



Chapter
One

It was a sound Elizabeth Bennet could not recall hearing in her lifetime; the deep, plaintive tones of a man in agony — an uncomfortable sound, which both resonated in her deepest emotions and pulled at the strings of her heart. It moved her to act, in the manner of one who comes upon a live animal caught in a poachers steel trap — willingly facing the danger from the wounded animal in an effort to set it free. Elizabeth noted the tumult seemed to be coming from just behind the stand of trees in the lower field to the west of Netherfield Park.

The day had been filled with exasperation. From the time of breaking their fast together, Miss Caroline Bingley, sister to the gentleman leasing the estate, had used every opportunity to insult Elizabeth's family. Not one flaw had been left unmentioned: the improper conduct of Elizabeth's younger sisters, the vulgarity of her mother, close family connections in trade, and the entailment of her home to a distant cousin. Miss Bingley spoke as if Elizabeth was not in the room, seated across from her at the long hardwood table. The place settings were elegant; the conversation was not. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy appeared to join in her disdain, though he said not a word. His constant stares and arrogant opinions set Elizabeth's back on edge like fingernails run down the length of a slate. Elizabeth, who refused to be intimidated or give evidence that Miss Bingley's comments pained her, had been relieved when Mr. Darcy received a letter that quickly took him away from the breakfast room. Miss Bingley's longing to follow him, not unlike a puppy who nips at your heels, was shown in her gaze following his withdrawal from the room. Elizabeth wondered what she saw in him. Certainly, he was a great man in England. From Elizabeth's perspective, it could only be his wealth and possessions that held any attraction for the woman for he was a miserable man to have in company.

Elizabeth's eldest sister, Jane, had fallen ill soon after her arrival for tea at Miss Bingley's invitation three days prior, and Elizabeth had followed her to the Bingley residence to assist in her care. Jane had shown consistent improvement, but was still worn from her illness. She had drifted off to sleep so Elizabeth sought refuge away from the turmoil of the house and her own thoughts. She loved the countryside, finding solace in the autumnal colors, the crisp October air, and the crunch of fallen leaves under her walking boots.

Elizabeth moved closer to the trees and the source of the outcry. As she approached, she was better able to discern specific phrases that repeated themselves in a chant. "Dear Lord, no." "Please, no." "What am I to do?" She peeked around the gnarled trunk of an old oak tree and was shocked to see Mr. Darcy. In front of her was a man broken. He must have left the estate immediately after receiving his missive as he stood in the glen with no greatcoat, hat, or gloves to protect him from the cold. His head was raised to the heavens with his eyes tightly shut as if supplicating for help. His jaw was clenched tightly, and his hands were fisted at his sides. In his left hand was a crumpled letter, so tightly held that it seemed an extension of that appendage.

She watched as a tear trickled down his cheek and a rush of hurt filled her own heart at his agony. Propriety and the fact that he had never, in their short acquaintance, shown her one morsel of consideration, demanded that she leave him to his pain. Human kindness begged her to offer whatever assistance she could provide. Kindness prevailed. So as not to startle him, she moved quietly in front of him, whispering his name softly.

"Mr. Darcy." She paused to see if he would respond. "Mr. Darcy, might I be of some assistance?"

He held himself stiffly, as if any movement might cause him to crumble. There was no indication that he had heard her. She spoke a bit louder.

"Mr. Darcy." Again, she waited, stepping even closer. "Mr. Darcy, can I call someone to come to your aid?" She thought of his valet, a man who would know Darcy more than any other, but could not recall if she had ever heard his name mentioned. Possibly, Mr. Bingley might be the person most likely to offer help. Their close friendship was a puzzle to Elizabeth. A case of light being attracted to darkness. Mr. Bingley was the most amiable man of Elizabeth's knowledge. She was unsurprised that Jane was emotionally attached after so short an acquaintance. Jane was all that was good. She deserved a man who would treat her with that same level of goodness.

By then, she was standing directly in front of him. When she called Darcy's name again and he still did not respond, she reached out her hand and touched his right arm. He flinched in fright as he realized he was no longer alone. She watched him quickly open his eyes and knew the moment he registered it was her. *Was that a look of relief that passed over his features?*

"Elizabeth!" It was said with not unwelcomed wonder.

Never in her lifetime of dreams would she have imagined what happened next. Darcy reached out with both arms and pulled her tightly to his chest. Her own astonishment kept her from immediately reacting. By the time she did, he had bowed his head and rested his cheek on the top of her curls. She felt his body start shaking and heard his first sob, his arms tightening in an uncontrolled reaction.

Elizabeth dropped the bonnet she had been holding by the ribbons to the ground and wrapped her arms around his waist, settling the side of her face over his drumming heartbeat. It was not an embrace of passion; it was succor, comfort, and ease.

Neither was aware of how much time passed or of the soft words Elizabeth whispered in an effort to calm the man. He was tall with broad shoulders and muscled arms. He smelled of sandalwood and citrus. At one point she felt the weight of him swaying towards her and realized he was on the point of collapse. She would never be able to bear his weight.

“Mr. Darcy,” her voice was firm. “Mr. Darcy!”

A heavy sigh came from his lips as his breath rushed out of his lungs. He lifted his head and took deep breaths in and out in an effort to regain a semblance of control. He still kept his arms tightly around her, unwilling or unable to let her go. His posture straightened and she felt his chest muscles contract.

Elizabeth fetched the handkerchief she had tucked under her left sleeve and brought it around to him at the same time he brought his hand up to take it from her. He was unable to because of the letter. Elizabeth knew the second he was aware of what was still in his hand. Pain etched the strong lines of his face. She had never looked at his features so closely. Elizabeth realized for the first time that he was a handsome man, even under these dire circumstances. How might he look if he was happy? She shook her head at the fanciful question. *What circumstance would ever crop up to make such a stoic man smile?*

“Pray, forgive me, Elizabeth.” He looked down at the woman who had been such a pleasure to him over the past three days. Never had he met a lady who intrigued him like Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She was beautiful, yes, but it was her intelligence, unfailing kindness, and composure under trial that drew him to her like the magnetic pull of the moon. He knew he was fighting a losing struggle with his affections and he relished having her close to him. His mind warred with his yearning for her and the horror of the words on the page.

Elizabeth was beyond surprised when he exchanged the letter for the piece of embroidered white cloth. After a cursory brush of the handkerchief over his face, he nodded towards the letter, indicating he wanted her to read it.

A letter was private, meant to be kept between the sender and recipient. That he would share something so confidential with her astounded her. She wondered what he meant by it.

“Please?”

In hopes it would shed light on his unusual behavior, she turned her head to the side to read the missive in her hand. He was not letting her go and she realized that she was not yet willing to remove herself from his embrace either. Should this letter be as unsettling to her as it was to him, she may have need of whatever strength he offered.

*21 October 1811
Pemberley, Derbyshire*

Brother,

I pray you are well and enjoying your stay with the Bingleys. I have yet to catch up on my studies from the pain caused by my foolishness of this summer. How you must suffer for the shame I have brought upon our family name. I hope never to see Ramsgate again.

William, I feel it is the course of wisdom to completely withdraw from society, including that found in Derbyshire. The Darcy estate in Scotland, with its isolation and bleak residence, would serve as a fitting home for the rest of my days. I have instructed Mrs. Reynolds to pack items needed to set up household there and plan to leave Pemberley on October 31. The fullness of the moon that night will allow for a longer travel day. It is my hope to arrive at Kerrydale within four days.

I love you dearly, Brother, and am confident you will want to return to Pemberley once I am gone. It will then be a place of peace.

You will always be in my heart,

Georgiana Darcy

Elizabeth immediately looked up into Darcy's eyes. She saw a mixture of pain, frustration, and loss and the power of those emotions made her unable to hold his gaze for any length of time. Miss Bingley had expounded at length about Miss Darcy's accomplishments, praising her to the point that Elizabeth assumed they were of the same type of character. Caroline had said nothing about a shameful past, which meant they were not as close as Caroline hoped to convey.

"What age is Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth had to know. If she had reached her majority, it would make this decision much more meaningful. If she was not yet of age, Miss Darcy might not have the authority to make such a choice on her own.

"She is not yet sixteen." The words came out a whisper, his voice hoarse from his sorrow.

Elizabeth looked up to see Darcy staring down at her in a look she was familiar with. However, seeing it in such close proximity, she did not observe any of the censure she had come to expect. His dark eyes softened, the blue changing from stormy to serene, at the mention of his sister. Immediately they filled with tears, and he had to blink them away.

"Pray tell me about your sister, Mr. Darcy. What kind of girl is she?" Elizabeth was curious to see how a brother would describe the paragon Caroline had recounted. Elizabeth's youngest sister was the same age as Miss Darcy. Lydia Bennet was brash and bold, in love with red coated officers, who possessed a propensity for getting her way. As hard as she tried, Elizabeth could not imagine Lydia ever wanting to distance herself from society. Instead, she used the fact that she was "out" to promote herself in a silly manner that brought shame and embarrassment to her two eldest sisters.

Darcy finally stepped back from Elizabeth and both felt the parting severely. Elizabeth was extremely astonished at the feeling of loss. How could that be possible? Taking Elizabeth's hand he led her to the most comfortable looking spot on a fallen log where they both sat. The natural sway of the old tree trunk moved them together as if in concert with Mrs. Bennet's desire to throw her daughters as close to a single gentleman as possible. Elizabeth tried to lean away from him, but she gave in when his shoulders filled the gap. She had yet to return the letter to the man seated so closely to her, closer than any gentleman had ever been.

"My sister is shy and very quiet. She has the looks of my mother so she is fair in appearance though we share the same color eyes. Georgiana is about your height or maybe a bit taller." A small smile played at the corner of Darcy's mouth. "When she was little, she would toddle behind me everywhere I went. If I went out riding, she would want to go. I would seat her in front of me and the faster I would ride, the louder she would squeal. She loved to play hide-and-seek, but did not understand the game. If I was in the library she would walk into the center of the room and cover her own eyes, saying, "Find me, William"". He chuckled at the memory. "If she could not see me, she was certain I could not see her either."

Elizabeth chuckled with him. It was such a tender memory. She watched as his face, again, became serious. It was as if a mask was donned by a skilled actor in an effort to hide his emotions.

“Early this summer Georgiana suffered ill health from the horrid air of London. I established her and Mrs. Younge, her companion, in a cottage at Ramsgate. It was not only for her health. My cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, and I share guardianship of Georgiana and we both worried that she was becoming listless and bored remaining at Darcy House where few of her friends were available to visit. She seemed quieter than normal. Mrs. Younge, who we now know was hiding behind a façade of all that was proper, had been Georgiana’s companion for but five months. Richard and I gave no consideration to the influence that woman had on Georgiana, not realizing it might have been her presence that was having such a negative effect on my sister. When we realized Mrs. Younge’s treachery, it was almost too late. Georgiana had been charmed by a former friend of mine into believing she was in love. This man was in partnership with Georgiana’s companion to extort the value of my sister’s dowry, which is thirty-thousand pounds. It was most fortunate that I made an unexpected visit to Ramsgate and stopped their flight to Gretna Green. My sister has been heartbroken since.”

Elizabeth’s hand flew to her chest as she shuddered in horror at all he had shared. She now understood the feelings of both brother and sister. He clearly felt he had failed his sister as Georgiana felt the same about a brother she undoubtedly adored. It was a terrible situation and Elizabeth wished there was some way to right it.

“What is your plan, Mr. Darcy?” She was stunned that he had shared such a private matter with her. It spoke of a trust that she never knew he had. She knew that nothing about what they discussed would pass her lips, but he could not possibly know that.

Darcy bowed his head and clenched his hands together between his knees.

“She told me before I came to Netherfield Park with Bingley that she felt her recovery would be smoother if I was not there as a constant reminder.”

“And, how did you feel about that? Did you feel that to be true, Mr. Darcy?” These were intimate questions and Elizabeth held her breath, waiting to see if he would answer or remind her she had overstepped.

“Truthfully, Miss Elizabeth, I was devastated.” It was the first time he had addressed her properly since her arrival in the glen, but she doubted he was aware of his lapse. “What do I possibly know about raising a girl? Who do I ask?” Frustration dripped from his tongue.

She knew his questions were rhetorical, so she waited for him to resume.

“My aunts, Lady Catherine and Lady Matlock, are only interested in using my sister as a means to draw attention to themselves and play upon the Darcy name and reputation. I would never trust either of them to put Georgiana ahead of their own interests.”

Elizabeth could hear his disgust.

“We are a small family with few extended family members. There is only one person I trust to look out for my sister’s welfare and that is Richard. Unfortunately, he is like me in that he, too, is unwed and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.”

“There is always Miss Bingley.” She suggested and he immediately scoffed, looking at her like she had grown an extra eye or nose. Then he grinned.

“No, there will never be a Miss Bingley as Mistress of Pemberley. Never.”

Elizabeth wondered that Miss Bingley was so completely unaware.

“Mr. Darcy. A sudden thought just occurred to me.” It was not her place to make any suggestions under these circumstances, yet she felt the need to try to help. She did not want him to get the idea that she was pursuing him in any way for that would not have been the truth. For some reason, it was embarrassing her to continue. At his pleading look, she finally blurted it out. “Mr. Darcy, did you find comfort in my embrace?”

That was the last question he was expecting. Certainly he had found comfort. Had she been willing, he would have gathered her even closer to his side and wrapped her in his arms, never letting her go. In her embrace he had found a peace he did not know if he had ever felt.

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth, I most certainly did.” It was simply spoken, but it was said with vigor.

“Then, might Miss Darcy get the same benefit from yours?” As she asked, she looked him square in the eye, her right eyebrow raised in question.

“I do not know. I have not held her since our father died five years ago. I do not know whether it would be welcomed.”

“Do you have anything else to try, Sir?”

“I do not.” He realized that other than his mother and his sister, he had never held a female like he had done Elizabeth. His reaction to his sister’s letter had moved him to act in a manner he had never done before, one that would have shocked him had he witnessed it in another. Darcy thought back on all the times, before the death of their father that Georgiana would crawl up onto his lap, snuggling as closely as possible to him. He thought of the times he would pick her up and twirl her around and around so he could see and hear her joy. She had always been affectionate. Might she miss the close contact they once had? He stood suddenly, not realizing it would unbalance the woman seated next to him. Reaching back, he helped right her on the log.

“You are correct, Miss Elizabeth. Rather than withdrawing from my sister, I need to spend time with her. She needs to realize she is still as important to me as she always has been.” He started pacing as his thinking became clear. “I will return to Pemberley and travel with her to Scotland. If I stay in Derbyshire, business will consume me and we will have little time together. The winter months farther north will be harsh. Nevertheless, it will allow plenty of opportunity to draw close and learn to have confidence in each other.” The faster he talked, the faster he walked. Back and forth. Back and forth. Suddenly he stopped in front of Elizabeth and turned to her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he began, his voice firm. “You have witnessed something today which no other human has seen. I pray that all you have observed and heard this day will remain private, something that only you and I share.” At her nod he continued. “I shall leave Netherfield Park as soon as my valet can pack. I do not know when or if I will be back in Hertfordshire. It would be my delight to introduce my sister to you if we do find ourselves in each other’s company in the future. May I presume to do so, Miss Elizabeth?” Again, she nodded, not able to take her eyes away from his.

“Then, let us leave this area separately so there is no chance we might be spotted together in such a place. I would not want to cause harm to either your reputation or mine.” With a definite task in mind, Fitzwilliam Darcy reverted back to the Master of Pemberley. This was the Mr. Darcy who was most familiar to her.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy.” When he offered his hand to help her stand, Elizabeth accepted it. She was unprepared for the charge that seemed to travel lightning fast up her arm. She wondered if he felt it too. It was the same feeling she had when they had held each other so closely. Before she could release his hand, she heard a noise to the right of her. Darcy must have heard it at the same time, for their heads both swiveled to the sounds of crackling undergrowth.

What came at them was their worst fear. It was not a wild animal, but one of Bingley’s footmen. He stood just inside the trees, his face bearing a smirk. “Miss, we have been searching for you. Your sister has awoken and is asking for you.”

Elizabeth gathered her bonnet from the ground where she had dropped it and prepared to follow the footman back to the estate. As she started the bow to tie it tightly, it hit her with full force. Consequences! She looked at Mr. Darcy to realize he had come to the same conclusion. They would not be leaving the glen separately.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet were compromised.