennet. As I mentioned Darcy himself has the fever and I hope to be of service to Georgiana during his illness. I would also be delighted to be of assistance to you if the occasion should arise. Please feel free to send word at any time you have need of me. Here is my cousins' address."

"Thank you, Colonel. You've already done so much just bringing me to my family here. I hope you find all to be well with your cousins. Please let Miss Darcy know that I am praying for her brother's recovery and that I am willing to assist her if that be possible."

"Thank you for that, Miss Bennet. I bid you goodnight."

Sally had already gone to unpack their things so Elizabeth hung up her own hat and coat. As they walked to the sick room, Aunt Gardiner asked, "Did I hear you sending a message to Miss Darcy, Lizzy? I did not realize you were acquainted with her."

"Only in a round about way, Aunt. We have never actually met." Elizabeth would not lie to her aunt, but she could hardly tell her everything. She told what she could of the truth and hoped it made sense. "I had occasion to meet her cousin Miss de Bourgh in Kent this spring, and of course, I met her brother last fall. Recently Miss Darcy and I have begun to correspond. She seems a very sweet young lady and I think she is lonesome for female companionship."

"That is very good of you, Lizzy. It must be lonely for a young girl being raised by her bachelor brother. Perhaps, you will be able to meet in person while you are here. Children are remarkably resilient and I hope Emma and Peter will soon be well."

Aunt Gardiner was plainly exhausted so Elizabeth sent her off to bed shortly after supper, promising that she or Sally would be with the children

through the night. Her uncle had escorted the other children to Longbourn and would not return home for several days.

Emma and Peter were little trouble as they were too tired to be demanding. Elizabeth watched over them and applied cold compresses when Emma's fever started to climb. The compresses were effective so Elizabeth was able to relax in a chair between their beds for some time. She found nursing those she loved to be very gratifying and these two little ones were quite dear to her. Watching the children sleeping peacefully, Elizabeth took encouragement that perhaps the disease was already running its course.

As the children slept, her thoughts were continually drawn to Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth wanted to help him, but could not decide how it might be done without revealing the particulars of their history. Her absorption was so great that Elizabeth did not hear Sally enter the room in the wee hours of the morning.

"It is your turn to rest now, Miss Lizzy. I have had a lovely long nap, not to mention the sleeping I did in the coach today. I will be fine until morning. You go on to bed now, and I promise to call you if there is anything amiss."

Finally allowing herself to feel how tired she was, Elizabeth was grateful that Sally had accompanied her to London. "Thank you, Sally. I know my cousins are in good hands."

"Go on now, Miss Lizzy. Your nightgown is all laid out for you."

Elizabeth managed a tired smile of thanks and left the room. Her fatigue quickly overcame her whirling thoughts and Elizabeth slept.

\*\*\*\*

The next day passed uneventfully. Elizabeth stayed busy helping her aunt in any way possible, but the Darcys were never far from her thoughts. Elizabeth felt she owed something to Mr. Darcy, an apology at the very least. Yet, how she could possibly call upon them under the circumstances?

Aunt Gardiner insisted that Elizabeth rest for several hours in the afternoon, as she and Sally were planning to divide the night watch again. Elizabeth dutifully lay down, but she was too consumed with worry for Mr. Darcy to sleep. Her anxiety grew with each passing hour. What if the unthinkable had happened and he were now dead? It was too horrible to consider.

Emma and Peter were much improved and both slept peacefully through Elizabeth's watch that night. She was relieved that they were better, but Elizabeth missed the nursing chores that had distracted her the night before. As she sat quietly between the children's beds, Elizabeth's thoughts were divided between memories of Mr. Darcy and her growing fear that it might be too late to make amends to the gentleman.

The sun was well up when Elizabeth awoke the next day. She dressed quickly and then stopped to look in on the children before going down to breakfast. They were both sound asleep under the watchful eye of the Gardiner's longtime servant Maggie. Maggie raised a finger to her lips and nodded proudly to two half eaten bowls of gruel on the table. The children had evidently taken some breakfast before going back to sleep. Elizabeth smiled and nodded her understanding before she quietly slipped away. She found Aunt Gardiner having breakfast in the dining parlor.

"Good morning, Aunt. I trust you slept well."

"Yes, I did, Lizzy. Thank you again for coming and for bringing Sally with you. I was nearly asleep on my feet when you arrived. I was almost too tired to sleep that first night, but as for last night, I slept very well indeed. It is amazing what a good night's sleep can do to restore one's spirits. I could tell Maggie was feeling much better this morning, too. Did she tell you that the children actually ate a little breakfast?"

"Yes, that is good news, Aunt. If the children are eating again, they will soon be stronger."

"You are such a comfort, Lizzy. I encouraged your uncle to stay at Longbourn, knowing that I would have you to lean on. Of course, he would hear none of that and plans to return home today. His exact words were, 'If I cannot look after the children, then I shall look after you, my dear.' I hope you have such a husband yourself one day, Lizzy."

"I hope so, too," Elizabeth agreed.

They were just finishing breakfast when a knock was heard at the door. Sally soon came into the dining parlor.

"Excuse me, ma'am. This message has come for you, Miss Lizzy, and the man what brought it is waiting for your answer."

Elizabeth recognized the handwriting and found her own hands sadly unsteady as she broke the seal. "It's from Miss Darcy, Aunt."

Elizabeth paled as she read the note. Then unable to speak she handed it to her aunt.

Dear Miss Bennet,

I was so relieved when Cousin Richard told me you were come to town. I had hoped to call upon you at your aunt's, but I cannot leave my brother. Fitzwilliam's condition is much worse. He is delirious with fever now and I fear he may not linger long. Fitzwilliam asked for you repeatedly during the night, and I think he would be more at peace if he knew you had forgiven him. I understand that you are busy caring for your own loved ones, but I am at my wit's end, Miss Bennet. I have sent the carriage in hopes that you will be able to come. Please help me, Miss Bennet. I am lost.

Yours truly,  
Georgiana Darcy

Mrs. Gardiner was stunned. Clearly there was much more to the history between her niece and the Darcys than she knew. Being a compassionate woman, Mrs. Gardiner realized that there would be time for questions later. Right now Lizzy was clearly most distressed for the Darcys and they obviously had need of her.

She spoke gently, "Lizzy, can you bear it? Can you go to Miss Darcy or shall I write a reply for you?"

"No, I think I had best go, Aunt, if you approve."

Proud of her niece's unselfishness, Mrs. Gardiner smiled encouragingly and patted her hand.

"Yes, love, I think perhaps you ought to go. It sounds as if Miss Darcy is quite alone. We will be fine this morning. I shall expect you back this afternoon, but, Lizzy-- If things go ill and Miss Darcy needs you to stay, send word so that I will know what is happening."

Nodding, Elizabeth turned to Sally who was waiting by the door, trying not to intrude.

"Sally, please tell the man who delivered the message that I am coming. I will be ready shortly."

"Yes, Miss Lizzy."

Once the maid was gone, Mrs. Gardiner rose and embraced her niece. "I do not know what has happened between you and Mr. Darcy, Lizzy, but I trust you. I shall ask questions later. For now though, go help his poor sister if you can. She does not know the comfort a sister or a niece can give. Perhaps you can offer her a taste of that today. I have Maggie and Sally to help me with the children, but it sounds as if Miss Darcy has no one."

\*\*\*\*

Elizabeth was too consumed with fear and grief to think on what she would say or do when she arrived at the Darcys' townhouse. She simply went. Colonel Fitzwilliam met her in the entryway. His usual cheer was gone, but he seemed immensely relieved to see her.

"Miss Bennet, I cannot thank you enough for coming. I do not know that there is anything to be done for Darcy now, but Georgiana's mind will be eased considerably by your presence."

"I am most concerned for both your cousins, Colonel. I think this is not the time to stand on ceremony. May I see Miss Darcy?"

"Certainly. I am afraid I have not been much help to poor Georgie. I do not know how to comfort her or encourage her. Anything you can do to assist her is greatly appreciated, Miss Bennet."

The Colonel ushered her upstairs and down a long hallway. Signaling Elizabeth to wait, he took a few more steps down the hall and knocked quietly on a door. Looking back over his shoulder, the Colonel whispered to Elizabeth, "She refuses to leave his side."

The Colonel then opened the door and stuck his head into the room. Elizabeth could hear him whispering, "Georgie, she's come. Miss Bennet is here."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was swept aside by his young cousin. Miss Darcy was lovely even with dark circles of fatigue under her eyes. She was too relieved to have Elizabeth Bennet here at last to worry about propriety. Georgiana Darcy began to weep even as she embraced Elizabeth.

Elizabeth held her and gently patted her back, knowing that the girl would feel better after a good cry. The Colonel stood by looking genuinely distressed. He was uncertain of what to do until Elizabeth gestured with a nod for him to leave. He quietly headed for the stairs trusting his cousin to her care.

The two young women stood thusly for some moments. When Georgiana had cried herself out, she stepped back, taking Elizabeth's hands in her own. "Oh, Elizabeth, thank God you have come." Realizing the familiarity of her address Georgiana began to blush. "I am sorry, Miss Bennet. I did not mean to presume--"

Elizabeth stopped her apology. "Please do not trouble yourself. These are very unusual circumstances for a first meeting. I hope you will call me Elizabeth and may I call you Georgiana?"

"Yes, please. I do not mean to embarrass you, Elizabeth, but you are just as perfect as I pictured."

Elizabeth could not resist a low laugh at this surprising pronouncement. "I am far from perfect, Georgiana, but you will soon discover that for yourself."

Lowering her tone, Elizabeth fearfully asked, "How fares your brother?"

"There has been no change since I wrote to you this morning. Please come in and speak to him, Elizabeth."

"Of course, but do not expect too much, Georgiana. Mr. Darcy may not recognize me in his weakened condition, but I will certainly speak to him. I would gladly help you in any way possible."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. It may sound silly, but my heart tells me that if Fitzwilliam hears your voice and knows you are here, he will improve."

Georgiana helped Elizabeth remove her hat and wrap, placing them on a table in the hallway. She then took Elizabeth by the hand and led her into her brother's room.

The curtains were drawn on the window nearest the bed, but the other draperies were opened admitting the morning sun and fresh air into the room. Elizabeth was dismayed by the great change in Darcy's appearance. His face had a gaunt, hollow look that even his beard could not disguise. His eyes were closed but Darcy's hands were moving restlessly, pulling at the bedclothes. Georgiana released Elizabeth's hand and reached out to gently shake him.

"Fitzwilliam, wake up. You have company. Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth is here at last. Come, brother. You must wake up and talk to her. Elizabeth is here."

At first Elizabeth thought he would not wake, but at the second mention of her name Darcy's eyelids fluttered. He focused with obvious effort on his sister's face. His throat was so dry he could scarcely speak, "Elizabeth is here?"

"Yes, she has come to see you, dear brother. Let me get you some water."

Georgiana filled a glass from the pitcher on his bedside table and gently helped her brother raise his head so that he could take a sip. As Darcy lay back down, she smoothed his hair and kissed his brow.

"I will be over by the window if you need me, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth sat down in the chair beside Darcy's bed, her hands resting lightly on the edge of the mattress. It distressed her to see him so, but she did not want to cry. That would not help either of the Darcys. Elizabeth tried to smile at him as she strove to control her emotions. She was surprised by the strength of her despair. Elizabeth did not realize she was wringing her hands until she felt the warmth of Darcy's fevered hand upon them.

"Elizabeth?"

Darcy saw her. He felt her hands beneath his own, but his mind could not grasp that she was really there. It was as if one of his dreams had come to life. Yet seeing the gravity and distress on her countenance, Darcy knew that this was real.

"Elizabeth, why are you here?"

His speech was hesitant and his voice, barely audible, but she took courage from his lucidity.

"Mr. Darcy, this may not be the best time for it, but I felt I had to apologize to you."

Darcy looked as if he wanted to protest. Knowing he was too weak for a prolonged discussion, Elizabeth stopped him by squeezing his hand. She then continued on.

"Please, sir. You must allow me to speak. My behavior towards you in April was abominable, and I couldn't bear it if you were to—" Elizabeth took a deep breath and then continued through her tears. "I couldn't bear it for you— You must know, Mr. Darcy, that I no longer think of you as I did then. I know now that I was very wrong about you, sir. I hope you can one day forgive me for speaking to you so unkindly."

Darcy spoke with difficulty. "There is nothing to forgive, dearest Elizabeth. You were right about many things."

Elizabeth's concern for Darcy overrode her own embarrassment. She forced herself to meet his gaze as she protested this harsh judgment of himself.

"No, sir. I was wrong. You are an honorable man and I misjudged you terribly. Please do not think on what I said then. It was wrong of me to speak so." She looked down as her mortification grew. "I am sorry, Mr. Darcy. I wish we could go back to the beginning and start our acquaintance anew. Then I might not have so much of which to be ashamed."

Her voice was barely audible toward the last, but Darcy heard every word. His heart began to race as he dared to hope. Elizabeth was offering her forgiveness and her friendship. Darcy squeezed her hand.

"Please look at me, Elizabeth."

She hesitantly raised her eyes and saw him looking upon her with such obvious love that it nearly took her breath.

Lacing his fingers through hers, Darcy continued, "I would wish to begin anew also, Elizabeth. Would you consider— Would you give me another chance?"

She smiled through her tears and clasped his hand firmly in both her own. After a moment Elizabeth felt as if she could trust herself to speak again, "Yes, Mr. Darcy," she whispered. "How could I refuse such a generous offer?"

Elizabeth found herself wanting to reach out and brush the hair from his brow with her fingertips, but she dare not. She offered him a small smile instead.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. It is very kind of you to overlook my past wrongs, sir. For now though, the most important thing is your health. We must have

you well again. Please try for your dear sister's sake. Please try, Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth's head dropped down on his bed as she began to weep, and Darcy tenderly caressed her hair.

"It is alright, dearest," he whispered. "Do not cry over me. All will be well. I promise, Elizabeth."

Then rousing himself, Darcy spoke a little louder, "Georgiana?"

Approaching the bed, Georgiana sighed with relief. Seeing her brother stroking his beloved's hair, she knew that her instincts had been right. Elizabeth's presence was already making him better.

Darcy looked into his sister's eyes and whispered, "Thank you."

Georgiana gave him a radiant smile in response. She then slipped out to tell their cousin of Darcy's improvement, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone for a few minutes. Elizabeth was trying to compose herself and wishing she had a handkerchief when Darcy spoke.

"Elizabeth, would you please get something for me from the top drawer of that armoire?"

"Certainly, sir," Elizabeth replied glad to be of use in some way. Opening the drawer she saw a supply of neatly folded handkerchiefs. Smiling, she asked, "Would you like a handkerchief, Mr. Darcy?"

"Actually, I thought you might like one."

Giving him her best impertinent grin, Elizabeth said, "Thank you, sir. It is only fair, that after making me weep so, you should supply the means to dry my tears."

"I would that I could dry them myself, Elizabeth, but I am not able at the moment."

"Well, you must apply your considerable powers towards getting better, sir. It is time you start to think of the rest of us."

Darcy's smile was weak, but it was a smile nonetheless. "Believe me, Elizabeth. I do think of you. Sometimes I can think of little else."

Elizabeth was overcome with embarrassment. Fortunately Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived just at that moment. A tea tray was delivered shortly thereafter.

Georgiana had her cousin pull two more chairs up beside the bed and then proceeded to serve them as if bedside tea parties were the most natural thing in the world. Colonel Fitzwilliam was amazed by the change in his cousin's condition. Darcy was still pale and weak, but he seemed himself again. He even took a little tea. Fitzwilliam found himself sharing Georgiana's hope that Miss Bennet's visit would make the difference.

Realizing the morning would soon be gone and seeing that Mr. Darcy looked in need of a nap, Elizabeth declared that she must return to Gracechurch Street. Colonel Fitzwilliam immediately offered to drive her home in Darcy's curricula.

"That would be lovely, Colonel. I would enjoy the fresh air."

"Excellent." He excused himself to see to the horses, assuring Elizabeth that all would be ready shortly.

When his cousin had left the room, Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand again. "Will you come again?"

"Yes, please, Elizabeth." Georgiana added.

Elizabeth smiled shyly as she responded, "Of course, if you wish it."

Both Darcys were pleased and relieved by her agreement.

"Now I must be going, and perhaps you should be thinking of a nap, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth gently encouraged him.

Georgiana instantly agreed. "Yes, Fitzwilliam, we do not want you to overdo now that you are feeling better. I'll walk Elizabeth out and then I will be back to check on you."

Arm in arm the two young women headed toward the hallway. As they neared the door Elizabeth felt Georgiana sway beside her. She managed to catch the younger girl and steer her into a nearby chair. Elizabeth then turned to Darcy who was already struggling to rise from the bed.

"No, Mr. Darcy, you must stay put. Your sister would never forgive herself if you got up too soon and had a relapse. I will see to her." Feeling Georgiana's brow, Elizabeth said, "She is feverish, but it may be exhaustion. Do not assume the worst, sir. Perhaps you would just ring for the servants. I do not want to release Georgiana at the moment."

A servant soon appeared followed almost immediately by Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth took charge without a thought. A message was dispatched to the doctor and the colonel was instructed to carry Georgiana to her room. Elizabeth then gave Colonel Fitzwilliam strict orders to keep Darcy in bed, as she turned her full attention to his sister. Once she had Georgiana changed into her nightgown and settled into bed, Elizabeth placed a cold compress on her brow in hopes of reducing her fever.

When Georgiana roused from her stupor she cried out in panic, "Fitzwilliam!"

"Do not worry about your brother, Georgiana. He is better. Remember? I have given him strict orders to stay put, and your cousin knows that I will

have his head if Mr. Darcy puts one toe out of bed."

This elicited a wan smile from Georgiana. Elizabeth continued soothing and fussing over her.

"The doctor will be here soon and I will have him check on your brother after he examines you. Now sip some water for me, Georgie. That's a good girl. Lie back and try to rest. I will stay right here with you."

Georgiana soon fell into a fitful sleep. As the hours dragged by, Elizabeth grew anxious. She frantically wished the doctor would come, but the fever was raging across the city. The doctor might not receive the summons for hours if he were out on other calls. Realizing that she needed a fresh supply of cool water, Elizabeth rang the bell. The answering maid was quickly dispatched for fresh water and additional pieces of flannel. Elizabeth decided she had best begin applying compresses to Georgiana's chest as well as her brow to hold the fever at bay. While awaiting the maid's return, Elizabeth dashed off a note to her aunt explaining that Georgiana was now ill and that Elizabeth did not feel she could leave her. When the maid returned, Elizabeth asked her to have the note delivered right away.

"Yes, ma'am. Is there anything else I can do for you or Miss Georgiana?"

"I think we are fine for the moment. I'm sorry. What is your name?"

"Grace, miss."

"Thank you, Grace. Please be sure the doctor is brought up to Miss Georgiana right away and I will ring if we need anything else."

"Yes, miss. We all think the world of Mr. and Miss Darcy, ma'am. Anything you can do for them is very much appreciated by the staff."

Having blurted that out, Grace fled the room. Elizabeth smiled. It spoke very highly of Mr. Darcy and his sister that they were beloved by their servants. Her pleasant musings soon gave way to worry about her patient.

Elizabeth continued to battle Georgiana's fever with little thought for anything else. Her relief was considerable when the doctor finally appeared. The poor doctor looked as pale as the patient. Dr. Abercrombie apologized for the delay. As Elizabeth suspected he had been out seeing patients all day and had just received her message.

Elizabeth nodded her understanding as she silently blessed the doctor for coming. Leaving Grace to assist him, Elizabeth went to check on Mr. Darcy while Dr. Abercrombie examined Georgiana.

To her relief Mr. Darcy was still abed as promised. He seemed more alert and somehow stronger than he had been that morning. Elizabeth was also pleased to see that Mr. Darcy's eyes were clear and his color had improved.

"How is Georgiana?" Darcy's anxiety for his sister was understandable.

"The doctor is still examining her, but he will speak to you when he is finished. Grace is also with Georgiana so your sister will not be alone for a moment. I know it is difficult, but you must not upset yourself, sir. We will take very good care of her."

"Is it the fever?"

"I cannot say, Mr. Darcy. The doctor may not be able to determine that so quickly either. She is feverish—which could mean the fever, but it could also be the result of excessive fatigue. Your sister has been quite worried about you."

Seeing his dismay, Elizabeth hastily continued, "Pray do not distress yourself, Mr. Darcy. You are not to blame for this. Georgiana has been concerned for you, as you are now concerned for her. It is no one's fault, sir."

"I hate feeling so helpless, Elizabeth. I should be doing something. Who will look after her? Richard is not suited for the sickroom and we are all she has."

"Pray do not distress yourself so, Mr. Darcy." Thinking only of how much she wanted to comfort him, Elizabeth took Darcy's hand. "The most important thing you can do for Georgiana is to rest and recover. While I know you want to take care of your sister, nursing is not a man's province. I have sent a note to my aunt and will be staying with your sister tonight. So for now, please trust her to my care."

"I am grateful for your kindness, Elizabeth, but we cannot expect so much of you. Georgiana is not your responsibility."

"Mr. Darcy, I am not staying out of obligation, but out of friendship. I want to help your sister and she needs me right now. I know that you and Colonel Fitzwilliam are her guardians, but Georgiana needs the loving care of her mother or her sister. Since she has neither, I will have to do." Elizabeth squeezed his hand and smiled gently as she continued. "Please do not worry, Mr. Darcy. I promise that I will care for your Georgiana as tenderly as if she were my Jane."

She was surprised to see tears in Darcy's eyes. He said not a word, but his silent look was filled with such love and admiration that Elizabeth could scarce return his gaze. Seeking to lighten the mood, she released Darcy's hand and began bustling about, smoothing his covers as she spoke in a teasing tone.

"Speaking of errant guardians, where is Colonel Fitzwilliam? I gave him strict orders to watch over you, for I do not trust you, Mr. Darcy."

"Fitzwilliam was driving me to distraction, Elizabeth, so I promised I would not leave the bed if he would just leave me alone for a while."

"And have you kept your word, Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, ma'am." Darcy echoed her teasing tone. "I have kept my word, and it has not been easy, knowing that you are just down the hall."

Elizabeth blushed to hear him speak so. "Well, easy or no, it is important that you get your rest, sir. Have you had any dinner?"

"No, I am not hungry. I'm too worried about Georgiana to eat." "I understand you may not feel like eating, Mr. Darcy. But you must, if you're to regain your strength. If you will not do it for yourself, then do it for your poor sister. Let her have one less care. You may also do it for me. I cannot nurse both of you at once. Please, sir, may I have some tea and broth sent up for you?"

Knowing she was right, Darcy sighed and nodded his acquiescence. The cook had evidently been hoping for such a request because the broth was provided right away.

"And what of you, Miss Elizabeth?" Darcy asked. "Are you eating and taking care of yourself?"

"I am, sir. It is one of the primary rules of nursing. Grace brought me a tray for lunch and I plan to have my supper on a tray in Georgiana's room as well."

Darcy was dutifully eating his broth when the doctor entered the room. Seeing the remarkable change in his patient brought a broad smile to the doctor's face.

"Well, now, Darcy, I am delighted to see you so improved and to see you eating again. This is wonderful."

"What of my sister, Doctor Abercrombie? You have already met Miss Bennet, have you not?"

"Certainly, sir. Miss Bennet has made my job considerably easier by keeping your sister's fever under control. I cannot yet say if this is truly another case of fever or just the result of excessive fatigue."

The doctor then proceeded to give his instructions to Elizabeth as if Darcy were not present. "I would recommend, Miss Bennet, that you continue as you've begun. Cold compresses to keep the fever from going too high, and water as you can get her to drink. I will return in the morning to check on Miss Georgiana. We should know by then if it is over exertion or something more."

Elizabeth smiled at him. "Thank you, Doctor. I hope you are able to get some rest tonight. You will be no good to your patients, if you do not care for yourself."

"Thank you for your concern, Miss Bennet. Mrs. Abercrombie could not have said it better. She will probably order me off to bed straightway upon my return home." The doctor smiled and bowed to Elizabeth. "Good evening, Miss Bennet. Please try to sleep tonight, as your patient will allow. Good night, Darcy. I am very pleased that you are better. Listen to Miss Bennet here and you will do well."

Elizabeth gave Darcy a comforting smile. "Now I must see to your sister, sir. Please do take care. I will step over to check on you later. In the meantime, do not hesitate to let others help you. Your staff is most anxious to be of use to you, Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth met Colonel Fitzwilliam in the hallway. He smiled sheepishly knowing he was guilty of deserting his post.

"I am sorry, Miss Bennet. I'm not very good in the sick room. Darcy grew tired of my company and sent me packing. He has not done himself any harm, has he?"

"No, Colonel, I think he actually kept his word and stayed in bed."

"How is my little cousin?"

"Georgiana is still feverish, but the doctor is not yet certain how serious it is. He will be back in the morning. For now I must attend her. Please excuse me, Colonel."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a new respect in his voice. Fitzwilliam had always liked Elizabeth Bennet, but this afternoon had shown him that she was strong as well as charming, a formidable combination.

Elizabeth paused and turned back before opening Georgiana's door. "Colonel, you might keep Mr. Darcy out of trouble by reading to him."

The colonel was stunned and relieved. He had wracked his brain all afternoon for a way to keep Darcy occupied. Why had he not thought of reading? Smiling he said, "Thank you, Miss Bennet. That's a wonderful idea."

Elizabeth could hear him as he opened Darcy's door. "What say I read to you, Cousin? Maybe that will keep you out of trouble for five minutes--"

Elizabeth smiled and then entered to check on Georgiana. Grace was sitting faithfully by the bed but rose when Elizabeth entered.

"How is she?" Elizabeth asked.

"Sleeping, young miss, but her fever may be rising. Would you please check? I have not had a lot of experience with sickness."

"Certainly. Tell me, Grace, have you ever had the fever?" Elizabeth was concerned for this young maid who seemed to hold her employers in such high regard.

"Oh, yes, young miss. Ma says I had the fever something terrible when I was little--some fifteen years ago now. Me and Simms are the only ones on staff who had it. That's why it is always one of us that comes to Mr. Darcy's room."

"Well, in that case, Grace, you may continue to help me care for Miss Georgiana. We would not want you to become ill, too." As she spoke Elizabeth was applying a fresh compress to Georgiana's brow. "Grace, we will soon need more cool water and some fresh flannel. Would you fetch those please and ask cook to prepare a tray for me? I will be staying with Miss Georgiana tonight."

When Elizabeth placed a fresh compress on Georgiana's chest, the sudden coolness woke her with a start. Elizabeth took the girl in her arms and reassured her.

"It is alright, Georgiana. You are ill, but I am here with you. Fitzwilliam is just down the hall. He is much better. He even ate some broth this evening so do not worry. Just rest, dearest. You need to rest so that you will be well."

Georgiana clung to her as she whispered, "Thank you, Elizabeth. I am so glad you came."

"As am I, Georgiana, as am I. Now sip some water for me and try to sleep."

When Grace returned with the fresh supplies and her supper, Elizabeth asked the maid to set out some of Miss Darcy's nightclothes for her. "Since I only came for a morning visit, I did not bring a bag," she quipped.

Grace, however, replied quite seriously, "It was the Lord looking out for these pitiful orphans what sent you today, young miss. They needed you today, they did."

Elizabeth was startled by Grace's description of the Darcys as pitiful orphans, but she realized the servant was right. Wealth and status were of little value compared to the support of a loving family. Elizabeth's reply was equally serious.

"Thank you, Grace. I do hope to be a blessing to them. Mr. Darcy is a fine man and one could not help loving his sister with her gentle sweetness."

\*\*\*\*

An hour later Georgiana's temperature was back down and she was sleeping peacefully. Leaving Grace to watch over her, Elizabeth went to check on Mr. Darcy one more time before donning her borrowed nightclothes.

Colonel Fitzwilliam jumped to his feet when Elizabeth entered the room.

"Here is our ministering angel, Cousin, come to tuck you in, no doubt. Good evening, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth nodded to the colonel and then turned her attention to his cousin. Darcy's face shone with joy at the sight of her. Elizabeth smiled at him, hoping the candlelight would hide her blush.

"I doubt it is necessary to tuck in a grown man like yourself, Mr. Darcy, but I did want to say goodnight. Georgiana is sleeping peacefully and I hope you will both rest well, gentlemen."

Darcy gave his cousin a significant look and the Colonel said, "Would you mind keeping him company for just a minute, Miss Bennet? I want to run down and avail myself of Darcy's port. I will only be a few minutes."

He left without waiting for her reply, and Darcy gestured toward the chair beside the bed.

"Please sit with me for a few minutes, Elizabeth. I do not require constant attendance, but I would welcome your company."

"I am reluctant to leave Georgiana for long, sir, but I will stay a few minutes."

Darcy reached out for her hand, "Elizabeth, I do not know how or why you came here today, but I want to say thank you. It means more than I can say. Seeing you has made a tremendous difference. I now believe I will be well again." He drew her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. "Thank you, Elizabeth."

It took great effort to answer calmly with her heart beating so rapidly, but she finally managed to whisper, "I will always be glad I came today, Mr. Darcy."

Needing distance to regain her self-possession, Elizabeth rose and went to draw the drapes. The activity and the distance from Darcy allowed her to face him again with the appearance of calm.

"I am relieved you are better, sir, but you must rest. You are still slightly feverish and it will take a while to regain your strength. Someday I will tell you the entire story of how my visit came to pass. For now I will simply say that your family is extremely concerned about your welfare. Goodnight, sir."

She paused at the door and looked back. "Please do try to sleep, Mr. Darcy. I will be in Georgiana's room if I am needed."

Once Elizabeth was dressed for bed and saw that she was adequately supplied with water, she sent Grace off to bed. The maid protested at first, but Elizabeth promised to summon her if aid were required. Elizabeth also assured Grace that she would get as much rest as possible herself.

Growing stiff in her chair, Elizabeth decided to crawl into bed with Georgiana around midnight. The bed was large enough and Elizabeth thought being next to Georgiana would ensure her wakefulness at any sudden change in the girl's condition. Elizabeth slept for several uninterrupted hours,

before being roused by a growing restlessness in her patient. Reaching over to feel Georgiana's brow, Elizabeth was frightened by how hot she had become.

Elizabeth was instantly wide-awake and leapt into action. She began applying cold compresses to Georgiana's limbs and neck as well as her head and torso. Elizabeth was continually removing hot cloths from her body, dipping them in the cool water and then reapplying them. As she worked, Elizabeth began to pray. This young girl had her whole life ahead of her, and Elizabeth did not even want to consider what the loss of his sister would do to Mr. Darcy.

As Elizabeth was succumbing to despair, the fever broke and Georgiana fell into a restful sleep. Elizabeth crawled back into bed with her and took the girl into her arms. Georgiana nestled against her and that was how Grace found them later. They were sound asleep, snuggled together like sisters. The maid quietly left the room wanting the young ladies to rest as long as possible.

When she stepped back into the hall Grace could hear Mr. Darcy's voice rising in a fit of pique. Anxious that the young misses not be disturbed, Grace went to give him news of his sister. Darcy was arguing with Simms about getting dressed when the maid entered his room. Simms was adamant that it was too soon and Grace immediately took his part.

"Come now, Mr. Darcy. You don't want to be undoing all young miss has done for you and your sister by rushing about too soon."

Darcy found himself being hustled back into bed before he even realized it. Grace continued talking as she plumped his pillows and smoothed his quilt. "Now, sir, why don't you let Mr. Simms give you a nice shave and help you into a clean nightshirt? Then we'll have your breakfast brought up and you'll be ready to receive young miss properly when she awakes."

Eager for news of his sister and Elizabeth, Darcy pounced on this comment, "Have you checked on the ladies? Are they still sleeping then?"

"Aye, sir. I have just come from Miss Georgiana's room and they are both sleeping peacefully right now so you just let them be, sir. From the looks of it young miss was up half the night tending your sister. But Miss Georgiana's color is good this morning and she is in a deep sleep, which is what she needs. Your young miss needs her rest, too. They're as pretty as a picture lying there together, with young miss's dark hair and Miss Georgiana's fair locks side by side on the pillow. No, you just let them be, sir."

Darcy found himself quite distracted by the image Grace's description brought to mind. Her voice soon brought him back to reality.

"No, sir, we cannot have young miss getting sick looking after you two, so you just stay put, sir. I know it's hard, but 'tis for the best. It is. Shall I have cook send up some gruel or would you rather have broth this morning, sir?"

Before he knew what he was about, Darcy had ordered broth for breakfast and was having the shave that his maid suggested.

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter Two

*My only love sprung from my only hate!*  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*

### Chapter Two

Grace was lying in wait for Dr. Abercrombie when he arrived that morning. She shooed the footman away, and then all but propelled the good doctor to Darcy's door.

"Here you are, Doctor, sir. Now you go on in and see to the master while I check on the ladies. Young miss was up half the night, she was, so you just take your time with the master. I'll come and fetch you when they are ready to receive you."

The doctor was decidedly amused, as he had never been so firmly ushered away from a patient. It required a considerable effort to avoid laughing aloud at the pushy servant. Dr. Abercrombie was generally considered to be quite imposing and no one ordered him around except for his wife on occasion--and then for his own good--and now, of course, Darcy's maid. He must remember to tell Mrs. Abercrombie about this.

Simms had just finished Darcy's first shave in weeks and the man looked much more like himself. After complimenting Darcy on how well he looked, the doctor asked how he had fared during the night.

"I am better as you can see, Doctor, but that is not what is important. How is my sister?"

Offering a wry smile, Dr. Abercrombie explained that he had not yet seen Georgiana. "Unfortunately, I can offer no report on your sister yet, Darcy. Your maid suggested rather strongly that I visit you first as the young ladies might not be ready to receive me."

Darcy's expression of impatience softened instantly into one of sympathy. "I understand you perfectly, Doctor. Grace has already put me in my place this morning, as well. Of course, I cannot complain since she is protecting my sister and Miss Bennet. Yet it is a little peculiar to find one's self being instructed by one's servants."

The doctor chuckled. "And now you have given yourself away, Darcy. I was about to commend you for being in bed, which is precisely where you should be. My guess now is that my commendation should go to Grace, heh?"

"Most definitely," Darcy confessed. "I was determined to go charging about this morning when Grace and Simms put me back to bed and decidedly ignored my orders."

"Well, they were right. You should give them both a raise, man. You must be very careful now to prevent a relapse, but your improvement is remarkable. It far exceeds what I would have expected. I think several more days in bed at least. Then you may spend part of each day up, but I do not want you to leave the house for at least a week. Is that clear, Darcy? We cannot have you undoing all your sister's hard work by foolishness."

When Grace came for the doctor, Darcy urged him to attend his sister immediately, "--and please do come back after you've examined Georgiana, sir. I am anxious to know how she is."

"I will not be long, Darcy."

Elizabeth gave the doctor an accounting of the night as he examined Georgiana. Once he had completed his assessment, Dr. Abercrombie was reasonably certain that her collapse was the result of exhaustion rather than illness. He insisted, however, that Georgiana stay in bed all day. If her fever did not return, then she would be allowed to resume her normal activities on the morrow. Georgiana did not protest as Elizabeth had already promised to stay with her. She was concerned though for her brother's contentment.

"Dr. Abercrombie, I understand the importance of my resting, but would you permit me to spend several hours on the settee in my brother's room? Now that he is improving, Fitzwilliam may not be the most patient of patients. I am afraid that if he is left alone too long, his restlessness will cause him to do more than he ought."

Knowing her fears were well founded, the doctor acquiesced. "That is acceptable to me, Miss Georgiana, but I do expect you to take a long rest this afternoon. Miss Bennet, I trust in your good judgment. Please do your best to see that neither of them attempts too much."

Elizabeth smiled at the doctor's implication that she was now in charge of the Darcy family. "I will do my best, sir."

As promised, Dr. Abercrombie returned to give Darcy the encouraging news about his sister. He also mentioned that he had given her leave to rest in Darcy's room for part of the day.

This prompted a flurry of activity in the master suite. Word quickly spread among the staff that Mr. Darcy and Miss Georgiana were both nearly well and there was no longer fear of contagion. With many hands Darcy's room was soon transformed--all under his direction, of course. Several footman rearranged the furniture, placing the settee and two chairs closer to the bed, while the maids bustled about dusting and tidying the room. The drapes and windows were fully opened and fresh flowers brought in from the garden. While these orders were being carried out, Darcy himself wrote a note to cook requesting that a light luncheon suitable for recovering invalids be prepared and served to them in his quarters at noon.

It was a very different room that the ladies entered that morning and they were both well pleased with Darcy's thoughtfulness. Elizabeth soon had Georgiana settled comfortably on the settee and took the chair beside Darcy's bed. Georgiana's glowing countenance reassured Darcy that his sister was well. However, he was not so pleased when he turned his full attention to Elizabeth. Although she had never looked more beautiful to him, Darcy could see the shadows of fatigue under her eyes.

"Did you rest at all last night, Eliz--Miss Bennet?" He instinctively reached across the counterpane for her hand and Elizabeth allowed him to hold it for a minute before modestly drawing it away.

"I actually did get a surprising amount of sleep, sir, and what sleep I lost was well missed to see your dear sister much improved this morning."

Darcy could not resist teasing Elizabeth to see if she blushed, "Yes, Grace mentioned that the two of you made a very pretty picture, sharing a pillow."

Elizabeth did blush, but Georgiana's forthright reaction to Darcy's teasing surprised him.

"It may seem silly to you, Fitzwilliam, but it meant so much to wake up with Elizabeth there. I felt loved and protected as if she were my own sister."

Seeing how earnest she was, Darcy immediately apologized, "I am sorry, Georgiana, I did not mean to tease you both unfairly. I am thankful that Miss Bennet was able to reassure you, and I am truly delighted that you are feeling better today."

It was not in Georgiana's nature to be resentful and her sunny smile assured her brother all was forgiven. "I do feel so much better, Fitzwilliam. I must confess that I do not remember much of last night. I have only vague memories of Elizabeth being there, but I can say this though. Both Doctor Abercrombie and Grace have both assured me that I could not have had finer care. I am deeply in your debt, Elizabeth."

Reaching out to pat Georgiana's arm, Elizabeth protested, "I am certain that anyone would have done the same, Georgiana. I am just glad that I was here when you fell ill." Her voice began to take on that teasing tone Darcy loved so well. "It would be terrible to leave you to the ministrations of your guardians. While they are zealous for your care I cannot imagine either having the patience for the sick room. Why Colonel Fitzwilliam had no notion of how to entertain your brother for an hour without billiards or horses until I suggested a book."

Georgiana giggled as Darcy pretended indignation. "Why the rogue made me think it was his idea to read aloud. I was actually impressed that he had come up with such an entertainment on his own. Of course, Fitzwilliam did spend considerable time searching the library for a book about horses playing billiards. In the end we had to settle for Shakespeare."

Both the young women laughed at Darcy's mock tirade and the Colonel chose that moment to enter the room, prompting another round of laughter.

"Well, I am pleased to provide amusement for one and all, and I am especially gratified to see you looking so well this morning, dear Georgie." The Colonel leaned over to kiss her cheek before taking the empty chair. "And how are you today, dear Miss Bennet? You are well, I trust."

"Yes, Colonel, I am very well. Thank you."

"No, I must thank you, Miss Bennet. We are all deeply in your debt. Darcy and I were talking about it last night. I cannot imagine how we would have cared for Georgiana so well on our own, especially with the housekeeper away and Darcy still being under the weather himself. A hired nurse would not have tended my cousin as carefully as you did, Miss Bennet. Thank you."

The morning passed pleasantly with amiable conversation. Elizabeth sent a note to her aunt reassuring her that Georgiana was much better. She explained that the doctor wanted to be careful of her for another day and asked if her aunt would consent to Elizabeth's remaining with Georgiana until tomorrow.

The messenger returned from Gracechurch Street with a note from Mrs. Gardiner saying that the children were also much better, Mr. Gardiner was home, and she would expect Elizabeth's return the following day.

Georgiana and Darcy were both visibly relieved when Elizabeth received her aunt's permission for the extension of her visit. Colonel Fitzwilliam shared their happiness. He was very gratified by Elizabeth's kindness to both his cousins, and he found the depth of her concern for them most encouraging. Perhaps Darcy stood a chance with her after all.

The morning passed quickly in such amiable company and they were soon enjoying the special luncheon Darcy had ordered. Elizabeth maintained a watchful eye on both patients and was insistent that Georgiana return to her room to rest when they finished eating. Excusing themselves, the ladies rose, as did Colonel Fitzwilliam. When Elizabeth had ushered Georgiana as far as the doorway, Darcy's voice halted her progress.

"Miss Bennet, might I beg the pleasure of your company once Georgiana is settled to your satisfaction? While I appreciate his efforts, my cousin's reading does leave something to be desired."

Seeing the Colonel's pretended indignation and Georgiana suppressing a giggle, Elizabeth could not resist a teasing reply. "I might be able to accommodate you, Mr. Darcy. Shall I fetch a volume from the library on horses? I know they are one of your particular passions or perhaps something on billiards, sir?"

Darcy laughed aloud as the ladies left them. The colonel's mock indignation now gave way to true puzzlement. "I say Darcy, what in the devil was that all about?"

Hearing his sister and Elizabeth giggling down the hall, Darcy could only laugh. This time his curious cousin joined in good-naturedly.

"Well, if I am prepared to be shot in service to the king, I suppose I can provide occasional amusement for my loved ones. Now, please give me my

instructions for the afternoon. Am I to make myself scarce before Miss Bennet returns or are you sufficiently recovered to require a chaperone?" The colonel waggled his eyebrows suggestively as he spoke.

Darcy smiled. "I assure you that Miss Bennet will be quite safe, Fitzwilliam. Being a proper young lady, she will no doubt guarantee the door stays open. Besides, with Grace and Simms both hovering about, it is unlikely that we will be alone for an instant anyway so you may take yourself off. I appreciate your willingness to be of service to Georgiana and myself, but I know how you hate to be cooped up, Cousin. Tomorrow when Miss Bennet returns to her aunt's, Georgiana and I will both need your cheer. It is a beautiful day. Go and enjoy yourself while you can."

With a smile and a bow, the colonel withdrew to do just that.

Once Georgiana was in bed, Elizabeth drew her chair in close and began to gently stroke her hair. Sighing at the pleasure of feeling herself to be "mothered" and safe, Georgiana closed her eyes savoring the moment. She could not, however, keep Elizabeth all to herself, not when her brother was anxiously waiting. Fitzwilliam needed Elizabeth. Georgiana knew that. Georgiana realized that in just a day, she had begun to need Elizabeth, too. Duty, however, demanded she relinquish Elizabeth to her brother's greater claim.

"That feels wonderful, Elizabeth, but I must beg you to attend my brother. He always endeavors to be so strong for me, but Fitzwilliam is far from recovered. If I know that you are watching over him, I will be able to rest."

"Of course, Georgiana, if that is your wish." Elizabeth leaned over to kiss the younger woman's brow. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, I am well, Elizabeth." Georgiana clasped Elizabeth's hand in both her own, tears suddenly filling her eyes. "I fear-- If you had not come yesterday, things would have gone horribly wrong."

"Do not upset yourself, Georgie. Your brother is very strong. I am certain Mr. Darcy would have rallied soon anyway, if not for himself, then for you, dearest. I am glad I was here to share your relief and to see to your comfort, but you owe me no gratitude. Now please try to sleep."

Nestling happily into her pillow, Georgiana whispered, "I will, Elizabeth. I will."

Assured of Georgiana's contentment, Elizabeth stepped into the adjoining dressing room. She was pleased to see that her hair was neat and the shadows under her eyes were not too pronounced. Elizabeth smoothed her dress as best she could and quietly stepped out into the hallway.

Her smile vanished when Elizabeth entered Darcy's room and saw that his bed was empty. The gentleman now occupied Georgiana's former place on the settee. Several pillows cushioned his back and a quilt covered Darcy's long legs, which stretched the entire length of the sofa. He did appear to be most comfortable; however, he was not in bed. Elizabeth felt her temper rising.

Sensing her irritation, Darcy hastened to explain. "Please do not be cross with me, Elizabeth. I promise that it was Grace's idea. In your absence she suggested this move rather strongly as she wants to change my bedding. She is gone now to fetch fresh bedclothes."

Darcy's anxious explanation vanquished her displeasure and Elizabeth smiled at him in amusement. "Very well, Mr. Darcy. As long as you have Grace's permission I will overlook it, but just this once, sir. You must take care."

Seating herself in the nearest chair, Elizabeth continued, "Now, how may I amuse the recovering patient? Shall I read to you, sir, or would you prefer to rest now?"

"I would prefer conversation, Elizabeth. Your voice comforts me and I would appreciate your satisfying my curiosity on a matter of great importance."

Uncertain as to what particular matter was on his mind, Elizabeth answered cautiously. "Very well, sir. Conversation it shall be. As for your curiosity, well, until I hear your question I do not know if I will be able to answer it."

Darcy was suddenly unsure of how to proceed, as he wanted no further misunderstandings between them. He was determined to no longer hide his affection from Elizabeth, but Darcy had little experience in sharing his private thoughts and feelings. Encouraged by her waiting smile, he haltingly began.

"I must first say that your appearance here yesterday was-- It was like a gift from heaven, Elizabeth. A gift for which I am grateful beyond words."

Darcy reached for her hand and kissed it reverently before continuing. "Your coming when you did and offering your friendship and forgiveness-- It means more than I can express. I was so tired, Elizabeth, and completely without hope, but hearing your voice, seeing you again-- It somehow gave me strength. Thank you, Elizabeth."

He gently kissed her hand again and fixed her with a penetrating gaze. "I do not care how it came to pass, my love, but I must admit I am curious."

Elizabeth could not help blushing at this endearment from Mr. Darcy's lips. Yet, she could not bring herself to rebuke him. He was so sincere in his admiration of her. She hesitated, uncertain of how to begin.

"Please, Elizabeth," Darcy pressed. "Seeing you yesterday made such a difference. May I not ask why you came?"

Meeting his gaze Elizabeth answered simply, "I came for Georgiana."

Seeing his puzzlement, she went on to explain. "Four days ago I received a letter from your sister. Do not be upset with her, Mr. Darcy. Georgiana's letter was very polite and she began by apologizing for writing when we had not been introduced. She wrote to me in desperation."

Elizabeth paused for a deep breath. Then feeling that she owed him nothing but truth, she continued quietly, "You see, Mr. Darcy, Dr. Abercrombie

had advised your sister to prepare herself for the worst."

Darcy's face blanched at the thought of Georgiana's despair. He knew he had been very ill, but had not realized what a close thing it had been.

Elizabeth smiled at him encouragingly as she continued. "Georgiana simply could not face the thought of life without you, sir. Knowing something of our history, Georgie wanted you to know that I no longer thought so ill of you. She hoped that it might somehow help you to rally. I do not understand it myself, but it seems your sister may have been right. In the interest of speed and discretion, Georgiana sent Colonel Fitzwilliam into Hertfordshire. He delivered the letter to me personally."

Darcy gripped her hand tightly as he shook his head in wonder. "I find my sister's decisive action surprising. She has been most uncertain of herself, particularly of late."

"One should never be surprised, Mr. Darcy, by a woman protecting her family, even a very young woman. We will dare much for those we love, and Georgiana loves you very much, sir."

"Oh, I assure you I am not upset by Georgiana's interference, particularly in light of the result." Darcy paused, his intense gaze fastened on Elizabeth.

How often she had misunderstood that look, assuming that Darcy was thinking ill of her. Now that she understood its meaning, Elizabeth felt herself begin to blush again. Yet she forced herself not to look away.

Seeing her discomfiture, Darcy lightened his tone. "No, I am definitely not troubled by my sister's actions. On the contrary, I am grateful that Georgiana would go to such extraordinary lengths on my behalf. It is most uncharacteristic of her to assert herself. If not for the seriousness of the circumstances, I would find the thought of Georgiana ordering my cousin about most amusing, made even more amusing by his obedience."

Glad of his levity, Elizabeth quipped, "Yes, the colonel did seem to have a much greater respect for Georgiana's orders than he does for his general's."

This caused Darcy to smile, and Elizabeth could not help noticing how very handsome he was when he smiled. Schooling herself to concentrate on the subject of their conversation, she continued more seriously.

"I believe the colonel would have gone to the continent to retrieve Napoleon himself at that moment, if Georgiana had wished it. He was quite alarmed for both of you, as was I when I read Georgiana's letter."

"But that was only four days ago, Elizabeth. How did you come to London so quickly?"

"It seemed to be impossible when I first read the letter. My heart was moved by your sister's suffering." Elizabeth paused and dropped her eyes, unable to face him as she continued. "I must also confess that it was dreadful to think that you might—that you might leave this world, Mr. Darcy, without knowing of my remorse for how I had treated you."

She took a deep breath and continued softly. "Yes, I was most willing to come, but I could not imagine how it might be done. At least not without exposing our private history and that would have occasioned too much gossip and speculation."

Elizabeth glanced up to see him nod his understanding.

"But yet, you are here." Darcy gripped her hand tightly.

"Yes. Fate or heaven, it would seem, intervened to bring me here, Mr. Darcy. Even as I was wracking my brain for a way to justify a sudden trip to London, a letter arrived from my Aunt Gardiner. She wrote of my uncle's intention to bring my healthy young cousins to Longbourn and to beg my assistance in caring for the two little ones who had come down with fever.

"As my family was debating how to send me to my relations here, I mentioned that Colonel Fitzwilliam planned to return to London the following day. My father approached him to see if he would escort me to town and that is how I came to be in London three days ago."

"And what of your cousins? And your aunt?"

"My little cousins Emma and Peter both seem to have rather mild cases. Sally, one of our maids, came with me from Longbourn. We took turns staying with the children the first two nights we were in London, allowing my aunt some well-deserved rest. Her note this morning assured me that Emma and Peter are doing very well and that my uncle returned safely from Longbourn last evening. I am confident your sister is truly well, Mr. Darcy, and I will be back in Gracechurch Street to assist my aunt tomorrow."

"But if you came to town to help your aunt, what brought you here yesterday, dearest?"

Hearing Darcy call her 'dearest' affected Elizabeth deeply. Anxious to cover her own disquiet, Elizabeth resumed their conversation. "While we were breakfasting yesterday, a note arrived from Georgiana. She wrote that it was feared—that it was feared you would not linger much longer and that—you had been asking for me."

Elizabeth glanced at him shyly to see how he bore this. Darcy did not seem surprised. He merely wrapped her hand in both his own and nodded for her to continue.

"My aunt is very kind and tenderhearted. When I showed her Georgiana's note, she agreed that I must come and try to support your sister as best I could."

"Does your aunt know of my proposal?"

"No, sir, not yet, but I will certainly have to answer some questions when I return. It was plain from Georgiana's note that the situation was most urgent, so Aunt Gardiner agreed I had best come right away. She sent me here with the understanding that we would talk later when the crisis had passed. Please do not concern yourself, Mr. Darcy. You may trust in my aunt's discretion. Although she will demand answers from me, it will only be to assure herself that I am well. She would never gossip about anyone."

"I am most grateful for your aunt's compassion. Her giving you leave to visit has made me far happier than I would have thought possible."

Elizabeth blushed and then tactfully changed the subject, "I think you would like my Uncle and Aunt Gardiner, Mr. Darcy. I love all my family, but it sometimes seems that Jane and I do not quite belong at Longbourn. At Gracechurch Street, however, we thrive. It is very much a second home to both of us."

"I think you are right. I would very much like to meet the Gardiners. Would it—may I call on you there while you remain in town, Miss Bennet?"

It seemed strange for Darcy to address her so formally, after his almost constant use of her given name. But this, of course, was part of the courtship ritual Darcy had bypassed in his earlier suit. It was a formal request for permission to call on her, and Elizabeth was surprised at how much it pleased her.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, when Doctor Abercrombie gives you leave, you may call upon me at my aunt's."

Elizabeth suddenly realized they had been talking for quite a while and Grace had not returned with the fresh linens. Mindful of what was due propriety, she cast about for a way to excuse herself without causing him to feel abandoned.

"I want to check on Georgiana. Would you like me to ring for tea, Mr. Darcy?"

"If you will return to share it with me, Elizabeth."

She almost laughed aloud at his purposefully pitiful expression. "I will be happy to take tea with you, sir. Oh, here's Grace now."

The timing of the maid's appearance made Elizabeth wonder if she had been lingering in the hallway to avoid interrupting their tete-a-tete. Elizabeth found, however, she could not be angry with the good-hearted servant. In fact, she smiled at the thought of the maid conspiring to aid Darcy's suit.

"Grace, when you've finished Mr. Darcy's bed would you be good enough to bring tea?"

"Certainly, Miss. Would you rather I do that first?"

"Oh, no. We must get Mr. Darcy back to bed first. Then we will have tea."

Darcy was surprised to see his servant deferring to Elizabeth and virtually ignoring him. In fact, he was greatly surprised, but not unhappy. Elizabeth gave him a radiant smile and left to see to his sister.

Georgiana appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Elizabeth gently touched her brow and was reassured that her temperature remained normal. She looked so young and fragile in her sleep. Elizabeth could not resist the temptation to softly kiss her brow and smooth her hair before turning to go. Georgiana smiled slightly in her sleep, but she did not wake.

What was it about the Darcy family? Elizabeth found herself feeling fiercely protective of both of them. It was amazing how quickly she had come to think of them as something far more than acquaintances. Elizabeth did not dare try to define what that "something more" was. For now she would enjoy their company. There would be time for reflection and contemplation once she returned to Gracechurch Street.

Mr. Darcy was back in his freshly made bed when Elizabeth returned to his room. His face lit up as she came through the door, but Elizabeth thought he looked tired.

"Your sister is sleeping peacefully, sir, and I am happy to report her temperature is normal. You, Mr. Darcy, look as if you could use a little sleep yourself."

"But you promised to take tea with me, Elizabeth."

"I did, sir, and I will, but I think you should rest first. We can have tea later."

Darcy looked like a petulant child, "But I am not tired."

Elizabeth spoke to him soothingly as she might to one of her little cousins. All the while she was smoothing his already smooth covers. "There, there, Mr. Darcy. You may not want to admit you are tired, but I can see that you are. I am afraid that if you do too much, too soon, sir, your fever will return." As she spoke Elizabeth leaned over and gently touched his brow. Relieved that he did not feel feverish, she still insisted that he rest.

"If you will lie back and close your eyes, Mr. Darcy, I will read to you. Please, sir, for me."

Unable to resist her coaxing smile, Darcy smiled in return, "Very well, I will rest for you, Elizabeth, but please do read something aloud. The sound of your voice will let me know that you are actually here and not a fabrication of my imagination."

Elizabeth laughed and teased him in response. "I am certain that if I were imaginary, I would be the picture of perfection, sir. Imaginary people almost always are. As it is, I am quite imperfect and, therefore, quite real."

Reaching across the bed Darcy grabbed her hand and spoke earnestly, "You are quite perfect for me, dearest Elizabeth."

Elizabeth colored at this. She squeezed his hand gently in response and then moved away to examine the bookcase in the corner. "Do you have any particular request, Mr. Darcy?"

"It matters not, just to hear your voice will be soothing. Choose what will please you."

Elizabeth enjoyed reading the titles. It was interesting to see what books the enigmatic man kept close at hand, and she was pleased to see many of her own favorites among the volumes. Elizabeth finally settled on reading aloud from Shakespeare's sonnets. They held the comfort of the familiar combined with truly beautiful language. Elizabeth also thought the meter and rhythm of the verse might help lull her patient to sleep. She was right, for Darcy nodded off soon after she began. Elizabeth could tell that he had fallen asleep by the change in his breathing, and she sat there for some time watching him sleep. Elizabeth was surprised by the unguarded affection and tenderness Mr. Darcy had demonstrated toward her over the last two days. She found herself warming to this caring, attentive man. It was difficult to believe she had once disliked him so.

When Grace tiptoed in with the tea, Elizabeth quietly poured herself a cup. She sipped it as she continued to watch Darcy sleep. Elizabeth was so deep in thought that she did not realize Colonel Fitzwilliam had returned. He stood silently in the doorway watching Elizabeth, as she watched over his sleeping cousin. Having resolved to speak with her about Darcy, Fitzwilliam spoke quietly so as not to wake him.

"Miss Bennet, it is a beautiful day. May I persuade you to join me for a turn around the garden while your charges are napping?"

"Thank you, Colonel. I think some fresh air would be wonderful." She rose and followed him into the hallway.

Like everything else about the house, the garden was charming. Although obviously well cared for, it was not ostentatious or overly manicured. Elizabeth reveled in the variety of colors and fragrances as they walked in companionable silence for several minutes. Finally Colonel Fitzwilliam stopped and gestured towards a nearby bench with a very serious expression on his face. When they were seated he began.

"Miss Bennet, first of all, I must thank you again. I thought Georgiana was grasping at straws when she wrote to you, but I see that she was correct. I know that my cousin's rapid improvement is due to your visit."

"Colonel, you must not think that--"

He interrupted her, "I do not think this, Miss Bennet. I know it. I do not mean to embarrass you, but I must speak frankly. My cousin loves you with a fierce determination I do not begin to understand."

The colonel paused here and Elizabeth was puzzled by the small smile that played about his mouth. She silently waited for Colonel Fitzwilliam to continue.

"Of course, my cousin is sometimes unreadable. Therefore, I feel I must explain certain things to you, Miss Bennet. Darcy does not do things by halves. He never has. It is therefore entirely logical that when Darcy did finally give his heart away, he would do so completely and irrevocably. I realize you never sought his love, Miss Bennet, but it is yours nonetheless. I do not think there will ever be another woman for him.

"It is not my desire to press you or meddle, but Darcy is often misunderstood. His circumstances have caused him to be guarded and cautious. I think my cousin has now dropped those defenses with you, and I hope that you will be able to return his affections one day soon. Darcy is an amazing fellow. I do not think I could not love him more if he were my brother. Therefore, I must be certain you understand that this is no infatuation or passing fancy. My cousin's attachment for you is now a portion of his very being. Please allow him the chance to change your feelings towards him, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth lightly touched his arm. "Pray do not worry, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I do not claim to understand your cousin fully or to return his affections in kind. Yet, I am confident that I now begin to understand him."

Elizabeth paused as she considered how to explain the change in her own feelings that she had yet to define. "I think much more kindly towards Mr. Darcy than I did in Kent. Although we had been acquainted for months, I do not think I really knew him then. In fact, your cousin quite took me by surprise there. Please be assured that I will not trifle with him, and I will endeavor not to hurt him. That is all the reassurance I can give you at this point, Colonel. I will not pretend what I do not feel, but I do feel some tie to Mr. Darcy now that--a tie that was not there before."

Elizabeth blushed and looked away as she softly added. "I have given your cousin permission to call upon me at my aunt's once he is strong enough."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was immensely relieved. He also felt a little silly. Here he was trying to secure his cousin's interest, when Darcy had already acted on his own behalf.

Seeing his embarrassment, Elizabeth gently teased, "Yes, Colonel, your cousin is no Miles Standish. Even in his weakened state Mr. Darcy can be quite resolute in pursuing what he wants."

The colonel smiled. "Yes, resolute is the very word to sum up Darcy." His tone became serious again. "Thank you for giving him the resolve to recover, Miss Bennet. Georgiana and I will be forever in your debt."

Elizabeth smiled at his mention of Georgiana, "As for your younger cousin, sir, she has quite stolen my heart away. I fear you would not be able to keep me from Georgiana if you tried."

"No indeed, Miss Bennet. I would not attempt such foolishness," the Colonel replied, "for foolishness it would certainly be. Georgiana would never permit such a thing and I am learning that she can be quite as stubborn as her brother. Seeing her with you, I now realize just how much Georgie

has missed growing up with two bachelors as her guardians."

"Georgiana may have missed out on the joys of sisterhood, sir, but then she has also been spared its trials and tribulations. It is quite apparent that she is well loved, and her adoration for both of you is equally obvious."

The Colonel smiled. Rising, he offered Elizabeth his arm and they continued on their walk in companionable silence. Each was lost in thought and felt no need for further conversation. As they reentered the house, the Colonel spoke. "Thank you for taking no offense at my interference, Miss Bennet. We military men are not schooled in the discussion of delicate matters. If you will but give my cousin a chance, then I am satisfied. Darcy has been alone a long time, but he is worthy of you. I am confident of that. There are few men who could deserve you, Miss Bennet, but Darcy does."

Discomfited and yet pleased by this, Elizabeth simply said, "Thank you, Colonel."

Georgiana seemed considerably stronger after her nap. Elizabeth helped her to change into a fresh gown and then escorted her back to her brother's room, as Mr. Darcy was now awake, too. Elizabeth was pleased to note that his color was much improved. The colonel soon joined them and they all shared a light supper together. Several hours in such pleasant company passed very quickly.

All too soon Elizabeth felt the necessity of their bidding the gentlemen goodnight. Georgiana did not protest, for she was tired and Elizabeth would be going down the hall with her. Darcy, however, felt the parting keenly. It disconcerted him to realize he was actually jealous of his own sister. Still, seeing the obvious affection between the two young women was very gratifying and bolstered his own hopes. As his mind was too active for sleep, Darcy gratefully accepted his cousin's offer to remain for a while and keep him company.

When the young women were safely out of earshot, Darcy could not help himself. He had to speak of Elizabeth to his kinsman. "I know that you greatly enjoyed Miss Bennet's company in Kent. Tell me, Fitzwilliam, what do you think of her on closer acquaintance?"

Knowing the depth of feeling behind this casual inquiry, Fitzwilliam was completely serious in his answer. "I think Miss Bennet is truly extraordinary, Darcy. I also think she is exactly suited to you. You cannot give up, Cousin. Miss Bennet's coming here—her concern for you and Georgiana—this should give you the will and hope to persevere for as long as it takes. However, now that Miss Bennet has seen you without that facade you often wear in company, I do not think it will take long for you to engage her affections."

Darcy was surprised that the colonel would speak so unguardedly and yet his cousin's encouragement was most welcome. "Then I have your support?"

"Darcy, you should know that you always have my support. However, if I may offer assistance in any way, or hold the family at bay for you, then you only need ask. After the last two days, I do not think you or Georgiana will be happy for long without your dear lady's company."

Seeing Darcy's nod of acquiescence, the colonel continued, "I understand that you are to call upon Miss Bennet at her aunt's."

"Yes, she gave me permission to do so, but how do you know of that, Fitzwilliam? Have you been eavesdropping?"

"No," he chuckled. "I am far too clumsy to make a successful spy. Miss Bennet mentioned it to me this afternoon."

"I am surprised that she would do so. How did you come to have such a personal discussion with Eliz—with Miss Bennet?"

"Do not fret yourself, cousin. Miss Bennet joined me for a walk in the garden this afternoon. I thought the fresh air would do her good. I was also anxious to speak to her on your behalf. However, the lady assured me that was not necessary. That you were quite capable of speaking for yourself and had, in fact, already done so."

Darcy was torn between appreciating his cousin's interference and being affronted by it. "But why would you do that, Fitzwilliam?"

"Because you need her, Darcy. Any fool can see that. Yet, you are sometimes so reserved. I had to be certain that Miss Bennet understood the depth of your affections and would return them if she could."

"You spoke to her thusly?"

"I did, and she heard me out graciously."

"And her response?" Darcy felt as if he might fly apart, so great was his anxiety to learn of Elizabeth's feelings for him.

Fitzwilliam smiled. "She did not assure me of her undying devotion, Darcy, but the lady blushed very prettily as she spoke of your request to call on her. I am convinced that her opinion of you is quite different than it was in Kent. If you woo her properly this time, I think your chances of success are excellent."

Darcy sighed with contentment at these words. "Be assured, Fitzwilliam, that I will make every effort to secure her affections."

The colonel was relieved that Darcy had taken his interference so well. He bid his cousin a good night and retired to the library for the remainder of the evening.

Georgiana was most gratified by Elizabeth's insistence that she would sleep in Georgiana's room again. Elizabeth was adamant that she wanted to be on hand in case Georgiana had need of her. Although Georgiana felt much better, she did not want to miss a minute of Elizabeth's visit. After changing into one of Georgiana's nightgowns, Elizabeth crawled into bed beside her. They remained awake for some time after blowing out the candles, talking and laughing in the dark. Finally Georgiana grew bold enough to speak of what was on her mind.

"Elizabeth, have you ever been in love before?"

"No, Georgie, I have not. I have certainly enjoyed dancing and conversing with gentlemen of my acquaintance, but I have always regarded them as friends. No one has ever touched my heart in that special way."

Thinking of her response to Darcy's endearments, Elizabeth wondered if that were still entirely true, but she quickly brought her focus back to Georgiana. "There are those young women who think themselves in love with a different man every week. I am more prosaic, if you will. I shall think myself lucky to fall in love once and hope that I will be blessed to have my feelings returned."

"You are very like Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth. I do not believe he has ever cared for a woman beyond friendship, at least not until he met you. Please do not be upset at my saying so, but if you were to return his affections someday-- Well, it would make me very happy to have you for my sister, Elizabeth."

"I think our shared adversity has already made us like sisters in some ways, Georgiana. I hope you will always think of me thusly, no matter how things are finally resolved between your brother and myself."

"You are not angry with me, Elizabeth?"

"No, Georgie, I am not angry."

"And you do not dislike my brother as you once did?"

"No, Georgie, I like your brother very much. Now go to sleep. If you are to keep him in bed tomorrow without my assistance, you will need to be well rested."

Georgiana giggled at that and then sighed. It was a sigh of pure contentment.

"Goodnight, dearest Elizabeth. I am glad to have you for my sister."

"Goodnight, Georgie."

Although Georgiana was soon sleeping peacefully beside her, Elizabeth lay awake for some time. She felt herself being overwhelmed by feelings she had yet to name but could not suppress. Did she already love Mr. Darcy? It would have seemed inconceivable three days ago, but now she found herself drawn to him. Elizabeth was just dozing off when she heard Grace whispering to her.

"Please wake up, young miss. I think you may be needed."

Elizabeth whispered, "I am coming," as she gently moved away from Georgiana. She slipped out of the bedclothes and made sure Georgiana was still sleeping peacefully before feeling for her borrowed dressing gown and slippers. Once her dressing gown was securely in place, Elizabeth reached out for the maid's hand and together they moved out into the hallway.

Neither spoke again until the door to Georgiana's room had been closed quietly behind them.

"What is it, Grace?"

"It is the master, young miss. Simms just came to get me. He looked in on Mr. Darcy and thinks his fever may be back. He went back to sit with him while I came for you. We don't know whether to send for the doctor right away or wait until morning."

"I am glad you woke me, Grace." Elizabeth was touched by the obvious concern on the maid's face and she patted her shoulder. "Let us go and check on Mr. Darcy. Then we will decide what is to be done. Did Simms wake Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

Grace looked embarrassed. "No, miss, we thought it would be best to consult you first."

Not wanting to distress her, Elizabeth smiled gently. "I am sure you are probably right. Men are not accustomed to the sickroom and we should not disturb the colonel unless there is something he can do to be of use. Otherwise, he will only worry."

Simms look enormously relieved when the two women entered his master's chamber. "Thank you for coming, miss. I am afraid the master's fever may be back."

Elizabeth could tell even in the dim light that Mr. Darcy was moving restlessly as he slept. Realizing the servants were looking to her for guidance, she walked over to the bed exhibiting more confidence than she felt. Touching his brow confirmed that Mr. Darcy was indeed feverish. However, it was not a high fever, and Elizabeth determined that it would not become one either, if they could prevent it.

"He does have a fever, but it is very slight. Let us see if we can bring it down and Mr. Darcy may not need the doctor tonight. I am sure poor Dr. Abercrombie needs his rest, too."

Elizabeth sent Simms to fetch a basin of cool water and Grace to gather flannel for compresses. As she awaited their return, Elizabeth took Darcy's hand and began to soothe him with her voice.

"Just rest, sir. I will take care of you. Grace and Simms are here to help so you must not distress yourself. All will be well." Although Darcy did not wake, his restless movements stopped and he seemed to relax.

When the servants returned, Elizabeth gently bathed Darcy's face with cool water and placed a cold compress across his forehead. She then

instructed Simms to loosen the neck of his nightshirt and place another compress across his chest. Once that was done, she pulled a chair up and sat beside Darcy's bed. The fever seemed to abate quickly. When it had subsided, Elizabeth asked Simms to remove the compress on Mr. Darcy's chest and refasten his nightshirt. As she resumed her seat by Darcy's side, Elizabeth turned to address the servants.

"He seems better now. Perhaps you would remain nearby, Mr. Simms, in case Mr. Darcy requires your assistance. I will sit with him and you might rest over there where you will easily hear me call." Elizabeth gestured as she spoke to the settee, which had been returned to its usual location near the fireplace.

"Yes, miss. If I should doze, please awaken me for any reason at all."

"Do not worry, Mr. Simms, I will."

"And what of me, young miss? How might I assist you?"

"Would you mind checking on Miss Georgiana for me, Grace? I do not think you need stay with her unless she shows signs of sickness."

"Right away, young miss. I will be back soon to let you know how she fares."

Elizabeth tenderly bathed Mr. Darcy's face once more, grateful that the fever had subsided so quickly. He seemed to be resting peacefully now. She settled herself comfortably in the chair, content to watch him sleep.

Grace soon returned, "Miss Georgiana seems fine, young miss. She's in a deep natural sleep. Now what can I do for you?"

"Thank you for checking, Grace. A pitcher of fresh water would be good in case we have need of it later."

"Certainly, miss. And what about you? Is there anything I can get for you, young miss?"

"No," Elizabeth answered with a soft smile. "Mr. Darcy is better now. I need for nothing more."

Grace smiled contentedly as she left the room. She doubted the young miss even realized what she had said, but the loyal servant rejoiced at the thought of a new Mrs. Darcy in residence. What a happy day that would be.

The maid soon returned with fresh water. Elizabeth expressed her thanks and then insisted that Grace go on to bed. Mr. Simms was already dozing in the shadows.

Elizabeth remained by Darcy's side and replaced the compress on his brow several times as a precaution. Happily the fever did not return and Elizabeth felt considerable relief. She took Darcy's hand as she watched him sleeping peacefully. Finally Elizabeth nodded off, her head resting on the edge of Darcy's bed beside their joined hands.

\*\*\*\*

Elizabeth was still sleeping when Darcy awoke the next morning. Unaware of what had passed in the night, he was surprised, but the sight of her filled him with a great tenderness. Darcy gently stroked her hair as he whispered, "Elizabeth, time to wake up, dearest. Have you been here all night?"

Elizabeth rubbed the back of her neck as she sat up. "I am sorry, sir. I did not mean to doze off. How are you this morning?"

"I feel stronger than yesterday, but what happened? I am sorry if I kept you from your rest last night."

"There is no need for apologies, Mr. Darcy. You did become feverish while you slept. Fortunately, it was only a slight fever and we were able to bring it down quickly. I'm glad you feel no ill effects from it this morning."

"We?"

"Mr. Simms suspected your fever had returned, so he sent Grace to fetch me. They were both eager to be of assistance, sir, and Mr. Simms stayed here last night as well, in case you required assistance I could not give."

Looking around, Elizabeth realized that Simms was now gone and they were quite alone. He had left the hall door wide open, but she was still overwhelmed with embarrassment. Here she was, alone with Mr. Darcy in his bedroom wearing his sister's nightclothes.

"I really am not dressed for a morning visit, Mr. Darcy. Please excuse me, sir. I should check on Georgiana."

"Elizabeth, you need not be embarrassed. To wake and see you here-- Well, I could not imagine a lovelier sight. You are a lady in every way, my dear. I have never respected anyone more in my life."

"Thank you, sir, but I must excuse myself. No doubt, your man just stepped out for a moment and will be back shortly to check on you."

Darcy squeezed her hand and then released it, but his gaze never wavered as he whispered, "Please hurry back to me, dearest."

Elizabeth heard him but was uncertain of how to respond. She smiled at Darcy shyly and then hurried away.

Georgiana was just waking when Elizabeth entered her room. Seeing the exhaustion on Elizabeth's face, Georgiana was at once anxious for her brother. "Oh, Elizabeth, is it Fitzwilliam? Has he suffered a relapse?"

"Don't be alarmed, Georgie. Your brother is well this morning. In fact, he says he feels stronger than he did yesterday. Mr. Darcy ran a slight fever in the night and Grace came seeking my assistance. We were able to bring his fever down easily, but I fell asleep in the chair."

"Poor Elizabeth, you must be worn out."

"I am a little tired, but you need not worry on my account. I am fine, Georgiana."

The colonel was already present when the ladies entered Darcy's room, and the four of them enjoyed another bedside picnic for breakfast. Dr. Abercrombie arrived as they were finishing and happily joined them for a cup of tea. The good doctor was not surprised to hear of Mr. Darcy's slight fever in the night. He said such instances were to be expected when one was recovering from a serious case. The important thing was that the fever be brought down quickly and for Mr. Darcy to continue to rest. The Doctor also allowed that Georgiana could resume her normal activities provided that she rest and eat properly.

The colonel earnestly assured Doctor Abercrombie that he would do his best to enforce the doctor's orders. He added with a smile, "After all, that is one thing I am trained for: enforcing a superior officer's orders."

"Yes," the doctor rejoined, "But have you ever had a Darcy under your command, sir?"

Everyone laughed at this. The doctor bid them good day, and Elizabeth knew it was time for her to depart as well. The colonel left them to ready the curriple to take Elizabeth home. A few minutes later Georgiana suddenly remembered something she needed from her room. Darcy was not fooled by his sister's ruse, but he appreciated her giving him a few moments with Elizabeth.

As soon as they were alone, he took her hand. "I hope you will be able to remain in town for some time, Elizabeth. The doctor has said I may not even leave the house for days. I fear it will be a while yet before he releases me to travel into Hertfordshire."

Elizabeth smiled shyly. "Now that I am here, I do hope to stay for a time, sir."

Grateful for this encouragement, Darcy returned her smile. "I am reluctant to part with you, dearest, but I know you must return to your aunt's. Please express my gratitude to her for sharing you with us. Elizabeth, I know it is too soon, and I will not ask anything of you now. Yet, I must say something, for I cannot imagine my life without you. I will give you time, my love, but I will not give you up. Thank you for giving me a second chance."

Darcy allowed his lips to linger as he kissed her hand. Elizabeth knew not how to respond to such passionate words, but she was spared by Colonel Fitzwilliam's return.

"Your carriage awaits, Miss Bennet."

"Thank you, Colonel." Elizabeth smiled warmly at Darcy, for she was eager to encourage him but uncertain of what to say. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Darcy. I shall look forward to seeing you just as soon as you are fully recovered."

"Yes, you shall see me, Miss Bennet, just as soon as I am able."

Georgiana hurried into the room. "Oh, Elizabeth, I will miss you so. I would be pleased to send the carriage for you anytime you are able to call, and we shall call on you at your aunt's just as soon as Fitzwilliam is strong enough."

The two young women embraced and Elizabeth left with the colonel.

When they entered the house in Gracechurch Street, Mrs. Gardiner greeted them cheerfully. "I am glad you have come back, Lizzy, and, Colonel, how nice it is to see you again. I trust both Mr. and Miss Darcy are better this morning."

The colonel responded, "Yes, thank you, ma'am. The doctor is now confident that Darcy will recover, but it was a very near thing. Georgiana had simply exhausted herself caring for him, but she is also much better now, thanks to Miss Bennet. I must express our family's gratitude to you, Mrs. Gardiner, for sharing her with us. I know Miss Bennet came to town to assist you, but I honestly do not know what we would have done without her."

Mrs. Gardiner was gratified by this praise of her niece. She could see that Elizabeth was very tired and insisted she head right upstairs for a rest.

Elizabeth merely nodded and said, "Thank you, Colonel, for seeing me home," before leaving the room.

Turning her attention back to Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mrs. Gardiner asked, "Would you care for tea, Colonel, or do you need to get back to your cousins?"

"I would love to take tea with you another time, Mrs. Gardiner, but I promised Georgiana I would not be gone long."

"Of course, sir. My best wishes for your cousins' return to full health soon."

"Thank you, ma'am. You should be very proud of your niece. Miss Bennet is an extraordinary young woman. I think her generosity and courage may have saved my cousin's life." With a bow, he was gone.

Being a kindly woman Mrs. Gardiner was sincerely glad that Mr. Darcy and his sister were both enjoying improved health. However, she was also human and was, therefore, most anxious to know how her niece came to be so important to Mr. Darcy's well being. Well, she thought, let Lizzy have

a little rest. There will be time for confidences later.

*Copyright 2007 Pamela St Vines*

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter Three

*They love indeed who quake to say they love.*  
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY, "Sonnet LIV"

### Chapter Three

It was late afternoon when Elizabeth awoke. Although she appreciated the much-needed rest, Elizabeth felt as if she had neglected her family while staying with the Darcys and was now eager to atone for her absence. Finding Aunt Gardiner in with the children, Elizabeth offered to relieve her.

"Are you certain you feel well enough, Lizzy? You still look a little tired."

"I must admit that I was exhausted when I came home this morning, but I feel much better now, Aunt. Thank you for allowing me to sleep so long."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled to hear Elizabeth refer to Gracechurch Street as "home." Although the Gardiners loved all their nieces, Elizabeth was their particular favorite. It was sometimes difficult for them to see her return to Longbourn, knowing how little her abilities were appreciated by most of her immediate family.

By happy coincidence Emma and Peter had just finished their naps, too, and were anxious for amusement. Cousin Lizzy was their favorite storyteller because she always did the voices just right. After some negotiation the children settled on a story and Elizabeth was soon seated between them with the chosen storybook in her lap. Mrs. Gardiner smiled at the pretty picture they made and left to see to her other duties.

When she returned an hour later, all three were sound asleep, still snuggled together on Emma's bed. Mrs. Gardiner nodded with satisfaction and quietly slipped away.

\*\*\*\*

Elizabeth enjoyed dinner with her aunt and uncle that evening. They talked easily about everything except the topic that was uppermost on everyone's mind. Mr. Gardiner waited until they were comfortably settled in the parlor afterwards to broach the subject of Mr. Darcy.

"So, Lizzy, I think it is time we talked about Mr. Darcy. There is obviously a great deal that we do not know about your relationship with the man. As I recall, there was a time when you disliked him quite decidedly. I do not mean to pry, my dear, but I would like to know what has happened to change your opinion of him?"

"Oh, Uncle, I am ashamed to admit my own foolishness. I did dislike Mr. Darcy, or rather I disliked the false impression I had of him. In truth I did not know him at all. I chanced to overhear Mr. Darcy make a silly, thoughtless remark at the beginning of our acquaintance that offended me, and I unwisely allowed that one comment to prejudice me against him entirely. I am having difficulty forgiving myself for having treated him so unfairly."

Mr. Gardiner smiled. "Well, I think it is safe to say that Mr. Darcy has forgiven you. If the man was asking for you as he lay near death, he must hold you in very high esteem, Lizzy."

"Yes, Uncle, he does." Elizabeth blushed as she answered. She then took a deep breath and continued her explanation. "As you may recall, our paths crossed again several months ago. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam were visiting their aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh at the same time that I was visiting Charlotte Collins. As Mr. Collins is Lady Catherine's parson, there is frequent intercourse between the households and we were much thrown together. What I have not told you--in fact, I have told no one save Jane--is that while we were in Kent, Mr. Darcy made me an offer of marriage."

"Marriage?" Aunt Gardiner gasped. Having grown up in Derbyshire, she understood just how powerful and wealthy the Darcy family was. That such a man had proposed to her favorite niece was gratifying, but somewhat surprising.

"But, Lizzy, you have not been secretly engaged to Mr. Darcy all this time, have you?"

"No, Aunt, at the time I was still foolishly persisting in my dislike of Mr. Darcy. I refused him, and I was most ungracious in my refusal. I allowed my temper to be ruled by my prejudice and I upbraided Mr. Darcy unjustly. It was only afterwards that I learned how wrong I had been about everything."

When Elizabeth lapsed into silence her uncle prompted her to continue, "What do you mean by 'everything,' Lizzy?"

"You both know how I believed Mr. Wickham's charges against Mr. Darcy without question." Elizabeth actually shuddered at the thought of Wickham's perfidy. "They were all lies. The only one who has behaved infamously is Mr. Wickham. I was so mortified to learn of how wrong I had been."

The Gardiners were both relieved to hear this. They had been suspicious of Wickham's eagerness to share such a private history with relative strangers. It was reassuring to know that Elizabeth would no longer think of such a man as charming.

Once Elizabeth had begun, she felt the need to confide everything in her beloved aunt and uncle. "I have been most distressed since that time over how I injured Mr. Darcy. I wanted to make amends but did not know how. After all, it seemed unlikely that we would even meet again. However, the

very day that I received your letter, Aunt, Colonel Fitzwilliam came to Longbourn. He made it seem as if he were in the area on business, but he actually brought me a letter from Miss Darcy. Although we had not been introduced, she wrote to implore me to come to London if at all possible. Their physician had told her Mr. Darcy might not survive. Faced with losing her only family, she was desperate enough to try anything that might strengthen her brother's resolve to live."

The Gardiners waited in silence, not wanting to make this more difficult for her. Elizabeth stood up and began to pace, wringing her hands as she continued.

"Evidently Mr. Darcy had been quite unhappy since his return from Kent. Colonel Fitzwilliam had pried the truth from him of his proposal and my refusal, and Miss Darcy felt that his unhappiness over me was part of why Mr. Darcy had succumbed so quickly to the fever. She hoped that if he knew that I no longer thought so ill of him--if he knew that I had forgiven him--then perhaps her brother might be strengthened and recover."

Elizabeth stopped her pacing and turned to face them, "Her letter and yours arriving on the same day--it seemed like fate or divine providence. I felt that I must come and do what I could to right the wrong I had done to Mr. Darcy. I still did not know how I could possibly call on the Darcys, but then Georgiana sent that note the second morning I was here. You read it, Aunt, and agreed that kindness demanded I go."

Aunt Gardiner nodded while Uncle Gardiner prompted her to continue, "But what of your time at the Darcys' home, Lizzy? Will you tell us what happened there?"

Elizabeth was a gifted storyteller and the Gardiners found themselves riveted as she described the events of the last two days. They were both deeply moved by her description of Mr. Darcy's pitiful condition upon her arrival. Elizabeth was too wrapped up in her own thoughts to notice the significant glance her aunt and uncle exchanged when she spoke of the change in Mr. Darcy's condition upon realizing she was there.

"--It was distressing to see him so gravely ill, but as we talked Mr. Darcy seemed to become more and more like himself. He should rightly despise me for the way I misjudged him, but he was very kind and gentlemanlike." Elizabeth's face was suffused with tenderness as she remembered Mr. Darcy's gentleness toward her. "His concern was for my distress. He did not even want me to apologize, but I felt that I must. When Mr. Darcy promised me that all would be well, I knew he spoke the truth."

Elizabeth paused to wipe her eyes and then she smiled at her aunt and uncle. "I wish I could describe the joy on his sister's face when she saw that he was truly better. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. We all visited together for a while and then Georgiana--Miss Darcy was walking me out when she nearly fainted."

The Gardiners nodded in silent sympathy. Aunt Gardiner reached out for Elizabeth's hand and drew her down to sit beside her. She embraced her niece and gently patted her back.

"There, there, Lizzy. I know it must have been quite an ordeal for you."

When Elizabeth had cried herself out, she took the handkerchief her uncle silently offered as her own was soaked through.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay with her, Aunt. Mr. Darcy was clearly not well enough to care for his sister and I do not think the colonel would have the least idea how to nurse someone. There were only two servants in the house who had already had the fever. No, I just could not leave her. Her gentle disposition reminds me so much of Jane."

The Gardiners listened with great interest as Elizabeth gave a rambling account of her time with the Darcys. Interwoven with her anxiety over Darcy and Georgiana were the happier memories of bedside picnics and congenial conversations. Elizabeth's imitation of Grace elicited delighted chuckles from both Gardiners. Finally she told them of Mr. Darcy's humble request for permission to call upon her at Gracechurch Street.

"Well, Lizzy," said her uncle, "it sounds as if you think very highly of Mr. Darcy now."

"I do, sir. Mr. Darcy has made it plain that he still loves me and while I cannot say that I fully return those feelings, I do find myself drawn to him. I am surprisingly anxious to know more of him. I think that I have always respected Mr. Darcy's intelligence, but having seen the high regard his servants have for him--his concern for his sister-- Well, I realize now that Mr. Darcy is also a man of deep feeling and great integrity. I hope that I will be able to stay with you for some time, as I would like to further our acquaintance. Mr. Darcy would willingly travel to Hertfordshire to see me, but I do not wish to raise anyone else's expectations before I have determined my own mind in this."

Mr. Gardiner immediately understood and shared Elizabeth's concerns, for it was clearly her mother's expectations she feared. He shuddered to think of his sister's response if she knew that Elizabeth had refused an offer of marriage from a man of Darcy's consequence. She had already tried to force Elizabeth to marry that imbecile Collins. His sister would be capable of almost anything to see her daughter married to Darcy. Mr. Gardiner readily assured Elizabeth that she was welcome to remain in their home for the foreseeable future.

Aunt Gardiner nodded her agreement and added, "I must confess, Lizzy, that I am anxious to become acquainted with Mr. Darcy myself. When do you think we might expect him to call?"

Smiling slightly Elizabeth answered, "The doctor has said he is not to leave the house for at least a week, but knowing Mr. Darcy, I think we may see him sooner."

It was Elizabeth's intention to stay the night with her cousins; her aunt, however, would not hear of it. "You have had a very trying time, my dear, and we can certainly manage tonight without your assistance. Rest well and perhaps I will allow you to stay with the children tomorrow night."

Elizabeth was too exhausted to protest and gratefully returned to her room. Although she was soon in bed, it was quite some time before Elizabeth could sleep. Her mind was awl with thoughts of Darcy--the touch of his lips to her hand--hearing him address her as "dearest" and even "my love." Elizabeth had never known a man to be so affectionate--so romantic. It was like one of the beautiful fairy tales she had loved as a girl, but

perhaps this was real. Finally, fatigue overtook her and Elizabeth slept.

It is only fair to report that Darcy also found sleep to be elusive that night. He had already grown accustomed to Elizabeth being in his home and it seemed empty without her. Darcy knew he would not be able to wait the doctor's prescribed week to call on her, and, therefore, determined that he simply must recover quickly. Georgiana was very sympathetic as was the colonel. However, when the servants began to give him pitying glances, Darcy realized that his feelings must truly be apparent to everyone.

Grace had even gone so far as to say, "I know you miss the young miss, sir. We all do. She made everything seem cheery like, did she not, sir? But there is nothing for it. You must get better so that you can court the lady proper like. That will be a happy day, will it not, sir? Yes, sir, a shining day that will be."

Darcy was extremely grateful that the maid did not seem to require a response, for he had no idea how to answer such a speech. Although he would not have admitted it, Darcy did find some comfort in Grace's enthusiasm for the subject.

\*\*\*\*

Two days after Elizabeth's return to Gracechurch Street, Georgiana entered Darcy's room to find him up and dressed.

"Fitzwilliam, I am glad you are feeling well enough to be up this morning, but you are rather formally attired for resting at home. You look as if you were going out."

"I am, Georgiana." Darcy raised a hand to stop her protest. "No, you may accompany me if you wish, but I have to see Eliz--Miss Bennet today. I am sorry to distress you, but I cannot wait any longer. I simply must see her."

"But what of the doctor's advice, Fitzwilliam?"

"I respect Dr. Abercrombie and I usually try to follow his directives, but this time I cannot. This is Elizabeth, Georgiana. I did not see her at all yesterday, and I find that can bear her absence no longer. I will not be foolish and we need not stay long, but I have to go."

"Then I shall come with you. May we invite Richard along, too? He may prove useful if you over exert yourself."

Smiling at her eagerness to assist him, Darcy readily agreed, "Yes, Georgiana, by all means invite Fitzwilliam along if you wish."

\*\*\*\*

Mr. Gardiner happened to be at home that morning and so joined his wife in welcoming their guests. The introductions fell to Mrs. Gardiner and Colonel Fitzwilliam as Elizabeth was above stairs minding the children. While Maggie bustled about in the kitchen preparing tea, Sally hastened to fetch Miss Lizzy and take her place watching Emma and Peter.

Elizabeth had not expected Darcy to stay away for a full week, but she was surprised and pleased that he had come to call so soon. She was at sixes and sevens over seeing him again--excited, yet fearful that he might revert to his previous aloofness--that perhaps Darcy's romantic gallantry would have vanished with his fever.

Her fears that Darcy would be altered proved to be wholly unfounded. When Elizabeth entered the parlor his gaze reflected such warmth and tenderness that she was able to breathe easy again. It was real. He was here and he loved her.

In truth, the gentleman's admiration was plain for all to see. The unguarded affection on his face brought tears to Mrs. Gardiner's eyes. This was the way their Lizzy deserved to be loved, whole-heartedly and unashamedly.

While Mrs. Gardiner's attention was fixed on Darcy, her husband and Colonel Fitzwilliam were both gauging Elizabeth's reaction to this meeting. Neither gentleman was disappointed. In fact, it is difficult to say which of them was more pleased, for Elizabeth's delight at being in Darcy's company once more was unmistakable. She quickly regained her composure and greeted all three of their guests charmingly, but it was evident that Elizabeth's thoughts were centered on Darcy.

All too soon, Colonel Fitzwilliam reminded his cousins that they had best be going. This was Darcy's first major exertion since his illness and the colonel was determined he would not do himself any harm. Georgiana embraced Elizabeth in farewell, and then Darcy stepped forward to take her hand. He kissed it gently and said, "I am most glad to see you, Miss Bennet. I hope we shall meet again very soon."

Discerning that her husband's thoughts mirrored her own, Mrs. Gardiner proceeded to invite their visitors back for dinner the following evening--if Mr. Darcy's health would permit it, of course. The gentleman assured her he was quite well and the invitation was gratefully accepted.

Once they had departed, Elizabeth excused herself to return to the children. Seeing the far away look on their niece's face, her aunt and uncle smiled. Yes, dear Lizzy was in love with Mr. Darcy, and after what they had seen of the gentleman today this idea pleased them both.

\*\*\*\*

Upon returning home Darcy was informed that Dr. Abercrombie awaited him in the library. Taking a deep breath, Darcy prepared himself for the doctor's worst. However, Georgiana stopped him before he could start down the hall.

"No, Fitzwilliam, you have already been too active this morning. While you are recovering, you are my responsibility. Cousin, please help him back to bed."

Having given the colonel his orders, Georgiana addressed Darcy once more. "You must rest, dear brother, if you are to be fit for dinner tomorrow. I

will speak with the good doctor and then bring him up if he wishes to examine you."

In truth Darcy was too tired to protest. He was grateful for Georgiana's intervention and amazed at her seeming confidence.

"I say, Darcy, I think 'your Elizabeth' is rubbing off on her." Fitzwilliam whispered when they were half way up the stairs.

Darcy merely smiled in response. Georgiana overheard the remark and was flattered as she greatly admired Elizabeth's courage and determination. With a pleased smile, she went to meet Dr. Abercrombie.

The doctor's greeting was terse. He had worked himself up into a full-blown temper while waiting, but was reluctant to release his wrath on the young woman before him. "Miss Darcy, I asked that your brother join me upon your return."

"Please sit down, sir. Yes, the servant relayed your request faithfully, Dr. Abercrombie. However, I thought it best that my brother go right to bed. You may certainly examine him if you wish after we have talked."

"Very well, Miss Darcy, I must admit I was displeased--no, I was angry to learn that your brother was not at home. My instructions were for his welfare. I do not manufacture such restrictions for my own amusement."

"Dr. Abercrombie, I am sorry we have upset you, but my cousin and I accompanied Fitzwilliam to be certain he did not overtax himself. I realize he is still recovering, but I feared that in this instance keeping him home would cause more harm than a carefully supervised morning visit. You will be pleased to know that our little excursion did seem to calm him considerably."

The doctor's expression softened. "Oh--so am I to understand that this was a visit to Miss Bennet?"

Georgiana smiled and nodded, pleased that the doctor had comprehended her meaning. "As you know, Miss Bennet has been very--instrumental in Fitzwilliam's recovery. We managed to keep him home all day yesterday, but my brother was most determined this morning. Feeling that argument and opposition would not sway him for long, I decided it best that we merely assist him to lessen his exertions."

The doctor was impressed by this display of wisdom in one so young. "You are very astute, Miss Georgiana. Mrs. Abercrombie could not have handled it any better."

This was praise indeed for the doctor always exhibited great respect and affection for his wife. Smiling at the young woman before him, the doctor continued in a conspiratorial tone. "So is it your intention to use outings to see Miss Bennet as Darcy's incentive to behave the rest of the time?"

"Precisely, doctor. I hope you will agree to the merits of my plan. One recalcitrant man is more than enough. I should have my hands quite full if you were to oppose me."

The doctor was delighted to see this teasing side in a young woman who was usually far too serious for her age. He actually laughed as he rose and offered her his arm. "Well, Miss Georgiana, let us go and see your brother. May I ask when he is to see Miss Bennet again?"

"Tomorrow evening, sir, provided Fitzwilliam takes care until that time. We have agreed to join Miss Bennet's family for dinner if his health permits."

The more he thought on it, the more impressed Dr. Abercrombie was by Georgiana's strategy. "That should do very well. With such incentive, Darcy will keep still today and tomorrow. Yes, Miss Georgiana, I think your plan is entirely to my satisfaction. However, I may have to play the affronted family doctor with your brother. It is always easier to maneuver a man if he does not realize he is being maneuvered."

Georgiana actually giggled as she said, "I will, of course, bow to your professional judgment, sir."

As Darcy anticipated, Doctor Abercrombie scolded him for going out too soon, but the doctor's reproof was less severe than Darcy had expected. Feeling quite exhausted by the morning's outing, he was grateful for his sister's intervention with the good doctor.

After examining Darcy thoroughly, the doctor announced that he did not think his foolishness had caused any real harm. "I must insist though that you rest for several days at least before making another such attempt."

Darcy's protest was immediate and vehement. "I will rest until tomorrow evening, but then I must be allowed out, sir. It is a most pressing engagement. Please understand that I respect you, Doctor Abercrombie. I am grateful for your attendance, but I must trust my own judgment in this. Even my family realizes it is useless to oppose me."

The doctor was far from displeased. Such a show of strength from his patient was encouraging. With a sly wink to Georgiana, the doctor continued 'playing his part' a little longer. "But what is more important than your health, sir? What cannot wait a week?"

In all earnestness, Darcy replied. "You have met, Miss Bennet, sir. Is she not worth any risk or effort?"

The doctor's compassion was genuine as he relented, "Yes, Mr. Darcy, I do understand."

\*\*\*\*

Peter returned to his own bed in the nursery that night and Elizabeth stayed in the sick room with Emma. Once she was assured that Emma was in a natural sleep, Elizabeth crawled under the covers with her. She awoke the next morning with a smile on her face knowing that Mr. Darcy would be coming to dinner that evening.

It was a beautiful morning and with her aunt's permission Elizabeth took both children out into the back garden. She kept them engaged with quiet pursuits, and they responded well to the fresh air and sunshine. When Emma and Peter were both put to bed for a nap after lunch, Mrs. Gardiner

asked Elizabeth to join her in the parlor. The two women sat in a comfortable silence for some moments before Mrs. Gardiner brought up the subject she wished to discuss.

"I hope you were not displeased by your uncle inviting the Darcys and Colonel Fitzwilliam to dinner this evening." She smiled to herself as her dearest niece began to blush.

"Oh, no, Aunt. I am sorry for not expressing my gratitude earlier. I appreciate your entertaining--my friends. It is very generous."

"Nonsense, Lizzy. We are happy to do so. All three of them strike me as being well worth knowing and I do not refer to their positions in society. Colonel Fitzwilliam seems an honorable and charming man, and Miss Darcy is such a dear girl that one cannot help but love her. Her brother is also quite disarming but in a very different way. He seems to be quiet and reserved. Yet Mr. Darcy is very open and unguarded in expressing his affection for you, Lizzy. Please do not think I mean this in a critical way. Mr. Darcy's behavior was all that is proper yesterday, but his feelings for you are evident. It makes me happy to see someone love you as you deserved to be loved."

"Then you do think he loves me?"

Her aunt laughed at this foolishness. "Lizzy, I was not born yesterday. One would have to be deaf and blind to miss his obvious affection for you. I think Mr. Darcy will renew his addresses to you as soon as you let him know that it is safe to do so."

"But how would I go about that, Aunt? I would never want to be forward or presumptuous."

"Do not worry, my dear. I doubt that your Mr. Darcy will require a great deal of encouragement beyond what you will offer him quite naturally. You need not concern yourself with stratagems or designs. It will work itself out."

Everyone enjoyed the dinner that evening. Mrs. Gardiner was a gifted hostess. Her natural charm and Mr. Gardiner's warm hospitality quickly put their guests at ease. Elizabeth was delighted for Darcy to become acquainted with her Aunt and Uncle. She knew that the Gardiners' manners and abilities would commend them in any circles. Conversation flowed so easily around the table that even the shy Georgiana entered into the lively discussion.

As the time drew near for the ladies to withdraw, Mr. Gardiner found himself thinking it would be heartless to separate the still convalescing Darcy from Elizabeth for a silly convention.

"Since we are a small informal party, would you gentlemen mind if we adjourn with the ladies instead of remaining behind?"

Darcy's delight with this suggestion was patent, and Colonel Fitzwilliam good-naturedly agreed, "I think that is a fine idea, Mr. Gardiner. What is port compared with the beauty before us?"

Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm as the company moved into the parlor. Seeing that he did look a little pale, she quietly asked, "Are you certain you are well enough to be here, Mr. Darcy? Please do not feel that you must stand on ceremony with my aunt and uncle. They understand you are still recovering."

Pleased by her concern, Darcy whispered, "I am with you, Miss Bennet, therefore, I am well. Do not fret yourself on my behalf."

Elizabeth's smile was warm as she replied, "Well, sir, if you are content to stay, how may we make you most comfortable? Is there a particular seat to your liking?"

Without hesitation Darcy gestured to a settee in the far corner, somewhat removed from the other seats in the room. "If you will join me, Miss Bennet."

Feeling awkward, but pleased Elizabeth merely nodded her acceptance of this suggestion. They crossed to the spot Darcy had chosen as the rest of the party settled in the area near the fireplace. Elizabeth was smoothing out her skirts when she felt Darcy's hand gently cover hers. Before she realized what he was about, Darcy was discretely holding her hand hidden within the fullness of her skirt.

For all his discretion, Mr. Darcy's daring was not entirely unnoticed. Both Mrs. Gardiner and Colonel Fitzwilliam saw him take Elizabeth's hand. Having no doubt of Darcy's honorable intentions towards her niece, Mrs. Gardiner decided to pretend that she had not noticed. The colonel also pretended not to see, as he had no desire to give his cousin away. In fact, Fitzwilliam was quite pleased to see his cousin boldly pursuing the woman he loved. He was equally pleased to note Miss Bennet's blushing acceptance of his cousin's attentions. The Colonel's contentment was made complete when Mr. Gardiner handed him a brandy.

His host quietly whispered, "Although we must dispense with cigars in Mrs. Gardiner's presence, she is not offended by a gentleman having a brandy after dinner."

Realizing that Darcy was well content, Mr. Gardiner did not make a similar offer to him.

Eager to provide the young couple some relative privacy in their quiet corner of the room, Mrs. Gardiner asked, "Would you consent to play for us, Miss Darcy? My niece mentioned hearing that you are quite an accomplished musician."

Fitzwilliam and Darcy were both immediately concerned for Georgiana. She was normally so shy of strangers. However, before either could determine a way to intervene gracefully, Georgiana spoke for herself, "I fear my abilities may have been exaggerated, but I would be most happy to play for you, Mrs. Gardiner. I dearly love music."

"That is a love we share then, Miss Darcy. If you would consent to play for us now, we might wait a bit to have our coffee."

Georgiana perused the Gardiner's sheet music collection, while Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner engaged the colonel in conversation.

Darcy took advantage of everyone's activity to whisper so that only Elizabeth could hear, "I adore you, Elizabeth."

At first she could not look at him, but when she finally raised her eyes Darcy felt his own cheeks begin to burn. The affection he saw there was more than he had hoped for. The realization that she did indeed care for him, emboldened Darcy to continue at the first opportunity. However, his sister had now begun to play, so politeness demanded their private conversation cease. Darcy did continue to hold Elizabeth's hand throughout Georgiana's performance gently rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb all the while.

Georgiana played very well, but rarely for anyone other than her guardians. She was surprised by her own confidence, but somehow the Gardiners did not seem like strangers. Georgiana was actually very comfortable with Elizabeth's family. When she finished playing, the praise was universal and sincere.

Between the feelings Darcy was exciting in her and the beauty of the music, Elizabeth felt herself unable to speak. She was content to beam her appreciation at Georgiana, as both Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were lavish in their praise.

"That was truly remarkable, my dear. You have a rare and unique talent." Mrs. Gardiner took Georgiana's hand as she continued, "Thank you, dear girl, for sharing your gift with us."

"Yes, thank you. You played that so beautifully, Miss Darcy." Mr. Gardiner enthused. "I hope we will have the pleasure of hearing you play often."

Georgiana smiled and nodded her thanks as she sat beside Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mrs. Gardiner busied herself with the coffee things that Maggie had brought in.

Having ascertained that everyone was still determinedly occupied, Darcy whispered, "I never imagined I could be so in love, dearest Elizabeth, but I am completely and irrevocably in love with you. Please tell me there is hope for me, that I have a chance of winning your heart in return."

As much as his words pleased her, Elizabeth knew that they were not alone and their privacy could end at any moment. She did not want to discourage Darcy in any way, but she did not want to behave improperly either. Elizabeth thought it best to lighten the mood even as she attempted to offer Mr. Darcy what encouragement she could.

Glancing up at him through her lashes, Elizabeth adopted her most impish smile and said, "It is my experience, Mr. Darcy, that persistence is usually rewarded. Do you not agree?"

Were he not still weakened from his illness, Darcy could have abandoned all dignity and cavorted around the room with joy. As it was he had to content himself with smiling at her and squeezing her hand as he whispered, "That is what I am counting on, Lizzy."

Hearing Darcy address her by the appellation her family used was surprisingly disconcerting. It felt so intimate—even more so than the endearments he had whispered. Elizabeth knew she should discourage such familiarity, but yet it seemed so right to hear him address her thusly. Fortunately her aunt's intervention spared Elizabeth the necessity of formulating a proper response. Mrs. Gardiner was not displeased. However, seeing her niece's blush and the ardor in Darcy's eyes, Aunt Gardiner felt that she had allowed the gentleman sufficient leeway for one evening. It was time for the young lovers to rejoin the general conversation.

"Lizzy, please come and get some coffee for Mr. Darcy. I am certain he will enjoy it."

Darcy was not put out by the interruption as Mrs. Gardiner had already been more than gracious in allowing him such a private conversation with her niece. He readily agreed that he would indeed enjoy a cup of coffee. Darcy then rose and addressed Elizabeth, "May I bring you some as well, Miss Bennet?"

She laughed and quickly admonished him, "No, no, sir. You are not yet fully recovered. Sit back down and I will fetch the coffee. I presume you still drink it plain, Mr. Darcy."

It pleased Darcy inordinately that she remembered how he liked his coffee. It confirmed that Elizabeth had noticed him even when she did not like him.

Knowing her aunt would have used the special coffee beans, Elizabeth was eager to see Darcy's response. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he took a sip.

Darcy's surprise and delight was evident. "This coffee is extraordinary, Mrs. Gardiner. I do not think I have ever tasted its equal, not even in Paris."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled as she said, "I see then, sir, that you are a connoisseur of coffee. These particular coffee beans are quite difficult to come by so we reserve them for special occasions."

Darcy was genuinely curious. "Where does it come from? Can it not be procured locally?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Darcy, how this coffee came to us is quite an interesting story." Seeing that their guests looked truly interested, Mrs. Gardiner began the tale. "Several years ago our Lizzy read of a particularly fine coffee that is grown in a very small section of Ethiopia. Its uniqueness is attributed to special properties in the soil and climate that have yet to be identified. However, their existence is undeniable for the coffee grown there is unique in its richness.

"Many have tried to duplicate the result in other locales with no success, so there is much clamor for the right to purchase the coffee crop from that region. Believing in her uncle's ability to procure anything, Lizzy was insistent that we must have some."

Darcy smiled imagining that Mr. Gardiner would find it difficult to refuse Elizabeth anything. His affection for her was obvious.

Guessing Darcy's thoughts, Mrs. Gardiner smiled knowingly and spoke to him directly. "I see that you have already discerned my husband's particular regard for Lizzy, Mr. Darcy. He was more than willing to make inquiries into the matter, but his inquiries brought no success. Mr. Gardiner became intrigued by the very difficulty in obtaining the coffee. The challenge spurred him on, and he went to extraordinary lengths to find a source for it. It was all very convoluted, but Mr. Gardiner was finally able to identify the Turkish trading company with a long standing contract for the lion's share of the annual crop."

"So he was able buy it from them?" Georgiana asked. She was quite caught up in the tale.

"Oh no, my dear," Mrs. Gardiner continued, "that would not be nearly so interesting. They were quite unwilling to sell the coffee to Mr. Gardiner at any price. However, my husband is a very clever man. He continued to investigate the Turkish company until he had enough information to make them an acceptable offer. Mr. Gardiner suggested a proposal to expand their other trading interests here and he is now their London agent. My husband assists them in exporting other goods to England and a portion of his compensation is paid each year in this particularly fine coffee."

Everyone laughed in appreciation of Mr. Gardiner's success and his wife's delight in telling of it.

Darcy could not resist whispering to Elizabeth, "I am now well warned of your stubbornness, my love."

Colonel Fitzwilliam felt that he must suggest an early departure as Darcy was still not fully recovered, and Georgiana readily agreed knowing that her brother would never admit to being tired. All three guests thanked their hosts most sincerely. Surprised at her own boldness, Miss Darcy asked if the Gardiners and Elizabeth might join them for dinner in two days time. Knowing her niece's feelings and seeing her husband's happiness at the invitation, Mrs. Gardiner readily accepted.

Content to know that she would see Darcy again soon, Elizabeth walked their guests to the door. Georgiana embraced Elizabeth and then allowed the colonel to escort her out, thereby giving Darcy and Elizabeth a minute alone at the door.

"Goodnight, dear sir. I hope you have not overly exerted yourself this evening."

"Do not worry, Elizabeth. I am impatient for the next two days to pass, but I am well." Taking her hand, Darcy gently kissed the back of it. Then he daringly kissed her palm and held it for a brief moment against his cheek. With a whispered, "Goodnight, my love," he was gone.

Elizabeth stood there some moments. She could still feel his lips upon her palm and found herself wondering what it would be like to feel his lips upon her own. This curiosity was new to her. While Elizabeth had assumed that she would one day kiss her husband, she had never given the matter a great deal of thought. She took several deep breaths to calm herself, before returning to her aunt and uncle. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were both well pleased with the evening. The more they saw of Mr. Darcy, the more they approved of him. While Darcy might be a little reserved, he did not seem shy at all when it came to displaying his regard for Lizzy. Knowing Lizzy's passionate nature, Aunt Gardiner believed that a man of such deep feelings would suite her very well. After a few minutes, Mr. Gardiner excused himself to check on the children. He thought his wife might want to speak privately with Lizzy and he was right.

"Come and sit with me for a few minutes, Lizzy dear. I do not want to force your confidence but I would like to speak with you about Mr. Darcy if you are willing."

"Certainly, Aunt." Elizabeth was pleased by her aunt's request for she felt so unsettled. She was happy and anxious all at the same time.

Realizing her niece did not know where to begin, Mrs. Gardiner gently asked, "Do you know your own feelings for Mr. Darcy, my dear?"

"I think I am beginning to, Aunt, but it is all so new to me."

"It is obvious that he cares for you deeply, Lizzy. Do you now feel that you return his regard?"

Elizabeth's voice was very small as she answered, "Yes, aunt, I did not always think so highly of him, but I find myself caring very deeply for Mr. Darcy. It is strange, but I feel anxious unless he is nearby. Does that sound silly?" Elizabeth was embarrassed by her own admission.

"No, Lizzy, it does not sound silly at all. Now, I do not wish to pry, but I saw Mr. Darcy holding your hand this evening. His attentions do not make you uneasy, do they?"

"No, aunt, though sometimes I wonder if it is wrong that I am not shocked by his gestures of affection."

"When you care for someone deeply, it is right and natural to express that affection. Your behavior thus far has been acceptable to me. Understand that I am not displeased with you or Mr. Darcy, my dear, but I want to make certain that you know your own mind in this. It would be most unkind of you to encourage a man who is so in love with you unless you intend to accept him. Do you understand me, Lizzy?"

"Yes, Aunt, I would not want to hurt Mr. Darcy again for anything. There is something on which I would like your opinion though."

"Of course, Lizzy, I want to help you in any way that I can."

"Well, Mr. Darcy is sometimes more familiar in his address of me than propriety would allow. Yet, I find it pleasing. Is that wrong of me?"

"How has he been familiar, dear?"

"Well, when he was so ill, Mr. Darcy often called me 'Elizabeth' instead of 'Miss Bennet.' He sometimes continues in that. He has also referred to me as 'dear,' and tonight he once teasingly called me 'Lizzy.' It seems so right when he says such things, but I do not want to err in this."

"Tell me, Lizzy, does this familiarity ever make you feel that Mr. Darcy does not respect you?"

"Oh, no, Aunt. If anything, it makes me feel that I am what he holds most dear. It makes me feel cherished."

"Then, I do not think you need worry as long as Mr. Darcy is always respectful of you and addresses you properly in company so that others will not misunderstand. I do not think you are in grave danger by allowing these liberties, if you are ready to accept him."

Mrs. Gardiner gazed at her niece questioningly and Elizabeth struggled to meet her gaze.

"Yes, aunt, it would make me very happy to be Mr. Darcy's wife, and I could not design a dearer sister than Georgiana. In some ways I already feel closer to Georgie than I do to my younger sisters. Is that terrible of me?"

"Oh, Lizzy, how you do worry." Aunt Gardiner laughed and patted her hand. "It is entirely understandable. While you love Mary and Kitty and Lydia, you have very little in common with them. You and Miss Darcy are more suited as companions by your interests and personalities, and Miss Darcy admires you deeply. It is only natural that you would return her regard. Do not worry so, Lizzy. All will be well. With your permission I will speak of some of this to your uncle. I think it best you and Mr. Darcy are soon wed. We do not want the man to worry himself into being ill again and it is obvious he is quite anxious to secure you. I also think you will both be happier if you do not have to be parted for long."

Elizabeth squeezed her aunt's hand affectionately. "Thank you for making me feel less silly and more content, Aunt. I will go and send Sally off to bed now. Sleeping with Emma will comfort me and allow me to watch over her."

"Thank you, dear."

Emma was sleeping soundly when Elizabeth slipped under the covers to join her. Greatly relieved by her aunt's assurances, Elizabeth was soon fast asleep.

\*\*\*\*

When morning came little Emma was cuddled up against her older cousin with one arm wrapped around Elizabeth's waist. Elizabeth woke first and found herself wondering what it would be like to wake up with someone else's arm around her. The train of her thoughts shocked her deeply. A lady should not entertain such speculations, and a gentleman did not sleep with his wife, or did he? Elizabeth knew from her mother's veiled references that the marriage bed was of considerable importance, but married couples maintained separate bedchambers. Yet, if you loved your husband then it would be pleasant to sleep in his arms.

Elizabeth blushed as she admitted the truth. She was not thinking of generalities, but of Fitzwilliam Darcy. She willed herself to be calm. When she was with him, Elizabeth had no doubt of Darcy's affection. When he was not there to reassure her, Elizabeth was haunted by the memory of how she had injured him. What man would renew his addresses after being scorned so?

Elizabeth forced herself to review her aunt's reassurances of the previous evening. That afforded her some comfort, but Elizabeth knew she would not be easy until all was settled between them. At least she was assured of seeing Darcy at dinner the next day. In the meantime, Elizabeth resolved to busy herself with being of use to her aunt.

Emma stirred beside her and Elizabeth smiled down at the sleeping child. She looked like an angel lying there with one hand under her cheek and the other reaching across Elizabeth. Of course, Emma was almost angelic even when she was awake. Peter, on the other hand, was more rambunctious. It would be difficult to keep him still now that he was feeling better. Elizabeth found herself wondering what Darcy was like as a boy. Surely, he was not so serious then. Of course, Peter was an exceptionally lively child, much as Elizabeth had been herself. Shaking her head at how quickly her thoughts had returned to Fitzwilliam Darcy, Elizabeth slipped from the bed to begin her day.

For all her reassurances to Elizabeth that everything would happen naturally over the course of time, Mrs. Gardiner found herself wondering how she might assist her niece. When Darcy and Elizabeth were together, Elizabeth was obviously happy. Mr. Darcy's constant attention and open affection made her easy. However, when they were apart, Elizabeth's anxiety was equally pronounced.

Mrs. Gardiner remained confident that all would work itself out eventually, but she was concerned that Elizabeth would work herself into quite a state of apprehension before tomorrow evening's dinner engagement. That would not do. No, she thought, it will not do at all.

While Mrs. Gardiner was wracking her brain for a way to bring Elizabeth and Darcy together today, Georgiana Darcy had already resolved to achieve the same end. A note arrived for Elizabeth shortly after breakfast.

Dearest Elizabeth,

I had hoped to call upon you this morning, but feel I cannot leave my brother. Do not be alarmed. Fitzwilliam is well, but as his strength begins to return I fear he is most likely to do himself harm by taking on too much. In truth, were I to leave him at home this morning, it is highly likely Fitzwilliam would do something rash, like call for his horse and follow me. I have sent the carriage in hopes that your aunt may be able to spare you for a visit this morning. However, be assured of my understanding if you are unable to come. I know the Gardiners have already shared your time with us most graciously. If we cannot see you today, then I will have to content myself with anticipating tomorrow evening.

Best regards,  
Georgiana

Elizabeth found her aunt and showed her the note.

Mrs. Gardiner was pleased to have it all worked out so well. "Why, of course, you may call on Miss Darcy, my dear, if that is what you wish."

"But are you certain you can spare me this morning?"

"Dearest Lizzy, we will be fine. The children are so much better now and we no longer have to isolate them, so you may certainly visit your friends."

Elizabeth kissed her aunt's cheek. She asked Sally to tell the coachman that she would be returning to the Darcys' with him and hurried upstairs to ready herself. After changing her dress twice, Elizabeth was pleased with her appearance and went downstairs to say goodbye to her aunt.

Meanwhile Darcy was restlessly pacing his study like a caged animal. He understood all the reasons he should rest, but was unable to do so when Elizabeth was right here in London. Georgiana had not told Darcy of her plan, wanting to spare him disappointment if Elizabeth were unable to come. Fortunately Georgiana came into the room before Darcy had worked himself into a full-blown temper. His agitation, however, was obvious.

"Fitzwilliam, whatever is the matter?" Georgiana asked, although she was fairly certain she knew his answer.

"Georgiana, I know I promised I would follow the doctor's directives, but I must go out this morning. We do not know how long Elizabeth will be allowed to remain in London and I have wasted too much time already where she is concerned. For months I was too foolish to approach her and then since-- Well, since Kent I have been too afraid. Now that I have a God given opportunity to try again, I am determined to secure her affections. You may go with me if you wish, but I am going to the Gardiners."

Georgiana patted Darcy's arm as she attempted to soothe him. "Please calm yourself, brother. I do understand your need to see Elizabeth and I hope she will join us shortly. I sent the carriage an hour ago with a note asking her to favor us with a visit this morning if her aunt could spare her."

"She is coming. Why did you not tell me, Georgiana?"

"I did not want you to be disappointed if Elizabeth could not come. I am sorry. I had no idea you would distress yourself so. Why not come and join me in the sitting room? We can wait together."

Darcy was slightly embarrassed by his outburst, but that emotion paled in the light of his relief. Offering Georgiana his arm, he whispered, "Thank you, Georgie. Without you I might never have seen Elizabeth again."

Georgiana smiled up at him. It was so wonderful to have her brother back.

The Darcys did not have to wait long before a servant announced Miss Bennet. Georgiana met Elizabeth with a sisterly embrace. Of course, propriety demanded a more formal greeting between Elizabeth and Darcy. She offered him her hand and Darcy took it with a bow. He did, however, hold it just a little longer than was strictly proper. When Georgiana invited Elizabeth to sit down, Darcy did not hesitate to take the seat beside her. He said little but could not stop staring at her. Elizabeth seemed preoccupied as well.

Georgiana was sincerely delighted to see her friend. She was also considerably amused by her brother's silent admiration. "Oh, Elizabeth, I am so glad you have come. I am afraid Fitzwilliam is becoming restless already and I could use your assistance in managing him."

Elizabeth smiled first at Georgiana and then at Darcy. It was all he could do to restrain himself from taking her in his arms.

Georgiana politely continued on. "I hope your presence here means that all is well with your cousins?"

Elizabeth roused herself to pay attention to her hostess. "Yes, thank you, Georgiana. Peter has been officially returned to the nursery and I expect Emma will soon follow. Our only difficulty will be to keep Peter relatively calm for a few more days."

Glancing at her brother, Georgiana giggled and said, "I do understand your difficulty."

Darcy thought he should perhaps be offended at being compared to a young lad, but he could not. They were both smiling at him so Darcy returned their smiles as he replied, "Although we have never met, I feel I must speak on your cousin's behalf. After all Peter is not here to defend himself. It is difficult when one is used to being active to find oneself expected to sit around."

Elizabeth laughed, "Well, sir, your eloquence on behalf of my cousin is touching. I am certain Peter would share your sentiments although he might express them a little differently. I fear you two gentlemen are more alike than I realized. Georgiana, you must watch your brother. If he is at all like Peter, Mr. Darcy will be trying to climb the tree in the garden before you know it."

The visit passed pleasantly. Darcy found himself wishing he were alone with Elizabeth, but it was enough that she was here. As if divining his thoughts, Georgiana excused herself saying she had something she wanted to show Elizabeth.

Darcy was grateful when his sister absent-mindedly shut the door as she left the room. He gently reached over and covered Elizabeth's hand with his own.

"Thank you for coming this morning, Elizabeth. I must confess that I was on the verge of tearing off for Gracechurch Street when Georgiana told me she had invited you. I just couldn't wait until tomorrow to see you, dearest."

"Thank you, sir. I was grateful to receive Georgiana's invitation." She gave him a teasing smile. "I must say that I like your sister very much. Although we just met she has already become very dear to me."

Darcy lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. "I hope--" He paused to kiss her hand again, "--that you did not come--" and again, "--only to see Georgiana, Elizabeth."

Darcy leaned towards her, his eyes locked on hers. Elizabeth thought he was going to kiss her, but then the sound of someone coming down the hall ended that possibility.

Darcy squeezed her hand. He then rose and walked quickly toward the window, while struggling to regain his composure. Though striving to collect herself as well, Elizabeth felt the distance between them keenly. It seemed right when Darcy was close to her. In a contradictory way that defied logic, his nearness, though exciting, also enabled her to be comfortable. With the width of the room between them, Elizabeth found herself feeling anxious and uncertain again.

In just a moment the door to the sitting room opened and in walked Colonel Fitzwilliam. "Ah, Darcy, I am glad to see you up and about and Miss Bennet, too. What a delight."

Colonel Fitzwilliam moved toward the empty seat beside Elizabeth, but a warning glance from his cousin caused him to retreat. With a contrite expression, he sat down across from her instead. By the time Georgiana joined them a few minutes later, Darcy was once more seated at Elizabeth's side.

Georgiana was surprised to see their cousin. "Why, Richard, we did not expect you today."

"Hello, Georgie. Yes, I have actually come to say that I will not be able to join you for dinner tomorrow. I will be leaving town on an errand for the general in the morning and will not return to London until the following day."

"Oh, Richard, I am sorry you will not be able to come. We shall miss you, but I understand that you have responsibilities. I certainly cannot fault your commander when he allowed you so much leave while Fitzwilliam was ill."

The colonel smiled affably. "You know that if it is a choice between pleasing you or the general, Georgie, I would chose you every time. However, I do need to stay in the army's good graces so duty cannot be shirked altogether. Please give my regards to your aunt and uncle, Miss Bennet. I have enjoyed getting to know them and I look forward to seeing them again soon."

"Thank you, Colonel. I will convey your regards. I know that my aunt and uncle have also enjoyed making your acquaintance. In fact, speaking of my family, it is time I returned home."

Darcy rose to see to the carriage, but Fitzwilliam stopped him. "No, you keep your seat, Cousin. I will go and have the carriage brought round."

When the colonel was gone, Georgiana handed Elizabeth a small, carved wooden box. "Here, Elizabeth. This is what I went to get. I want you to have it."

Elizabeth did not know what to say. "Georgiana, I assure you that your friendship is all the gift I need."

"No, Elizabeth, please. I want you to have it. After the way you took care of us, it is only right that they belong to you. Go on. Open it."

Elizabeth lifted the lid and inside was a beautiful pair of beaded hair combs. "Georgie, they are exquisite, but it is impossible for me to accept them."

"No, you must take them, Elizabeth. They were mother's and they will be beautiful in your dark hair."

Elizabeth tried to hand them back. "No, Georgiana, if they were your mother's then you must keep them."

"But that is the very reason I want you to have them, Elizabeth. When I fell ill the other day, you did not just attend me. You cared for me--as tenderly as I imagine mother would have, if she were here. I really do not remember her. The only memories I have of mother are things I have been told about her. It may sound silly, but when you were watching over me, I felt as if I knew for the first time what it might have been like if she had lived. That is a gift I cannot repay. Please let me at least have the pleasure of giving you these."

Both young women were crying softly when Elizabeth rose and drew Georgiana into an embrace. Darcy watched them silently, his own eyes glistening. He had been shocked when Georgiana handed the box to Elizabeth for he knew what it contained. After Georgiana's description of how affected she was by Elizabeth's gentle care, Darcy understood completely why she wanted Elizabeth to have something of their mother's. He prayed that Elizabeth would be his very soon, for Georgiana's sake, as well as his own. Until that moment Darcy had not fully realized just how much his sister had missed by not knowing their mother.

After a moment the ladies resumed their seats. Georgiana drew a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. Elizabeth reached into her own pocket but realized her handkerchief had been left behind in the first dress she had worn that morning. With a warm smile, Darcy handed her his.

"Thank you, sir," said Elizabeth as she wiped her eyes, "I never seem to have a handkerchief when I need one. Yet, most days I carry one in my pocket and never use it." When Elizabeth reached out to hand it back to him, Darcy closed his hand over hers.

"Please keep it, Miss Bennet, in case you have need of it on the carriage ride home."

"Thank you, sir." She gave him a tender smile, enjoying the feel of his hand upon hers. "And thank you, Georgiana. I would not have been anywhere else this week. Sisterly devotion is no more than you deserve."

When Elizabeth and Darcy parted both felt the next evening could not come quickly enough. Darcy found himself irritated with Fitzwilliam for his earlier interruption. Had he not walked in on them, perhaps--no, Darcy must be honest with himself. He had been on the verge of kissing Elizabeth, not proposing to her, although he wanted to do both desperately. Darcy sighed. That could have been a disaster. What if he had offended her? It was too great a liberty to even think of, but that was the problem. When he was with Elizabeth, Darcy was too overcome by his own feelings to assess hers. It had seemed right to kiss her this morning and Darcy thought he was becoming more attuned to her feelings. Had Elizabeth wanted him to kiss her? Or was he completely mistaken?

Having worried himself into quite a headache, Darcy offered his excuses saying he would like to rest. Seeing his drawn expression, Georgiana was concerned, but Darcy reassured her.

"It is only a headache, Georgiana. It will surely pass, if I lie down for a bit."

"Very well, Fitzwilliam, but please send for me if you need anything. I am taking no chances with your health, dear brother."

After he was gone, the Colonel said, "I am afraid I may have interrupted Darcy and Miss Bennet at a most inopportune moment this morning, Georgie."

"Richard, if you interrupted a proposal I will have your head. Why do you think I 'accidentally' shut the door when I left them this morning?"

The Colonel threw back his head and laughed, "Georgiana, I never knew you to be so sly. So you are determined to have Miss Bennet as your sister, are you not?"

"Yes, I am, but do not look so superior, Cousin. You simply have not figured out how to help him along yet. We both know Fitzwilliam will not be happy without her."

With a more thoughtful expression, the colonel replied, "You are right, of course, Georgie. I think when he has fretted enough, Darcy will act to secure his happiness."

*Copyright 2007 Pamela St Vines*

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter Four

*No sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved,  
no sooner loved but they sighed, no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason,  
no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy;  
and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage...*  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*

### Chapter Four

The next day was interminable for Elizabeth. She felt her anxiety grow with every minute that crept by, and by early afternoon Aunt Gardiner was watching her carefully. Finally, when Sally had taken the children upstairs for a nap, Mrs. Gardiner called Elizabeth to sit beside her.

"Lizzy, you seem uneasy. I trust you would have told me if something happened yesterday that I should be aware of."

"Oh, no, of course not-- I mean I would have told you if something--" Elizabeth blushed and began again. "I am sorry Aunt. I feel like such a simpleton. I had a very pleasant visit with both the Darcys yesterday, but today I feel anxious and miserable. Yet I am happy at the same time."

"There, there, Lizzy," Mrs. Gardiner soothed her, "it is naturally unsettling. You are aware of Mr. Darcy's regard for you and you return his feelings. Yet you must wait for the gentleman to act before you can be easy. Waiting is sometimes very difficult, but let us think on the immediate happiness before us in this evening's dinner engagement. I hope you are planning to wear the lovely combs that Miss Darcy gave you. I think it would mean a great deal to her and to her brother to see them on you."

"I wanted to, but I was not certain if it would be appropriate."

"While it is an unusual and precious gift, let me assure you again, Lizzy, that I have no scruples regarding your acceptance of it."

The two of them had discussed the matter at length the previous afternoon, and Mrs. Gardiner's heart had gone out to the motherless girl when Elizabeth recounted Georgiana's persuasive words. Mrs. Gardiner had been firm in her opinion that Elizabeth must accept the gift in the spirit in which it had been given. Of course her aunt understood that the true difficulty was Elizabeth's lack of certainty regarding Mr. Darcy's intentions. It was making her uncertain of everything else, including the gift from his sister.

"No, Lizzy," she continued, "I think it is important that you wear the combs tonight. It will show Miss Darcy that you understand their significance and that you value her regard and her gift."

"You are right, of course, Aunt. Georgiana would probably be disappointed if I did not wear them."

Her aunt suggested they take their tea in the garden hoping to distract Elizabeth. Mrs. Gardiner intentionally kept the conversation light, talking of their family, a new dressmaker she was most eager to try, anything and everything--except Mr. Darcy. It did help. Elizabeth was much more composed when she went upstairs to change.

When Elizabeth was satisfied with her appearance, she joined her aunt and uncle in the parlor to await the carriage Darcy had insisted on sending for them--despite Mr. Gardiner's assurances that it was not necessary. They were somewhat surprised when the gentleman himself arrived with the carriage. Determined to show Elizabeth every possible attention, Darcy had come to escort her and her family to his home.

His eyes lit up at the sight of his mother's combs in his beloved's hair, and Darcy whispered, "You look very beautiful tonight, dearest," as he helped Elizabeth into the carriage.

Having resolved to befriend Miss Darcy, Mrs. Gardiner concentrated on drawing her out over dinner, and the amiable Mr. Gardiner followed his wife's lead. Not only did Georgiana blossom under their gentle attention, but it also resulted in Darcy and Elizabeth having ample opportunity for relatively private conversation during the meal. At one point when their companions were particularly animated, Darcy went so far as to reach for Elizabeth's hand under the table.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," he whispered.

"For what, Mr. Darcy?" she whispered in reply

"For making my life worth living."

Darcy thought that if they had been truly alone, he might have had the courage to ask her to marry him in that moment. Elizabeth had not shied away from his grasp under the table and the look she gave him bespoke her affection, but alas, they were not alone.

There was little conversation between the two of them for the rest of the evening. What remained unsaid loomed as too great a barrier to span with small talk, but there was some degree of comfort in simply being together.

Elizabeth retired for the night immediately upon returning to Gracechurch Street, but she tossed and turned for some time, longing for sleep that

would not come. Across town Darcy also found sleep elusive. Fortunately for both, Mr. Gardiner had decided it was time to intervene.

\*\*\*\*

Darcy was astonished the following morning when Simms announced that Mr. Gardiner was downstairs asking for him. He panicked at the thought that something might have happened to Elizabeth.

"Certainly, Simms. Have someone show him into the library and tell Mr. Gardiner I will be right down."

Mr. Simms nervously cleared his throat and said, "Knowing that Mr. Gardiner is Miss Bennet's uncle, I already took the liberty of telling Parker to admit him to the house, sir. The gentleman is awaiting you in the library even now. He expressed his hope that you would be able to see him, but sends assurances of his understanding if it is not possible today."

"Quick, Simms, my coat. I must find out what has happened."

Darcy hurried downstairs donning his coat as he went. Upon entering the library he was both surprised and reassured by Mr. Gardiner's usual cheerful expression.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy. I am delighted that you are able to spare me some time this morning."

Darcy silently chided himself for assuming the worst and tried to focus on his guest. "On the contrary, Mr. Gardiner, I am happy to see you again. How may I assist you?"

"Actually, Mr. Darcy, I am here with the aspiration that I may be of assistance to you. I hope you will not think me presumptuous, but I would like to speak with you about Lizzy."

"Is she well, sir?"

"Pray do not alarm yourself, Mr. Darcy. Lizzy was quite well when I left home this morning and I am certain she continues to be well. Please--may I speak frankly, Mr. Darcy?"

"Of course, Mr. Gardiner, I would willingly hear anything you have to tell me of your niece. Miss Bennet is very important to me."

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, my wife and I are both well aware of your regard for our niece and that is why I would hope to be of use to you."

Darcy was almost in a panic. He could not determine where Mr. Gardiner was going with this round about conversation. "I hope you do not disapprove, sir. I would be reluctant to cause dissention in Miss Bennet's family."

"Oh, no, Mr. Darcy, quite the opposite. My wife and I are both impressed by the obvious depth of your feelings for Lizzy and we are eager to secure her happiness. Normally, I would never presume to interfere in such a personal matter, but knowing something of the unusual history between you, I was concerned that you might be hesitant to speak to Lizzy again after the vehemence of her earlier refusal. I am here to encourage you that, if and when you are ready, I think you would be safe in speaking to my niece."

Darcy's face lit up. "Do you mean to say that you think she would accept me, Mr. Gardiner?"

"I would not be here, Mr. Darcy, were I not confident that Lizzy returns your regard."

Darcy reached out to shake the older man's hand. "Words cannot express my gratitude, Mr. Gardiner. I have feared Miss Bennet would be required at home before we reached an understanding, but I was also fearful of speaking too soon. Thank you, sir. May I call upon her this afternoon?"

"I believe it is safe to say that my wife and niece would welcome you at any time, Mr. Darcy. I am happy that we understand one another. I must confess I have also dreaded the prospect of Lizzy returning to Longbourn before everything is settled between you. My sister is not the most sensitive of mothers and she does not understand her second daughter at all. I have been apprehensive that she might make Lizzy truly miserable if another Mr. Collins came along."

"Mr. Collins? Do you mean that he actually proposed to Eliz--Miss Bennet? I cannot believe her mother wanted her to marry such a man."

"Yes," said Mr. Gardiner with a sigh, "it was a difficult time for Lizzy and a repeat of that is what I would wish to prevent."

Darcy nodded his understanding as he said, "I am most eager to marry your niece, sir. May I request your assistance in a related matter, Mr. Gardiner?"

"Why certainly, Mr. Darcy, I would be happy to assist you in any way possible."

"I am thinking of Mr. Bennet, sir. As I am unable to journey into Hertfordshire in the immediate future, I would wish to write for his consent as soon as Elizabeth--please forgive me, sir--as soon as Miss Bennet has accepted me. I am not well acquainted with Mr. Bennet, sir, and fear that I did not make the best impression upon Meryton in general last fall. Could you-- Would you, perhaps, assure Mr. Bennet of your approval of the match?"

"I understand your concerns, Mr. Darcy, and would be happy to oblige. My Brother Bennet is not an easy man to know, but he loves Lizzy dearly."

When he is assured of her happiness, he will give his consent. Perhaps, when you are ready to approach Mr. Bennet, you might let me send your letter along with one of my own. He may still have questions, but I think that will help ease your way."

When they parted, both gentlemen were well pleased with their conversation. Darcy immediately began planning how he would propose to Elizabeth. He would do it right this time and hopefully, he would receive a very different answer. Darcy went to his private study and opened the safe. He carefully removed a small ring box. It was the last thing his mother had given him, explaining that one day he would give it to his wife. Hopefully, this ring would be on Elizabeth's hand before the day was out. Darcy was soon in the carriage on his way to Gracechurch Street.

Georgiana and Fitzwilliam had both protested his going out alone, but Darcy would brook no argument. Neither of them missed his look of determination, but it was Georgiana who noticed the tell tale bulge of the ring box in his waistcoat pocket. Realizing what Darcy was about, she had hurried their cousin away on an unnecessary errand insisting that she could deal with her brother. Darcy steeled himself for an argument, but as soon as they were alone Georgiana embraced him and kissed his cheek.

"Do be careful, Fitzwilliam. I am delighted that while securing your own happiness you will also be securing a wonderful sister for me. Do not overexert yourself, but do not come home until mother's ring is on Elizabeth's hand."

Darcy wondered how she had so easily guessed his purpose, but he was too anxious to see Elizabeth to discuss that now. There would be time to quiz his sister later.

When Darcy alit from his carriage at the Gardiners' he could hear Elizabeth's voice coming from the back garden. Without a thought he followed the sound and soon was faced with a very charming sight. Elizabeth was seated on a bench with her two little cousins snuggled up, one on either side. She was reading to them from Perrault's *Cendrillon*. Darcy knew the story well. *Cendrillon* or *Cinderella* had been one of Georgiana's favorites when she was younger. He had, of course, always just told her the story, thinking the French language would confuse her. Seeing Elizabeth with her cousins, Darcy realized he had been wrong. The two little Gardiners were transfixed as Elizabeth read to them from the original French. She would stop every so often to explain the plot in English or to ask them questions about the story. It was obvious they were taking in much of the French. They also seemed to be captivated by the sound of the language itself. Darcy stood there for some minutes as if enchanted. It was young Peter who first espied him.

"Cousin Lizzy, who is that man? Do we know him?"

Emma seeing the tall, handsome stranger standing by the garden gate immediately answered, "Why he is the prince, of course, right, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth smiled and blushed as she wondered how to answer such questions.

Darcy spoke first. "Good afternoon, Miss Gardiner and Master Gardiner, I presume."

The children giggled to be addressed in such a grown up way, and Elizabeth found her tongue.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy. Yes, these are my cousins Emma and Peter. Children, this is Mr. Darcy."

"Well, then Emma and Peter, I am quite delighted to meet you both. I am also pleased that you are feeling better. My name is Fitzwilliam Darcy. I am not a prince, but I am like the prince in one way. Can you guess how?"

"Do you have a castle?" Peter asked quite wide-eyed.

"No, no castle, but I do have a very nice house across town and a big, old house in the country with a pond and a trout stream. Would you like to come and visit me there sometime?"

"Yes, sir." Peter thought a pond and a trout stream sounded much better than a castle.

Enjoying the children, Darcy continued the game. "Do you have any other guesses how I might be like the prince in the story?"

"Are you very rich, sir?" asked Emma.

Darcy laughed at her honest question. "Well, some people might say that I am, but I am not nearly so rich as a prince. Do you have another guess?"

Emma thought for a moment. "Are there a lot of ladies fighting over you?"

Elizabeth stifled a laugh as Darcy blushed. He decided to sidestep this particular question. "I do not think ladies fight, Emma. What about another guess?"

By this time Elizabeth was quite curious herself, but she silently waited for Mr. Darcy's answer.

Darcy found himself gazing at Elizabeth even as he continued to talk to the children. "I will give you a hint. What was the prince looking for when he rode through the land?"

"Cendrillon!" Peter cried triumphantly.

"But he did not know her name yet, silly." Emma chided.

"You have guessed it, Peter. The prince was looking for the one woman in all the world who could make him happy. He was looking for his bride. Like the prince, I have come here today in search of a bride." Darcy fixed his eyes on the children, afraid to look at Elizabeth now. "Have you heard this story before?"

Both children nodded seriously.

"Well, then, perhaps you can help me. Just how did the prince know that Cendrillon was the right young lady for him?"

Emma was only too happy to help the handsome Mr. Darcy. "Everybody knows that. Cendrillon lost her slipper and he carried it in his pocket, because he knew that when he found the lady whose foot fit the slipper, she would be the right one.

"It was a glass slipper." Peter added, eager to also be of use. "Cendrillon's glass slipper. I am sure she was glad to get it back. What would you do with one shoe?"

Darcy laughed. "An excellent point, Peter. I do not have a slipper in my pocket, but I do have something else. Something that I think might fit the lady who is right for me. Are there any single young ladies here today?"

The children both giggled and Peter happily answered, "Only Lizzy."

"Well, perhaps she is the right one for me."

Abandoning all dignity, Fitzwilliam Darcy knelt down before the woman he adored and took his mother's ring from his pocket.

"I know I have not given you much time, and I hope this is not too soon, dearest." He gently took Elizabeth's hand and continued, "Elizabeth Bennet, I have been in love with you for some months now and it seems that every time I see you, I love you more. I know that I do not deserve you, but I need you, Lizzy. Please say that you will marry me. Please say yes."

Darcy slowly slid the ring onto her finger as he looked up at her with eyes full of love and hope. Elizabeth found it almost impossible to speak, but she managed to whisper the one word he was longing to hear.

"Yes," she whispered, "Yes."

The children had watched this in wide-eyed wonder. Now Peter broke the spell. "So are you really going to marry him, Lizzy, or is this just pretend?"

Finding her voice again, Elizabeth hastened to reassure Mr. Darcy as well as her cousins. "No, Peter, this is not pretend. It is quite real. I am going to marry Mr. Darcy."

Unable to take his eyes off her, Darcy slowly rose and dusted off his knees.

Emma, remembering her manners and feeling she must set the example for Peter since he was younger and a boy, rose and curtsied very prettily. "Welcome to the family, Mr. Darcy." She then whispered hasty instructions to Peter ending with, "--this is important, Peter. Act like you know what's what."

Determined to do his duty on such a solemn occasion, Peter rose to his feet and bowed, "Congratulations, Mr. Darcy. Lizzy is my favorite cousin so I am sure she will be a very nice wife, too. She can run and climb trees almost as good as a boy, and Lizzy doesn't scream when you show her a nice frog so you need not be afraid of her scaring the fish away from your trout stream."

Darcy maintained a serious expression with considerable effort. "Thank you, Peter. That is very good news indeed. So I have your blessing then?"

"Yes, sir," Peter said, "I think you and Lizzy will do well together. After all the ring fits her, and that is almost as good as a glass slipper."

Wanting Darcy all to herself, Elizabeth said, "Would you two please run in and tell your mama that Mr. Darcy is here? I want to talk to him for a bit and then we will be in."

"Yes, Lizzy." Emma answered sweetly. She scampered away anxious to tell her mama all about Mr. Darcy.

As he followed his sister toward the house, Peter turned back to whisper loudly, "She really does like frogs, Mr. Darcy. It's true." He grinned happily and followed Emma inside.

"Will you sit with me, sir?"

"Only if you will stop calling me 'sir' when we are alone, Elizabeth. My name is Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth colored with pleasure as she teased, "Perhaps I should simply refer to you as the prince since you have so much in common."

"This is not pretend," Darcy began and then hesitated as he gazed into her eyes searching for reassurance. "It is real, is it not, Elizabeth? You did just agree to marry me or am I dreaming?"

"Yes, Fitzwilliam, this is real." His name was little more than a whisper from her lips, but it was a sweet sound to Darcy.

Bravely taking his hand, Elizabeth continued. "I have agreed to marry you, sir, and I will do my best not to frighten away the fish."

Darcy laughed, "You are the perfect one for me, my love. I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

They sat in the garden for sometime, content in one another's presence and the newfound peace of their engagement. Finally Elizabeth remembered her aunt.

"Mr. Dar--," she began but seeing his pointed look Elizabeth corrected herself, "I am sorry--Fitzwilliam, my dearest love, I could willingly sit here with you forever. However, I have just realized that my aunt might have gotten a very jumbled report from the children. We had best go inside and set her mind at ease."

When Elizabeth and Darcy found Mrs. Gardiner, she was indeed anxiously awaiting news of what had actually transpired in the garden. The children had seemed quite certain that Lizzy was going to marry Mr. Darcy, but then they were also chattering on about castles and frogs. Maggie had finally taken the children upstairs for a nap, and Mrs. Gardiner was doing her best to wait patiently for the young couple to come inside.

When Elizabeth and Darcy entered the parlor, Mrs. Gardiner knew the children had been correct in the primary point of their news, for the young couple radiated happiness. Mr. Gardiner soon arrived and all was discussed over tea.

Darcy was content to simply watch Elizabeth and hold her hand as she happily related the story of his fairy tale proposal. The Gardiners were sincerely happy for both of them. Mr. Gardiner beamed as his wife kindly invited Darcy to stay for dinner if he were not too tired.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. I would like that very much. Let me send a message to my sister, and then I would appreciate the use of your study, Mr. Gardiner. I want to write for Mr. Bennet's consent right away."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy, come with me and we will get all this necessary business accomplished as soon as possible."

Darcy paused to kiss Elizabeth's hand before leaving the room.

"Thank you," he whispered, "for saying yes."

She smiled and squeezed his hand in reply.

Once the gentlemen were gone, Mrs. Gardiner felt free to be more effusive in her best wishes for Elizabeth's happiness. "Oh, my dear, there are few men who would humble themselves to propose a second time and to do so in front of children, the most indiscrete of witnesses. I must confess I like your Mr. Darcy very much, Lizzy. He is a fine man. Now, let me see your ring again. I did not want to gawk at it in front of Mr. Darcy, but it really is quite beautiful."

Elizabeth shyly held out her hand. The ring was a simple but lovely setting of sapphires worked in the old style. Just as the whispered endearments had seemed right coming from Mr. Darcy's lips, his ring felt right on her hand.

In Mr. Gardiner's study, Darcy first wrote a note to his sister.

Dearest Georgiana,

She said, "Yes," and I am now the happiest of men. Mrs. Gardiner has kindly asked me to stay for dinner. I am certain that you can trust me to Elizabeth's care for the evening, but I also promise to be cautious. I will tell the coachman to come back at a relatively early hour for me so that you need not worry.

Thank you, dear sister, for writing to Elizabeth.

Your loving brother,

FD

The letter to Mr. Bennet took considerably longer to write and Mr. Darcy asked Mr. Gardiner's opinion several times. Both men were finally satisfied.

Dear Mr. Bennet,

I am sorry we did not become well acquainted when I was in Hertfordshire last fall. Due to family difficulties I was not in a sociable frame of mind at the time and I am afraid I did not impress the neighborhood favorably. However, I myself was quite impressed by your daughter Miss Elizabeth. From the earliest days of our acquaintance I was drawn to her intelligence, her wit, her liveliness and her integrity. In fact, I was so dazzled by your daughter, sir, that I found it quite impossible to behave normally around her, first in Hertfordshire and then later when we were both visiting in Kent.

As you may know, I proposed to Miss Elizabeth in Kent and she rejected me in no uncertain terms. Not only had I failed to properly win her heart at that time, but she had also been misled regarding my history and my character. Those misunderstandings have been laid to rest and to my great relief your daughter now has a very different opinion of me. Miss Elizabeth accepted my offer of marriage this afternoon. I know that I do not deserve her, sir, but I pledge to you that I will love and treasure her for the rest of my life. I know that she is dear to your heart, and I hope that you will consent to her becoming my wife. Thank you, Mr. Bennet. May God bless you, sir.

Sincerely,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Mr. Gardiner insisted that Darcy read his letter to Mr. Bennet, as well.

My Dear Brother,

The enclosed missive may come as a surprise to you. It seems that Lizzy and Mr. Darcy were better acquainted than any of us realized.

However, Mrs. Gardiner and I have had the opportunity to get to know Mr. Darcy and I offer my endorsement of his suit. Although Mr. Darcy is somewhat reserved, it is obvious to both of us that he loves Lizzy dearly. It is equally unmistakable that his love is returned. Of course, Mr. Darcy is well able to provide for a wife and children, but more importantly, he is an honorable and intelligent man—someone Lizzy will be able to respect. We are confident that they are well suited to one another. In fact, Mr. Darcy may be the only man of my acquaintance whom I would judge worthy of my dearest niece. I urge you, dear brother, to make their happiness complete by granting them your consent and every blessing for their happiness.

As Mr. Darcy is unable to leave town at present, I would be happy to act on your behalf in regards to the settlements. In fact, I would be delighted to assist you in securing my niece's marriage in any way. Please write to me of your wishes.

Yours truly,  
EG

Darcy was touched by Mr. Gardiner's sincere praise. Too many people assumed his annual income was the most important measure of his worth. It warmed Darcy's heart to read that Mr. Gardiner considered him to be worthy of Elizabeth because of his abilities and his love for her—not his fortune.

"Thank you, Mr. Gardiner, for your commendation and support. I shall do all that is in my power to ensure you never regret it."

"I have no fears on that account Mr. Darcy. Now let's get this express off. The sooner my brother writes back, the sooner you may set a wedding date."

Darcy's eyes glowed at the prospect of setting a date for his marriage to Elizabeth. The evening passed all too quickly and it was time for Darcy to return home. After he bid the Gardiners goodnight, Elizabeth walked her intended to the door. Darcy took her hand and kissed it. As he turned her dear hand over to kiss her palm, Elizabeth reached up with the other and lightly touched his cheek. Darcy closed his eyes savoring her touch. She squeezed his hand and then drew back slightly.

"Goodnight, Fitzwilliam," she whispered. "Sleep well, dearest."

"Goodnight, my love. You have made me so very happy."

Elizabeth laughed, "That is only fair, sir, as you have made me happy, too. Please give my regards to your sister. I hope she will rejoice in our news."

"Rest assured, dearest. Georgiana sent me off this afternoon with strict instructions to secure her the sister she has long desired. If you had refused me, I fear I would have been unable to face her."

Elizabeth's expression clouded. Her earlier refusal of Darcy was still an embarrassment to her. Perceiving the cause of Elizabeth's distress, Darcy hastened to reassure her.

"Please do not be unhappy, Elizabeth. I was not thinking of the past. I only meant to tease you about Georgiana's determination to have you for her sister."

"I am sorry, my love," she whispered, "but I cannot think of the past without shame. It may take me some time to forgive myself for how I mistreated you, dear Fitzwilliam."

Darcy lifted her chin until she met his gaze. "You were right to refuse me then, dearest. I was selfish and foolish, but losing you made me realize that I had begun to take on those very attitudes that I find so offensive in others. Were it not for you, I might have been irretrievably lost, but you helped me find my way again."

She smiled at him tenderly. "Please do not reproach yourself for my sake, my love. Let us just be gloriously happy."

He smiled. Then with a whispered, "I love you, Lizzy," he was gone.

Darcy was exhausted by the time he reached home, but he was also happier than he had ever been. He was somewhat relieved to find the downstairs deserted except for a few servants. Darcy had expected Georgiana and Fitzwilliam to be lying in wait for him and so they were. However, Darcy failed to anticipate that they would wait in his room, but there they were, comfortably settled as if prepared to wait all night.

Georgiana immediately moved to embrace him. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, thank you for the note. I was so anxious to know all was well. Please tell me everything."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was right behind her ready to offer his congratulations. "So Miss Bennet has accepted you, Cousin. That is very good news. Congratulations! Now tell Georgiana all the details before her impatience gets the better of her."

Darcy smiled, "Actually if you want to hear all the particulars of the matter, you should wait and ask Elizabeth. She will surely tell it much better than I ever could. I had given considerable consideration to how I might propose to her this time, but when the moment came it was nothing like I had planned. I hope it was better. It was definitely memorable."

"Well, at least tell me where you did it," Georgiana urged. "Did you propose in the parlor? And however did you manage to get her alone?"

"Actually, we were not alone, Georgie. Elizabeth was seated on a bench in the back garden with her little cousins Emma and Peter, one on each side of her. We chatted a bit. It was actually more of a conversation between the children and myself. Elizabeth was rather quiet, and then I knelt down before her and asked her to be my wife. I think the children found it all rather fascinating. They were very charming and welcomed me to the

family quite nicely. Peter also assured me that Elizabeth will make an excellent wife, as she is his favorite cousin and has no fear of frogs."

The colonel could not help himself. He shook with laughter. "You actually proposed in front of the Gardiners' children. Oh, Darcy, that's rich. Surely you know that children can remember every detail of any embarrassing incident they have ever witnessed and they tend to bring them up at the most inconvenient times."

Darcy smiled rather smugly. "Ah, but this was not an embarrassing moment. It was one of the most significant events of my life. Besides having the children there gave me two witnesses when she said, 'Yes.' I do not think Elizabeth is harboring any doubts, but should she waver I am not afraid to use her relations against her."

By now Georgiana was laughing, too. "Very well, dear brother, off to bed with you. I see I will have to ask Elizabeth if I am to hear all the details."

\*\*\*\*

Georgiana awoke the following morning determined that she would call on her soon-to-be-sister. She was eager to see Elizabeth and hear all about her brother's proposal. When Georgiana informed Darcy of her plans at breakfast, he expressed a natural desire to join her.

Georgiana was surprised at her own boldness when she actually refused him. Only a few weeks earlier she would not have dared to disappoint her brother.

"I understand your desire to accompany me, Fitzwilliam, but I would prefer to visit Elizabeth alone this morning. I know that is selfish of me, but I beg your indulgence. I want to have a sisterly chat with Elizabeth all to myself for a bit. Besides, you should rest. Yesterday was a long day for you and a relapse now would not do."

Seeing her earnestness, Darcy tried to hide his disappointment by teasing her, "Very well, Georgiana, I will stay behind this once, but please do not expect such concessions on a regular basis."

"Thank you, Brother."

"Although we cannot publish our engagement until Mr. Bennet has given his consent, the Gardiners have sanctioned it. Therefore, I think I might be safe in writing Elizabeth a note this morning. Would you mind delivering it for me, Georgie?"

Georgiana was relieved that she could at least allow him this comfort. "Of course, what a wonderful idea. I will come to your study before I depart."

That is how Georgiana came to arrive in Gracechurch Street later that morning with a bouquet of roses and Elizabeth's first love letter.

Having no doubt of Elizabeth's impatience to read her letter, Aunt Gardiner thoughtfully provided her with the privacy to do so after they had greeted Georgiana. "Lizzy, there is a vase in the china closet that would be perfect for your roses. I will keep Miss Darcy company while you go and put them in water. They are so beautiful."

Elizabeth obediently found the vase and saw to the flowers before she sat down in the dining parlor and opened the precious letter with trembling hands.

Elizabeth, my dearest love,  
*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest;  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

There, now you know that I believe our love to be strong enough to withstand the effects of poetry. Oh, dearest Elizabeth, you have made me the happiest of men by consenting to be my wife. I could scarcely sleep last night for joy. Georgiana was most earnest in her desire "to have you all to herself" this morning. Else I would be by your side at this moment. The roses cannot compare to your beauty, my love, but their softness and their sweetness remind me of you. I eagerly await our next meeting. Until then know that my heart is--

Forever yours,

FD

Had Darcy not written of Georgiana's desire for her company, Elizabeth might have completely forgotten her guest. She secured his letter in her pocket and took a few deep breaths to calm herself before returning to the parlor.

"Here, Lizzy," Aunt Gardiner greeted her, "come and have a cup of tea."

Elizabeth was grateful for the activity as it gave her a few more moments to collect herself. She did not want to neglect Georgiana, but her thoughts were fixed on Darcy. After reading his letter it was impossible not to think of him. Elizabeth did not realize that she was blushing as she recalled his words. However, both her aunt and Georgiana noticed and shared a smile.

When Georgiana shyly entreated Elizabeth to tell her more of Darcy's proposal, Elizabeth said, "I think I should let Emma and Peter tell you about it first."

"Oh, yes, my dear," Mrs. Gardiner agreed as she rang for a servant to fetch the children. "What the children's version lacks in clarity, it more than makes up for in entertainment. Then I will send you girls off to discuss all the details in private."

It was no surprise to Elizabeth or their mother that the children arrived carrying THE book. Although Cendrillon had long been one of their favorite tales, Emma and Peter had thought of little else since seeing the story come to life in their garden the previous afternoon.

Mrs. Gardiner's introduction of the children to Georgiana was all that was proper. She concluded by explaining to the children that this was Mr. Darcy's sister and would soon be Cousin Lizzy's sister, too. The children were obviously impressed by this news.

Handing the book to her mother Emma made a very deep curtsy as she whispered loudly to Peter, "Bow, Peter. This is Prince Darcy's sister."

Peter instantly obeyed and his expression was quite solemn as he bowed deeply to Georgiana. All three ladies managed not to laugh, but it was impossible not to smile.

"Emma, Peter," Lizzy began, "Miss Darcy was asking about how I came to be engaged to her brother. Would you, perhaps, like to tell her what happened in the garden yesterday?"

Both children beamed. Georgiana soon found herself flanked with a young Gardiner on each side and the precious book open on her lap. The young storytellers were most enthusiastic and they delighted in using the book's illustrations to tell the story. Of course, both children hastened to assure their audience that Lizzy was never made to sleep in the fireplace or anything like that.

Georgiana found their story of Darcy as the handsome prince seeking his bride to be most amusing. Peter gravely displayed a drawing of the prince kneeling before Cendrillon as Emma concluded their tale.

"--and that is what the prince--I mean Mr. Darcy did. He knelt down just like in the story. He did not have one of Lizzy's shoes, but he had a ring that worked just as well."

"And it fit, just like it was made for her," Peter chimed in. "So that is how he knew Lizzy is the only girl for him."

Peter assured their guest of the wisdom of Mr. Darcy's choice, much as he had assured the man himself yesterday. While Georgiana knew it mattered not to Darcy if Elizabeth climbed trees or like frogs, she solemnly thanked Peter for his endorsement.

"Thank you, Peter. While I am very fond of your Cousin Lizzy, I had no idea she was so lively. I am very happy to know my brother will have such an entertaining wife. He likes your Cousin Lizzy very much, Peter, and so do I."

Eager to assure Georgiana that Elizabeth would be excellent company for her, too, Emma said, "But do not worry, Miss Darcy. Lizzy is a perfect lady. She helps me care for my dolls and Lizzy is delightful company at tea parties."

Georgiana graciously thanked Emma. As she was obviously enjoying the children's company, Mrs. Gardiner allowed them to prattle on a bit before dismissing them.

"I think it is time for you two to return to the nursery now. Lizzy, it is such a fine morning. May I suggest you take Miss Darcy out into the garden? No one will disturb you there, and perhaps, she would like to see the spot where her brother proposed."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. I would like that very much if it is agreeable to you, Elizabeth."

"I think it is a fine idea." Although Elizabeth was happy beyond words, the children's enthusiastic telling of her own personal fairy tale come to life had calmed her nerves. She was now able to focus on Georgiana and fully enjoy the visit.

Emma and Peter's narrative to Georgiana had actually been much more coherent than the version told to their mother the previous day. This was the result of practice. The children had told the story of Cousin Lizzy-Cendrillon and Prince Darcy to anyone who would listen. All the servants had heard the tale at least twice. Emma and Peter had also found considerable amusement in telling the story to each other repeatedly. Not to detract from the children's narrative talents, but it should also be noted that Georgiana had the distinct advantage of knowing the conclusion of the story before they began.



"Oh, Elizabeth, I want to. I have been so worried that no respectable man would want me after what I almost did."

"Georgie, any decent man who cares for you will be outraged on your behalf. He will not blame you, just as your brother and your cousin do not blame you." Elizabeth found herself blushing at her next thought, but forced herself to speak it for Georgiana's sake. "Think of your brother's generosity towards me. Fitzwilliam refuses to blame me for the wrong I truly did to him. Do you think he would blame me so unjustly for an injury done to me by another?"

"No, of course not, Fitzwilliam loves you, Elizabeth--" Georgiana paused as true comprehension began to dawn. In relief she hugged Elizabeth tightly. "Oh, thank you, Elizabeth. I understand."

Darcy was struck by the change in his sister when she returned home. Although her spirits had been somewhat improved of late, Georgiana suddenly seemed completely happy and free of care. She had not been so jubilant since the incident with Wickham. Knowing that somehow Elizabeth was behind this, Darcy thought he would not be able to contain his emotion.

"I can tell your visit went well, Georgie. You are obviously quite happy."

"Oh, yes, Fitzwilliam, or perhaps I should call you Prince Darcy now," she teased.

"Let me guess--you met Emma and Peter."

"I did and it was delightful. They told the tale of your proposal quite charmingly although I think Peter still regrets that you did not have one of Elizabeth's shoes in your pocket. Emma, on the other hand, was quite pleased by the ring."

Darcy threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, Georgiana, we have been too solemn, for too long. Elizabeth is just what we have needed."

"Yes, she is, dear brother. She not only has brought laughter back into our lives, but your Elizabeth has also helped me to put last year's unhappiness behind me."

Reaching out to take his sister's hand, Darcy whispered, "Wickham?"

"Yes, Fitzwilliam, Wickham. While I may despise him forever--which Elizabeth assures me is quite proper--you need not be afraid for me. Elizabeth helped me to see things differently and I no longer feel so burdened by it."

Darcy embraced her, "That is very good news, Georgiana. I have been so worried, but I am afraid I have not been of much assistance to you."

She drew back to look into his eyes. "That is not true, dear brother. Mr. Wickham may have taken advantage of my naivete, but you protected my innocence, something for which I will forever be grateful."

Darcy was taken aback. He had never thought of it that way. He had been too consumed by guilt and worry over the incident to fully appreciate how little lasting harm was done. Seeing Georgiana's sincerity, Darcy nodded his understanding.

She continued with a smile, "Because of you, Fitzwilliam, my life was not ruined and I hope to one day wed a worthy man who will love me as you love Elizabeth. We have wasted too much time fretting over George Wickham. I, for one, do not intend to make that mistake in the future."

Not trusting himself to speak, Darcy nodded and embraced her again. After a moment, Georgiana pulled away and spoke teasingly.

"I just remembered that I have something in my pocket for you--something that will make you smile, brother dear."

Seeing the eager expression in his eyes, Georgiana laughed, "Yes, Fitzwilliam, I have a note for you from Elizabeth." Reaching into one pocket, she murmured, "Now what did I do with it, I thought it was right here."

She then tried her other pocket, "Maybe-- No it's not here either."

Seeing Darcy's impatience, Georgiana simply smiled, "Oh, do not worry, Fitzwilliam, I am only teasing you. Here it is."

She produced the precious letter from the first pocket she had searched. Darcy took the note into his hands and gazed at it with wonder. Georgiana could not resist a final giggle as she walked toward the door.

"I will leave you to read your letter in privacy, brother. By the way we are invited to the Gardiners' for dinner this evening."

Darcy flashed his sister a huge smile and then settled into his chair to read Elizabeth's letter.

Dearest Fitzwilliam,

I must confess I was surprised to receive your letter this morning. I had not considered all the advantages of being engaged until Georgiana made her deliveries. Thank you for the flowers and for the beautiful letter. Although I would rather have you than all the love letters in the world, it is something I will always treasure. Your confidence in the strength of our love is well placed, dearest, as your selection of poetry only seemed to increase my ardor for you.

I had hoped to see you this morning, but you were wise to allow Georgiana to come alone. A degree of closeness had already developed between us, but I think in some ways we truly became sisters today as Georgiana talked to me of last year's difficulties. Please do not be upset that she confided in me or that I could offer her a type of comfort you could not.

You have always taken excellent care of Georgiana, a fact of which she is very appreciative. However, to be blunt, you are a man, dearest

Fitzwilliam. I am very glad that is so, my love, as it works out quite nicely for us. But while you are the best of brothers, Georgie was missing the type of comfort and understanding that only another woman can give. I was very gratified that she chose to confide in me and that she seemed to be less oppressed afterwards. I hope you will be happy, too.

I would be most remiss if I closed this letter without assuring you of my love and devotion. While the children have been most amusing with their continual retelling of the story of *Cendrillon*, which is now also known as *Cousin Lizzy and Prince Darcy*, I do truly feel as if I am in a fairy tale come to life. When we parted in April, who could have thought it would end so happily? While I did not always love you so, I can no longer imagine my life without you, dearest Fitzwilliam. I will be counting the minutes until I see you again.

Your own,  
Elizabeth

Darcy kissed the letter before sliding it carefully into his coat pocket, glad to know that he would see her in just a few hours. He smiled thinking of how she had signed the letter, "Your own Elizabeth." Yes, she was his own, or very soon would be.

*Copyright 2007 Pamela St Vines*

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter Five

*Now a soft kiss - Aye, by that kiss, I vow an endless bliss.*

JOHN KEATS

### *Chapter Five*

The house in Gracechurch Street was in an uproar when the Darcys arrived for dinner that evening. Mr. Bennet had appeared quite unexpectedly a short while before, bringing the rest of the Gardiner household with him.

Mr. Gardiner welcomed them graciously and explained the unusual commotion, "Ah, Mr. and Miss Darcy, how delightful to see you both. Please excuse all the confusion. My brother Bennet has quite taken us by surprise, bringing the rest of my family from Longbourn. This will probably delay dinner just a bit. Please sit down."

Lowering his voice, Mr. Gardiner whispered to Darcy, "I believe he received our letters this morning, sir, and that precipitated Mr. Bennet's hasty trip to town."

Speaking in a more normal tone, Mr. Gardiner continued, "I hope you will not mind if we forego a formal dinner this evening for a family meal with the children. They are excited to be home and it would be cruel to dismiss them to the nursery right away."

Georgiana nodded her agreement as Darcy assured Mr. Gardiner of their delight in meeting the other Gardiner children. Then sensing her brother's uneasiness, Georgiana asked, "Pray, Mr. Gardiner, is Elizabeth helping with the children?"

"No, she is actually with her father at the moment. Mr. Bennet requested a word with Lizzy just before you arrived." Seeing Darcy begin to rise, he continued, "I think it best we give them a few minutes alone, Mr. Darcy. I am certain that Mr. Bennet will wish to speak with you later."

Darcy nodded and kept his seat, but he was anxious. What if Mr. Bennet refused his consent? All Darcy's happiness might ride on a conversation taking place at this very minute and he was not a party to it. Darcy was entirely correct in assuming he was the topic of discussion in the study.

Mr. Bennet's consternation was obvious as he addressed his daughter. "Well, Lizzy, I received the letters from Mr. Darcy and your uncle, and I must say I was surprised to hear that you have accepted Mr. Darcy of all men. Before I speak with the man I want to know if you are still certain of your choice."

Elizabeth blushed, but she forced herself to meet her father's penetrating gaze. "Yes, Papa. I know I have been foolish and most unfair to Mr. Darcy in the past, but I did not really know him then. Now that I do, I do not believe I could be happy with anyone else."

"But, Lizzy, how has this come about? I never thought you would be swayed by wealth, but I am at a loss to understand this sudden change in your opinion of the man. I thought you agreed with the general consensus in Meryton that Mr. Darcy is a proud, disagreeable man."

"And I am partly to blame for Mr. Darcy's poor reputation in Meryton, Papa. Oh what mortification that knowledge has caused me--"

Knowing that her father's concern was for her happiness, Elizabeth told him everything about her earlier acquaintance with Darcy--how her vanity had mislead her, of Darcy's misunderstood admiration of her, and finally, "--it was in Kent that Mr. Darcy first confessed his regard for me and made me an offer of marriage."

Elizabeth was surprised when her father said, "Yes, Lizzy, I am aware of that. Mr. Darcy already explained as much in his letter, but he gave me to understand that you refused him in Kent."

"I did. Oh, Papa, I was a blind fool--I who have always prided myself on being clever and perceptive--it is painful to remember just how wrong I was. I was most vehement in my refusal of Mr. Darcy and I even berated him for his cruelty towards Mr. Wickham."

"You spoke to him of Wickham?"

"Yes, just another instance of my gross misjudgment. I have since learned that I was very much deceived by that gentleman. He is, in fact, not a gentleman at all, but a wastrel and a rake."

Mr. Bennet had always thought Wickham's tale of woe to be too charmingly told to be plausible and so demanded no verification of those assertions at the moment. He did decide to ask Mr. Darcy more about Wickham later since they were obviously well acquainted. Meanwhile there was more he would know from his daughter, "But tell me, Lizzy, if you refused Mr. Darcy in April, what has happened since to bring on a renewal of his addresses?"

"Once my eyes were opened to Mr. Wickham's true nature, I began to see Mr. Darcy very differently. I was tormented by guilt for my unkindness to Mr. Darcy, but I did not expect our paths to cross again--" Elizabeth went on to relate the history of the Mr. Darcy's illness, Georgiana's letter, and then the note she had received after arriving in London. "--I only went to apologize for the unfair and harsh way I had spurned him, but Mr. Darcy made no attempt to hide the fact that he still loved me, Papa."

"I have never seen anyone so close to death, and when Mr. Darcy saw me--he knew that I no longer thought ill of him--he began to improve. It was remarkable. I think I have always admired his person and his intelligence, but in London I have discovered that Mr. Darcy also has a sense of humor and a depth of feeling that he does not usually display. I found myself returning his affections and was most relieved when he again made me an offer of marriage."

Mr. Bennet's demeanor had softened considerably as he listened to his daughter. When she finished he nodded his approval.

"So you turned him down, and the man had the sense to not give up. Such a strong regard for you, Lizzy, predisposes me to like Mr. Darcy very much. Your uncle's approbation also speaks well of him. Enough for now. Let us go and see if he is here. I shall look forward to speaking with your young man later."

Mr. Bennet prided himself on being a keen observer of human nature, but he doubted a blind man could have missed the way Darcy's face lit up at the sight of his daughter. Her delight in seeing him was equally evident. Touched by the sight of his daughter's happiness, Mr. Bennet's greeting of the Darcys was somewhat friendlier than was his usual manner.

Mrs. Gardiner soon appeared with all five of her children. Emma and Peter greeted their guests warmly, but the others were understandably shy. Margaret and James were the two eldest and their greetings were proper, if subdued. Katie who was a year younger than Peter hung back, timidly clinging to her mother's skirts.

Seeing that Emma had THE book in tow, Georgiana helpfully suggested that Emma and Peter tell the other children and Mr. Bennet the story of their cousin's engagement. This was just what the intrepid storytellers had hoped would happen. Their faces lit up with pleasure and the whole party was soon rearranged to their satisfaction so that the newcomers would be able to see the illustrations.

Although Darcy blushed considerably at being compared to the handsome prince, he enjoyed the tale along with everyone else. The adults all considerably refrained from laughing aloud, but their amusement was evident. As Emma pointed out the picture of the prince kneeling before Cendrillon with her shoe in his hand, Darcy gathered his courage and took Elizabeth's hand in his own. Curious to see how the solemn young man was taking the children's version of his proposal, Mr. Bennet happened to glance at Darcy just as he was reaching for Elizabeth's hand. However, seeing the way Darcy looked at his daughter, Mr. Bennet could not be affronted.

Just at that moment Peter caused the whole company to laugh by saying, "It is a shame you would not let Mr. Darcy have one of your shoes, Lizzy. Then a frog could have jumped out of it and that would make the story much more interesting."

By the time dinner was over, Mr. Bennet had warmed considerably toward Darcy. Understanding that he had proposed to Elizabeth twice, Mr. Bennet was prepared to see a young man in love. However, he was not prepared for the way in which Darcy made no attempt to hide his admiration for Elizabeth. Mr. Bennet was also very pleased by the respect Darcy showed for his daughter. When Elizabeth spoke, no matter what the subject, she had Darcy's full attention. Even when Darcy had held her hand before dinner, it was not done casually or with the arrogance of presumption. The man had taken her hand as if it were the most precious thing in the world. Yes, Mr. Bennet was quite pleased by Elizabeth's choice.

After dinner Elizabeth and Darcy accompanied her father to the study as Mr. Gardiner herded the children upstairs. Seeing Georgiana's anxiety, Mrs. Gardiner hastened to reassure her.

"Do not worry, my dear Miss Darcy. The fact that my Brother Bennet asked Lizzy to join them is most reassuring. If he were in doubt about giving his consent, Mr. Bennet would probably be speaking to your brother alone. I am certain that all will be well."

A tendency toward worry was most definitely a family trait, as Darcy was also feeling apprehensive at that moment. It helped considerably when Elizabeth smiled at him and took his hand in her own for a moment. Her actions were not unnoticed by Mr. Bennet. "Yes," he thought, "Lizzy is definitely determined to have him."

Aloud he said, "So, Mr. Darcy, I understand you wish to marry my daughter."

"Yes, sir, with all my heart."

"I trust you understand that Lizzy has no dowry."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Bennet. It is of little consequence. My fortune is more than sufficient for both of us. All I lacked before was happiness and I have found that with your daughter."

"Well said, sir. I appreciate the fact that you hold Elizabeth in such high esteem. I only point out the disparity of fortune to be certain that you have both considered the possible repercussions."

Darcy's expression assured Mr. Bennet this was well-traveled ground for him. Elizabeth on the other hand looked as if she had given the matter no real thought.

Seeing Elizabeth's momentary confusion Mr. Bennet persisted, "I am concerned for your future happiness as well as my daughter's, Mr. Darcy. It is likely there will be those who will judge Elizabeth to be a fortune hunter. What of your family, Mr. Darcy? Will they condemn her thusly?"

"My dearest relations are my sister Georgiana and my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam," Darcy replied. "They both understand that our marriage will be one of mutual affection and are delighted that I have managed to secure your daughter's affection and acceptance. As for the rest of my relations, I have not informed them yet, as I had not obtained your consent, sir."

Darcy sighed as he continued, "In truth I expect my Aunt Catherine will be somewhat displeased, but that is not because of anything about Miss

Elizabeth. My aunt has long hoped I will marry her daughter, although neither my cousin nor myself have any inclination towards such a match.

"As for my other relatives, I believe they will all respect and admire Miss Elizabeth when they have come to know her. Be assured, however, that anyone who refuses to show your daughter the respect that is her due will not be welcome in our home. When we are married, our relationship will preclude any other in importance for me."

Mr. Bennet nodded with satisfaction, "Very well, Mr. Darcy, I am satisfied that you are prepared to deal with that sort of unpleasantness, but what of you, Lizzy? Does this give you pause? Do you need time to reconsider?"

Elizabeth took Darcy's hand again, and this time she did not relinquish it. "No, Papa, I confess I had not given the matter as much thought as Mr. Darcy has, and I appreciate your concern for my happiness. I think, however, that I would prefer to be thought a fortune hunter by those who are small minded, than to forego the happiness of being Mr. Darcy's wife."

"Very well, then," Mr. Bennet said, "you have my consent. Are you prepared to set a date for the wedding now or would you prefer to take some time to consider it?"

Although they had not discussed this, a quick glance between Darcy and Elizabeth confirmed they were both eager to set a date. Elizabeth actually spoke first, "I think, Papa, that we would like to be married within a few weeks. Mr. Darcy must go into Derbyshire soon and neither of us wants to be parted for an extended period of time."

Darcy's countenance glowed. He had hoped to be married soon, but had prepared himself for the possibility that Elizabeth might require a long engagement.

"Your daughter is right, sir. Due to my illness I have neglected my estate in Derbyshire of late, but I do not think I could bear to be so far from Elizabeth-- Miss Elizabeth."

Although Mr. Bennet was disappointed to lose his favorite daughter so quickly, he had already expected as much. Determined that nothing would mar Elizabeth's happiness, he managed to smile as he said, "Very well then, shall you go into Hertfordshire to marry or will you be married from your uncle's house here in London?"

"That is your decision, dearest, for I do not care where we marry as long as you will have me," Darcy whispered reaching across with his other hand so that Elizabeth's hand was now firmly clasped between both his own.

Elizabeth smiled her appreciation and then hesitated as she gathered her thoughts, "I would like to have all my family with me for the wedding, but I do not wish a lot of parties and fuss, Papa. I fear it will be impossible to avoid that if I am married from Longbourn. If my aunt and uncle do not mind, could you bring Mama and my sisters here for a simple, private ceremony in London?"

Mr. Bennet understood all too well Elizabeth's aversion to the fuss her mother was sure to make. He rose and kissed the top of his daughter's head, before he replied, "Of course, child, if that is what you want and is agreeable with the Gardiners, then that is what we will do. I shall go and speak with your aunt right now." Turning his attention to Darcy, Mr. Bennet added, "You have my permission to remain behind for a few minutes, but only a few, sir."

Darcy rose to shake Mr. Bennet's hand, "Thank you, sir. I promise to take good care of your daughter and I hope that you will come and visit us at Pemberley this fall."

"I may just do that," Mr. Bennet replied. "Now, remember I expect to see you in the parlor in a few minutes."

When the door had closed behind Mr. Bennet, Darcy turned to Elizabeth, "You have made me very happy, but are you certain that you do not need more time, Elizabeth?"

She smiled at him reassuringly, "No, Fitzwilliam, I do not need more time. While we still have much to learn of each other, I know that I am happiest when I am with you and that is enough for now."

"My only concern is that you may be foregoing your own desires in consideration of mine, Elizabeth." Darcy paused to kiss her hand before continuing, "I appreciate your desire for my happiness, but I would not wish for anything about our wedding to make you dissatisfied. If you would like a longer engagement or want to be married from your home--"

"Hush, dearest," she shushed him. "I will confess that I am concerned for your health and do not want you to be fatigued by a lot of bother, Fitzwilliam, but a small, quiet wedding is also all I have ever wanted for myself. Under different circumstances I might have tolerated more 'fuss and bother' simply to please my mother. However, you are my primary concern here, sir, and as our wishes are in accord we shall please ourselves. I dare say my mother will be pleased enough that we are marrying, and she can 'fuss' over one of my sister's weddings--" Elizabeth blushed as she remembered her mother's past behavior to him. Her voice was barely audible as she continued, "I hope you will be able to endure her raptures. I know she has been abominably rude to you in the past, Fitzwilliam."

"Pray do not trouble yourself over that, dearest. She is your mother, therefore, I will do my best to be polite to her."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You have made me so happy, Lizzy," Darcy whispered in reply. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly.

Gazing down into her eyes and seeing her love for him, Darcy dared to ask, "Elizabeth?"

She nodded shyly still meeting his gaze.

Darcy took her face in his hands and then he leaned in slowly. He kissed her gently allowing his lips to linger on hers briefly. When Elizabeth opened her eyes, Darcy was watching her anxiously as if afraid he might have offended her. He relaxed when she smiled at him.

Darcy held her hand to his chest and said, "I do not know if you can feel it, but my heart is racing, my love. I am glad that we are to be married soon, for I do not want to be apart from you even for an hour. For now, I think we had best join the others. I should hate for your father to think I have taken advantage of his generosity."

The Gardiners were delighted that Lizzy wanted to be married from their home and assured her the entire Bennet family would be welcome to come and stay with them for the wedding. Elizabeth was doubly grateful when her aunt insisted on planning the wedding breakfast. She knew it would be a reflection of her aunt's taste and creativity, which was a considerable relief.

The Gardiners understood all too well the excessive activity and interest Elizabeth was trying to avoid by remaining in London. It was agreed that Darcy would procure a special license on Monday, and Mr. Gardiner offered to call on their minister to arrange the time for the ceremony. Once those details were in order, Darcy and Elizabeth could write to the select family and friends who would be invited to the ceremony. Mr. Bennet elected to remain in London until all was arranged. Understanding his wife's temperament and temper he thought it best to present her with a fait accompli.

\*\*\*\*

Much to Elizabeth's chagrin, Aunt Gardiner insisted on taking her to the dressmaker Monday morning. However, to Elizabeth's surprise and delight, shopping with her aunt was far simpler and more pleasant than shopping with her mother. Mrs. Gardiner was a sensible woman with excellent taste. They quickly decided on fabrics and patterns for six dresses and assorted personal articles and were home in time for luncheon with the children.

By mid-afternoon Darcy had arrived to report his success in procuring the license, and Mr. Gardiner appeared shortly thereafter with the news that the wedding was scheduled for a week from Friday. Darcy and Elizabeth immediately set about writing to their closest family and friends about the upcoming wedding.

When their letters were done, Darcy sighed with satisfaction and said, "Writing invitations to my relatives makes it seem real, Elizabeth."

She smiled teasingly, "I hope that is a good thing, Fitzwilliam."

"It is most definitely a very good thing, my love. Before today it seemed a happy dream that you would soon be my wife. The dream was lovely, but the reality is much better," said Darcy with a smile. "Come, dearest. I must see if Mr. Gardiner's man can take these to the Express Office for me. I want them to go out right away."

Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand to help her up, and when she stood, their bodies were almost touching. He stood there staring down at her intently until Elizabeth tilted her chin up expectantly. Then Darcy smiled as he bent down to kiss her. He allowed his lips to linger longer this time before he pulled away.

His voice was husky as Darcy whispered, "Come, my love, before you drive me to distraction."

\*\*\*\*

Mr. Bennet left for home the following morning, carrying a long letter from Elizabeth to Jane in his pocket. The two eldest Bennet sisters had always been close. Elizabeth could not imagine how she would have born her misery and mortification after Darcy's first proposal without Jane's consolation and encouragement. What a relief to now write to dear Jane of her present happiness.

In truth Elizabeth had written several letters to Jane during her stay in London that told of Mr. Darcy's continued regard for her and the change in her feelings for him. It had been a comfort to write those letters, but Elizabeth had not dared to post them. It was simply unthinkable to risk her mother knowing anything about Mr. Darcy before all was settled. Elizabeth trusted Jane implicitly and knew she would never willingly betray a confidence; however, Jane was not devious enough to safeguard her personal letters from their mother's prying eyes. Even now Elizabeth dreaded her mother's elation over the wedding, but she knew Jane would assist her to endure it.

Mr. Bennet returned to Longbourn alone, having decided that Sally would continue as Elizabeth's personal maid until after the wedding. Mr. Bennet had also encouraged her to consider continuing in Elizabeth's service after she was wed, but left the final decision to Sally.

\*\*\*\*

The week passed happily for Elizabeth, as she saw Darcy every day. She was amazed at how quickly her happiness had become wrapped up in one person. Although Elizabeth was pleased at the thought of seeing her family on the following Monday, she also dreaded their coming. Elizabeth

longed for Jane, but she knew that all peace would end with the arrival of her mother and younger sisters. On Sunday evening after the Darcys left to return home, Mrs. Gardiner called Elizabeth aside for a chat.

"Lizzy, dear, I do not want to impose on you with unsolicited advice, but I would like to speak with you seriously."

"Of course, Aunt, you know that your counsel is never unwelcome. In fact, I would be most grateful for any advice you have for me," Elizabeth smiled at her aunt as she continued, "especially regarding marriage, for it is clear that you and my uncle are very happy together."

"Thank you, Lizzy. We are very happy, your uncle and I," said Mrs. Gardiner. "In fact, that is the very thing I would like to talk about, happiness in marriage. Mr. Darcy obviously adores you and you are well suited to one another, so I do not fear for your long-term contentment, dear Lizzy. However, I do want the best possible start for your life together. I do not want to embarrass you or alarm you, dear, but too many young brides are entirely ignorant and that is not good. Has your mother spoken to you at all about the more private aspects of marriage?"

Elizabeth shook her head no; however, her uneasy expression confirmed Mrs. Gardiner's supposition that Elizabeth's mother had probably planted seeds of fear and uncertainty in her girls regarding marital intimacy.

"Well, Lizzy, I would like to enlighten you then, if that is agreeable to you. Too many young women are either misinformed or enter marriage knowing nothing of what to expect. It is unfortunate because wrong expectations can deprive a young woman of the sacred pleasures of marriage."

"Sacred pleasures, Aunt?"

"Yes, pleasures, Lizzy. Does it not give you pleasure when Mr. Darcy holds your hand?"

Elizabeth blushed as she nodded.

"And that is right," said Aunt Gardiner. "It is supposed to be pleasurable to share love with one's husband. The Bible describes marriage as two becoming one flesh, and it is truly a miracle the way our bodies are made to respond to our husbands."

Mrs. Gardiner proceeded to describe the act of married love to her niece. She was tactful but direct and it was obvious that Elizabeth was listening carefully.

"-- For a husband and wife to express their love this way is the most natural thing in the world and when you are close to your husband it is a wonderful thing. I wanted to talk to you tonight, because--" Mrs. Gardner paused seeing Elizabeth's smile. "Yes, dear, in part because your family will be here tomorrow evening and then privacy will be hard to come by, but I also wanted you to have some time to think this over. You may have questions after you have given it some thought and I would be happy to answer them for you, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy is an excellent man and I want you to be able to trust him in this, for I know that he loves you dearly."

"Thank you, Aunt. I will think about what you have said and I promise I will come to you if I have questions or find myself worrying about it."

"Then I am satisfied, my dear. Goodnight," said Mrs. Gardiner who was encouraged by her niece's composure. Although she had seemed a little embarrassed at first, Elizabeth did not appear to be upset or shocked.

Elizabeth lay awake for some time thinking of what her aunt had shared. She then found herself thinking of Fitzwilliam's kisses and how she had wished for him to continue. Had her body instinctively understood what was to come? The thought of such a strong secret desire within herself was disconcerting. Then Elizabeth remembered how gentle Fitzwilliam's kisses had been and knew she had nothing to fear. He would never harm her in any way. Her aunt was right, Elizabeth could safely trust in her husband as she hoped Fitzwilliam would trust in her. Her husband-- Elizabeth found herself smiling at the thought. Yes, Aunt Gardiner's chat had been very reassuring. Elizabeth finally fell asleep wishing fervently for Friday to come.

\*\*\*\*

Sally was taming Elizabeth's curls the next morning when she worked up the courage to speak to her mistress about the future.

"Miss Lizzy, do you truly want me to stay on with you after you marry Mr. Darcy?"

"Of course, Sally, it would please me greatly, but my father is right. You must do what you think is best. Have you considered it?"

"Yes, Miss Lizzy, I have thought about it a lot." Sally took a deep breath and then blurted out her answer, "I want to stay with you, Miss Lizzy, I do, but are you sure you will be wanting me? Mr. Darcy must have a lot of fine servants, and I do not know as I am fit to be a real lady's maid."

Elizabeth laughed and took Sally by the hand. "Well, you are more than fit to be this lady's maid, and it would make me so happy to have you come."

"Truly, Miss Lizzy?" Sally was grinning at her.

"Truly, Sally. While I am certain Mr. Darcy has many excellent servants, they are strangers to me. You know me, Sally. In fact, you may understand me better than some of my family. Please say you will come. If you ever change your mind and want to return to Longbourn, you know you will have my blessing."

Darcy arrived at the Gardiners' later that morning with very good news. He had received a letter from his uncle stating that he and Lady Carlisle would return to town for the wedding. They were not yet certain when they would arrive but hoped to meet Elizabeth before the wedding itself. Darcy was elated.

Little did Darcy know that his letter had initially caused his uncle considerable consternation. Lord Carlisle's concern about his nephew's sudden marriage to a young woman of whom they knew nothing was understandable. However, after his wife pointed out that Darcy had never made a foolish move in all his life and had proven himself quite adept at identifying and avoiding fortune hunters, the earl's anxiety abated. In fact, after another day's reflection, Darcy's uncle decided the whole thing sounded like what he should have expected of his nephew. After years of eschewing high society's matrimonial offerings, Darcy had at last found himself a suitable young woman, and was determined to wed her as soon as possible.

The ever-loyal Colonel Fitzwilliam had taken leave upon receiving his letter from Darcy, and he arrived at his family's country estate two days later ready to do battle on his cousin's behalf. However, by the time he arrived his parents were happily speculating about their future niece so any defense of Darcy's choice was completely unnecessary.

Fitzwilliam's parents were delighted, however, to discover that he actually knew the lady. They were eager to hear all he could tell them of Darcy's bride and he was most happy to oblige them.

Fitzwilliam was a gifted storyteller and he held his parents spellbound as he told them all he knew of Darcy's bride and their unusual courtship. They often nodded and smiled as the colonel talked of Darcy and Elizabeth's numerous misunderstandings during their acquaintance in Hertfordshire and its renewal in Kent. As Darcy's near relations, his aunt and uncle were well aware of his foibles and had often worried over his shyness with strangers.

"--Poor Darcy was rather funny to watch. I do not think the lady had any notion of his admiration for her, but knowing my cousin as I do it was obvious to me. Darcy would sit around staring at her and could hardly string two words together in her presence. I must admit I enjoyed provoking him by engaging Miss Bennet in conversation while all he could do was watch."

"Oh, Richard, that is so unfair," his mother chided him, while his father smirked behind her back. "You know your cousin has always been shy."

"Yes, well, I knew he was smitten, but I had no idea of the depth of Darcy's feelings. At the time I thought it was a passing fancy, and I never dreamed he would act on it. He did though. Without a word to me, he just up and proposed to her. I am certain he took Miss Bennet quite by surprise and she refused him in no uncertain terms."

This time it was Fitzwilliam's father who interrupted his tale. "Do you mean to say, that this young woman actually refused your cousin's offer of marriage?"

"Yes, she did. Miss Bennet is a young woman of fixed opinions and strong ideals. You should have seen her with Lady Catherine. Miss Bennet was always courteous, but she refused to kowtow to my aunt's incessant advice and indoctrination. Lady Catherine did not know what to do. She admired Miss Bennet's cleverness, but it also affronted her that Miss Bennet did not grovel before her."

That brought a murmur of approval from the earl.

Fitzwilliam resumed his tale. "Where was I? Oh, yes, when Darcy sprang his declaration on her, Miss Bennet did not return his feelings and so she refused him. I think there was considerable misunderstanding between them at the time. It seems Miss Bennet had been acquainted with Wickham in Hertfordshire."

"Oh, no! Lord, how I hate that man," Lady Carlisle exclaimed.

"I know, Mother. We all do, except perhaps Darcy and Georgiana. Darcy is very angry with Wickham, of course, but I do not know if he has yet come to hate him. Anyway, the scoundrel had told Miss Bennet numerous lies of my cousin, which no doubt contributed to her poor opinion of him. Of course, I knew nothing of the proposal at the time. All I knew was that Darcy seemed very unhappy when we left Rosings. I assumed he was frustrated with our aunt, but his spirits did not recover. If anything Darcy's melancholy seemed to deepen. It was several weeks later before I pried the truth from him, and shortly thereafter Darcy fell ill."

His parents' expressions were grave as Fitzwilliam haltingly described his cousin's subsequent decline. The earl instinctively reached for his wife's hand to comfort her when they learned of how near a thing it was. They had known their nephew was gravely ill, but had not realized how close they had been to losing him.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had tears in his eyes as he continued. "I shall never forget the look on Georgiana's face when the doctor said she must prepare herself for the worst. I thought my heart would break. Yet, Georgiana exhibited a strength that is beyond my comprehension. Instead of collapsing in her own grief, she decided to take whatever action might bring comfort to her brother. I had told Georgiana about Darcy and Miss Bennet, as I did not want her to think she was in any way to blame for his unhappiness.

"Of course, once he began to burn with fever, it would not have remained a secret long, for Darcy would sometimes speak of Miss Bennet and other times speak to her in his delirium. Georgiana determined that as his unhappiness over the lady had undermined Darcy's health, perhaps hope of reconciliation with Miss Bennet might save him. She wrote to Miss Bennet requesting she come to London--"

The colonel was able to give his parents a much more detailed account of the subsequent events. They listened spell bound as he recounted the particulars of his trip into Hertfordshire, then the days Elizabeth spent at the Darcy home in London and finally Darcy's subsequent wooing of the

lady. When he described the formerly solemn Darcy's proposal in front of the Gardiner's children, his parents laughed aloud. It was a welcome relief to laugh after the distress of hearing the details of their nephew's illness.

The colonel thought it was quite characteristic that his father's concern was the depth of Darcy's attachment for the lady while his mother's concern was that it was returned in kind.

Seeking reassurance the earl ventured to comment, "Your cousin must truly love Miss Bennet to have trusted Georgiana to her care."

"Yes, Father, he does. Even if there were no hope for a future with Miss Bennet, I am convinced there would never be another woman for Darcy. His attachment is beyond anything I would have expected or thought possible. That is why I am truly happy for him now. If you can envision two drowning sailors being saved by a raft miraculously floating by, well Darcy and Georgiana were the drowning sailors and Miss Bennet, the raft that saved them. I am not just speaking of their health, but their happiness. It is something you must see for yourself to understand."

The colonel smiled warmly at his parents and added, "I cannot wait for you to meet her, Mother. I know my brother's wife is something of a disappointment, but I think you will be very fond of Darcy's wife."

Lady Carlisle dried her tears before speaking, "I think you are right, Richard. I believe I love this young woman already, but I hope she is not marrying your cousin out of pity. Does Miss Bennet truly return Darcy's affection now?"

"Yes, Mother, I am certain of it. While Darcy had previously tried to hide his admiration, in London he has been openly affectionate and determined in his pursuit of Miss Bennet--a much better tactic for winning a fair lady's regard. Although Darcy has loved her longer, I truly believe Miss Bennet's regard for him is now equally strong."

After all their son had told them of Miss Bennet, Lord and Lady Carlisle were most eager to meet the young woman herself. As Sunday travel was regarded as unconscionable by the earl, they would leave for London at first light Monday morning. With no difficulties, they would arrive in town by midday Tuesday.

\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile in London, Elizabeth had no thoughts at the moment for Darcy's extended family. She was too preoccupied with worry regarding the arrival of her own. Although she was anxious to see Jane and her father, Elizabeth was concerned about the many ways her mother and younger sisters might embarrass her in front of the Darcys. The Bennets, however, failed to arrive at Gracechurch Street on Monday afternoon as expected. An express arrived instead. Mrs. Bennet had insisted that she and the girls must all have new dresses to wear to the wedding and the local seamstress was unable to finish them all so quickly. The Bennets would, therefore, be arriving in London on Wednesday evening.

Mrs. Gardiner was rather irritated that Mrs. Bennet thought dresses of greater import than being with her daughter at such a time, "Oh, Lizzy, I hope you are not too disappointed."

Elizabeth smiled at her aunt as she reached for Darcy's hand. "I must confess I am very anxious to see Jane. I will miss her so, but I am not terribly distressed by the delay. It means less time for Mama's nerves to flutter."

Darcy smiled down at her and squeezed her hand, "You know that you may invite your sister to come and stay with us once we are settled, my love. I know that I cannot keep you all to myself."

"Thank you, dearest," Elizabeth barely whispered the endearment but Darcy heard it and beamed at her. "I know you are sincere about welcoming Jane into our home. I love you for that, but once we are wed it will never be quite the same as it was for us growing up together. I must be a little sad for that, but I promise it is only a little."

"Well, since I will be depriving you of your sister, you know that I will gladly share mine with you."

"I thank you for the favor, sir. Speaking of Georgiana, where is she?"

Aunt Gardiner answered merrily, "I believe Emma and Peter have lured her into the garden to play proposal again. This time I believe Georgiana is to be you, Lizzy, and Peter will be you, Mr. Darcy. I imagine that means Emma will be playing herself and supervising everyone else."

Darcy threw back his head and laughed, a sound that warmed Elizabeth's heart.

\*\*\*\*

Tuesday was another beautiful summer day. Knowing this was the last day of complete calm before the wedding, Darcy asked Mrs. Gardiner if he might take Elizabeth for a walk through the nearby park. She gave her permission gladly, knowing that the young couple had few moments for private conversation.

The pair walked in companionable silence for some time. Darcy was content to have Elizabeth on his arm and she was equally satisfied by his nearness.

Finally, Darcy felt he had to speak, "Elizabeth, I must confess I have been very selfish."

"How so, my love?"

"Well, I have been thinking only of how happy I am that you will be going into Derbyshire with me next week. Until yesterday, I had not really thought of all you will be leaving behind. I hope you are not too sad, dearest." Darcy's face revealed the depth of his anxiety and Elizabeth sought to reassure him.

"You must allow me to miss my family a little, Fitzwilliam, but do not distress yourself. I will be where I want to be, for I will be with you." Elizabeth blushed slightly, but she did not pull away from his gaze. "Friday I will become your wife and you will be my husband. No matter what changes that will bring, it will make me very happy."

Darcy could scarcely restrain himself from taking her in his arms right then. He had to content himself with placing his hand over the smaller one resting on his arm and intertwining their fingers.

"I adore you, Elizabeth" he whispered, "and I can hardly wait until Friday to make you my own."

Realizing she had best tease him into a less passionate frame of mind, Elizabeth gave Darcy her sauciest smile, "Well, I am afraid you must wait until Friday, sir, but I promise I will not make you wait a moment longer than is necessary."

Darcy gave her a mischievous smile of his own and replied, "I will hold you to that promise, Elizabeth, not a moment longer than necessary."

When Darcy and Elizabeth returned from their walk, his uncle's carriage was sitting in front of the Gardiners' house. This sudden appearance of Darcy's relatives made Elizabeth surprisingly nervous. She had assumed that she would have time to prepare for meeting them. Sensing some anxiety behind Darcy's smile as well, Elizabeth took a deep breath and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. They entered the house to find Lady Carlisle and Colonel Fitzwilliam having tea with Mrs. Gardiner. Darcy presented Elizabeth to his aunt who immediately began a heartfelt apology.

"I am sorry, my dear, for bursting in on you this way. I should have had Darcy bring you around for tea or something, but we only arrived this morning and I could not wait to meet you. My son has told us so much about you that I feel as if we are already friends." Lady Carlisle grasped both of Elizabeth's hands in her own. "I cannot thank you enough, my dear, for your recent kindness to Georgiana when she was ill. She and Darcy are almost as dear to us as our own sons. If anything had happened to either of them-- Well, bless you, my dear."

Lady Carlisle was insistent that Elizabeth sit beside her. Since that particular sofa was not long enough for three, Darcy without hesitation pulled a chair up next to Elizabeth and proceeded to take her hand. She blushed at this show of affection before his aunt, but Elizabeth did not pull away.

Lady Carlisle was, in fact, quite struck by the change in her nephew. His happiness was obvious. Seeing Darcy now, Lady Carlisle's realized for the first time how miserable his life must have been. Clearly, this change was Elizabeth's doing. Darcy was polite to his aunt and sincerely glad to see her, but he could not keep his eyes off of Elizabeth, and Elizabeth glowed in response.

Yes, Lady Carlisle decided that Darcy had chosen very well indeed. Elizabeth was charming, well mannered and intelligent, but most importantly, she had brought Darcy to life. By the time the visit was concluded Lady Carlisle was calling her "Elizabeth" and had insisted that Elizabeth call her "Lady Margaret."

Before departing Lady Carlisle invited Elizabeth and the Gardiners to dinner the following evening. Mrs. Gardiner regretfully declined explaining that Elizabeth's family was expected to arrive from Hertfordshire then.

"--I am sorry Lady Carlisle, but we must be home to receive them.

"Oh, of course, I understand, Mrs. Gardiner. I realize it is very short notice, but could you join us this evening instead? It will just be a quiet family dinner, but I know my husband is equally anxious to meet you, Elizabeth. Darcy, you and Georgiana are included in the invitation, of course."

This invitation was accepted with pleasure. Darcy was delighted by his aunt's cordial reception of Elizabeth, but his cousin's odd behavior had him worried that something was amiss. Colonel Fitzwilliam had been strangely quiet during the visit. He had only spoken when addressed directly and even then he had seemed reticent.

Darcy drew his cousin aside as the ladies said their farewells and asked, "Are you well, Fitzwilliam? You are unusually quiet."

The colonel gave him a reassuring smile, "Everything is fine, Darcy. I was just being a good soldier and following Mother's orders. She made it perfectly clear that my role today was simply to make the introductions. This visit was all about the ladies becoming acquainted. If she could have accomplished it gracefully, I think Mother would have banned us both from the room, but do not worry. She was actually beside herself with excitement at meeting your Elizabeth. I shared some of your history with Mother and Father and they are sincerely delighted for you, Darcy. Although he was not invited to come along this afternoon I think my father is already quite captivated by your Elizabeth, too."

Darcy clasped his cousin's shoulder and whispered his thanks. He was most pleased when his aunt kissed Elizabeth's cheek before departing.

Darcy left soon after his aunt and cousin. It was agreed that he and Georgiana would return in several hours to escort Elizabeth and the Gardiners to his uncle's house. When Darcy left, Elizabeth walked him out, anxious for just a few more minutes together.

Elizabeth was pleased at the welcome she had received from Darcy's aunt, but she was still nervous about meeting his uncle the earl. "Should I be fearful of your uncle's displeasure, my love?"

"No, not in the least." Darcy took her hand and smiled reassuringly. "Fitzwilliam actually whispered that his father is quite taken with you already and

my aunt's approval is obviously sincere. I think they simply want to know you and I know you will enjoy the Gardiners' company. Who would not?"

Elizabeth smiled up at him. "I love you," she whispered.

"You are my heart and my life," Darcy whispered in reply. He tenderly kissed her hand and he was gone.

Such a parting was not quickly recovered from. Elizabeth had to force herself to return to the parlor and found it difficult to engage in conversation with her aunt. Fortunately Aunt Gardiner, who knew full well the importance of Elizabeth's introduction to Lord Carlisle, soon sent her upstairs to rest before their dinner engagement. She also encouraged Elizabeth to wear one of her new gowns.

When Elizabeth came down the stairs, Darcy's heart caught in his throat. He could not have described the gown, which was elegant in its simplicity. Darcy merely thought Elizabeth was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

While Darcy was speechless in his admiration, Georgiana was not. "Oh, Elizabeth, how lovely you look."

Georgiana carried most of the conversation in the carriage, telling the Gardiners about her uncle and his family. Colonel Fitzwilliam was, of course, well known to the Gardiners, but Georgiana told them something of his older brother Philip, the Viscount Carlisle, and his wife of several months. Georgiana thought Philip and his wife were probably still in the country, but she wanted their guests to be prepared in case he was present this evening. Elizabeth scarcely heard any of the conversation. She was too wrapped up in Darcy to even be nervous about meeting his uncle. In three days time she would be his wife. The thought made her shiver just a little. Aunt Gardiner who was seated beside her asked, "Are you cold, Lizzy? I thought I felt you shiver."

Elizabeth assured her aunt she was fine. Darcy, however, still looked concerned. Eager to stop his worrying about her, Elizabeth waited until no one else was looking at her and mouthed, "I love you," to him silently.

Darcy's face lit up instantly and Elizabeth knew that he was impatient to be where he could touch her again. The distance across the coach was too great.

Lord and Lady Carlisle greeted their guests warmly. Lord Carlisle bowed low over Elizabeth's hand. "I understand we are indebted to you, my dear, for your recent care of our niece and nephew. I trust Darcy will spend the rest of his life happily repaying your kindness."

He then turned his attention to Elizabeth's relatives. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were well mannered, well educated and genuine. That rare combination engendered Lord Carlisle's respect. He was also pleased to find Elizabeth to be a lovely, artless young woman, and the way she looked at Darcy warmed his heart.

It was a very pleasant evening, or at least it began that way. They were lingering over dessert when what could only be described as a shriek was heard from the hallway.

"Where is my brother? Out of my way, you simpleton, I must speak with Lord Carlisle immediately."

The Gardiners remained blissfully ignorant for a few moments longer, but everyone else at the table knew that Lady Catherine had arrived.

The woman herself burst into the dining room. "There you are--" Lady Catherine was rendered speechless by the sight before her. Her brother was actually entertaining the country upstart who thought to marry her nephew and those were no doubt some of her family. It was not to be born!

"Catherine," Lord Carlisle began, "How nice it is to see you. I understand that you already know Miss Bennet. Please allow me to introduce Miss Bennet's uncle and aunt Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. Would you care to join us?"

Lady Catherine actually sniffed. "I had thought better of you, brother. Darcy is young enough to be taken in by the arts and allurements--"

Darcy himself stopped her, "That is quite enough. Miss Bennet will be my wife in three days time, Aunt, and I expect you to treat her with the respect she is due."

Lady Catherine began sputtering, but Lord Carlisle was also on his feet by this time, and he interrupted her before she could resume her ranting.

"Yes, you have said too much, Catherine. I must insist that you apologize to our guests."

Seeing the enraged expression on his sister's face and fearful of what she might spew forth next, Lord Carlisle took Lady Catherine by the elbow and propelled her toward the door. He spoke over his shoulder as he forcefully removed her from the dining room, "Please excuse me for a few minutes. Richard, help your mother entertain our guests."

Darcy felt compelled to apologize for his aunt. "Miss Bennet, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, I deeply regret my aunt's poor behavior. While she is my aunt, there is very little of substance on which we agree. I am sorry for her--"

Mr. Gardiner interrupted him good-naturedly, "Pray do not distress yourself, Mr. Darcy. We do not hold you responsible for your aunt's opinions. I am sorry that she does not approve your choice, but I trust you to know what is best in dealing with your own family, sir."

Even as her uncle was reassuring Darcy, Elizabeth noticed her aunt patting Georgiana's hand as she whispered something to her. The girl immediately relaxed and offered a small smile in response.

Colonel Fitzwilliam further dispelled the tension by saying, "Perhaps, we should let the ladies have the port this evening, gentlemen, and take ourselves off to the parlor."

Everyone laughed appreciatively and it was quickly decided that the entire party would move to the parlor. Darcy briefly entertained the thought of joining his uncle in confronting Lady Catherine, but decided he did not want to hear what she had to say. He would stay with Elizabeth. They had only been seated a few minutes when Lady Carlisle shooed Darcy away.

"I want to talk to your bride, Darcy. Go and see to Georgiana for a bit. I promise I will return Elizabeth to you unscathed."

Thankful for this Aunt's approval of his choice, Darcy obliged her by giving up his seat beside Elizabeth.

When he had walked away Lady Carlisle took Elizabeth's hand, "I trust, my dear, that you are not too distressed by that little scene in the dining room. Catherine is a pretentious fool. Please do not let her steal even the smallest part of your happiness."

"Thank you, Lady Margaret, you are most kind. While I had not anticipated Lady Catherine would appear here this evening, I will confess that I did not expect her to approve of Mr. Darcy's choice. Remember, I am acquainted with Lady Catherine. I know that she is a woman of decided opinions."

"Please know that she is not representative of the Fitzwilliam family. I do not know how Catherine came to be so course and unfeeling. She and Darcy's mother were as different as night and day. Ann was always considerate and loving, and Catherine-- well she has been like this for as long as I have known her. My poor husband is often quite exasperated with her, but she will not listen to him either. Do not worry though, Catherine may not always listen to Lord Carlisle, but I think she will fear him too much to break off from the family over this. And that will be her choice, all of us which includes you, my dear, or none of us."

Instead of comforting Elizabeth as Lady Carlisle intended, this thought was distressing to her. "Please Lady Margaret," she began, "I am grateful for your support, but I would not have this family divided over me."

"Do not fret, Elizabeth. I doubt it will come to that, but if it does it will be Catherine's doing and not yours." Lady Carlisle embraced Elizabeth as she whispered, "You are very sweet, my dear, and I am very happy to have another niece on whom I can dote."

Raising her voice so that Darcy would hear her, Lady Carlisle continued, "But now I see Darcy is too anxious about you, dear Elizabeth, to enjoy himself. Come here, Darcy. See. I return her to you safe and whole."

Darcy smiled at his aunt's teasing, but he was truly worried about Elizabeth. "Elizabeth, I am so sorry. I had no idea--"

Elizabeth gently placed a finger over his lips, "Do not fret so, my love. I am still here and I have no intention of going anywhere. Three days from now we will belong to each other completely. I am sorry if it displeases Lady Catherine, but I have no intention of giving you up to oblige her."

Darcy tenderly kissed the finger over his lips and then he took that hand in his own. "I do love you, Elizabeth," he whispered.

Lord Carlisle soon joined them. He made an apology on Lady Catherine's behalf and then there was a determined effort by all the company to speak of anything but Lady Catherine.

When their guests had gone Lord Carlisle remarked to his son, "You are right, Richard. I am very impressed with Darcy's choice. Not many young women would have remained so calm and collected with Catherine breaking down the door to say her piece. I think Darcy was far more offended than Miss Bennet was."

"I am sure you are right on that, Father. Remember, Miss Bennet is well acquainted with Lady Catherine. She knows how rude and unfeeling my aunt can be, but I have always admired Miss Bennet's poise in comparison to my aunt's posturing. One is the result of inner strength, the other is simply a show of strength and they are two very different things."

"Well said, my boy."

Lady Carlisle spoke up at that point, "While you were out with Catherine, my dear, I did speak with Elizabeth. I assured her that Catherine will be putting herself in opposition to the entire family if she persists in opposing their marriage."

"And what was her reaction, my dear?"

"Elizabeth actually seemed far more concerned about division within the family than she was with the outlandish things Catherine had been about to speak in the dining room."

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled, "It makes you understand why Darcy is so anxious to tie Miss Bennet down before she can change her mind, doesn't it, Father?"

*Aaran St Vines*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Happily Ever After by Pamela St Vines

## Chapter Six

*Come live with me, and be my love;  
And we will all the pleasures prove  
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,  
Woods or steepy mountain yields.*

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE  
"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"

### Chapter Six

Darcy was at the Gardiners' on Wednesday afternoon waiting with Elizabeth for the coming of her family. Between the last minute preparations for their visit and the arrangements for Friday's wedding breakfast, the house was full of activity. Knowing full well that peace and quiet would disappear with the Bennets' arrival, Mrs. Gardiner considerably allowed Elizabeth and Darcy some time alone in the parlor--with the door open, of course.

They sat on the corner sofa--the one chosen by Darcy the evening he first came to dinner--and neither spoke for a moment. Elizabeth was clearly anxious and Darcy was watching her keenly trying to determine exactly what was causing her to worry so.

When she leaned against his shoulder with a sigh, Darcy prompted her, "That does not sound like a sigh of contentment, my love."

"Oh, I am just being silly, I know, but--"

"But what, Elizabeth?"

"It has been many months since you have seen most of my family, Fitzwilliam. I fear that you may have forgotten just how badly they-- Perhaps you will have regrets when you are confronted with the realities of their misbehavior."

"Elizabeth, how could you entertain such a notion? First and foremost, my heart is yours. It is also firmly established that I have no right to disdain anyone for unfortunate family connections--least of all you--after last night's display. Besides, it is my impression that when your sisters'--and even your mother's--behavior errs, it is usually from a lack of thought. Lady Catherine's attempt to injure you last night was intentional, my love. I would consider thoughtless indiscretion to be preferable over willful maliciousness any day."

Darcy paused to kiss her hand before continuing, "No matter what may happen with your family, today or in the future, remember this--I love you, Elizabeth. How could I regret you when you are necessary to me? Everyone who understands me can see that. I remember Fitzwilliam urging me not to give up on you shortly after you came to London. He did so because he could see that I needed you and would never be happy without you."

Rewarded with a small smile, Darcy added, "You *are* silly to worry about my having regrets, my love. Would you give me up, if your mother preferred a man with fifteen thousand a year?"

Her smile grew, "Of course not, Fitzwilliam, now if he had twenty thousand--"

Darcy stopped her with a kiss. He kissed her softly and then again more passionately. When he drew back, Darcy was both reassured and amused by Elizabeth's response. She remained perfectly still, her eyes closed as if awaiting another kiss. Remembering the open door, Darcy did not dare kiss her again. He brushed his thumb gently across Elizabeth's lips as he whispered her name.

"Oh," was all Elizabeth said as she opened her eyes. She gazed up at him and whispered, "You must promise not to stop so abruptly on Friday, Fitzwilliam. I think I shall enjoy kissing you for a very long time."

Darcy's heart began to race, but he managed to speak normally. "Believe me, Lizzy, there will be no reason to stop then and I will kiss you for as long as you wish." He lifted her hand to his lips and began kissing her fingers one by one.

Elizabeth allowed herself to simply enjoy the warm feelings rising within her for a moment before attempting to lighten the mood. She slowly withdrew her hand and flashed Darcy a teasing smile. "Then I shall most definitely look forward to it, Mr. Darcy."

Having determined she could trust herself no more today, Elizabeth suggested they find her aunt and see if she required any assistance. Mrs. Gardiner, however, assured them all was well in hand.

"--I realize you were waiting to greet Elizabeth's family, Mr. Darcy, but they are somewhat later than I anticipated. Perhaps, you should go now and fetch your sister for dinner. Surely, the Bennets will have arrived by the time you return."

Darcy looked to Elizabeth. Knowing that her family was the subject of considerable anxiety for her, he was concerned lest she think he was slighting them.

"What do you say, dearest?"

Touched by his solicitude for her feelings, Elizabeth smiled.

"Thank you for asking," she said, "but I do think my aunt's suggestion is a good one, sir--just so long as you promise not to linger at home."

"No, indeed, my love."

Elizabeth clung to his arm as she walked him to the door. In the relative privacy of the front hallway, Darcy took her face in his hands as he leaned in to whisper, "Only two more days, my love."

Elizabeth blushed, as his meaning was unmistakable, but she held his gaze and whispered back, "I shall look forward to it, dear sir."

The Bennets arrived shortly after Darcy had returned with Georgiana. They were obviously tired, but no less noisy than usual. Mr. Bennet looked as if his patience was at an end and Mrs. Bennet all but shrieked in Elizabeth's ear as she embraced her.

"Oh, Lizzy, look at you," she gushed, "the first of my girls to become engaged. I was astonished to hear it, but I am so happy for you."

Darcy was offended for Elizabeth at such a greeting, but she seemed to accept her mother's remarks with grace.

"Mama, you remember Mr. Darcy, of course. Please allow me to introduce his sister to you--"

When the introductions were accomplished, Mrs. Gardiner earned Darcy's deepest gratitude by restoring peace to the room. She achieved this miracle by simply showing the Bennets upstairs to refresh themselves and change for dinner. Lydia and Kitty could be heard squabbling as their voices faded into the upper regions of the house. With a smile Georgiana excused herself as well and went in search of the children, allowing Darcy and Elizabeth a moment alone.

"I am sorry for your mother's thoughtlessness, my love."

"Pray do not be offended or unhappy on my account, Fitzwilliam. Mama has simply never learned to restrain her tongue and it is doubtful that she will." Elizabeth smiled up at him as she continued, "Having never known a man such as yourself, it is entirely understandable that she would be surprised by my engagement, for there is not another man in the world whom I would agree to marry."

Darcy could not help but be pleased by such a declaration, and he attempted to forget his irritation with Mrs. Bennet for Elizabeth's sake. After all, he would only make Elizabeth anxious and unhappy by choosing to be offended on her behalf. Seeing her questioning gaze, Darcy smiled and whispered, "As you wish, dearest."

The talk around the dinner table was animated. Mrs. Bennet and the younger girls were full of questions about how Elizabeth and Darcy came to be engaged. Of course, there was rarely an opportunity to actually answer any of these questions, as they talked over one another and kept changing the subject. Elizabeth was slightly embarrassed but Darcy seemed to take it all in stride.

Sensing her discomfort, he discretely took her hand under the table at one point and whispered, "It really does not bother me, Elizabeth. I love you."

Georgiana was slightly overwhelmed, but very entertained by the boisterous Bennet family. She could easily perceive why Elizabeth was so fond of Jane. Jane's gentleness put Georgiana at ease instantly and she found herself wanting to know the eldest Miss Bennet better.

In consideration of the Bennets' fatigue following their journey, Darcy and Georgiana left soon after dinner. Elizabeth walked them to the door where she and Georgiana exchanged a parting embrace. Then Darcy took Elizabeth's hand in farewell. He kissed it tenderly and leaned in close to whisper into her ear, "Remember, I love you, dearest."

Elizabeth stood in the open doorway and watched them go. She then squared her shoulders with a sigh and returned to her family.

Lady Carlisle had invited Elizabeth and the ladies of her family to tea on Thursday. After consulting her aunt, Elizabeth had decided she would not extend the invitation to her younger sisters. Mrs. Gardiner deemed this a very wise course of action and assured Elizabeth that there would be no harm in it--especially as her sisters would never know they were originally included in the invitation. Elizabeth hoped that between Aunt Gardiner, Jane and herself they might have some success in guiding her mother's behavior.

It all went rather well, as Mrs. Bennet was surprisingly well behaved or at least her behavior was far less indecorous than usual. She was somewhat in awe that Elizabeth was to be so closely connected with an earl. Mrs. Bennet's behavior was also tempered by Mr. Bennet's stern warnings that she had best behave with dignity lest she ruin things for Elizabeth. He had enforced those warnings with the threat of no new gowns for a year if his wife forgot herself and embarrassed Elizabeth in front of Lady Carlisle.

Perhaps Lady Carlisle was somewhat deceived as to the degree of Mrs. Bennet's silliness, but being a shrewd judge of character she knew that Mrs. Bennet was, indeed, a silly, selfish woman. Although Elizabeth was properly respectful to her mother, there was no sign of any particular regard between them. This pleased Lady Carlisle for she thought Elizabeth would not be unhappy at the distance between Pemberley and Longbourn. Now having met her mother, Lady Carlisle fully understood the unusual degree of closeness between Elizabeth and her Aunt Gardiner.

Although the mother was something of a disappointment, Darcy's aunt was very pleased with Jane Bennet. Lady Carlisle preferred Elizabeth's liveliness, but Jane was clearly not stupid. She was also very kind and considerate. A man might do far worse in Lady Carlisle's opinion. Being related to the Gardiners and Elizabeth's eldest sister would not be a burden to Darcy and Georgiana. Hopefully, the rest of the Bennets would remain in Hertfordshire.

Thinking back to Catherine's performance in her dining room, Lady Carlisle remembered that Elizabeth would be acquiring some unpleasant

relations through this marriage as well, and recalling Elizabeth's composure after Catherine's exhibition stirred Lady Carlisle's pride in her new niece. She would not allow Catherine to sully Darcy and Elizabeth's happiness. Lady Carlisle also promised herself that she would protect them from the other imbeciles of the first rank who would not be able to comprehend a marriage based solely on mutual respect and affection. She would wield every bit of her formidable influence to promote Elizabeth as Darcy's wife and to ensure her acceptance in society.

To that end Lady Carlisle turned to Elizabeth and said, "I realize that my nephew plans to whisk you away to Derbyshire next week, Elizabeth, but I expect you to favor us with a visit later in the summer, my dear. We must have the opportunity to become better acquainted. By the time we return to town, the season will be upon us. Although we will certainly see a great deal of each other then, it will not have the intimacy of a family party in the country."

Elizabeth smiled, "Thank you, Lady Margaret. You are most kind."

"Not at all, my dear. I shall look forward to it."

To Darcy's relief Mrs. Gardiner had declined his offer to host a dinner party the night before the wedding. Although she spoke in terms of Elizabeth's limited time with her family, Darcy felt certain that Mrs. Gardiner's primary aim was to shield them from any unpleasant scenes the night before they were wed. Propriety would have demanded Darcy include his family if he were entertaining the Bennets, and there were too many embarrassing possibilities in that scenario. Darcy had reconciled himself to the reality that Elizabeth's family would soon be his family as well. However, he felt it only wise to limit the interaction between their two families as much as possible. Of course, the Gardiners and Jane were not included in this opinion. He knew that anyone of sense would respect them, and Darcy cared little for people without sense, his Aunt Catherine being a prime example of that ilk.

Mrs. Gardiner had, of course, insisted that Darcy and Georgiana join their family party for dinner, and so they arrived in Gracechurch Street not long after the ladies had returned from his aunt's. Although Darcy appeared his normal self, Elizabeth could tell he was uneasy.

"Come, my love," she whispered. Then speaking in a normal tone, Elizabeth addressed Aunt Gardiner, "Do you mind if I show Mr. Darcy the arrangements for tomorrow, Aunt?"

"Of course not, Lizzy. It will be some time yet before dinner, and the fresh air will do you both good."

Smiling her gratitude Elizabeth took Darcy by the hand and led him through the house and into the garden. Only when they were safely outside did she voice her concern.

"I can tell you are anxious, Fitzwilliam. Please tell me what troubles you."

"If you are not unhappy, then all is well, dearest," he replied, kissing her hand.

"Surely you do not think I would be unhappy today, my love," she reassured him brightly. "After all tomorrow is our wedding day. Have you forgotten?"

"No, I can think of little else," Darcy answered. He smiled sheepishly as he explained, "I do sometimes worry for naught, and this appears to be one of those times. I was concerned that something unpleasant might have transpired during your visit to my aunt's."

"Ah, I see," Elizabeth's eyes sparkled and Darcy knew all was truly well. "Were you referring to the sort of unpleasantness that might arise from your side of the family or mine?"

Darcy actually chuckled as he responded, "Both are very real possibilities, my dear, but since I know that Lady Catherine has returned to Kent, my concern was more for your relations today."

Elizabeth's expression grew grave as she whispered, "Do you have doubts?"

"Never think that," Darcy replied passionately, "as you are my life, Elizabeth. My concern was only for you in this. I know that your mother and younger sisters are sometimes a trial for you."

"You are right, of course, Fitzwilliam," she said with a sigh. "It was a situation fraught with the potential for disaster. Please forgive me for misunderstanding your concern."

"Of course," Darcy whispered as he tightened his arm around her.

Elizabeth buried her face in his shoulder and breathed in the reassurance of his presence. "It is sometimes difficult to grasp that you love me so in spite of--well, I am just thankful that you do. All in all, things went as well as could be expected this afternoon. I did not extend your aunt's invitation to my younger sisters. Please do not give me away."

Darcy smiled down at her as he gently trailed a finger down her cheek. "Of course not, my love. I would say that was a very wise decision on your part."

Elizabeth's happiness was not only restored. The relief of sharing her apprehensions with Darcy and knowing that he understood them actually multiplied her contentment.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam, I am so glad you are here. Thank you for understanding. I was anxious, too, but Mama was actually rather quiet, at least for her. While I am confident your aunt is not deceived in the least regarding my mother's abilities or character, there were no heart-stopping embarrassments. I think Mama was rather in awe."

Gazing up at him with an impish grin Elizabeth added, "Our tea with your aunt will, no doubt, be the talk of Meryton for some weeks to come."

"Your mother may boast of your new relations all she likes, as long as she does not make you unhappy, my love."

"I should warn you, Fitzwilliam, that your aunt will be expecting us to visit them later this summer. She was most insistent that we spend some time with them away from town."

His face alight with pleasure and pride, Darcy explained, "You do not know Lady Margaret well enough, dearest, to understand the significance of such a request. My aunt not only approves of you as my wife, but she is also positioning herself as your champion by this invitation. Lady Margaret rarely entertains in the country so anyone who knows her will interpret this to mean that you have her favor and support. No doubt, she will see to it that the news is widely circulated before the season begins."

Dinner was as calm as a meal with the Bennets could be. Mrs. Bennet was fluttering and chattering. Lydia and Kitty were arguing and Mary was sermonizing. Georgiana was uncertain which conversation took precedence and was thus initially confused by the chaos. It did not displease her, however. Once she realized nothing was expected of her, she enjoyed the happy bustle.

When Darcy and Georgiana left that evening, Mrs. Bennet requested Elizabeth accompany her upstairs.

"Of course, Mama, if you wish it, but I was just going up with Jane. I wanted to spend some time with her before retiring."

"This is important, Lizzy. Tomorrow you wed and I must be certain you are prepared." Seeing the disappointment on Elizabeth's face, Mrs. Bennet added, "Very well then, come along, Jane. You will need to know these things soon enough anyway."

Elizabeth smiled at Jane apologetically as they followed Mrs. Bennet upstairs. She had been trying to engineer her own escape and regretted involving Jane in what would assuredly be a very uncomfortable conversation.

Once they were behind closed doors, Mrs. Bennet began her attempt to educate Elizabeth in anticipation of her wedding night. Having already been well prepared by her aunt, Elizabeth was able to sit there calmly while reciting sonnets in her head. She had no intention of following her mother's advice on how to conduct herself in any situation, much less in her intimate relationship with her husband. Elizabeth's immediate goal was to endure her mother's instruction, but hear none of it, as she did not want to risk the possibility of something horrid her mother said plaguing her in the future. Elizabeth had found the sonnet trick invaluable in the past. It required just enough concentration that she looked as if she were paying attention. Yet, the mental activity prevented most of her mother's words from even registering in her consciousness. As this lecture was particularly long, Elizabeth found her mother's words began to break through the sonnets at one point. In desperation, she cast about for a more absorbing mental occupation and settled upon conjugating Latin verbs. To Elizabeth's vast relief her mother's voice was relegated to a hum in the background once more. Mrs. Bennet noticed the resulting look of concentration on Elizabeth's face, but happily she misinterpreted this to mean that she had her daughter's full interest and attention.

Poor Jane was a truly obedient daughter with no such defenses against their mother's counsel, and Mrs. Bennet's description of what awaited Elizabeth the following evening was as bewildering as it was terrifying. She was just warming to the subject of how to deflect a husband's unwanted attentions when Jane excused herself and bolted from the room. Elizabeth dutifully remained--appearing attentive, yet not minding a word her mother said--until Mrs. Bennet had finally talked herself out. She patted Elizabeth's hand and said with a sigh, "Just do your best, Lizzy."

Elizabeth murmured a quiet thank you and went in search of Jane. She found her hiding in their room, weeping as if her heart were broken. Elizabeth embraced her and waited for Jane's sobs to quiet before she asked, "Oh, Jane, whatever is the matter? Did our mother frighten you or has something else occurred to cause your unhappiness?"

When Jane raised her eyes and Elizabeth saw the terror in them, she knew this was definitely their mother's handiwork. "Oh, Jane, you must not think on Mama's words."

"But, Lizzy, how can you bear it?"

"Truthfully, I did my best not to hear a word she said," Elizabeth confessed, "as I have already had the benefit of Aunt Gardiner's counsel on marriage. Do not fear for me, dearest. Mr. Darcy loves me, Jane. He would not be able to take pleasure in anything that was displeasing to me."

Jane wiped her eyes as she whispered, "You are not afraid then?"

"No," Elizabeth said with a smile. "I will confess that I am a little nervous but in anticipation, not dread. When I think of the pleasure I take in the slightest brush of his hand against mine, I yearn for more, Jane. It was always my desire to marry for love, but I did not really understand what that would mean until I grew to love Mr. Darcy. Oh, Jane, the reality of loving and being loved has far exceeded my expectations."

\*\*\*\*

Friday morning dawned bright and clear. Today is my wedding day was Elizabeth's first clear thought. Jane was already getting dressed.

"Good morning, Lizzy. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Jane, I did," she responded. Seeing that a shadow of apprehension lingered behind Jane's smile Elizabeth hastened to add, "I have been so excited about today that I would have thought it impossible for me to sleep last night, but I slept very well indeed. In a few hours I shall be Mr. Darcy's wife and next week we will be going into Derbyshire. A month ago that would have sounded strange, unbelievable, in fact, but now it seems so

right."

Elizabeth sat up in bed and hugged her knees to her chest as she continued, "Jane, I would wish for you to be equally happy in marriage." She paused and then softly asked, "Do you still think of Mr. Bingley?"

Jane blushed, "Oh, Lizzy, I liked Mr. Bingley very much, but I do not think my feelings were anything like yours for Mr. Darcy. Besides today is your day. We must talk of your future today."

"Oh, Jane, how I shall miss you. You must come and stay with us after we are settled. Please promise me that you will."

"Oh, Lizzy, you will not want me so soon."

"When have I ever not wanted you, dearest Jane? I know it will be different after I am married, but you will always be my dearest sister. Mr. Darcy and his sister both understand that. Have you not noticed how much effort Georgiana has made to become acquainted with you? She is very shy of strangers, but she is determined that my dearest sister will become her sister as well."

Seeing Jane's flush, Elizabeth realized that she must be thinking of Miss Bingley's intimations of the expected marriage of her brother and Darcy's sister. "Oh, Jane, please tell me you are not thinking of Caroline Bingley's schemes to marry Georgiana to her brother. That is all that was—a scheme. To Georgiana, Mr. Bingley is simply her brother's friend and to Mr. Bingley, Georgiana Darcy is simply his friend's sister. Please do not let Miss Bingley's machinations turn you against Georgiana. She is dear to me already and I must have the two of you be friends."

Seeing that her reassurances had put Jane at ease, Elizabeth returned to the topic of her visiting them. "Now promise me that you will come and stay with us once we are settled."

Jane's smile was whole hearted this time, "Yes, Lizzy, when you are ready for me, I will come."

Sally soon interrupted them bringing Elizabeth a cup of tea. Jane kissed her sister's cheek and left to join the family downstairs. Elizabeth settled back against her pillows and allowed Sally to fuss over her. Aunt Gardiner had decreed the night before that Elizabeth was to have a leisurely morning and be pampered. Elizabeth appreciated her aunt's foresight. She knew it was her way of protecting Elizabeth from being upset by her family on this happiest of days. Although it was her last morning as a Bennet, Elizabeth was delighted to forego her sisters' squabbles and her mother's fluttering. She preferred to dwell on the happiness to come. When it was time to go to church Mr. Bennet himself came upstairs to fetch Elizabeth.

"Well, Lizzy, although I am reluctant to part with you, I am very happy for you. From what I have seen of you and Mr. Darcy together, I daresay that you will be a very happy woman."

"Thank you, Papa. He truly is the best man I have ever known."

"It is good you feel that way. Now, Lizzy, I do not mean to embarrass you, but I must ask if you are prepared for this-- I would not want you to have wrong expectations of what is ahead--"

Wishing to forestall another session of marital advice, Elizabeth interrupted him, "Please do not be anxious for me, Papa. I have had the benefit of my aunt's advice and counsel, and I am very happy to be marrying Mr. Darcy."

Mr. Bennet's relief was evident. "Ah, good, your aunt is an excellent woman. Well, Lizzy, shall we go meet your young man? I am certain he is anxiously waiting for you."

\*\*\*\*

Although their family party arrived at the church before the appointed hour, Darcy was, indeed, already anxiously waiting. Colonel Fitzwilliam did not know whether to be amused or frustrated by Darcy's inability to relax. It was as if Darcy feared something terrible would happen at the last minute to deny him the happiness that was nearly within his grasp. Knowing that Darcy's fears were founded in the reality of having lost Elizabeth once made it impossible for Fitzwilliam to tease him. In fact, the colonel himself was vastly relieved that the Bennets were not late. When Darcy espied Elizabeth entering the church, all was well. The simple ceremony was soon concluded and the happy party adjourned to reassemble at the Gardiners' home.

Seeing the results of Mrs. Gardiner's careful arrangements for their wedding breakfast, Elizabeth was very grateful they were not at Longbourn. It was all tastefully done, with none of the vulgar pretensions favored by her mother. Mrs. Bennet, no doubt, thought it all too plain and simple, but Mr. Bennet's constant presence at her side forced his lady to keep those opinions to herself. It was just the sort of relaxed intimate family party the bride and groom had desired. They dined in the back garden and it took very little encouragement for the young Gardiners to re-enact the story of Cousin Lizzy and Prince Darcy. Finally it was time for Elizabeth to wish her family farewell and depart with her husband for their townhouse. Georgiana was going to spend several days with her aunt and uncle to allow the newlyweds their privacy. She would then join them for the trip to Pemberley next week.

Elizabeth felt strange upon entering Darcy's townhouse and realizing it was now her home as well. The servants, however, greeted her with an encouraging mixture of deference and friendliness. Although Elizabeth had not met each of them previously, it was probable they had heard much of their new mistress from Grace and Simms. Elizabeth was grateful to be so warmly received, and her own dear Sally was in the front hallway waiting with the rest of the staff. She had moved Elizabeth's things during the wedding breakfast and had almost finished unpacking them—with

Grace's help, of course.

Darcy proceeded to take Elizabeth on a tour of the house, as there were many rooms she had not seen during her visits. He concluded the tour by showing Elizabeth her private rooms which adjoined his. Sally and Grace were chatting amiably in the dressing room as they finished putting Elizabeth's things away, but the maids fell silent when they realized they were no longer alone.

Not wishing to intimidate them, Darcy smiled as he said, "Sally, Grace, would you please excuse us? Mrs. Darcy will ring when she requires you."

Both maids bobbed a curtsey and quickly left. Elizabeth could not decide whether she was more embarrassed or amused. However, her husband was soon commanding her full attention. Darcy set her bonnet aside and then gently touched her cheek. Elizabeth closed her eyes as she relaxed into his caress and then she felt his lips on hers in the gentlest of kisses. She was surprised, however, that Darcy only kissed her once. Did not marriage mean the end of such restrictions?

Elizabeth's puzzlement must have been evident for Darcy smiled at her indulgently when she opened her eyes. "Yes, my love," he said, "We are now man and wife and we may kiss for as long as we like, but first I would like to talk."

Taking her hands Darcy led his bride to the settee in front of the fireplace. "Elizabeth, I love you," he began, "and I want you to be my wife in every way, but I do not wish to rush you or frighten you."

Seeing the question in his eyes, Elizabeth realized that her husband's concerns were similar to her father's. He was worried about what preparation she might have been given for what lay ahead. Realizing Darcy's concern was only for her happiness, Elizabeth cast aside her own embarrassment and hastened on to reassure him.

"You need not worry for me, dearest. My Aunt Gardiner explained the act of marriage to me. I am not afraid of you."

"Thank God it was your aunt," Darcy said in palpable relief. "I must confess, Elizabeth, that I was concerned over what your mother might have said or implied."

Elizabeth could not help but laugh at that. "Oh, she did try, Fitzwilliam, but I have no intention of following my mother's advice on a matter of such importance."

Elizabeth then proceeded to confess her sonnet technique for enduring her mother's instruction without any lasting effects. That drew an appreciative chuckle from her husband, but his expression grew serious again as Elizabeth went on to confide that poor Jane had not had any such defense against their mother's words.

"--It was simply dreadful for her. Dear Jane was so frightened for me, Fitzwilliam. I was finally able to convince her that there was no need to fear for me or to even believe our mother in this instance. I told her that I was determined to completely disregard Mama's counsel and to be guided by my aunt's instead."

Squeezing her hand, Darcy dared to ask, "And what was that, Elizabeth?"

She gave him an unfaltering smile, "Aunt Gardiner's advice was to trust in my husband and in his love for me. I do trust you, Fitzwilliam, and I know that you love me. Is that not enough to start?"

Drawing Elizabeth into his arms, Darcy held her close and breathed into her ear, "Yes, my love, it is more than enough."

Darcy held her for some time and then he began to gently kiss his bride. He kissed Elizabeth's hair, her brow, her eyes and finally her lips. This time he did not stop. As Darcy's gentle kisses became more insistent, Elizabeth's lips instinctively parted and her husband deepened the kiss. He gently caressed her and Elizabeth felt a burning desire for more. It was just like Aunt Gardiner had said it would be, with enough trust and love, the rest came naturally.

Darcy's kisses began to wander down her neck and Elizabeth moaned in response. "My love," he eagerly whispered, "I do not think I can wait until tonight--may--"

Elizabeth halted his request with a passionate kiss and then pulled away to whisper, "Yes, dearest, yes."

Darcy hesitated a moment, anxious that all be perfect for her, "May I help you undress, Elizabeth, or do you want your maid?"

Elizabeth giggled, "I definitely do not want the maid right now. It is only you that I want, Fitzwilliam."

Darcy's smile lit up his whole face and he kissed her again before rising and pulling her up with him. With some instruction and assistance from his bride, Darcy managed to free Elizabeth from most of her clothing. He removed his own outer clothing and then hesitated, not wanting to embarrass her. Although she was a little uneasy, Elizabeth knew that it would pass as soon as Darcy kissed her again. She reached up as if to pull off her chemise, but then faltered.

After chewing her lip for a moment Elizabeth finally managed to whisper. "My aunt also said that as we are one in the eyes of God there is no need for modesty between us."

Exerting himself to speak around the lump in his throat, Darcy managed to respond, "Your aunt is very wise, for I would have nothing between us, Elizabeth, nothing."

Sometime later Elizabeth awoke and smiled, remembering what had precipitated her nap. Darcy was propped up on one elbow at her side, gazing down at her as his other hand gently caressed her bare arm.

"Hello, husband," she whispered.

"I love you, Elizabeth," he whispered back and then Darcy leaned down to kiss her.

They spent the whole afternoon in bed. As the room was beginning to grow dark, Darcy roused his bride who had dozed off once more, "Elizabeth-Lizzy."

She slowly opened her eyes and gazed at him adoringly before teasing, "I had no idea marriage would be so exhausting."

Darcy grinned, "My dear, I have no objection to your napping when I consider the activity that brought on your nap, but it is evening. Now I have a question. Do you want to dress for dinner or shall I have it brought up to our rooms?"

"May we do that?" Elizabeth asked, thinking of what the servants might whisper.

"Yes, Elizabeth, of course. This is our home. These are our servants. It is expected that we will inform them of our wishes. What would you prefer?"

She gave him a mischievous grin, "I think I would prefer that you kiss me again."

"I plan to do that," Darcy replied. "However, I do need food. Do you particularly care to dress for dinner or may I just have it brought up?"

Elizabeth giggled as she answered, "Taking our meal here is fine, if you are certain it will not shock the staff. Perhaps I should find my dressing gown."

"You need not bother. I will have dinner brought to my room so that no one will disturb you."

Elizabeth could not help but admire her husband's form as he rose and walked to the door connecting their rooms. Turning back to address her over his shoulder, Darcy asked, "Would you like a bath after dinner?"

"Oh, yes," she answered with a sigh, "a bath would be heavenly."

Elizabeth felt a contentment far exceeding anything she had ever known. However, she soon found herself missing Darcy even though he had only been gone a few minutes. She was undressed and had no idea where to look for her dressing gown. Impatience soon triumphed over modesty. Elizabeth wrapped the bed sheet around her and went in search of her husband. Knowing that servants might be on the other side of the connecting door, Elizabeth knocked. When there was no answer she stuck her head into the room. It appeared to be empty, but he had to be in there somewhere.

"Fitzwilliam?"

His voice answered immediately from his dressing room. "In here, Elizabeth. Is something the matter?"

Darcy strode out into the room wearing a dressing gown and carrying another.

"No," she answered with a rueful smile. "Nothing is the matter. It is just that I missed you and it seemed as if you were never coming back."

"You cannot know how wonderful that is to hear, especially after all my months of pining for you, Lizzy," he said with a smile. "I did not want to brave your maids so I was looking for another of my dressing gowns for you. I had planned to ring for the servants and have someone bring up dinner. However, seeing you in that sheet gives me other ideas."

"And to think I used to be under the misapprehension that you were unfeeling, Mr. Darcy," she teased.

He reached out and drew her close, "Now, we will have no 'Mr. Darcys' when we are alone, Elizabeth. Do I have to remind you that we are married?"

As Darcy began to unwrap the sheet she was wearing, Elizabeth sighed and wrapped her arms around him. "No reminders are needed, sir, but that does not mean they are not appreciated."

It was some time before Darcy rang for the servant.

They ate in a companionable silence on the settee in Elizabeth's room, each wearing one of Darcy's dressing gowns. The once fine dinner had obviously been kept in the oven for some time, but they were content. When they were finished eating, Darcy rose and reached for Elizabeth's hand.

"Come, my love, your bath should be ready by now." He moved toward the connecting door. Seeing her confusion Darcy stopped to explain, "I requested that the bath be readied in my dressing room so that we would not be disturbed by the preparations."

"Oh—but my maids?" Elizabeth asked.

"There will be no servants in attendance tonight, my love, I will help you."

Elizabeth could not help but smile, "You, sir?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, I think I am capable of all the assistance you require. You may have to prompt me or instruct me, but we will manage."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "You are truly the most considerate husband I have ever had."

Darcy growled at her quip, but Elizabeth could tell he was not seriously affronted. "As long as I am your only husband I shall be content, Elizabeth."

She pulled away from him just long enough to retrieve her brush from the dressing table. "Here, sir, you will be needing this. My hair must be brushed before it is washed."

"That, my dear, will be a pleasure."

Elizabeth had only been teasing him about brushing her hair. She fully intended to do it herself, but Darcy was insistent. It was luxurious to have him do such a small thing for her. When it came to the actual bath, Elizabeth discovered that her husband was definitely an innovative man. His intention was to share the bath with her. Elizabeth, however, was concerned that there would not be enough room.

"Trust me, Elizabeth. I had Simms put in less water than usual so we will both fit."

And he was right, of course.

Even though it was summer, Darcy built a small fire afterwards so that Elizabeth could dry her hair more easily. Clad in Darcy's dressing gowns once more, they lounged before the hearth in her room--sometimes chatting and sometimes silent--while Elizabeth combed through her hair. When she declared it to be sufficiently dry and began to rise, Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand and drew her back down beside him. He kissed her and as he did so, Darcy untied the sash of the robe she was wearing and slipped his hands inside.

"I need you, Lizzy," he whispered between kisses.

Instantly aroused by the touch of his hands on her bare skin, Elizabeth reached for the sash of Darcy's robe that she might reciprocate. Both dressing gowns were soon completely discarded and it was her husband's pleasure to teach Elizabeth that the delights of the marriage bed did not require a bed at all.

Sometime later Darcy roused himself to say, "Perhaps it is time we went to bed, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's smile was contagious and its meaning unmistakable as he pulled her to her feet.

"I merely meant it is time to go to sleep," he teased.

Elizabeth stuck her lip out in a pretend pout as she replied, "But that is not what you said, Fitzwilliam. You did not mention sleep at all."

"No, I am afraid I did not, but I am only human, dearest. I must rest sometimes."

Holding fast to his hand, Elizabeth drew Darcy toward the bed. "Well, if you must sleep, Fitzwilliam, the bed will definitely be more comfortable than the floor."

Feeling no self-consciousness Elizabeth climbed into the bed they had laughingly remade--sometime after she had discarded the sheet in favor of her husband's robe. Darcy only hesitated for a moment before sliding in beside her, but it did not go unnoticed.

"Is something wrong, Fitzwilliam?" she asked with a puzzled frown.

"No, dearest, everything is very right," he said taking her in his arms. "It is just that we have never discussed--our sleeping arrangements and I was--uncertain of your wishes. Most married couples of our station do not sleep together."

"Yes, I know," Elizabeth said with a sigh, thinking of her parents. "Is that what you want, Fitzwilliam?"

"Certainly not," he said emphatically, "but I was unsure of your expectations and-- Well, I was simply afraid of presuming too much, my love." Darcy kissed her and then whispered, "It is my desire that we never have to sleep apart, Lizzy."

She nestled in beside him with a contented sigh. "Good, because I want to be as close to you as possible. There, now you know what my expectations are. I hope that meets with your approval, Fitzwilliam."

"It not only meets with my approval, dearest. It delights me more than I can say."

When Elizabeth awoke the next morning Darcy was still asleep with his arm wrapped around her. It brought to mind waking in a similar pose with her little cousin Emma. Elizabeth had wondered at the time what it would be like to awaken beside the man she loved, and now she knew that it was far more wonderful than she had imagined. Not wanting to disturb her husband, Elizabeth carefully rolled onto her side for a better view of him. Even with the shadow of his beard, Darcy looked younger in his sleep. It also pleased her immensely to observe how very happy and at peace he looked.

When Darcy awoke some time later, he smiled to see her watching him. It was Elizabeth's lovely, expressive eyes that had first commanded his attention. To see those beautiful eyes now gazing at him with such obvious love nearly took his breath away.

"Good morning, husband. Would you like some tea?"

"Tea--" That unexpected offer startled him awake. "But Elizabeth, you are--"

"Do not be alarmed. I did not summon my maid into the room while you were asleep. I dressed and went into your room to ring for tea a little while ago. Mr. Simms did not seem shocked at all to find your wife in your room. I am sure I just heard it being delivered. Stay here and I will be right back."

With a smile, Elizabeth rose and shrugged back into his dressing gown before returning to Darcy's room to fetch the tea tray. Darcy found himself unable to take his eyes off of her. Marriage to Elizabeth far exceeded his expectations and he had expected a great deal.

As he sipped his tea, Darcy murmured, "So it is not a dream. You are really here and serving me tea."

Elizabeth laughed. "Yes, I am really here and serving you tea, my darling husband, but it is almost too perfect to be real, is it not?"

\*\*\*\*

Realizing that their time 'alone' would be brief, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy stayed in their rooms all day Saturday as well. For a change of scene they moved into Darcy's room at one point. Elizabeth's mood grew more somber as being there raised memories of Darcy's illness and their chance to begin anew.

"I was so afraid for you, Fitzwilliam. You had always seemed strong and invincible, and when I saw you so weakened--" Elizabeth paused to brush away her tears. "I know I did not love you then as I do now, but there was already some tie to you--perhaps it was just understanding that you truly loved me-- The thought that you might die not knowing how much I regretted the horrible way I treated you--"

Darcy enfolded her in his arms and murmured, "There, there, dearest. Do not cry, Lizzy."

When she was more composed he continued, "All is truly well now. I am healthy again, and a much better man than I was in April. Do not torment yourself. You were entirely right to refuse me at Hunsford. I know that what you believed of me at the time was not entirely true, but neither was it wholly false. Even the way I proposed to you--it was horrible. I shudder to remember my conceit. I actually expected you to accept me. I still find it hard to believe that you have forgiven me for interfering with Jane and Bingley."

Darcy watched Elizabeth anxiously as he waited for her response. He had finally dared to broach the one misunderstanding they had not yet discussed.

"I was very angry then," Elizabeth said with a sigh, "but after reading your letter I understood your reasons. You were protecting your friend, as I would have tried to protect Jane. There is also a part of me now that believes Bingley's love could not have been very deep if he would give up so easily."

"What do you mean, Elizabeth?"

"I compare his behavior to yours, Fitzwilliam."

"Mine?"

"Yes, dearest, with yours. I do not refer to that period when you were battling yourself over your feelings for me, but rather afterwards-- Once you had determined that you loved me, you would brook no one's interference. You were willing to face your family's disapproval and censure because you knew your own heart. Even when I did not immediately return your affections here in London, you were not dissuaded. You were committed to pursuing me until my heart was won or all hope was lost. These have been the happiest two days of my life and it has all come so easily--the intimacy, the unreserved communion. That ease is in large part because I know that you love me, Fitzwilliam. I know that I can depend upon your love."

She sighed before continuing, "I believe that Bingley favored Jane and that he liked her, but now that I have experienced love, I do not think he loved her--at least not in the way that Jane deserves to be loved."

"I understand you, my love," Darcy whispered, taking Elizabeth in his arms, "and I thank you for not blaming me. I do not think I could bear it. I cannot pretend to fully understand Bingley. I do know that his feelings for your sister were deeper than any I had observed in him before, but I think you are right. Had Charles truly loved Jane, he could not have given her up so easily. If he does not love your sister enough to fight for her, then perhaps she is better off waiting for someone who does."

When Darcy and Elizabeth discussed their plans for Sunday, she suggested they attend services in the Gardiner's parish. They might see the Gardiners and they would definitely avoid numerous casual acquaintances of Darcy's who would be attending church in the neighborhood. Darcy thought it an excellent idea. Since they would be going out, Darcy and Elizabeth decided to have breakfast downstairs.

Elizabeth was vastly contented sitting at the breakfast table with her husband, pouring him a second cup of tea. Truth be told she did feel a bit like a little girl playing house, but Elizabeth knew it would begin to feel real in time. Although Darcy was not given to displays of emotion, his happiness was unmistakable to those who knew him well. Grace had already assured one and all that the new mistress was kind and good, and observing Darcy's happy state solidified the household's general good will toward the new Mrs. Darcy. It was the commonly held opinion among the staff that the man who spent so much time looking out for everyone else deserved some happiness of his own.

Elizabeth's private fears that the rest of the household might think less of her for spending the first two days of her marriage sequestered with her husband were without foundation. Although such behavior had occasioned a few sly nods and winks among the servants, it had also reinforced the general opinion that the new mistress loved the master rather than his wealth. That was a welcome relief to one and all who had feared the likes of Caroline Bingley becoming mistress of the household. She would have been abandoning her marriage bed almost immediately to assert herself as mistress of the house. Yes, the staff was quite pleased with the master's bride.

The Gardiners were at church and invited the Darcys to come with them after the service. As the Bennets had returned to Hertfordshire the previous day, order was restored once more in Gracechurch Street, and Elizabeth was glad to have one more visit with her aunt before leaving town. After luncheon their husbands were playing with the children in the back garden while Aunt Gardiner and Elizabeth looked on from the porch.

"You both seem very happy, Lizzy," Aunt Gardiner began, "and I am truly delighted for you."

"Yes, we are very content, and I want to thank you for your wise advice. I know that it helped make things easier for me, for both of us really. I shudder to think what might have been the outcome if I had actually listened to my mother."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled and patted her favorite niece's hand as she said, "I am happy to have been of use, Lizzy. I was confident that you and Mr. Darcy would do well together. You not only love one another, but you are also well suited in terms of character and temperament."

Suddenly realizing the import of Elizabeth's words, Aunt Gardiner could not help her curiosity. "But whatever did you mean by saying if you'd actually listened to your mother? I shudder to consider what advice she may have given you on marriage, but how did you avoid it? I know she insisted on a private interview with you."

"I suppose it is safe to own my tricks now that I am a married woman," Elizabeth said with a mischievous smile.

When Elizabeth explained the sonnet method of attending, yet not attending her mother's lectures, Mrs. Gardiner laughed with great delight.

"Oh, Lizzy, you are definitely too clever by half, but I am glad you did not allow your mother to poison your expectations. Your Mr. Darcy is an excellent man and he deserves your love."

"Yes, he does, Aunt, and he definitely has it."

The gentleman in question happened to glance their way at the moment and realized he was probably being discussed. When he raised one eyebrow quizzically at his wife, she silently mouthed, "I love you," in reply.

At that, Darcy smiled and turned back to the children.

On the carriage ride home the newlyweds decided to forego a formal dinner in favor of eating in their rooms. They would prepare to retire upon their return home and then have a light supper sent upstairs. As they were ascending the stairs Darcy took Elizabeth's hand and asked, "When shall I come to you, my love?"

"You are welcome to enter my room at anytime, Fitzwilliam," she answered. "I plan to use my dressing room as such, so you need not fear an embarrassing moment if you enter my rooms while Sally is assisting me."

"That is very generous of you, Elizabeth, but are you certain?"

"Of course, dearest. I thought we agreed nothing should come between us. If Sally and I are occupied in the dressing room, just alert us that you are waiting without."

Darcy kissed her hand, "I love you, Lizzy. Thank you for trusting me."

There was no answer when Darcy knocked on the door connecting their rooms some time later. Assuming that Elizabeth must still be in her dressing room with the maid, he tentatively opened the door. Darcy felt awkward entering a woman's private rooms without her permission, but then he reminded himself that Elizabeth had given him permission—permission to enter her room at anytime. Even in other marriages of affection, Darcy doubted that many husbands were afforded such liberty. It touched him profoundly to know that Elizabeth truly wanted to share every part of her life with him. Hearing the expected murmur of voices from the dressing room, Darcy knocked gently on that door and his wife's voice immediately answered.

"I will be out in a minute, Mr. Darcy. Please make yourself comfortable."

Darcy smiled and moved to the settee where he settled in to await his wife. He was initially surprised to discern two voices besides Elizabeth's coming from the dressing room, but then realized that Sally and Grace were probably both attending her. That elicited a quiet chuckle of appreciation. Darcy had always prided himself on the good relationships he had with his staff, but Elizabeth had a way of endearing herself to people. Sally had known Elizabeth since she was a child, but Grace was already quite attached to her, too. Darcy could not make out what they were saying but the conversation was obviously animated and punctuated by Elizabeth's happy laughter.

Hearing his wife happily talking and laughing with the servants made Darcy feel at as if his life were whole for the first time in many years. There had been very little laughter in Darcy's life since his mother died, but now the lively, happy woman in the next room was his. Although her earlier refusal had pained him, Darcy now reveled in the knowledge that Elizabeth loved him knowing full well his failings.

With a sigh of contentment, Darcy settled back into the settee. Closing his eyes, he simply allowed himself the pleasure of listening to his wife's voice. He must have dozed off, because the next thing Darcy knew Elizabeth was leaning over him kissing his cheek.

"Wake up, dearest. Our supper will be here soon."

Darcy reached up to pull her onto his lap. "I have missed you," he murmured.

Elizabeth laughed as she said, "I did not realize I had made you wait so long, but I am all yours now, my love."

There was a knock at the door. Elizabeth stood and moved away toward her dressing table before answering, "Come in."

Grace entered the room carrying their supper tray. "Evening, sir. Where shall I put this, Mrs. Darcy?"

"Just leave it on the table there by the door, Grace. Thank you. That will be all until tomorrow morning so have a good evening."

Grace bobbed and smiled, "Thank you, missus. Good night then."

Darcy turned to watch his wife brushing her hair. "For someone who never had her own maid before, you seem to be managing two of them quite nicely."

Elizabeth smiled as she explained, "Yes, Grace did want to be of particular service to me so I have worked it out. Since Sally knows me so well, she will see to my personal needs and since Grace knows the staff and the household so well, she will take care of more general needs. This way there is no uncertainty about my expectations and they can be comfortable with each other instead of feeling like rivals."

Darcy was actually impressed. Elizabeth's solution took into account the strengths and personalities of the two women and meant she would not be forever settling disputes between her maids. "I am impressed, Elizabeth. You will be a formidable mistress of Pemberley."

"Oh, my," she exclaimed in sudden panic as the blood rushed from her face.

Thinking she might be ill, Darcy hastened to her side, "What is wrong, dearest?"

"Mistress of Pemberley?"

"Well, yes," he answered with a smile as he understood the reason for her sudden pallor, "just as you are now mistress of this house, you are now mistress of Pemberley."

"I really had not thought of that. I only thought of being your wife, Fitzwilliam. I do not know that I am up to such a huge responsibility."

He knelt beside her and took her in his arms as he answered, "Do not worry, dearest. Pemberley is a large estate to be sure, but you will have every assistance you desire. And you will be a wonderful mistress of Pemberley, Elizabeth, because you are not only intelligent, but you are also compassionate and genuinely concerned about the welfare of everyone around you. Our responsibility at Pemberley is to care for those people who depend on us. It is something you do instinctively, my love.

"When Georgiana fell ill and I was too weak to help, you took charge. My servants knew that they could trust you. You brought Sally into this household two days ago and have already managed to secure an ally and a partner for her in Grace. You will be a wonderful mistress of Pemberley simply by being yourself, and I might add that the most important responsibility of the mistress of Pemberley is to care for its master. You have already exceeded my expectations in that regard."

Elizabeth's color was returning, "Well, if you put it that way, it does not sound quite so daunting. As long as my first responsibility is to you, Fitzwilliam, then I will be content."

"As will I, Mrs. Darcy, as will I."

*The End*

*Copyright 2007 Pamela St Vines*