



Sixteen Days at Pemberley (Romantic Pride and Prejudice Variations #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: When Elizabeth Bennet's journey to Derbyshire with the Gardiners results in an extended stay at Mr Darcy's estate, new depths of understanding grow between them—but it takes longer than either had hoped.

Sixteen Days at Pemberley was previously published as a part of the An Inducement into Matrimony anthology. This short story, Pride and Prejudice Variation is a trapped-together enemies to lovers romance. Angst is low and content is closed door.

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Longbourn, July 1812

My Dearest Lizzy,

How I miss you! Whenever you are from home, 'pleasure bent' as Papa likes to say, Longbourn is never the same; nor do I feel the same without you by my side.

Fortunately, my young cousins are ripe with good humour and keep me laughing despite your absence.

They are, all four of them, such a joy and provide a wonderful distraction from the succession of busy nothings that have dictated our days here since your departure.

While each moment spent with them brings me sincere pleasure and a sense of fulfilment, no one's society, my dear sister, compares to your own.

I hope with all my heart you are enjoying this time with my aunt and uncle touring Derbyshire and visiting with such friends as my aunt Gardiner has known since girlhood.

I can well imagine you seeing all the local sights, contentedly walking through miles of woodland, and scaling large, imposing boulders while my poor aunt and uncle call to you, reminding you to take care.

Yes, I can see it all very clearly indeed—the expressions of wonder and delight on your countenance as the wind twists your skirts about your ankles and whips your curls into a frenzy while you stand at the edge of the world admiring the untamed

beauty of the peaks!

As you can imagine, Papa feels your absence acutely.

Daily, he laments the fact there have been few words of sense and no peace at Longbourn since you left us.

Poor Lydia, having been denied permission to go to Brighton for the summer with Colonel and Mrs Forster, continues to sulk and complain of the injustice of remaining at home.

I am afraid she tries my father's patience exceedingly, as does my mother by adding her voice to Lydia's.

Even now, as rumours of Mr Wickham's unpaid debts circulate through Meryton, Mama refuses to believe such a handsome, gentlemanlike man is truly so unscrupulous and wicked as the shopkeepers in Meryton claim.

Even my aunt Philips cannot make her see reason, and so she persists in her endeavour to persuade my father to send Lydia to her friends in Sussex.

Papa, of course, will not have it and has declared no daughter of his shall ever be known as the most determined flirt who made herself and her family ridiculous.

Mama, of course, is indignant on Lydia's behalf.

She sees only Lydia's popularity with the officers and the amusement being denied her so long as she remains at home.

Needless to say, my father is more determined than ever to keep our sister out of the reach of Colonel Forster's officers, and Mr Wickham particularly.

Oh! What do we not owe to Mr Darcy for enlightening us as to Mr Wickham's reprehensible character, and for writing to our father of his own painful dealings with him? I suspect that his kindness has already spared us all substantial mortification, and our dear father much regret!

Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something unexpected has occurred; but be not alarmed.

We are all well.

What I have to relate pertains to my father and this business with Lydia.

Oh, Lizzy, he has had a change of heart, or, more likely, I believe his patience has been tried to such an extent by my mother and Lydia that he has relented and declared that we are all to travel to the seaside and remain there for nearly a month! We are to leave by the end of the week!

My young cousins are delighted, of course, as are my sisters and my mother, but none more so than Lydia, who is under the impression we are to go to Brighton! Papa, however, has confided he has no intention of going into Sussex; he has secured a house for us in Kent instead.

In Kent, he believes Kitty and Lydia will be in far less danger of causing mischief, as they will have no friends there to encourage their improper behaviour or tempt them into much worse.

Mama is beside herself with anticipation, although whether her present gaiety shall persist once we arrive at the rugged cliffs of Kent instead of the excess and pomp of Brighton I cannot say.

Kitty and Lydia are preparing for our journey with much high spiritedness; but poor

Mary has lost much of her initial exuberance, as Mama has told her, in no uncertain terms, that she is permitted to bring only one book.

With ten of us, I cannot imagine Papa will sanction undertaking such a long journey in a single carriage.

Surely, he will hire a second conveyance to accommodate us all more comfortably, otherwise I fear the children shall have no choice but to perch upon our laps and we will be very snug indeed!

My only regret, my dearest sister, is that you are already from home and therefore unable to join us on our seaside adventure.

If you were by my side, my happiness would be complete.

I must say adieu for now, as my cousins have been wanting me this half an hour, but I promise to write again once we are all settled in Kent.

Until then, I remain your affectionate sister,

Jane

“ Oh, Jane,”

Elizabeth murmured, staring at her letter with a feeling of dismay in her breast.

It was not Jane's sincerity she doubted, but the soundness of the scheme itself.

Her dear father hated travelling anywhere beyond Hertfordshire; Elizabeth could not imagine him setting out on a hundred-mile journey with her mother, sisters, and young cousins of his own volition, regardless of whether there was one carriage or

two.

It seemed far more likely Mr Bennet would see to the arrangements for the trip, then simply send his family off on their own, thus sparing himself the inconvenience of spending two days in a confined space on a hot, dusty road with five enthusiastic ladies, four energetic children, and the constant hum of conversation.

Mr Bennet valued peace and quiet above all things; without his family underfoot, he would enjoy several weeks' worth of it in the comfort of his own home.

When faced with such an appealing prospect, Elizabeth doubted he would leave his book-room except to sleep! The only interruption to his reading would be the ringing of the dinner bell.

Uttering a sigh of frustration, she wondered what had possessed her father to form such a resolution.

Although sending her mother and sisters on a seaside holiday would undoubtedly make them happy, it would defeat the purpose of denying Lydia permission to accompany her friends to Brighton in the first place.

Britain was at war with the French; it was as likely there were large encampments of soldiers erected along the coast of Kent as there were along the coast of Sussex.

Should Mr Bennet remain at home in Hertfordshire, he would have no power to rein in his wife's zealous matchmaking nor Lydia's and Kitty's enthusiasm for handsome young men in red coats.

Jane and Mary would be the only voices of reason and economy, and they would likely go unheard.

Elizabeth shuddered to think of the outcome of such single-minded neglect.

In no mood to read her letter a second time, she set it aside and reminded herself that nothing was certain of yet.

Her father would either accompany his family on their excursion to the seaside or he would not.

There was nothing Elizabeth could do about it from Derbyshire except hope that all would turn out well as she awaited further news in another letter from Jane.

Tugging her shawl more closely about her shoulders, she abandoned her comfortable chair at the table and crossed the parlour to peer out of the window.

Long fingers of sunlight greeted her, warming her through the glass.

The day promised to be a fine one, with a deep blue sky overhead and barely a cloud in sight.

Although the hour was early, it was not so early that Lambton was empty or still.

Beyond the thick, whitewashed walls of the Red Lion, the village was alive with activity.

Shopkeepers and solicitors and servants bustled along the high street, having already begun their day.

She watched the goings-on below for some time before spying her aunt and uncle Gardiner walking arm in arm at the top of the street, slowly making their way towards the inn.

An hour earlier they had set out alone to visit the church while Elizabeth read her letter; now, they were accompanied by a gentleman whose figure Elizabeth knew well: Mr Darcy.

Elizabeth caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she watched him—his tall frame; his confident, unhurried gait; his regal bearing.

He was presently speaking to her aunt.

Nearly a full minute passed before he finished saying his piece, at which time a brilliant smile appeared on Mrs Gardiner's countenance as her lips formed words Elizabeth wished she could hear.

With an inclination of his head, Mr Darcy returned her aunt's smile before he turned his attention to her uncle, who looked as well pleased as his wife.

In that moment, Elizabeth's own countenance flushed with unexpected warmth.

For so long she had thought of him as the most arrogant, insufferable man of her acquaintance; more recently, she had begun to see him in a very different light.

After meeting him unexpectedly as she toured his beautiful park with her relations, she was forced to admit the Mr Darcy she had known in Hertfordshire—so haughty and disagreeable and proud—had undergone a material change.

In Derbyshire, he was no longer arrogant but exacting.

He was no longer recalcitrant but reserved.

He was no longer exceedingly proud or unpleasant or severe, but perfectly amiable in every respect.

He was handsome as well.

Elizabeth had forgotten precisely how handsome and felt a sense of disquiet descend upon her, for Mr Darcy was even handsomer when he smiled.

He had rarely smiled while they were in company together in Hertfordshire, and never in the presence of her family.

Although he was slightly more animated in Kent among his own relations, Mr Darcy's aloofness had been as firmly fixed at Rosings Park as it was elsewhere.

Also firmly fixed were the long, penetrating looks that served to confound her and discompose her and annoy her no matter where she was or what she happened to be doing.

Elizabeth had felt Mr Darcy's eyes upon her constantly.

But for what purpose? Her beauty he had earlier withstood; surely, a man such as he, who appeared to consider himself above his company wherever he went, must only ever look at her to find fault.

How wrong she had been!

Although Mr Darcy had found much to criticise where her family was concerned, it did not follow that his censure of them extended to her, as was evident when he called upon her late one afternoon in Kent while her friends were dining at Rosings and Elizabeth was alone, nursing a headache.

He enquired after her health, paced the length of the room, and then shocked her by announcing with more emotion than she had ever believed him capable that he ardently admired and loved her.

Instead of a litany of heartfelt sentiments that would have served him well as a professed lover, what followed was a recitation of every conceivable reason why Mr Darcy should, in actuality, feel nothing for Elizabeth at all—certainly nothing that would inspire a man of his position and notoriety to ignore the expectations and wishes of his family and friends.

And then, after begging her to relieve his suffering, he proposed.

Only after many months' reflection did Elizabeth conclude that Mr Darcy, who had long professed disguise of every sort to be his abhorrence, had likely viewed such a blunt, uncensored declaration as a perverse nod to her intelligence and discernment rather than as the insult it was in truth.

In the end, however, it mattered not.

The moment he had mentioned the inferiority of her connexions and her family's impropriety, Elizabeth had heard nothing, and therefore discerned nothing beyond the offensiveness of his words and his total disregard for her feelings by having uttered them.

Her refusal, and the language with which she had abused him the moment he had done, she would much rather forget—especially the part that pertained to the debauched Mr Wickham and the living he claimed Mr Darcy had denied him.

Mortified and furious, Mr Darcy quit the house.

Elizabeth, unable to support herself, sank onto a chair and wept.

Other than one brief moment the next morning, when he handed her a letter—one she had read often—their paths had not crossed again until three days prior at Pemberley.

Elizabeth shook her head.

The civility Mr Darcy had shown her as they had made their way along the picturesque, wooded paths of his ancestral home was as generous as it was surprising.

Instead of treating her with contempt after the unjust accusations she had levelled at him in April, Mr Darcy had shown her nothing but kindness and respect, even going so far as to request her permission to introduce his sister to her during her stay in Lambton.

As though he feared Elizabeth would change her mind or suddenly leave Derbyshire without a proper farewell, he had brought Miss Darcy to wait on her the very next morning.

The following day, Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner returned the visit by calling upon Miss Darcy at Pemberley, where they talked of their recent travels, shared thoughts on music, and ate nectarines and peaches in a beautifully appointed parlour with a view of the lake.

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Tonight, they would return as Miss Darcy's dinner guests along with Mr Bingley and his sisters, whom Elizabeth understood had visited Pemberley every summer for years.

Running her finger along the edge of the windowpane, Elizabeth endeavoured to ignore the quickening of her pulse as she watched Mr Darcy approach the inn and gesture for her aunt and uncle to precede him through the front entrance. Although she no longer disliked him as she had in Kent, neither was she ready to admit the opposite: that she had come to like him very well within the span of three impossibly short days. His metamorphosis from proud and unpleasant to amicable was unexpected, to say the least—as unexpected as his civility to her, his hospitality, and his smile. Constantly, did she ask herself, what had inspired such a transformation? Was it for her sake he was so altered? Surely, his improved manners were not the result of his having taken her reproofs to heart!

All too soon, she heard voices in the corridor—her uncle's jovial tenor and Mr Darcy's rich baritone. In the next instant, the door to the parlour was thrown open and Mr and Mrs Gardiner entered the room.

“Lizzy,” said her uncle with a bright smile and a twinkle in his eye, “you will never guess with whom we had the pleasure of meeting this morning.”

Her aunt looked pointedly at Elizabeth as Mr Darcy appeared behind her, removing his hat and ducking his head so as not to hit it on the heavy, oak beam above the door. His eyes found Elizabeth in an instant and settled there—on her face and her eyes and her mouth. The tips of his ears turned red, and a vivid slap of colour appeared high on his cheeks, but his steady, piercing gaze did not falter.

Elizabeth felt a heated blush bloom upon her own cheeks and endeavoured to appear composed, as composed as possible while he regarded her so intently, blushing like a schoolboy. Her curtsy was merely perfunctory, but her smile was welcoming and heartfelt. “Mr Darcy. This is indeed a pleasant surprise. I hope this morning finds you well?”

The corners of Mr Darcy’s mouth lifted as he bowed. “I am very well, Miss Bennet. I confess I was surprised you did not accompany your aunt and uncle on their walk through the village. I know how fond you are of exercise, especially when the weather is fine. I hope you were not indisposed.”

“Not at all, sir. I elected to remain behind to read a letter from my sister Jane. As I have not heard from her for some time, I was impatient for any bit of news I could glean from Longbourn.”

“Of course,” he replied. “I trust that your sister is in good health, and all of your sisters and your parents as well?”

“They are all in excellent health, sir.” She glanced at her aunt and uncle and, with an arch look, informed them, “Jane writes that my father has decided to take everyone to the seaside.”

“Has he!” cried Mrs Gardiner. “How wonderful, for the children especially. When are they set to leave, Lizzy? I ought to write to your mother directly.”

“According to Jane, they were likely to have departed Longbourn yesterday.”

“And where are they off to?” Mr Gardiner enquired, smoothing his hands along the lapels of his coat. “I understand Lydia was eager to go to Brighton with her friends, Colonel Forster and his wife, but your father decided against the scheme. Perhaps they are to join them after all?”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy, whose expression had become inscrutable as he watched her. “When last I spoke to my father, he was adamant that Brighton—and certain society there—was best avoided. His opinion has not altered. They are for Kent instead and shall reside there for several weeks. Where in Kent remains a mystery at present, as not even Jane is privy to that information as yet.”

The Gardiners expressed their approval of Kent but shook their heads at what they perceived as a poor attempt by Mr Bennet to have a bit of fun at Lydia’s expense. “How like your father to keep their destination a secret,” said her aunt with more than a hint of disapprobation in her tone, “though I am very glad he saw fit to confide in Jane. Should their carriage become upset and fall into a ravine, we would have had no notion of their general direction.”

“Now, now,” said Mr Gardiner, patting his wife’s hand with a reassuring smile. “Such morbidity, my dear, will never do. All will be well. Kent is a lovely county. I am sure everyone shall arrive in one piece to enjoy it.”

“Kent,” said Mr Darcy, looking fixedly at Elizabeth, “is very beautiful, as I am certain you recall from your stay with your friends in Hunsford. The southernmost coast is seventy miles or so to the south of it, and is home to many seaside resorts, most of which offer an impressive variety of attractions and comforts. I have no doubt your family will enjoy themselves, regardless of where they stay.” His voice was warm, as warm as the look in his eyes. “I have been to Brighton as well, but found its amusements were not to my liking. I much prefer the subtle beauty of Kent to the ostentation of Brighton.”

Elizabeth could tell at once Mr Darcy was not only pleased by what she had related of her family’s destination, but relieved. He had taken the trouble of writing to her father, warning him of Mr Wickham’s dissolution and depravity, and his warning had not gone unheeded. “I am certain you are right,” she told him, endeavouring to keep her tone light as she returned his steadfast gaze. “I well recall the loveliness of Lady

Catherine's park. If the rest of the county is as pleasant, my family may never wish to leave!"

Before anything more could be said of the seaside or Kent or Elizabeth's family, a serving girl arrived with their breakfast and her uncle extended an invitation to Mr Darcy to join them.

Mr Darcy glanced from Mr Gardiner to Elizabeth, then back to her uncle with something akin to regret. "I thank you for your hospitality, but I am afraid I must decline. I have business this morning with my steward and am expected back at Pemberley by half ten."

"I understand, sir. We will dine with you tonight in any case."

"Of course. I look forward to your coming, as does my sister. She was pleased beyond measure to have received Mrs Gardiner and Miss Bennet at Pemberley yesterday." He paused to clear his throat. "I sincerely hope you will give my proposal serious consideration. I cannot think of anything my sister, or I, would enjoy more."

"You are generous, sir," said Mr Gardiner.

A rueful smile appeared on Mr Darcy's countenance. "I am selfish. I desire to see those I love happy. Your society is most welcome at Pemberley." He bowed. "Good day, Mr Gardiner. Mrs Gardiner." He turned to Elizabeth and his voice took on a decidedly tender tone. "Good day, Miss Bennet."

Before Elizabeth could bid him a good day in turn—or utter a single word of sense for that matter—Mr Darcy bowed to her, turned on his heel, and quit the room.

"You are joking, of course," said Elizabeth to her uncle an hour later as they sat around the breakfast table, now nearly emptied of cold ham, seasonal fruit, and cakes.

She reached for her water glass, diversion dancing in her eyes, and raised it to her lips.

Mr Gardiner chuckled as he speared a grape with his fork. "Indeed, I am in earnest. We are invited to stay at Pemberley as Mr and Miss Darcy's guests for however long we like."

Elizabeth stared at him, unable to credit what she had heard.

"Come now, Lizzy," said her aunt, giving Elizabeth a significant look. "Do not be missish. Mr Darcy extending such a generous invitation to us is clearly a compliment to you."

Elizabeth made no answer, and Mrs Gardiner sighed.

Mr Gardiner, likely sensing the ladies required privacy, set his napkin upon the table and rose from his chair. "I believe," he said to his wife, "I shall walk to the green and return in half an hour."

The door had barely shut behind him when Mrs Gardiner said, "Mr Darcy admires you, Elizabeth. A blind man could see his admiration. The question remains, do you return it?"

'You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you...'

Elizabeth averted her eyes to the window, where she could see the spire of the church in the distance. Not every word Mr Darcy had uttered to her at the parsonage that fateful afternoon had been ugly. "I cannot deny that I esteem him. Indeed, I like him. But you know it has not always been so. We have spent so much time over the course of our acquaintance misunderstanding one another and causing each other pain." She shook her head. "I was awful to him in Hertfordshire, and even worse in Kent. He

would be well within his right never to speak to me let alone invite me into his home.”

“And yet, Mr Darcy seems determined to do the opposite.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth allowed, forcing herself to meet her aunt’s steady, encouraging gaze. “He has been beyond generous since we met at Pemberley the other day. Beyond civil in every respect.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled gently. “It would be a brilliant match for you. A love match, if you could see your way to open your heart to him.” She reached for Elizabeth’s hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. “I will not push you. I am not your mother. But I cannot in good conscience turn a blind eye to Mr Darcy’s interest in you, not when he has singled you out the way he has—calling on you in Lambton not once but twice, and inviting us to stay at Pemberley as his guests. It would be ill-advised. The question remains: Would you like to be a guest at Pemberley while we are here?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. The idea of being in Mr Darcy’s house—of living in Mr Darcy’s house—unsettled her in ways she was ill-prepared to consider at the moment. Rather than give a reasonable answer, she resorted to humour. “The house is tolerable I suppose, and Mr Bingley appears to be as congenial as ever, but I am afraid the society of Miss Bingley and the Hursts leaves much to be desired.”

“Lizzy,” her aunt chided. “Do be serious.”

“Very well,” Elizabeth told her as a shadow of a smile appeared on her countenance. “If you insist upon my being serious, I shall tell you that I like Miss Darcy very much. She is a delightful young woman, if not a bit shy. I confess I should like to know her better.”

“And what of Pemberley’s master?”

Elizabeth laughed, but her levity soon took a more thoughtful turn. “I hardly know. Of late, Mr Darcy’s behaviour has been beyond reproach. I can find nothing to criticise. But we have been in company together only three times in as many days.” She toyed with a ribbon on the sleeve of her gown. “I suppose, if he continues as he is and does not revert back to the Mr Darcy of old, that knowing him better will give way to my liking him better. How much I shall like him remains to be seen.”

Having had enough seriousness for one morning, she assumed an arch look. “In any case, I know that you should like to stay at Pemberley, Aunt. Since you and my uncle have been so kind as to bring me all the way to Derbyshire to see the peaks, the least I can do is ensure your comfort is of the finest quality while we are here. Yes. I will go to Pemberley.”

“Oh, Lizzy! You will not be disappointed, mark my words. The woods are some of the most beautiful in the country.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Will Mr Darcy show them to us himself, do you think, or will he arrange for one of the gamekeepers to give us a tour?”

Her aunt only laughed at her impertinent tone. “I have no doubt that Mr Darcy will be eager to show you all of Pemberley personally. The gamekeepers will be well occupied with their duties.”

Four Days at Pemberley...

Darcy smiled warmly at Elizabeth's aunt, who was seated beside him on a couch in the music room listening to Mrs Hurst perform a complicated piece by Haydn on Georgiana's Broadwood grand. Mrs Gardiner's elegant manners and intelligent conversation went a long way towards soothing the agitation he felt in the face of Miss Bingley's rudeness at his dinner table. He had known Miss Bingley for many years and had long considered her a friend, despite her penchant for sometimes treating those she considered beneath her with disdain. Bingley had once confided it was insecurity that made her do it; Darcy tended to believe it was jealousy. Whatever it was, her behaviour that evening was beyond the pale, and it was Elizabeth who had suffered the brunt of it.

Mrs Hurst's performance soon came to an end, and a smattering of polite applause filled the room. Across from him, Mr Hurst lay sprawled like a well-fed cat across a settee upholstered in pale yellow silk. Darcy pursed his lips disapprovingly. Bingley's relations had begun to grate on his nerves. He had invited the Gardiners to Pemberley because he genuinely enjoyed their society; the Hursts came part and parcel with Bingley, as did Miss Bingley and her platitudes and her pettiness and her lofty aspirations to never leave. Discouraging her interest in him had failed. Ignoring her had served him ill. Inviting Elizabeth into his home had made her jealousy flare from a spark to a conflagration.

Darcy felt a little thrill each time he thought of Elizabeth Bennet residing at Pemberley. She had been there for half a week. Presently, she was sitting beside his

sister a short distance away, smiling and speaking quietly to her about music.

Suddenly, Georgiana's gaze, which had been trained on her lap, shifted to Elizabeth. "Oh no," she said, seemingly horrified. "I could not possibly...not in front of all of these people."

Elizabeth reached for her hand. "I absolutely insist," she said, giving Georgiana an encouraging smile. "Miss Bingley has sung your praises for so long I do not know how I can possibly continue spending another day in this house without hearing you myself. Come, else I shall enlist your brother to add his entreaties to mine. As you have already admitted you can deny him nothing, it seems a hopeless business. You had much better play."

Darcy had not expected his sister to give way, but after Elizabeth made another round of petitions, Georgiana emitted an incredulous little laugh and allowed herself to be tugged to her feet and led to the pianoforte. Once there, they examined sheet music together and Elizabeth did her best to make her new friend smile. Her efforts yielded success. After several minutes Georgiana appeared at ease.

Eventually, Elizabeth presented her with a piece of music that met with her approval, and Georgiana, after a slight hesitation, straightened her shoulders, seated herself at the instrument, and began to play Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 9.

Through the entire composition, Elizabeth remained by Georgiana's side, turning her pages and making her smile, diverting her attention from her rapt audience.

Darcy felt his heart swell with affection. He was proud of his sister, but his eyes were drawn to Elizabeth again and again. He had loved her for so long, but never so much as he did in that moment. Her inherent sweetness and her natural ability to put others at ease had been instrumental in coaxing Georgiana out of her shell, enough so to allow his shy sister to set aside her inhibitions and ignore her insecurities to play for

their friends. Until tonight, Georgiana had declined doing so and professed a desire to hear her guests play instead, particularly Miss Bingley, who was ever eager to oblige.

“How ill-mannered Eliza Bennet is this evening.”

Darcy was startled to hear Miss Bingley’s voice, just behind him and to his left. He glanced at Mrs Gardiner, who was presently in conversation with Bingley on Darcy’s right. Fortunately, she appeared not to have overheard the insult Miss Bingley had made about her niece.

Having elicited no reply, Miss Bingley continued in the same vein. “Why, she practically forced poor Miss Darcy to play! It was quite shocking to watch.”

Darcy clenched his jaw in annoyance.

Behind him, he heard Mrs Hurst sigh. “Miss Darcy,” she replied pleasantly, “plays so beautifully, especially for one so young. It is a shame her shyness hinders her playing for her friends.”

“Oh, I quite agree,” Miss Bingley allowed, “but that is hardly my point, Louisa. My point?—”

“I know very well what your point is, Caroline,” said Mrs Hurst, “and it is ill-advised to carry it. No one here wishes to hear your opinions. This...situation is beyond your reach. You must accept it.”

Miss Bingley made an inarticulate sound, but before she could utter another word on the subject, Mrs Hurst said quietly but firmly, “Enough. Your chatter is distracting from my enjoyment of Miss Darcy’s exquisite playing. You know how I adore Mozart.”

Miss Bingley said nothing in response. Instead, Darcy watched as she marched across the room and out the door.

He was relieved to see her go and gratified to discover a possible ally in Mrs Hurst. Lord knows Bingley did nothing to silence his sister's tongue or discourage her interest. For the past four days the man had ignored her completely as he waxed poetic with Elizabeth about the handful of weeks that he had spent in Hertfordshire last autumn. He was full of recollections and recounted them all, especially those that pertained to Elizabeth and her sisters. His doing so only served to incite Miss Bingley's ire.

Darcy shifted his position on the couch as he directed his attention to Elizabeth. The fact that he had not had an opportunity to speak to her for any length of time since her arrival made him feel impatient and peevish. She was either spending time with Georgiana, indulging Bingley, or accompanying her aunt on calls to their friends in Lambton. He shifted again, wishing it was not so late so that he might invite her to take a turn in the garden or on the terrace just outside the music room.

He had not expected her to look at him then, but look at him she did as she lifted her eyes from the page that she had just turned for his sister. Even from such a distance, her eyes captivated him. Darcy thought of all the things he wanted to say to her, and one particular question he ached to ask.

He knew Elizabeth no longer disliked him as she once had, but to what extent her opinion of him had improved he had yet to ascertain. He supposed it had likely improved significantly; she was presently in his house and had agreed to be his guest until her aunt and uncle decided to return to London.

Darcy wanted so badly to go to her.

Would she welcome him if he did?

The Chippendale clock in the hall chimed eleven times, signalling the conclusion of their evening was fast approaching. The music ended, and a fresh smattering of applause filled the room. Georgiana smiled as she rose from her place at the Broadwood and clasped Elizabeth's hand.

Elizabeth praised her performance with a sincerity that warmed Darcy's heart and made Georgiana blush. Then she took a moment to admire the instrument, gently pressing the keys of the higher octaves with the hint of a smile playing upon her lips. "It is a wonderful instrument," she said. "You are fortunate to have such a generous elder brother. The pianoforte at Longbourn is sadly lacking compared to this one. I believe, Miss Darcy, that you and your brother have spoilt me!"

Georgiana reassured her she could play it any time she liked, then asked Elizabeth if she would consent to play. "One last song before we all retire. I know my brother would especially enjoy hearing you."

For the second time that night, Elizabeth met Darcy's eyes from across the room. The corners of her lips lifted and she smiled.

Darcy felt a flush of warmth, knowing her smile was meant for him and no one else. He returned it and watched her take a seat on the bench. Beside him, Mrs Gardiner was telling Bingley about Miss Jane Bennet's enjoyment of the seaside. Bingley appeared enthralled. Though he doubted either would notice his absence, Darcy excused himself in any case and crossed the room.

"Pray allow me the honour of begging a seat beside you, Miss Bennet, so that I may be of assistance to you."

Elizabeth smiled at him, and Darcy's heart skipped a beat. "You are welcome to sit beside me, Mr Darcy," she said blithely, "but as to your being of assistance, I cannot say." She turned towards Georgiana and addressed her. "Tell me, Miss Darcy, is your

brother a proficient reader of music? Miss Bingley failed to mention page turning when she recited her very long list of Mr Darcy's accomplishments in Hertfordshire."

"My brother," said Georgiana with mock seriousness, "is an excellent page turner, so long as you inform him as to when he must turn each page."

"Oh dear," said Elizabeth, her eyes dancing with mirth. "That is hardly an endorsement, sir! You are likely to hinder far more than you will help. But I suppose we shall make do." She took a moment to rifle through some discarded sheets of music and soon made her selection. It was neither a sonata nor a concerto, but a lullaby. Glancing at Darcy, Elizabeth placed her fingers on the keys and began to play.

Darcy claimed his place beside her, but he spent far more time admiring her than he did looking at the sheet music. It did not matter. Elizabeth did not spare it so much as a single glance.

She knew the piece by heart.

Surely, she must know his heart...

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Nine Days at Pemberley...

Darcy rubbed his forehead with his hand; he sat at the desk in his study staring at a stack of correspondence that he knew he should answer but would much rather avoid. Resting his head on the back of his tufted leather chair, he gazed at his beautiful park through the massive bay window that encompassed most of one south-facing wall. Somewhere, beyond the lake and the fountain and the formal gardens and the maze, was Elizabeth. She had been at Pemberley for nine wonderful days, reading his books and walking his grounds and becoming fast friends with his sister. They had become such good friends that they now referred to each other by their Christian names.

The weather out of doors was very fine. The sky was a rich, cerulean hue that reminded him of the bluebirds that nested in the meadows every summer. Large cumulous clouds cast shadows over the land as they passed overhead like ships on the sea.

Darcy glanced at his correspondence and sighed. He did not want to remain indoors; he wanted to seek Elizabeth out, wherever she was, and spend the afternoon with her. He wanted to hear her play Beethoven and watch her pick cornflowers and listen to her speak of everything under the sun.

Most of all, he wanted to know what she was thinking in her beautiful, impertinent mind.

Was she thinking of him?

There was nothing for it. He would not waste such a perfect day sitting inside wishing he was with Elizabeth and wasting precious time. His correspondence could wait.

Darcy quit the room, determined to seek her out and ask her to walk with him. The park, the ornamental garden, the meadow...Where they walked did not signify so long as she was amenable to spending time with him. She had yet to see the woods; Darcy had been surprised to hear it. Knowing how fond she was of walking the wooded paths of Hertfordshire, he had expected her to leap at the chance to explore Pemberley's.

She had not, and Darcy could not help but wonder why.

An hour later—after wandering aimlessly through the first floor of the house and narrowly avoiding Miss Bingley and the Hursts, inspecting the gardens, and walking the paved path that led to the woods—an under gardener directed him to the orchard.

That was where he found her—among long rows of cherry trees and apple trees and peach trees, sitting on a tartan rug spread upon the grass. Elizabeth was in the centre of it and his sister was beside her, a crayon in her hand and a smile on her face as Elizabeth tilted her face to the sky. Their bonnets were discarded upon the ground and their spencers as well, and what looked to be a letter. It was a lovely scene of domesticity—the kind of domesticity Darcy desperately hoped was within his grasp.

A gentle breeze ruffled the leaves on the trees, and Elizabeth shut her eyes.

She was beautiful.

She was guileless.

She was intelligent—far too intelligent not to know that he loved her.

Though he was reluctant to intrude upon their time together, he was not so reluctant that he was willing to forfeit such an opportunity to be a part of it. “I am very glad to see you have not been set upon by gypsies,” he said, stepping forward until he stood before them. “Pemberley’s woods are full of them.”

Georgiana exchanged an amused look with Elizabeth.

“Gypsies,” proclaimed Elizabeth, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand as she looked up at him from her comfortable seat on the ground. “I was under the impression there were tigers in your woods, Mr Darcy. I confess it is a relief to hear that I may only be set upon and not eaten.”

Darcy grinned. “I would not discount being eaten so readily, Miss Bennet. There are badgers, as well.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I shall keep that in mind, sir.”

Darcy offered her a belated bow. “Forgive me for intruding,” he said as he returned her smile.

She shook her head. “You are hardly an intruder, Mr Darcy. This is, after all, your orchard.”

Georgiana examined her crayons. “Do you intend to join us, Brother?”

“Only if you and Miss Bennet will consent to have me.”

“What do you think, Lizzy?” Georgiana asked. “Perhaps we ought to turn him away...”

A familiar, teasing smile appeared on Elizabeth’s lips. Her eyes sparkled with mirth.

In the sunlight her eyes looked lighter, with tiny flecks of green and amber towards the centre. “I think we ought to take pity on him. Your poor brother has likely spent his entire morning answering letters of business and meeting with his steward. It must have been very tiresome.”

“Very,” said Darcy drily. He indicated the tartan rug with his hand. “May I?”

Elizabeth inclined her head, but her smile remained. “You may.”

He took a seat beside her, as close as he dared, and nearly sat upon the discarded letter. He picked it up and saw Elizabeth’s name written across the front in a neat, elegant hand. Beneath her name, the direction read: Pemberley, Bakewell, Derbyshire. Darcy ignored the little thrill he felt upon seeing it. “I believe this is yours,” he said, handing it to her.

“Oh! Yes, it is a letter I received just this morning from Jane.”

“I hope your sister is enjoying her visit to Kent. Did she happen to mention where your family is staying?”

Elizabeth glanced at Georgiana, who was presently absorbed in creating a masterpiece with her crayons. “They are near Margate. Jane says it is lovely and my mother is delighted with the town. My young cousins have gone sea bathing every day. I am happy to report that everyone is well pleased except for my youngest sisters, who were disappointed to find they were not, as they expected, going to Brighton.”

“I can well imagine,” Darcy remarked. “And your father? Was he able to join them?”

“He was. He has.” She shook her head with a self-effacing smile. “Forgive me. I am so used to him being always at Longbourn. That he has developed a sudden interest in

undertaking such a journey with my mother and sisters is owing to you, sir. Had you not written to him, I am convinced my father would have stayed at home and allowed Lydia to go to Brighton with her friends. Mrs Forster, who is barely three years older, would have made a poor chaperon. I shudder to think of the outcome of such an arrangement. I am more grateful to you than I can say.”

Darcy bowed his head, profoundly uncomfortable with her gratitude. He had done what was right to be done. “You need say nothing, Miss Bennet. I should have spoken to your father long ago, when Mr...when I was first in Hertfordshire. I did not.”

“It does not matter,” she said softly, almost tenderly. “All is well.”

Their eyes met, and the corners of Darcy’s mouth lifted infinitesimally.

Yes, he thought. Perhaps it will be.

Fourteen days at Pemberley...

The bed Elizabeth had been given, and the room in which it sat, was a slice of heaven. The mattress was stuffed with soft feathers, the counterpane was a luxurious down, and the pale blue and silver paper on the walls made her feel as though she was in a scene from a fairy tale.

Fairy tales, however, rarely ended happily. They were morality tales, meant to teach lessons and deter disobedience. Truthfully, she had never liked them. Even as a young girl, she was not formed for melancholy; when misfortune struck, she put a smile on her face and endeavoured to find a silver lining. Why dwell on present miseries when happier circumstances would eventually present themselves and all would be well?

Exhaling a weary breath, Elizabeth smoothed her skirts and walked to the window. Rain lashed against the panes and a low rumble of thunder rose in the distance. The sound it made resembled a loaded wagon rumbling along a cobbled street. Despite the poor weather, her aunt and uncle had gone to Lambton to say their farewells to their friends. Georgiana was learning a new piece of music that arrived from London that morning, and the Bingleys and the Hursts had left five days earlier.

Reminiscing about Hertfordshire and his acquaintances there had a profound effect upon Mr Bingley. One morning, when a footman had brought Elizabeth two letters from Jane on a gleaming silver salver, Mr Bingley had been suddenly seized by a powerful compulsion to return to Netherfield. He declared his resolution at breakfast

and by midday his valet had packed his trunks, his driver had readied his carriage, and he was off. Apparently, it was precisely as Mr Darcy had once remarked in Hertfordshire: when Mr Bingley made up his mind, he acted upon it at once.

Miss Bingley had been beside herself with indignation, but she was allowed no say in the matter. Her brother was determined. She was given the choice to accompany him to Hertfordshire or to go with the Hursts to their aunt's home in Yorkshire. As she had received no invitation to extend her stay at Pemberley, to Yorkshire Miss Bingley went.

Elizabeth was glad to see her go. Her superior looks and snide little asides had tried Elizabeth's patience to its limits. The false flattery and repetitious platitudes she showered upon Darcy at every turn made Elizabeth feel irritable and ill. It never ceased to amaze her how, in the matter of weeks, her feelings for him had changed so completely as to render them the very opposite of what they once were. Gone was her abhorrence and dislike of him. Gone was her uncertainty. If anyone had told her in April that she would come to love Darcy in July, she would have laughed!

But nothing could be truer.

She loved him!

He had gone from being the last man in the world she would ever marry to being the only man she could imagine marrying. He was warm and generous and funny and sweet.

And thoughtful. When Elizabeth wanted to read, he had shown her his library. When she wanted companionship, he sat beside her. When she wanted conversation, he readily discussed any topic she introduced. He offered her sweets from his kitchens, long walks in his park, and flowers from a meadow whose bounty was painted in every imaginable colour of the rainbow. One day he had brought her a litter of kittens

from the barn just to make her smile.

And they talked. Never alone, of course; her aunt and uncle had been ever conscious of propriety. Georgiana was their constant companion, but she was also quiet and easily absorbed in her music and her art. While she ignored them, Darcy had spoken to Elizabeth of countless things; yet he had not once spoken to her of his feelings.

She was certain he loved her. She could see it every time he looked at her, in his every gesture and expression. She could hear it in his voice. Why did he not declare himself? Surely, he could not mistake her feelings for him now, after two weeks of living in the same house together. Not only had Elizabeth taken every opportunity to speak to him, but she teased him. She walked with him. She smiled at him. She welcomed him.

Of course, she had done those things before, but in a very different context. In Hertfordshire, her conversation was meant to provoke him. In Kent, she teased him to amuse herself. When he joined her in the grove at Rosings Park, she had resented his company and secretly wished him away.

And Darcy had misread her intent every single time.

His declaration of love and his poorly worded proposal came to mind. Dismayed and disheartened, Elizabeth sat heavily upon the cushioned window seat before her and momentarily shut her eyes. To say she was embarrassed by her past behaviour was an understatement. She was mortified and ashamed. Darcy had since shown himself to be a good man—one of the best men of her acquaintance. She had hurt him deeply with her harsh rejection and her reprehensible accusations against his character—an honourable character she had since come to admire. Pain and disappointment such as he had likely suffered at her hands was no trifling matter. Such humiliation as she inflicted upon him—she, the woman he had loved and wanted to marry—did not fade with the rise of the sun.

It lingered.

It tormented.

It caused one to doubt.

Is it truly such a wonder he remains silent now?

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Sixteen days at Pemberley...

“How beautiful,” said Elizabeth on a breath. She was standing on top of an enormous configuration of solid rock on the edge of Pemberley’s woods. It had taken her nearly an hour to reach the top, but the view was well worth her effort.

She could see every aspect of the surrounding area for miles.

Darcy stood beside her, protective and close as the wind caused her gown to billow like a sail on a ship. “Lambton is over there,” he said, pointing towards the village in the distance. The high street wound through the centre of it, from the line of neatly kept houses at the edge of the village to the ale house at the opposite end of it. “And that is Kympton.” He indicated a second village approximately three miles to the south of it which was slightly larger in size. “My father would take me there often when I was a boy. During the summer months, my cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and his brother Viscount Emerson, would spend time at Pemberley. Emerson is eight years my senior and preferred to keep his own company, but Fitzwilliam and I were always together. We were forever thinking of ways in which to best the other. Our favourite pastime was that of racing one another to the village. The pump in the church yard there has the coldest water I have ever tasted, and a wall of blackberries at least ten feet high.”

Elizabeth smiled. She could easily imagine Darcy as a boy, running from Pemberley to Kympton, wanting nothing more than to best his cousin and closest friend. “And were you victorious?”

Darcy shook his head. “Not often, no, and never by much on the occasions I did

happen to win. Fitzwilliam was older, and therefore taller and faster. But his advantages over me did not outlive boyhood, and so his days of victory were numbered.”

“You cannot mean to imply you have raced each other to Kympton as men!”

“It was only once,” he admitted, “right before I left for Cambridge. Fitzwilliam had just purchased his commission. It seemed a fitting way to mark the occasion.”

“Did you win?”

“I did.”

He looked so proud of himself that Elizabeth could not help but smile. “A long-awaited victory, then, and well earned.”

“Indeed,” said Darcy, and grinned.

A sharp gust of wind caught her skirts then, twisting them around her ankles, and Elizabeth was suddenly propelled forward towards the very edge.

Darcy caught her arms, holding fast to her, and pulled her back. “Elizabeth!” His grip was sure and strong, but the words he uttered beneath his breath were harsh and unintelligible.

Elizabeth’s legs shook slightly as she endeavoured to calm her racing heart. Had she been alone, or with her aunt and uncle—who would not have accompanied her all the way to the top—she might have fallen to her death.

Darcy urged her to sit, lowering himself onto the bare rock and then guiding her to sit beside him. When she was settled, he released her with an exhalation.

Not yet ready to lose the reassurance of his touch, Elizabeth reached for his hand.

He surrendered it willingly, without hesitation, and squeezed.

Elizabeth relished his closeness; the feeling of his hand wrapped protectively around her own. There was a comforting weight to it, and a warmth that made her feel cared for and safe. A lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed thickly in an effort to dislodge it. If her aunt and uncle were not standing several hundred feet below them with Georgiana, patiently awaiting their return, she might consider remaining where she was indefinitely.

Instead, she tightened her grip on Darcy's hand.

"Will you show me the woods?" Elizabeth asked him later, once they were back at Pemberley and she had been told by her aunt Gardiner to rest. She had tried, but her head was too full, and her heart was too full, and she did not know what to do with herself.

Darcy set aside the letter he had been reading before she entered his study. He had risen to his feet immediately and bowed, but in his haste, he had not relinquished his letter. "Are you well, Miss Bennet?"

When he had clasped her arms and pulled her away from the edge, he had called her by her Christian name. At the time, Elizabeth had been distressed and had barely noticed. At the time, there were more pressing matters to consider. Now, after the fact, she recalled him doing it with startling clarity.

She longed for him to do it again.

Her lips lifted infinitesimally. "I am well enough to take a walk, sir."

Darcy regarded her with an inscrutable expression before inclining his head. Stepping

away from his desk, he offered her his arm. “Shall I summon my sister?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No,” she told him quietly, and immediately felt her complexion become heated in the face of her boldness. “Not this time. I would prefer it to be only us.”

They left the house through a door set before a garden ripe with summer blooms—hydrangeas, roses, and lilies of every variety and colour. An intimation of a smile appeared upon Elizabeth’s lips as she beheld it, but she remained silent as they walked past the garden and continued towards the woods. Her aunt had called Pemberley’s woods some of the finest in the country. When they reached them, and stepped from the paved, gravel path onto the soft, damp loam of the forest floor, Elizabeth had to admit Mrs Gardiner had not exaggerated in the least. Everywhere she looked she saw mature trees—sturdy oaks, sycamores, and elms. Interspersed among them were fragrant evergreens. Their canopies extended nearly a hundred feet into the air, a majestic tapestry of verdant leaves and needles that, despite its vastness, made Elizabeth feel insulated from everyone and everything as though she had entered another world.

“It is very beautiful here, and peaceful,” she said to Darcy. “It would be a shame if a band of gypsies were to suddenly appear and demand recompense for our trespassing.”

“That it would,” he replied in a similar tone, “especially as I have left my purse at home.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Perhaps the badgers will save us, then.”

“Perhaps,” said Darcy, with a slight, almost teasing smile of his own.

They came to a clearing where sunlight shone through the canopy, dappling the forest floor. Birds flitted from branch to branch, ruffling their feathers, their songs light and

pleasing. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves on the trees. A few fluttered to the ground, lazy and meandering and slow.

At the far side of the clearing, there was an old stone bench, littered with seeds. Darcy led Elizabeth towards it, swept it clean with a brush of his hand, and gestured for her to sit. She hesitated when she saw there was an inscription carved into the top of it, ancient and worn, so much so she could not make it out. “Do you know what is written here?”

Darcy shook his head, leaned over the top of it, and ran his hand over the letters. “No. The inscription was as illegible when I was a boy as it is now. But according to my grandmother, who is long dead, it is a monument of sorts.” He frowned. “I know nearly everything that there is to know of Pemberley and its history, but I do not know this. It has always grated on me.”

“You like to know things.”

“I do, but I believe that is a universal trait. Most people have an innate curiosity about the world in which they live and the people who share it. At least, that is my experience.”

She looked at him then—at his handsome face, and his dark eyes, and his firm jaw. She could not see his neck, only a sliver of skin barely visible above his cravat. The sudden compulsion Elizabeth felt to trace her fingertip along that sliver of skin, to feel the softness of it, was immediate and compelling. Instead, she curled her fingers into fists so she would keep her hands where they belonged: to herself.

Darcy, however, had no such compunction. He reached for her hand and gently uncurled her fingers, first the left and then the right, before raising each one to his lips to press a lingering kiss to her palms.

The intimacy of such a gesture made Elizabeth’s breath hitch. Neither of them wore

gloves. She had not given a single thought to it before that moment; now, the impropriety of it was glaring. In the house, her only thought had been to get away, to be in a quiet place out of doors so she could clear her head and find the courage to ask Darcy why, when his every action spoke of loving her, did he persist in remaining silent about it. Of course, voicing such a question would be as impertinent as it would be inappropriate.

If he would not speak, and she could not speak, then what was left?

In cases such as these, perhaps it was better to let her heart speak for itself.

Before Elizabeth could change her mind, she boldly placed Darcy's left hand upon her sternum, directly over her heart.

His intake of breath was as sudden as it was sharp, but he made no attempt to retract his hand. After what seemed like a small eternity, he spoke. "Your heart..." he said roughly, but the words caught in his throat, and he paused for a long moment, struggling for composure. Once he obtained it, he murmured, "Your heart is beating like a hummingbird's wings, as though it will take flight."

"And what of yours?" Elizabeth whispered unsteadily.

"It is the same." Slowly, brazenly, his thumb caressed the supple flesh above the collar of her gown, making her shiver. Darcy exhaled heavily. "Surely, by now you know I love you. I have not stopped."

"I know," she said as her heart soared and her belly tightened, and her mind refused to be still. To say she was relieved by his declaration was an understatement. She was overjoyed and overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, and the tantalising pleasure of his touch. Wanting nothing more than to be closer to him—to touch him more intimately in turn—Elizabeth pressed her other hand to his coat, where she felt his heart was in fact beating every bit as violently as hers. "Your every action, your every

look gave you away, but you remained silent.”

Darcy shook his head. “I did not want to rush you. I knew your opinion of me had changed for the better. You welcomed my society with pleasure, yet I did not know whether that pleasure was afforded to your friend or your lover— No . Not to your lover. To your husband.” He paused. “I have long known my own heart, Elizabeth, but I do not know yours.”

Elizabeth’s throat felt impossibly tight. “I believe you do.”

“Do I?” he asked almost desperately. “You are too generous to trifle with me...”

His eyes were so full of emotion, so full of hope and love, all of it for her. How had she ever thought of him as cold? Elizabeth felt the hot pressure of tears in her eyes, and a lump form in her throat. Somehow, she managed to say, “You do. You do know it. It is yours, and you will always have it.”

He stepped forward then, closing the distance between them to inches. The hand on Elizabeth’s sternum slid upward, and the tip of Darcy’s forefinger caressed her clavicle with a tenderness that was maddening. “And will you marry me?” he asked, with no little emotion.

Elizabeth’s eyelids fluttered closed. “I will,” she promised, urging him closer until she felt the solidness of his body against her own, and his warmth, and each exhalation of his breath on her face. “I love you,” she said resolutely, with all her heart. “I love you dearly.”

“As I love you.” His right hand found purchase on her hip; his left caressed her cheek with unexampled gentleness. “Dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth,” he whispered, and pressed a reverent kiss to her forehead, each eyelid, and the tip of her nose. “I love you, most ardently.” His voice sounded endearingly uneven.

Elizabeth released a slow, tremulous breath and tilted her face towards the sky. Dappled sunlight shone behind her closed lids—warm, muted shapes of orange and yellow and red. She smiled.

It was then Darcy's lips descended upon her own, soft, definitive, and sure as he kissed her with all the tenderness and yearning, ardency and passion he had claimed to feel for her before, and which Elizabeth knew, beyond any doubt, that he always would.

The End