



# Worthy in Every Way (The Montford Cousins #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Georgiana Darcy wants nothing more than to fall in love, yet her innate reserve as well as a traumatic event in her past makes her uneasy in company—particularly in the company of gentlemen. She desires a husband and family, but how is she to manage such a feat when she will not even consider partaking of a London Season? She cannot so much as hold a meaningful conversation with most men, which does not bode well for falling in love.

Charles Granville, the Earl of Bath, never expected to find himself without his hearing, but the unexpected became his truth. Now, his life is different; it has been altered and his options are not what they once were. No lady of worth desires one who cannot hear. After all, most believe those who are deaf are also dullards. Who is he to change their mind?

When Georgiana's sister-in-law Elizabeth and Charles's sister-in-law Jane, the Duchess of Albemarle conspire to throw her into the company of Lord Bath, Georgiana finds herself suddenly staying with the duke and duchess who are caring for the recovering earl. She is caught unawares by their matchmaking, yet, unlike others of his sex, Lord Bath has a way that does not make her ill-at-ease. In fact, she is drawn to him. She wishes to learn to speak to him and enjoys his company. However, he is vehement he is not seeking a wife—that he will never marry. The barriers to her heart are crumbling with every moment spent in his company, but how is she to convince him he is worthy of love—that he is worthy in every way?

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# Page 1

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Even though she sat upon the settee, appearing very much the lady she was, Lizzy's knee bobbed in a furious rhythm. With her sister's current state, Georgiana would soon need to restrain her brother's wife should she become more discomposed. They were all at sixes and sevens to be assured Jane was well, but Lizzy's inability to hold still was not helping any of them remain calm.

"How much longer will this take?" said Lizzy.

"Calm yourself," said Lady Richmond, or Gran, as Georgiana had come to call her.

Amelia, Lizzy's cousin and Lady Richmond's granddaughter, grasped Lizzy's knee in a firm grip. "We have to hope Janey is unharmed, and do cease that infernal movement. You are making me want to fidget."

Lizzy stood and crossed her arms over her chest as she went to the window and stared like Georgiana's brother, Fitzwilliam, would at large gatherings. Her dearest sister had been kidnapped by the younger brother of Jane's husband, Henry. They were all beside themselves to hear if she was well—if the ambitious earl had harmed their beloved Jane.

Georgiana stepped beside her. "You will see nothing from here." Lizzy's sister Jane had been abducted from her husband's estate just outside of London a week ago, and tonight, they had reason to believe she would be recovered. While Jane was Georgiana's sister-by-marriage, Georgiana's heart had been ill-at-ease since her disappearance. Jane, who was the Duchess of Albemarle, was a gentle and kind lady

who had always been quite easy to confide in, particularly when Georgiana found herself frustrated with Fitzwilliam or Lizzy—not that she was often at odds with them. On the contrary, they got on splendidly for the most part, but even those who were the best of friends still had moments of irritation towards the other.

“Georgiana, whether I see from here does not matter. I require some occupation or activity to keep me busy lest I run mad. What if they harm her?” Lizzy wiped a tear from her cheek. “I could not bear it if she...”

With a hand between Lizzy’s shoulder blades, Georgiana leaned closer. “Do not think the worst. You must not think the worst. Jane will be returned, and within the week she will surely deliver that baby you and Gran have been so eager to meet.”

“She swears it is a boy. Did I tell you that?”

“No, you did not, but if the child is a girl, I doubt your sister or her husband will be disappointed.”

Babies in their family were treasured. A rarity indeed, yet one Georgiana relished. She so adored fussing over a little one with their innocent smiles and irresistible laughter.

The door burst open and slammed against the wall. “Mistress! Mistress! The duke’s coach has returned, and upon its arrival, he carried a lady into the house.”

Lizzy’s sharp inhale pierced the moment of silence that followed.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” said Gran as she stood, causing almost all present to be startled at once.

Before Georgiana could place a hand upon her sister’s arm, Lizzy hastened from the

room.

Gran made to follow. “Do not expect me to stop her. I want to see Janey with my own eyes. I need to know she is well.”

When Amelia stood, she looped her arm through Georgiana’s. “Come. I am certain you want to know what has occurred as well.”

As soon as they were bundled in their winter clothing, they descended to the pavement and began the short but brisk walk to Albemarle House. At the first blast of frigid air to her cheeks, Georgiana winced at the sting.

“I believe this winter is almost as cold as the last,” said Gran. “’Tis a wonder the Thames has not frozen over.” Last year, the Thames had indeed iced over deep enough to allow for a Frost Fair, yet this year, the river was not yet covered. [1]

“I hope Janey was kept warm.” White puffs came from Amelia’s mouth while she spoke.

Lizzy said nothing; she only quickened her pace.

Thankfully, the walk to Albemarle House was a short one, and the butler, Mr. Bates, admitted them without question.

“Lady Richmond, Lady Greene, Mrs. Darcy, Miss Darcy.”

“My sister has been recovered?” asked Lizzy without delay.

“Yes, ma’am. The duke rushed her upstairs. Allow me to make you comfortable while I send word you are here. I am certain Her Grace’s maid will be refreshing her mistress after her ordeal. May I suggest the music room? I shall have refreshments

sent in, and you may remain for as long as you wish.”

Georgiana took Lizzy’s hand. “Come. He is right. The duke will want to ensure Jane is hale and see to it she is warmed and fed before he admits anyone, but I know he will not keep her from you once he is satisfied.”

Her sister bit her lip while her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “You are right—I know you are.”

Once they were made comfortable, a maid brought refreshments that sat untouched on the table while Lizzy resumed the incessant bobbing of her knee. It seemed that whether they were at Albemarle House or Darcy House, the occupation was to be the same.

After almost five minutes, Georgiana prepared the tea and poured cups that she handed to each of them. Jane, from what the butler had said, was alive and well and above stairs. They had no need to worry as they had before. Surely Bates would have told them if Jane had been injured or ill.

Lizzy nodded when Georgiana placed the cup in front of her, but the tapping of her heel upon the floor never ceased. Meanwhile, Gran sipped from her cup and placed it on the table. This continued until the housekeeper entered. Georgiana glanced at the clock. Had it truly only been half an hour? She could have sworn it had been an hour—at least!

“I beg your pardon, but Her Grace’s maid sends word that the duke is to refresh himself if you should like to see the duchess.”

Lizzy leapt from the sofa. “Yes, pray, take us to her.”

When the three of them reached the door, Lizzy looked back with a frown.

“Georgiana, are you not coming?”

“I know Jane would be pleased to see me, but she has endured quite an ordeal and I do not want to overwhelm her. You go and satisfy your need to see her well. I shall remain here until you return. Should she wish for my company, she need only ask and I shall come.” If Georgiana were in a similar predicament, she would not desire a roomful of people gawping at her.

Lizzy nodded. “I understand. We shall tell her you are here and send your best wishes.”

“Thank you.”

Once the three ladies departed, Georgiana paced the room. A beautiful Broadwood Grand was placed in pride of position where all who entered would see the expensive instrument. Otherwise, the room was not as gaudy as she would have expected—for a duke, that is. Gran had mentioned one or two dukes whose homes were all about what they could afford rather than what was pleasing and comfortable, yet Jane’s husband seemed to prefer the latter.

She continued to pace while she awaited their return. On the third circuit, a man stood in the doorway when she turned. She was not unaware of who he was. Lord Charles was the Duke of Albemarle’s youngest brother. He had attended Jane and the duke’s wedding and had even visited Pemberley. She had not spoken to Lord Charles much. He was exceedingly handsome with his dark hair and striking hazel eyes. Her tongue never failed to stick to the roof of her mouth around him, so she had remained silent as a result.

Last year, he had lost his hearing—a tragedy indeed! Now that they were face to face, she knew not what to say—she could not speak with her hands as Jane and the duke had learnt to do. Without knowing how to communicate with him, she curtsied and

smiled.

Lord Charles bowed in return then departed. Truly, she had not expected more. Fitzwilliam had mentioned that the duke's youngest brother had stopped speaking around those not in his family a short time ago. Fitzwilliam had not said why, but if Lord Charles had remained and been willing to talk, she could have learnt some of his language. Something about him drew her to him. For some reason, she wanted to try.

When Lizzy, Gran, and Amelia returned, they chattered on about how well Jane looked, though apparently, she appeared tired and had begun to labour. They spoke of Jane's appreciation that Georgiana would consider Jane's needs before her own. A fresh tray of tea and cakes was brought out, and this time, the ladies partook of the fare while they awaited news of the child. The mood was light—a stark contrast to the earlier heavy air of the room.

After a time, Gran requested Georgiana play, and she was happy to oblige the lady. She fingered through the music book near the instrument, but instead chose to play a piece from memory, a long-time favourite.

Before she could sit at the pianoforte, Amelia stood. "I should return home to Audley Place. Janey could labour for hours yet, and I am exhausted." Amelia was with child, though not nearly as far along as Jane. They had been awake since early in the morning. Her fatigue was understandable.

"Of course, dearest," said Gran. "We shall send word when the babe comes."

Amelia departed, and Georgiana placed her fingers upon the keys, closed her eyes, and soon lost herself in the melody of the sonata. Since the piece was one she knew from memory, she had no need to see the keyboard but for a few instances to ensure she had stretched her hand enough to reach the next keys, even though she was certain she could have done so without the reassurance. On one of those occasions,

she glanced up. Lord Charles stood just outside the door, his gaze trained upon her. When their eyes met, a frisson of something travelled through her, and she was forced to return her focus to the music lest she fumble and give away Lord Charles's presence. He surely did not wish for Gran and Lizzy to know he was there.

At the end of the first movement, Lizzy sighed. "That was lovely, Georgiana. I believe you favour that piece, do you not? I hear it often."

"I do. It soothes me. With Jane's trials this past week, I thought a calming melody might be just the thing." She peered at the door, but Lord Charles was no longer to be seen. If he was nearby, he remained out of sight.

"Well done," said Gran. "I do wish Janey could hear it, but I am certain the mistress's suite is too far from the music room for her to partake of Georgiana's beautiful performance."

"How long do you think the babe will take to come?" Lizzy always seemed to have her children during the night, so Georgiana had no idea how long a babe took to be born.

"Her pains were rather steady when we left," said Lizzy. "I would not think it too long. We each walked with her, and her husband was to walk with her as well when he returned."

Gran swallowed a sip of tea. "I do believe it will be rather quick. Why do you not play the next movement? I daresay it does help to pass the time."

Georgiana played the next two movements before the housekeeper appeared in the doorway. "I beg your pardon, but His Grace is beside himself. We cannot find a midwife to attend the duchess, so he is begging for anyone who has had childbirth experience."



The housekeeper had barely begun to speak when Gran rose and motioned to Lizzy. “We shall go directly.”

“Georgiana?”

“Go, Lizzy. I shall be well. I have a pianoforte to play and can always find the library should I wish to read.”

No sooner had they departed than she stood and fingered through the music. She was really not of a mind to play, so she stepped from the room as the butler passed. He was rather young but bowed with a genial curve to his lips when she found herself face to face with him.

“May I be of aid, miss?”

“Yes, thank you. Pray, which way is the library?”

He gestured for her to join him, and he walked her down the corridor then pointed to a door not far from them. “Do you require tea or refreshment? I am certain Mrs. Fletcher would be happy to send more should you wish it.”

“No, I am well. Thank you again.”

With a bow, he departed as she entered the grand room. For a moment, she stood, taking in her surroundings. Books lined every wall and stretched to the ceiling, a tall sliding ladder in the middle to help those who wished to obtain a tome on one of the highest shelves. The scent of the pages overpowered her. The library of any house always reminded her of Fitzwilliam. It was his favourite room in their homes, so he was oft times to be found amongst the books—as was their father. Lizzy loved to join her husband and loved the library almost as much as Georgiana and her brother.

She trailed her fingers along the spines while she read the titles. Once or twice, she pulled a copy from the stacks and perused the pages before placing it back amongst its brethren and moving further down the wall.

At the corner, she turned to continue but stopped with a gasp at Lord Charles seated in a nearby chair. “Forgive me. I did not mean to disturb you.” She could have covered her face at her stupidity. He could not hear her apologies. She was an addlepate! Yet the sight of him also did things to her—made her heart squeeze and a current travel through her. She was at a loss for how to behave around him.

Lord Charles stood and bowed. He did not speak but shifted on his feet before he clasped his hands behind his back.

She glanced about them. A desk with some paper and a pen was to the opposite side of the room, so she hastened over and wrote what she had said on the paper, followed by, “I know you can speak. Why do you not?” Yes, the question was bold, but she would not ridicule him if that was what he feared.

When she turned, he was not far behind her. He frowned when he took the paper and glanced at its contents. His lips pressed in a tight line before he moved to the desk and picked up the pen.

“My voice is not what it was. I prefer not to speak.”

“I care not if your voice is different. Why should that make one whit of difference?” she wrote.

He shrugged with a sigh and made to return to his chair, but she grabbed him by the arm. “Wait!” She flinched back when he turned, not that she feared him. No, she more feared his response to her touching his arm. What would he think of her?

“Will you teach me how to speak to you?” she wrote on the paper.

His eyebrows lifted when he read it, then he looked at her a moment before nodding. A portable writing desk sat to one side, and he placed the ink and paper upon it before moving back to the chairs near the fire. She sat in a chair across from him, and he handed her the paper.

“What would you like to learn?”

“How does someone say your name?”

For the next hour, he taught her bits of his language. For particularly tricky signs, he would move her fingers into the correct positions. The first time, she gasped at the contact of his bare flesh to hers. What had been that jolt that had coursed through her? His gaze had caught hers, but he said nothing of it. He could not hear her swift inhale of breath, but had he somehow understood what had happened?

“Oh, Georgiana! Jane gave birth to the most beautiful baby girl,” cried Lizzy. “The poor dear is exhausted, but radiant. I cannot wait to discover what they name her.”

Georgiana hopped up from her chair and stepped around. From the doorway, Lizzy would not readily see Lord Charles should he not wish it.

Lizzy waved for Georgiana to follow. “Come. I should be needed at home for Sophie soon, and I am certain all in this house will sleep for the next week. They are all haggard from searching for Jane.”

“Of course,” she said as Lizzy turned and quit the room.

Georgiana peeked around the wall and held up a hand to say goodbye to Lord Charles, who did the same in return. “Thank you.” She spoke while she said the

words with her hands. The duke's brother gave a tight smile. What she would not give to see a true smile grace his countenance! How long had it been since he had been truly happy? The question made her heart hurt.

## Page 2

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“Good morning, Miss Darcy. Welcome to Albemarle House,” said Bates with a warm smile. “I understand you are removing to Hemel Hill with His and Her Grace.”

“Yes, I am indeed. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy and the children departed for Nottinghamshire this morning with the Greenes and their children.” They planned to break their journey at Dereham, then continue on to Pemberley in a fortnight. Georgiana was not sure why Jane required her aid with the new baby, but her sister had insisted Jane needed her desperately. She could never abandon dear, sweet Jane, so here she was. She adored children, so any assistance she could provide with Clarissa or even Juliana and Emmeline, the duke’s children from his first wife, would be welcome.

“Of course, miss. The duke and duchess have yet to come down, but Lord Bath is at breakfast should you like to join him.” The earl had been Lord Charles when she had first met him. Of course, the death of Simon, his elder brother and the former Lord Bath, had meant Lord Charles assumed the title since it was separate from the dukedom. These things happened from time to time, yet this one would require more adjustment. The former Lord Bath was not a good man.

“I shall join Lord Bath, thank you.”

The butler brought her to a small room with windows that curved outward and gave a lovely view of the garden behind. When she entered, Lord Bath stood and bowed as Bates pulled out a chair across from the earl. After she thanked Bates, she clasped her hands in her lap. Why did this gentleman sitting opposite from her rile her nerves so?

He could not hear, but that did not matter. In essentials, he was no different from any other gentleman.

“Good morning, Lord Bath, I hope you are well,” she said, speaking with both her hands and her voice.

He tilted his head. “Where did you learn that?”

“My brother and his wife have been working with a master who came highly recommended from His Grace.”

“Mr. Creasy?”

“Yes, he has been kind enough to let me join. I still stumble and it is difficult to remember every...” Speaking of stumbling!

She bit her lip and was about to place her palm to her forehead when the earl lifted his eyebrows. He spelled then signed “word.”

“Yes, word.” She nodded. “My brother enjoys speaking to you on matters of estate management, and since you will be a part of our family party in the future, we would not want to see you left out of the conversations around you.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, he blinked several times quickly, then nodded. Was he overcome? He would not receive a great deal of consideration from most, so if he was, his feelings were understandable. She poured herself coffee. Her distraction would give him a moment to compose himself.

He pointed to her cup. “You do not drink tea?”

“I do, but mostly in the afternoon and evening. Lizzy has converted me to coffee in

the morning.”

One side of his lip quirked. “I hear she enjoys brandy. Do you partake of the gentleman’s drinks as well?”

“Lizzy drinks brandy, and my cousin Nicholas’s wife partakes of whiskey—she is Irish—but I have yet to try brandy, or whiskey for that matter.” Georgiana spelled the words she did not know. When she had a moment, she took a muffin from a plate and spread jam upon it before taking a bite. In her nervousness to stay with Jane and her family, she had not eaten that morning. Doing so now might not have been the best idea, but she would try.

Lord Bath returned to his food but mostly picked at what was on his plate. After a quarter-hour in such an attitude, Jane finally entered with her husband behind her.

“Oh, Georgiana, forgive me. We overslept and took a tray in our sitting room. No one told us you had arrived.”

“Where is Clarissa?”

“Sleeping in her cradle for the moment,” said His Grace. “We did not want to disturb her before it was necessary.”

Jane glanced between the earl and Georgiana. “Have the two of you eaten?” she asked aloud and with her hands.

“Yes, I was not too hungry, so I had a muffin and some coffee. That should suit me for now.” She spoke as best as she could with her hands so Lord Bath could follow.

With a grin, Jane shook her head. “You have become too much like Lizzy.”

Georgiana pursed her lips. “Not too much. I could never be as forthright and witty as she is.”

“I believe you could if you wished it,” said Jane.

“Your Grace, the carriage is in front of the house. Your trunks are loaded, and the servants’ carriage awaits them in the mews.”

The housekeeper entered with the small bundle of Jane’s new babe in her arms. “I took the liberty of bringing your little lady to you, Your Grace. ’Twas so nice to have a babe in the house. I shall miss it.”

“Here, I should like to hold her if you do not mind.” With a slight lurch forward, Georgiana reached for Clarissa and took the small babe, cradling her with care to her chest. As soon as the wee thing was secure in her arms, Georgiana could have wept. More than anything, she desired a family—children to care for as Lizzy and Fitzwilliam did Alexander and Sophie—but how was she supposed to trust her heart to a gentleman? Wickham had wanted her for her fortune, similar to the way Mr. Bingley had desired Jane for hers. Somehow Jane had overcome those scars, but perhaps she had not cared for Mr. Bingley in the same way Georgiana had been fooled into caring for Mr. Wickham. How was she to overcome her reticence with most gentlemen? She could not imagine being so open with anyone.

“She seems content in your arms,” said Jane, “but you have had plenty of practice with Alexander and Sophie.”

The housekeeper turned her attention back to her mistress. “Lady Emmeline and Lady Juliana are having their breakfast. They will follow with Miss Fletcher.”

“Good,” said Jane. “I know His Grace has business to attend at Hemel Hill, but I did not want the girls rushed this morning. If you have any issues or questions, do pen me



a letter.”

After the housekeeper nodded, Jane hurried out on her husband’s arm. No sooner were they alone than Georgiana’s gaze met Lord Bath’s. What was he thinking? He was so unreadable all of the time. Here and now, he did no more than stare at her while the baby slept in her embrace. With a start, he held out his arm for her to go ahead of him, and she followed Jane and her duke with Lord Bath close behind her. The flesh of her back prickled. She had never experienced such a sensation before. Why would it happen now?

No matter how he tried not to cease staring, Charles could not rip his gaze from the sight of Miss Georgiana Darcy holding his niece. What was it about this lady that disconcerted him so? He had been in company with her and her family more than once since Henry wed Jane, but he had not truly spoken to her until that night in the library—the night when Clarissa was born. That was the evening Miss Darcy had requested he teach her to sign, but what was he to make of her learning on her own? No, he would not consider it. As soon as he lost his hearing, he became unmarriageable. No lady—not even one reputed to be as timid and sweet as Miss Darcy would want him now.

Since that night in the library, he had taken great pains to avoid her company. When he knew she would be coming, he hid away in his sitting room with a book or rode Rotten Row. Most of the time, she called before the fashionable hour, so the Row was not crowded. Without his hearing, navigating the usually busy stretch of dirt track would be dangerous indeed.

His brother helped the ladies into the carriage then took his own seat before Charles climbed in and sat beside him. Thank heavens propriety demanded Jane sit beside Miss Darcy lest he be so close to her. He was attracted to her, but she was the maiden relation of his sister-in-law. He could not act on his desires.

At a light pat to his forearm, his head darted from the floor where he had trained his gaze.

“Are you well?” asked Jane, her mouth moving with her hands.

He nodded, but when the carriage began to move, he dropped his head back into the squabs and closed his eyes. The next couple of hours would be long with Miss Darcy in the carriage. Rather than attempt to join their conversations, he would sleep, or feign sleeping, whichever he could manage.

Once they had all stepped down from the carriage, Charles followed his brother and the ladies towards the house. Jane hastened upstairs with Clarissa while the housekeeper, Mrs. Deaton, showed Miss Darcy to her own rooms, leaving him with his brother.

Unfortunately, Henry tugged at his forearm before Charles could disappear to his sitting room. “I wish to speak to you.”

His brother closed the door behind them after they entered the study. “You are avoiding Miss Darcy, are you not?”

Avoiding Miss Darcy? Of course, he was avoiding her. Henry was aware of his aversion to people—aside from his close family that was. Why did he seem to believe Charles would do anything different today?

“Come now. You never sleep in the carriage. I am not stupid.” Well, that part was true.

“What does it matter if I eschew her company? I shall see her at meals and be as polite as possible, as I was this morning, but why must I spend any more time with her than necessary? She is Jane’s guest, not mine.” Unlike when he was in company,

he used his voice. Henry had heard it as it continued to alter, so no reason existed for him to be silent with his brother and Jane.

Henry leaned back against his desk. “Miss Darcy is also exceedingly shy and uncomfortable around those she does not know well. She enjoys riding, as do you. Since I need to attend to some business of the estate, I cannot show her the property, but you can.”

After narrowing his eyes, Charles shook his head. “I thought her here to be of aid to Jane and the baby. When would she have time to ride?”

“She is not a nursemaid, and Jane will not require her every moment of every day. I do intend to take Jane to the grotto in the next week or so. The place is a special one for us, and I do not want that tarnished by what happened there.” Two men had ambushed Jane’s footmen just outside the exit and chased Jane, who was very heavy with child, until they had caught her and abducted her. “We had hoped Miss Darcy would watch Clarissa for us then and when Jane is required to attend her household duties, but otherwise, she will be tasked with entertaining herself.”

“Does she not have a companion?”

His brother took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. When his hand dropped, his shoulders mirrored the movement. “From what Darcy told me, her companion wed a local landowner a year ago—a country squire from what he described. Miss Darcy opted not to have another.”

“You and Jane are playing matchmaker.”

“Charles—”

“Do you think me ignorant? Do remember that I lost my hearing, not my wits.” Why

would he do this? Why would Jane do this? Why could they not let him live his life in peace? One day, when he left this world, he would bequeath his title and lands to Henry's younger son...if Henry ever had a son.

"I am very aware you did not lose your wits, Brother, but you have lost your confidence. I remember a man who would flirt with the ladies at balls and who, from time to time, even sowed his wild oats with a widow or two. You are not so changed—not in essentials."

"But why would she wish to be tied to a man no one respects?"

"I respect you," said Henry, accentuating his statement with a pound to his chest. "Jane respects you. Darcy and Greene speak highly of you, as do their wives and Lord and Lady Richmond. Do you honestly believe Jane would introduce you to a lady who would think less of you because you do not hear?"

Charles sank into the chair by the fire. "I visited Mrs. Chapman."

Henry frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. "When was this?"

"Before Jane's abduction." He dropped his head back and closed his eyes. "She has always been a compassionate lady, so I thought to try speaking to her when..." At a touch to his arm, he opened his eyes.

"Did she ridicule you?"

"No, I could not speak—I had no need to speak. I only ever visited Mrs. Chapman for one reason, and she was pleased to see me, so once I bowed in greeting, we adjourned upstairs." He shook his head. He and Mrs. Chapman had been friends for a few years. She had lost her husband after a fall from a horse and had never intended to marry again. During a house party at a neighbouring estate, she had invited him to

her bedchamber. He had not refused. They were not together often, but when they found themselves both in town or found each other at some event in the country, they indulged.

He shook his head. “ I could not bring myself to try to say a word. All I could do was worry that if I made a sound, she would be repulsed. In the end, I could not do it .” He squeezed his eyes closed at the burn. No, he would not cry!

Again, his brother touched his arm. “You never gave her a chance and were likely overcome by your fear of ridicule. That does not mean you will never again...”

“ Pray, do not say it .”

Henry sat across from him and rested his elbows up on his knees. “Were you considering offering Mrs. Chapman your hand?”

“ No, I do not care for her in that way, and she would never accept it. She is a wealthy widow and, as you know, fifteen years older than me .” Most thought her younger—hell, he had believed her to be younger when he first met her.

Henry stood before him. “If I have naught but girls, the dukedom dies with one of us. You need to wed. We are not insisting you consider Miss Darcy but saw an opportunity to introduce two like-minded individuals.”

“ Like-minded how? ” No lady would want to be shuttered away at Bathwick Abbey with him. They would wish to attend performances and plays in town, which no longer appealed to him, for obvious reasons.

“According to Jane, she has always been uncomfortable around strangers and has no desire to spend time in town. She has been quite content to remain at Pemberley for the past several years.”

“ You should have consulted with me before you agreed to this scheme. ” He would have never capitulated to it, which is surely why Henry and Jane never mentioned it, but why force this lady into his company when he did not want her there?

“What are we supposed to do, Charles? You hide away from people more and more. The only reason you have come to know Darcy, Greene, and the Montfords is because you met them at the wedding, then were forced into their company when Jane was kidnapped. I do not want to see you lonely for the rest of your life. Would you wish that for me?”

Charles scrubbed his face with his hands and rose. “ I shall not court a lady just because you want me to. Do you understand? Now, I do not wish to discuss this further .”

His brother tugged at his arm more than once, but Charles waved him off and departed. He strode upstairs and surely barked at his valet for his riding clothes—he could not know for certain if he barked, but Jennings had startled when he made the request. The assumption was reasonable.

Once atop his mount, he turned the stallion in the direction of the west fields and urged him into a gallop. What he needed now was a good run to clear his head—to, for a short time, purge all thoughts of his future, his lack of wife, and the candidate his brother and sister thrust into his notice from his mind. He could not think on any of that now. It was all too much.

## Page 3

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18 th April 1815

Only a few clouds obscured the brilliant blue of the sky as Georgiana lifted her face to welcome the warmth of the sun on her cheeks. The morning air was crisp, and a few of the spring flowers had delayed blooming due to the lateness of the season. Despite their reluctance to wake from their winter's sleep, the verdant green of the new leaves on the trees and the grass did much to lift the gloom one often experienced with an overlong winter. Yet how much could such a simple change lift such doldrums?

When she reached the entrance to the stable, the stablemaster greeted her without delay. "Good morning, miss. Forgive me for not having a horse ready for you. I sent an enquiry to His Grace as to which mount you should ride. No one has responded as yet."

She opened her mouth to speak when the man snapped straight. "My lord, I have your mount ready and waiting, but before you go, would you know what horse might be appropriate for the young miss to ride? I sent word to the duke, but I have not yet heard back from him."

Georgiana glanced over her shoulder due to the stablemaster's immediate change in demeanour, then frowned at how Lord Bath, who had approached while her back was turned, had been addressed. The stablemaster had not signed for the earl but had spoken while a servant with Lord Bath translated what was said. She bristled.

"With a new baby, the duke can hardly be expected to attend to such matters at this early hour," said Georgiana. "If you had but asked me, I could have informed you of

my skill, and you could have selected a mount yourself.” She spoke with her hands as well so Lord Bath could follow the conversation.

“Give her Persephone,” said Lord Bath through his servant.

The stablemaster frowned. “But sir, Persephone requires—”

Lord Bath held up a hand, palm out. “Miss Darcy’s brother has spoken of her skill on a horse, so I have no doubt Miss Darcy can manage the mare’s spirit. Do as you are told.”

As soon as the man scurried off, Lord Bath waved off the servant with him and stepped forward. “The stablemaster is excellent with caring for horses but seeks our instruction for most matters. He is also not accustomed to ladies riding. Henry has brought Emme to learn, and the stablemaster has been difficult. If matters continue, the man will be finding a new position.”

Following the movements of his hands allowed her a reprieve from the intensity of his gaze. At times, she could not maintain the connexion and was forced to glance away. “I would have thought him to have asked before now, which is why I spoke as I did. I am certain censuring him is difficult when what you say must be related by someone else.”

“My valet is competent and has known me for ten years, yet he is new to managing matters such as this, so your aid was welcome; I assure you.”

Her body relaxed when another horse was brought out, and she approached the animal to inspect it, as well as the bridle and saddle. A growl rumbled in her throat. The girth was loose! She pressed her knee into the mare’s side while she adjusted it, withholding the chastising she would have preferred to unleash. The horse had obviously sucked in a sizeable breath before the heavy leather strap was tightened.



Someone had not taken the time to ensure the saddle was secure before presenting the mount to her. This was not acceptable—not acceptable at all. Since she had stepped in front of the inadequate stablemaster, she had no way of knowing whether he had intended to confirm the horse had been prepared correctly. What if she had not inspected the girth before departing the stable?

“Miss?”

Her back stiffened at the stablemaster’s tone. “She had held her breath when you saddled her, so the girth was dangling,” she said as she whirled around. “I have no desire to ride under her belly, which is where I would be if I had not made the adjustment. The duke will hear of this. I assure you.”

Where her forwardness came from was a mystery. The stablemaster’s incompetence had riled her, and her focus upon the horse allowed her to avoid the scrutiny of Lord Bath’s vivid eyes. Even now, her neck prickled. He was staring at her. She was certain of it.

Without further comment, she took the horse’s reins and led her towards the mounting block. She set her gaze in front of her, but the curve of the earl’s lips could be discerned from the corner of her eye. What amused him so?

She stopped and made to mount, but at a hand to her arm, she paused.

“Allow me to help.” Lord Bath laced his gloved fingers together and gave her a lift. For a mare, Persephone was tall—likely over sixteen hands. Georgiana could have gained her seat without a block, but the assistance was always welcome. “The morning is a fine one for a ride. Persephone should be in high spirits with the cool weather so take care.”

“I should wish you the same. Good day, Lord Bath.”

After he gave a dip of his chin, he stepped back, and she took up the reins and walked her horse around the stable yard twice to ensure she had the feel of her before Georgiana cued the horse to a smooth trot and rode in the direction of the lake.

Today, she had no wish to ride across the fields or on the roads. Solitude was her objective, and while she could find a quiet spot to be alone in the house, a servant could always happen upon her, or Jane, for that matter. If she indulged in a bit of maudlin behaviour, she wanted no one to be the wiser.

The horse manoeuvred through the trees and up the hill to the folly where she could see the valley below; the lake and its environs shown to perfection. At her slight tug on the reins, her mount paused. The prospect from this point was one she would never tire of! A refreshing breeze rustled the leaves on the trees, the birds sang and could be spotted flitting from perch to perch, and the lake below glistened under a golden sun. Yes, she could be satisfied with such a view. She could also understand why Jane enjoyed this estate rather than living in town for the Season. The duke's daughters surely took great pleasure in the freedom the property afforded as well as the picturesque environs more than Albemarle House as well.

After an hour of meandering around—hardly her usual ride—she stopped at a small stream that fed into the lake. She dismounted but held the reins in her hand as she stepped to the edge of the water. That was when the burning of her eyes gave way to tears that forged warm paths down her cheeks and dripped to the front of her riding habit.

She choked down a sob. She was not always so unhappy, but at times, she had the need to hide away from the world—to seclude herself and let the discontent flow from her heart, which hurt if she were to tell the truth. Perhaps if she had not been taken in by Wickham all those years ago, she would be different—she would be more open to a Season in London, to allowing callers and finding a gentleman to wed. The notion was unfathomable. Yet, how could one be surrounded by people and still be so

utterly alone? Yes, she had family and amongst them friendships like that of Jane, Lizzy, and Amelia, but no one to hold her close, as a lover would. The most protected parts of her heart possessed this great chasm that yearned to be filled, but how was she to find that person who would fill it? How was she to shed the reserve she had taken comfort in since she was a child to fulfil the woman she had become?

Her disappointments had to be cried away from time to time. If she held fast all she felt inside her, she would become intemperate, and she could not be intemperate. She also did not want Lizzy or Fitzwilliam to fret, and they would if they were aware of the reasons behind her solitary rides. After all, she could not be maudlin with a footman ten yards behind her. To her relief, the stablemaster at Pemberley never divulged that she often returned with red-rimmed eyes.

The crack of a stick made her sniff and turn at once to where a horse stood about ten feet away, Lord Bath atop its saddle. What was he doing here? Had he followed her? She turned back to the stream. He could not see her like this.

The wind whipped against his face as Charles galloped his mount through the fields. He could no longer hear the breeze as it rushed past his ears. Something in his chest cracked open as it did whenever that realisation came to him. Yet even though he longed for that familiar sound, the activity still calmed him in a way no other could. The peace that washed over him was welcome indeed!

When he returned to the stable, the stablemaster approached as Charles dismounted. The man's mouth moved, but of course, Charles was met with silence. When the man began making strange gestures, he levelled a fierce glare upon him. What the devil! No one at Hemel believed him to have gone stupid, except maybe this dolt!

The man continued, however, and Charles could have groaned as the stablemaster clasped his hands under his chin and batted his eyelashes. Was he referring to Miss Darcy? If she were to bear witness to this shameful display, she would be insulted, to

say the least. He could not blame her for it either!

Finally, the man grasped him by the sleeve as a groom took his stallion. Charles wrenched his arm away but still followed until they reached Persephone's empty stall. He withdrew and opened his pocket watch. She had been gone an hour and a half? Not enough to incite worry, but the stablemaster surely thought her lying in a ditch somewhere if Charles assumed correctly.

He caught up to the groom who had just removed the saddle, gestured towards a steady gelding in a nearby stall, and helped the boy prepare the mount. When he took the horse from the stable, he climbed atop, then made his way in the direction Miss Darcy had ridden when she first departed. He had no reason to believe anything had befallen the lady, yet if she did not return, he would, no doubt, bear some responsibility, at least in his own mind.

The tracks of her horse vanished into the woods, so he wandered around the lake until a hoofprint in some mud near the stream caught his eye. He took a deer path through the trees until he reached a small clearing along the water's edge. There Miss Darcy stood. He paused. Had she taken a fall? Her horse's reins rested upon the ground, the animal grazing on some soft grass growing where a shaft of light had escaped the shade of the trees to fall upon the earth.

Miss Darcy was at least standing. She could not be too injured. He was hopeful she was not, anyway.

On his mount's next step, her head jolted around. Somehow, it seemed that he had startled her, though that was not the greatest concern. Instead, he balked at the state of her swollen eyes, reddened nose, and damp cheeks. She had been crying.

He dismounted without delay and hastened to stand before her. Reaching out, he tilted her face up then ran his hands along her shoulders and down her arms until she

shoved them away. Where was the injury?

“What are you doing?” she signed. She made to shove him back once again.

“You have fallen from your horse, have you not? Where is the pain?”

“No, I dismounted and let my horse wander because I simply felt like crying. In the meantime, I wish to be alone, so pray, go. When I am more presentable, I shall return, but I am not ready as yet.”

He took out his handkerchief and held it out for her.

Her shoulders dropped with her chest in a way that told him she had exhaled heavily.

“Thank you, but—”

“Yours appears soaked through.” The bedraggled bit of linen was limp in her fingers when she signed. When she did not take his cloth, he stepped closer and dabbed it to her cheek until she took it from him and continued herself.

“If you wish to return to the house and your bedchamber without someone seeing you, I can be of aid.” He ensured she was looking at him before he signed. Even red-faced as she was, she was lovely. Her vivid blue eyes held a quality that tore at his soul. Why did he long to mend whatever was making her so sad?

Her head lifted a little, the graceful arch of her neck drawing his eye. “You could do that?”

“’Tis not so difficult. I prefer to go unnoticed most of the time, so I have become accustomed to making my way through the house without detection.”

She stared at the water for a few minutes before returning her gaze to his. “Yes, I

would like that. Ambrose, my maid, can help put me to rights before Jane or the girls see me.”

He helped her mount, then climbed atop his own horse before turning back in the direction of the house. When they were not far from the stable, he dismounted at the edge of the trees and stepped over to Persephone.

Miss Darcy was capable of getting down on her own, but his palms itched to touch her—a nonsensical response to her presence, yet one he had all the same. Without understanding why he needed to do so, he wrapped his hands around her waist and cushioned her return to the ground. Her eyes held his and lingered as did his hands, which fought not to pull her against him.

After a moment, she turned her head as he wrenched himself away. It was difficult to tell with her having cried, but were her cheeks pinker? A bit of the redness had faded but not enough to know for sure if she had blushed.

She stood among the trees at the back of the stable while he took the horses inside. The stablemaster and groom appeared confused when he returned a horse without its rider, but he told them naught. Instead, he walked back to Miss Darcy without any explanation.

“When we return to the house, do not look back. The stablemaster and groom will surely look for you since I could not very well tell them where you were.” Her whereabouts was not their concern anyhow—he possessed the knowledge she was well, and that was all that mattered.

Georgiana took his proffered arm, and they made their way towards the great house, but rather than lead her around to the front, he took her to a servants’ entrance. He pressed lightly upon the door, so it opened just enough to peek through. No one was about at the moment. In all likelihood, the servants were at breakfast, so this was an

opportune time to sneak her inside.

His hand grasped hers, and he tugged her into the passage. He then peered around each corner before continuing until they reached the stairs. When they had made their way to the first floor, he stopped and turned near a window.

“Which room is yours? Tell me as though you were using the usual method?”

“Second passage from the stairs on the left. I have the last room on the right.”

A minute was required for him to work out how to reach that suite from this location, but soon, he pulled her into a guest bedchamber, then across to another before entering the servants’ passage on the other side of the house. From there, her rooms were two doors down on the right.

“You look inside. Make sure it is the correct bedchamber.”

She cracked the door a little at a time until she could peer inside. “This is it,” she signed. “Thank you.”

After a quick dip of a bow, he retreated to his own rooms. Jennings looked at him askance when he entered through the servants’ door, but he should have become accustomed to Charles using the back stairs by now. He had been coming and going through those passages more and more since his hearing had disappeared for good.

He removed his gloves and stretched his fingers. Despite having had her redingote and his gloves between them, his palm had this odd sensation like he still touched Miss Darcy—as though he were still lifting her from her mount. He had never experienced the like. His eyesight seemed improved since the loss of his hearing, as did his sense of smell. His physician said this oft times occurred when someone lost a sense—that the other senses seemed to take over. Was this another method of his

body coping without hearing or did another reason exist? He shook his hand as his valet began to help him remove his topcoat. He would think on it no longer. What were the odds he would touch Miss Darcy again? After all, his sense of touch becoming more sensitive likely had little to do with the lady in question. Why would it?



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

30 th April 1815

What an awkward morning! They had attended Sunday services at the church in the nearby village, then walked back to Hemel Hill through the fields, a pretty stroll with the spring flowers displaying their bright colours and the sun peeking out for the first time after two days of hiding behind thick, gloomy clouds. The day before, a light rain had misted down, but not enough to sodden the ground, so it had been pleasant, and they had returned with their petticoats no worse for the wear.

Upon their return, the housekeeper had a repast of cold meats and cheeses served with their tea. Lord Bath, as was his wont, chewed quietly while the duke and Jane carried most of the conversation. When asked directly, the earl would set down his utensils and answer, but he seemed to have little to impart on whatever matter they chose to discuss. In truth, responding while trying to eat was, no doubt, a nuisance. If he spoke a great deal, he would not be able to finish his refreshments.

“I should see to Clarissa,” said Jane as she rose. “She will surely be wishing to eat again soon.”

Georgiana set her napkin beside her plate. “Will you be requiring my aid this afternoon?”

“No, I have little planned but a nap once the baby is asleep. She woke me several times during the night, and I imagine will do so again tonight. Lizzy said babies will eat more right before they grow, so perhaps we will notice her becoming taller in the next month or so.”

The duke chuckled. “Perhaps she will finally grow hair. Emme and Jules had tufts of dark hair when they were born, yet Clarissa seems to be bald.”

“Henry, stop it. She has hair. ’Tis just very fine and fair.” Jane’s laughing response made Georgiana smile. Her heart always lightened when she witnessed such felicity as her brother and Lizzy shared, and Jane seemed to possess a similar deep abiding love with her duke. In the years since her brother wed, Georgiana had become more like true sisters to the Montford ladies—she had begun calling Fitzwilliam’s wife Lizzy after all, and Lord and Lady Montford “Gran” and “Grandpapa.” The Montfords were her family as well, and their happiness was as important to Georgiana as her brother’s. They had welcomed her unreservedly since her first memories. Such feelings were to be expected.

With a twinkle in his eye, the duke darted after his wife when she departed the room, leaving Georgiana alone with Lord Bath. The gentleman’s mouth screwed into an unreadable expression.

“I believe I shall ride this afternoon,” she said. She could not say why she spoke, but she had waited until his eyes lifted from his plate to sign. Would he respond?

His eyebrows rose. “For the same reason as before?”

“I do not believe so, but I never know when one of those moments will creep up on me. I was hoping to enjoy the spring colour since the sun is high in the sky. Of late, we have had clouds more often than not. I am fatigued of the dreariness.”

He nodded, and she stood to make her way from the room, but a hand to her arm stopped her before she could reach the door. When had he risen from his own chair? She rubbed the place he touched. His hand was warm, and a current flooded where his palm had made contact with her elbow. Had he ever touched her bare skin before?

“I can show you where you will find some colour.”

Her chin hitched back. “You want to ride out with me? You never ride with me.” He avoided her more often than not.

With a shrug, he took a step back. “I simply know a place you might enjoy. If you do not want me to show you—”

She held out her hands. “Forgive me. I was taken aback by your offer. Yes, I would like to see whatever it is you believe I may take pleasure in.”

“Shall we meet in the hall when you are ready?”

“I need no more than a quarter-hour.”

He straightened. “A quarter-hour in the hall then.”

She attempted a slight smile as she departed, but the expression in his entrancing hazel eyes made her insides do an odd sort of dance.

Ambrose was pressing her gowns when she entered her dressing room, so in good time, Georgiana was changed into her habit and returned to the hall. Since the earl had sent word to the stable of their intention to ride, their horses were saddled and ready when they arrived. As he had before, Lord Bath helped her atop Persephone, then mounted his own horse. He pointed towards the lake, and she followed.

At the fork at the base of the hill, he veered into the grass and entered what appeared to be a deer path into the forest. They travelled uphill for a short time before descending the other side. Since the folly still stood above them and off to her right, they had not crossed the summit where the temple stood but rather one of the sides where the rise was not as steep. When they reached the valley, the wood thinned just

a little and the floor became a carpet of rich, deep blue.

“Bluebells,” she breathed. Fitzwilliam had always taken her to a particular valley near Pemberley in April or early May to see the bluebells. She had resigned herself to missing the beauty of a bluebell wood this spring, but Lord Bath had somehow fulfilled what she would have been otherwise denied.

She pulled her horse to a stop and climbed down before the earl could help her. Near the edge, she stood with her palm pressed to her chest. “How did you know?” she said when she drew her hand away to speak to him.

He frowned as he joined her on the ground. “What do you mean?”

“Every year, my brother has taken me to see the bluebells this time of year. Since I had no idea a bluebell wood was nearby, I thought I would not see them this spring. How did you know?”

He leaned against the tree behind him. “I did not know. I guessed you would enjoy the prospect. Do you not want to walk among them?”

“Then I would crush them and tarnish their beauty.”

While she took in the sight before her, her cheek prickled. “Why do you stare so?” She did not turn when she spoke but continued to soak in the view before her.

When she finally looked to him for a response, he shook his head. “No particular reason.”

“I do not believe you.” She made to cross her arms over her chest, but she could not do so if she was to talk to him. “You are an unusual man. You avoid my company as well as your brother’s and Jane’s and hide away who knows where, but when you

join us, I feel your eyes on me more and more.”

“Did you know you were invited to help Jane as part of a matchmaking scheme?”

Her head hitched back. “You cannot be serious? I have been introduced to no one. Who was to be the gentleman?”

With his thumb, he pointed to his chest. “Mrs. Darcy and Jane thought you and I would suit, so they contrived to have you join us—to throw us together.”

She stepped away and knelt to run her palm along the tops of the blooms. As much as her heart screamed to deny what he was saying, Lizzy’s manner had been odd when she had told Georgiana their plans. Fitzwilliam had also kissed her forehead and told her to follow her heart. Had he been part of the scheme as well? He and Lizzy had said she could remain with them always, but had they changed their mind? She clenched her teeth as she stood and whirled around.

“So you are staring at me to decide whether I am handsome enough to tempt you? Or are you marvelling at being matched to someone so unfavourable as me, to someone who could have been irrevocably ruined if not for the fortuitous appearance of her brother?” While her hands moved, the words flowed from her lips, gaining in strength and volume as she continued. How dare they arrange her life without her knowledge or consent! And how dare he see fit to inform her of it!

His forehead had furrowed for a moment when she mentioned the situation with Wickham, but she had barely finished the last when he grasped her by the arms and shook his head. He then began signing so furiously, she could not keep up. She was still much better at speaking than reading what someone was saying.

Her hands waved before her. “I do not know what you are saying.”

After a guttural exhale, he clenched his hands and started again. “I had no plans to be matched! I had resigned myself to a life alone—to never marrying rather than cursing some lady to live with me for the rest of her life.” His movements were not relaxed, but tense and forceful. Was he angry...displeased?

“Cursing?” Something in her chest twisted painfully. He would think a lady cursed if she was married to him?

“Yes, cursed. Even if we suited, would you want to be married to a man who cannot hear—who cannot protect you? I can run an estate as long as I have someone to carry out my instructions or translate what I say to the tenants, but I can do very little without help. I am beholden to someone who can make up for what I lack. What kind of life could I provide a lady worthy of being pleased? I am veritably useless!”

Her eyes burned. “That is not true. You aided me in returning Persephone to the stable and me to my bedchamber without anyone being aware I had been crying, you are good company when you make the effort, and you brought me here, satisfying a need to cheer myself. Whether you require aid or not is not important. We all require aid at times. What matters is whether you would make a good companion and father. I have seen you with Emmeline and Juliana, and you dote upon them. They adore you. Your countenance when you held baby Clarissa the other night radiated with the love you have for her, and she is your brother’s child, not your own. A great many men would prefer not to be exposed to babies at all, yet you even appeared eager to have a moment with your niece. Your brother and Jane love you and want what is best for you. I know you assisted in the investigation to find Jane when she was abducted. You may not have gone inside when she was recovered, but you ensured your brother’s well-being and used your mind to great effect from what my brother said, so you are not useless! You have a giving heart and will do all in your power for those you love. Those are the qualities that matter, and if a lady discounts you because you cannot hear, she is a simpleton!”

“Most ladies would not care of those qualities,” he said in a broken manner.

“Then perhaps you are considering the wrong ladies.” She propped her hands on her hips and stalked off into the flowers. Minutes ago, she cared whether the blooms were crushed under her feet, and now, she only wished to escape Lord Bath’s recalcitrance.

When she reached what seemed to be the middle, she sat and squeezed her burning eyes shut. All this time, she had felt sorry for herself—for her reserve that made it difficult to speak to most people. Lord Bath had been different when she met him. He still possessed his hearing and laughed freely. He had bowed over her hand at the wedding and had done what he could to put her at ease. She had been flattered by his attentions. A part of her dwelled upon him for months after, but to find him thus? He was so altered.

To make matters worse, a part of her still experienced that rattling of her nerves when he was around, but even so, she could speak to him more than most men. Why had he felt the need to ruin it? Did he truly believe himself useless? The questions kept turning in her mind as the first warm tear fell to her cheek. Gah! She was crying again. She had wanted a modicum of cheer this afternoon, not to be mired down in gloom.

In the end, a prevailing question remained: was she more hurt by her family’s scheme or at Lord Bath’s opinion of himself? Both made her chest ache and a rock lodge in her throat.

At some point, she lifted her head from her hands and turned. The earl was gone. He had not waited to show her the way back, not that she required it of him. She could manage on her own. He had not accompanied her on any of her rides since he found her crying by the stream. Why would today be any different?

Once again, her handkerchief was sodden, and she could have wrung the tears from

the fabric, but she did not bother. She hauled herself to her feet and returned to Persephone. As she sat atop the tall mare, she glanced about her. The glen was so beautiful, yet it now held a memory she wished she could forget.

The stablemaster looked at her askance when she returned her horse, but she ignored his gawping to return to the great house. He had no need to know what had occurred. Her mount was uninjured, as was she. What had occurred between her and Lord Bath was none of his concern. She merely needed solitude to regain her equanimity. Her mind would remain unsettled for the time being, but that could not be helped. No one could expect her to disregard what had occurred so quickly.

She entered through the same door Lord Bath had shown her a couple of weeks before and crept up the stairs, but after three turns, she sighed and sat down on the floor, letting her tears flow. He knew the passages better than she did, and now she was hopelessly lost. Would nothing good come of this day?

“Miss?”

Georgiana turned her head at the young maid’s voice. How long had she been in such an attitude? Her mind had been so occupied, she had no way of knowing.

“I was trying to find my bedchamber.”

“Through the servants’ passages?” The set of the girl’s brow, along with her tone, made her seem doubtful.

Georgiana climbed to her feet. “I did not want Her Grace to know I had been crying. I would also appreciate it if you would not say anything.”

The maid straightened and shook her head. “No, miss, not a word. I promise. Now, let’s get you back to your rooms.”



As it turned out, Georgiana had not gone far enough. Two doors down, and the girl took her through to the other side through the guest rooms as Lord Bath had done before. “The servants’ passages on each side do not connect. Unless you take the correct staircase below stairs, you have to pass through the guest rooms.”

“Where is the other staircase?”

“Near the kitchen. If you were trying to sneak up, you would not have reached that staircase without happening upon someone.”

That explained why the earl had taken her this way. When she reached her bedchamber, the maid opened the door for her to enter.

“I thank you.”

“Anytime, miss. My name is Claire should you have need of me.”

Ambrose took one look at her as the door closed and left to fetch the cool water and rags she would need to reduce the swelling. In the meantime, Georgiana sat at the escritoire and took the pen from the holder.

30 th April Hemel Hill

Dear Fitzwilliam and Lizzy,

I have become aware of a scheme involving the matching of Lord Bath to myself. You have always expressed to me that I am welcome at Pemberley for the rest of my days. Why would you change your mind without speaking to me of it? What have I done to fall into disfavour because I cannot think of it myself?

I am so confused and hurt. Moreover, Lord Bath is a boorish man who holds so much

pity in his heart for himself, he has no room to love anyone and would never trust that someone could love him in return. The belief that we suit makes me doubt how well you know me at all. Why would you match me to such a disagreeable man?

How could you do this to me?

The pen dropped from her hands while she read over the words upon the page. She choked back a sob, crumpled the paper, and threw it into the fireplace, the flames consuming it and leaving nothing to remain.

She could not send that to her brother and his wife. Regardless of what Lord Bath said, they surely wanted nothing more than to see her happy. They had spoken of Georgiana's concerns over courtship and her belief that she would remain unwed. Lizzy had pried out of her the wish for children and to be loved, but she had never met a gentleman to whom she could say more than a few polite words. Did such a man even exist?

The examples of felicity she had before her were stout sorts of love that could endure even the worst of trials. How was she to find such a connexion to someone? The entire possibility seemed beyond her reach.

The mistake Lizzy made was in choosing Lord Bath as a part of her scheme. Yes, she could speak more than the bare necessities to him, but until the gentleman came to value himself and what he could offer to anyone in the form of friendship or love, he could not be much of anything to anyone—a sad state indeed!

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

4<sup>th</sup> May 1815

Four days after the entire debacle with Lord Bath, life had returned to more of what Georgiana had become accustomed to prior to their encounter in the bluebell wood. She spent part of her morning with Clarissa while Jane met with the Hemel Hill housekeeper, and in the afternoons, weather permitting, she rode Persephone around the grounds, trying the stablemaster's patience with the length of her rides, if his tense expression upon her return was any indication. The day before, she had not returned until just before dinner, and the man had sent a note to the great house a half-hour before her arrival. The addlepate had been in a panic about her return. Nightfall was not until almost nine o'clock. The servant was unreasonable and had earned her haughtiness with his behaviour. He should just do his job rather than scowl at her. She was at the point where she despised the man's officiousness. A word with the duke when the opportunity arose would certainly not go amiss.

This morning, she was holding Clarissa, who had just reached three months of age. How well she remembered Alexander's and Sophie's heart-warming toothless grins at this age! Jane's little girl was no different, bestowing her happy smiles to anyone willing to speak to her. Falling in love with their cheerful countenances was unavoidable. They could melt the coldest of hearts; Georgiana was certain of it. Not to mention, Clarissa was a peaceful child and rarely displayed any fits of temper. An easy babe to love.

"You will be as pretty as your Mama." Georgiana stroked the babe's cheek while Clarissa's tiny fists pumped. "Speaking of Mama, are you still keeping her up at night? Perhaps you should sleep so your parents can rest."

A familiar prickling made her lift her gaze. Lord Bath stood in the door with a peculiar expression on his face. When their gazes met, he stiffened, gave a slight bow, and hastened away. She sighed and shook her head. Their interactions were all equally as friendly. At dinner, he spoke less than he had before, if that was possible, and after drinking brandy with his brother, retired for the night. He had a tray in his rooms for breakfast, and he never appeared at tea. Perhaps she should feel some guilt after their argument, but she could not. His boorish manner that day prevented any feeling of remorse from taking root.

“Do you know where Charles is going?” asked Jane, who must have entered when Georgiana was not looking.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Lord Bath? Do you know where he is going?”

“Oh. No. He did not say.”

Jane sat in the chair across from her and tilted her head. “What has happened between the two of you?”

“Nothing has happened.” Yes, it was a lie, but she had no wish to recount all that had occurred.” She returned her attention to the babe in an attempt to avoid Jane’s narrowed eyes.

“I do not believe you.”

“He came to the door, saw me with Clarissa, and departed. What else would you have me say?” She was feigning stupidity, of course. She did not want to discuss what was sure to arise if she spoke the truth.

“Have you not gone riding together since our arrival at Hemel?”

“Why should we ride out together? He prefers to race his horse through the fields, and I have sought out some of the attractive prospects on the property. We have two different objectives that would not suit for a ride in company.”

“Yet, the stablemaster said you returned together once not long after our arrival to Hemel, then you rode out together a few days ago.”

The stablemaster should mind his own business! “Lord Bath wished nothing more than to show me a place on the estate he thought I would enjoy. Once we rode to that spot, he departed to leave me to my own reverie.”

Jane stood and took the babe, setting her in a nearby cradle, before returning and squatting before her. “What happened Georgiana? I can tell something is amiss. Charles never takes a tray in his rooms unless he is unwell, he never makes excuses for tea, and when he does join us, he tries not to stare at you, yet his eyes betray him at every turn.”

“That means nothing.” She averted her gaze.

“You will not look me in the eye anymore, which means the two of you quarrelled or some such disagreement occurred. I have not even mentioned the differences in you: you no longer speak at dinner, and you avoid looking at Charles, though you sometimes fail in that endeavour as well. Do not believe you have fooled us by picking at your food. We know you are eating little. You mostly push your food around your plate.”

She squeezed her eyes closed then opened them. “What do you want me to say, Jane? I was invited here...No, I was told to come help you with Clarissa—not that I minded at the time—but you and Lizzy had an alternative motive, did you not?” At Jane’s

flinch, Georgiana lifted her eyebrows. “Your response to my question tells me the truth of the matter. Why would the two of you scheme against me?”

“Against you? Our intention was to give you the happiness we know—a contentment you desire. If you let him—”

A derisive chuckle escaped before she could stop it. “If I let him? He somehow knew what all of you have been about. In fact, he told me of it. He brought me to a beautiful forest where bluebells covered the ground for as far as I could see into the trees, then when I least expected it, he unleashed his displeasure at being matched to me. He informed me why he would not make an acceptable husband as well. His anger at his present state is such he could never open his heart. He will not allow it. The manner in which he expressed himself on the matter made me question all Lizzy and Fitzwilliam have promised me; not to mention, what if any affection you have for me.” So much for keeping her hurt to herself.

Jane grasped her hands and squeezed. “Lizzy and Fitzwilliam have never lied. If you remain unwed, you may live with them or wherever you wish. As for me, I care for you and for Charles. I believe the two of you would suit, and I also believe that together, you would be more than you are apart.”

“I disagree. He is so full of pity for himself he cannot see anything but what he lacks.” Her heart split and bled at the idea of it. How could he value himself so little?

With a heavy exhale, Jane shifted back to her chair. “Henry told me of a boy near Clitheroe. He was born to a poor family in the village. The father worked wherever he could find work, and the mother took in sewing and any job she could to help feed them. When their son was born, he was like any other babe, but as he grew, the differences between him and the other children his age became apparent. He did not speak or respond when someone made a noise nearby or called him. The parents were dismayed. They needed him to be able to work when he was old enough and saw

nothing of value in him.

“Henry and Charles both witnessed the child begging on the streets and how people threw food at him. Charles, in particular, saw a woman sneer at the boy before hitting him in the head with a rotten tomato.”

Georgiana squeezed closed her eyes. “Good Lord.”

“You know those without hearing are assumed addled in the mind. Charles knows he is not, but how those around him perceive him is not lost on him. My husband is seeking out a new stablemaster. We are thankful most of the servants do not look at Charles any differently. When they saw us learning how to speak to him, several enquired of learning themselves. His valet teaches most of them below stairs during meals and in their free time. We have wondered that if they had not known and admired him so well before his hearing was lost to him, whether we may have had a different response.”

“That poor child,” said Georgiana. She could not get the image of the small boy out of her mind. “Do you know what became of him?”

“I saw him in the village last we were at Clitheroe. The vicar has taken him in and has taught him to communicate. The young man tends to the church and the grounds, and the vicar has seen he is fed and has a place to sleep. Henry mentioned the language we have learnt, and the minister expressed an interest in the study. My husband sent a book [2] he found in London in the hope it can be of aid.”

Georgiana rubbed her forehead. “I understand this has influenced Lord Bath’s perception of himself, but he has so many who value him.”

“Do remember he only lost his hearing just after we wed. It has been nearly a year by my memory. I do not know how most people cope, but he seemed to be more at ease

with the change in the beginning. Only of late has he become more withdrawn.

“Mayhap the significance of the change is truly settling in. I wish he did not feel so isolated, but we have done all we can think of to ensure he is included.”

What had begun as a slight ache in Georgiana’s head had begun to throb. “I do not know what you would have me do. I cannot force him into my company, and what lady, other than Caroline Bingley, would desire such an unequal marriage?”

Jane gave a slight smile.

“I have not thought of Miss Bingley in a long time. You correspond with Mrs. Hurst, do you not?”

With a nod, Jane’s smile grew. “I do. She gave birth to her own child last year—a boy. Mr. Bingley’s daughter is thriving. By Mrs. Hurst’s account, she resembles Mr. Bingley a great deal, from her blonde curls and blue eyes to her smile. She has Mr. Hurst bewitched too. He drinks little these days and is teaching her to ride her own pony.”

“I suppose ’tis a good thing some happiness came from such a tragedy,” said Georgiana.

“It is indeed.”

Georgiana rose and shook out her skirts. “I believe I shall ride before tea today.”

“Henry has indicated we shall journey north the day after Parliament ends for the year.”

“Near mid-July [3] then?”



“Yes. I am unsure if the long days in a coach will be easy for Clarissa at that time or not. She was undisturbed by the journey here, but we only travelled for a small portion of one day. It is much further to Bathwick.”

“Yet, you have your husband, Lord Bath, and myself to help you, not to mention the nurse. We shall manage.”

Before Georgiana could leave, Emmeline and Juliana appeared in the door. “Georgiana!” they both exclaimed when they saw her.

“We came to see Rissa!” Little Juliana had her hands clasped before her chest.

“Georgiana, I lost a tooth!” Emmeline gave an exaggerated smile to reveal a gap in the bottom front of her teeth. “I cried and cried at first, but Miss Fletcher said a new one will appear soon to replace it. Have you ever lost a tooth?”

“I have,” she said. “When I was your age, I believe I lost the very same one as you.”

Jane rose and waved the girls forward. “Come visit your sister before she decides it is time to eat. If Georgiana is to go riding soon, and she needs to change into her habit.”

“Will you read us a story tonight?” asked Juliana.

Georgiana tapped the little girl on the nose. “Of course, and you may choose the tale.”

She hesitated for a moment or two, watching Jane interact with the little girls. After Jane gently instructed Emmeline to sit in a chair, she aided the child in holding her baby sister. Jane was a doting mother not only to her own child, but also to the duke’s daughters. Their love of her was shown in how quickly they had begun to call her “Mama.” She was an excellent mother.

Georgiana finally rose and made to leave, but Jane called her name, making her look back.

“I know he is difficult, but give him time. Look at your brother and Lizzy. If you would have asked Lizzy her first impression of Fitzwilliam, she would have given you a litany of embittered descriptions; however, you would never know it of them now.”

After a nod, Georgiana walked to her rooms and requested her habit.

“But it is raining, Miss.”

She rushed to the window and stared at the steady shower that poured outside, her shoulders dropping. “When did it start?”

“About half an hour ago.”

“I suppose I have no need of my habit then.”

Ambrose excused herself while Georgiana glanced about the room. Her head still throbbed, and oft times being out of doors did much to relieve the discomfort, yet due to the steady shower falling upon the grounds, she was relegated to the house.

She poured a glass of sherry and sat for a time. When her eyes began to droop, she called for her maid to help her remove her morning gown, climbed into bed, and was soon asleep.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

31 st May 1815

Charles sighed. Through the window, little could be seen with the heavy rain pouring upon the gardens of Hemel House. At long last, he was ready to attend to Bathwick, his estate, but Henry was insistent upon seeing Parliament through to the very end, and while Charles could journey on his own, Henry was adamant about being of aid, and based on the little communication he had with the steward, his brother was likely required.

A flash of lightning illuminated the grounds, and the floor beneath him trembled just enough for him to perceive the sensation. He had no need to hear to understand what had just happened. Thunder. The manner in which he recognised many things had changed, yet he could still discern certain sounds even without hearing them. At times, his new reality was still an oddity.

He stepped over to the brandy and poured a sizeable portion. While he would welcome the oblivion from being in his cups, Henry would not tolerate him drinking to excess every night, regardless of how inviting Charles found the prospect—and the prospect was inviting indeed.

The fire burned low in the grate, and he relaxed into his favourite chair nearby to watch the last of the coals glow and pulse with heat. A movement in the corner of his eye made him turn. Wearing an ethereal white dressing gown, Miss Darcy moved towards the shelving area with a chamberstick in her grasp. She stepped slowly while she read the titles on the spines, her fingers trailing along while she catalogued each. He would have thought her fond of poetry, but she now perused the very same novels Jane seemed to favour. What was she doing up and about so late?

His gaze raked down her form, pausing at how a few of her mahogany locks fell loose from her braid and rested upon her shoulder. He swallowed hard as his breeches became tight in a way he would not have expected—with a vehemence he had never experienced before. What was it about this whisp of a lady that inspired his ardour so acutely?

He cleared his throat, and she startled, almost dropping the chamberstick. As soon as she set the candle on the nearest table, she rounded on him. “You could have announced yourself sooner, sir.”

“Perhaps I first thought you a ghost.” While not cordial, matters between them had softened since their encounter in the bluebell wood. He had relaxed some in her presence and had once again begun having tea in the parlour with Henry, Jane, and Miss Darcy. At dinner, he contributed more to the conversation, as did she. No, naught was resolved per se, but they were no longer avoiding each other.

Her chin hitched back. “You are teasing me.”

“Why are you awake at this late hour?” The clock on the mantel had chimed midnight not too long ago.

“The thunder woke me, so I thought to find a book to help me settle.”

He tilted his head. “You do not like storms?”

“Little good has happened during such weather. The night my father died, lightning struck an old oak at Pemberley and split it in two, then at Ramsgate...” Her hands fell to her sides.

“At Ramsgate?”

“Forgive me. I should have never...I am not supposed to speak of it.”

He stood and stepped towards the table with the spirits. “Would you care for sherry or claret?”

“What are you drinking?” She pointed to the glass on the table, her head tilted just a bit.

“Brandy. Would you care to try some?” He picked up his portion and held it out. Her fingers brushed his when she took the glass, and their gazes met as their flesh touched and held while she brought the glass to her mouth. The golden liquid touched what was surely plump and soft. He licked his own lips.

Her face contorted, and she coughed as she set the glass on the shelf. “It burns.”

He could not help but grin. “Try it again. After the first sip, it should do no more than warm your chest.”

She did as he bid while he stared at the liquor disappearing into her mouth. Her lips appeared so soft and full when they pressed against the glass. His own prickled. He startled and straightened. When had he begun to bend forward? He needed to control himself. She had come to his dreams of late, unbidden, and he had touched and pleased her until he awoke exceedingly aroused and shaking. Now, she was standing before him in a dressing gown, no less, and he needed to push those memories from his mind lest he act upon them—and he could never act upon them.

He poured himself another glass and returned to his chair. Space! He required space between them lest he lose himself. After setting his drink on the table, he motioned for her to sit across from him.

“I believe I owe you an apology,” he said when she looked his way. “I had not

intended to behave so that day in the woods, and I beg your forgiveness for it. My intention when we rode out was to bring you cheer, and it seems I did the opposite.”

“Then why did you speak of such things?”

He shifted in his chair. “I should not say.”

She regarded him with a steady gaze just long enough to make him ill-at-ease, then drew her feet up under her. “I propose a trade of sorts.”

“A trade?”

“Yes, you tell me what you should not, and I shall tell you what I am not supposed to speak of as well.”

His heart quickened a little at her suggestion. Why did he desire to know whatever she held secret? The only problem with her proposition was what would she think when she knew why he had acted so that day?

“Very well, but since this was your idea, you go first.” His gaze strayed to where her bare toes peeked out from under her dressing gown. He took a generous gulp of brandy.

“My father’s steward had a son who grew up with my brother. He became a handsome man and my father’s favourite. They often played chess or cards together, and my father ensured this man, his godson, attended school with my brother. I am certain my father wished for the young man to take a living he had once it became available, but the reprobate did not finish university.” She described how the young man behaved after her father died—how her brother gave him a sum in lieu of the living. “Yet, I knew naught of those matters at the time. When I was fifteen, I was removed from school, and my companion and I went to Ramsgate. We happened

upon him there, along the sea wall, and he began to call on me.”

Charles tightened his grip on his glass. This man was the age of her brother, and she had been too young and naïve to recognise what he was about—Charles could discern the scoundrel’s scheme before she needed to elaborate.

“My companion forwarded our association. Mr.—the man proposed marriage, and I accepted. He planned for us to journey to Scotland to marry, but the night before we were to begin our trip north, a storm raged while I expressed my doubts over excluding my brother. He refused my entreaties to wait until my brother would accept our engagement and insisted we wed without Fitzwilliam.

“After I told the horrid man I would not marry him, he pushed me down on the sofa and kissed me. I resisted as best I could, but he did not relent so I bit his lip.”

Charles gritted his teeth. If this man forced himself upon her, he would track the rake down and rip him limb from limb. No, that would be too good for the blackguard. He would need to think of something more painful.

“He struck me, then reached under my skirts.” She averted her gaze, seemingly staring into nothing, the only hint of her disquiet her white knuckled grip upon her glass. “That was when my brother appeared as if by magic. He tore the rake from me, beat him, and threw him into the street. My companion was relieved of her duties, and we departed the next day for Pemberley.”

He swallowed down a large gulp of brandy and bared his teeth while she took a sip of her own drink. After such a tale, she, no doubt, relished the sting of the strong liquor; he always did. “What became of this man?” Her eyes were not quite on him but in a position where she seemed to see what he was asking.

“Lord Richmond saw to it he was put in debtor’s prison. My brother said that no

sooner had he been released than he was caught cheating in cards and killed.”

“A fitting fate I believe,” said Charles. “How did he die?”

“He was shot. My brother was told that he died instantly.”

Charles shifted in his chair. Died instantly? Well, such a fate was not satisfying—not at all. Yet why was he so determined to bestow a slow and painful demise to this man?

Her gaze met his. “Most would consider me ruined.”

“Most are not worthy to lick the ground you walk on.” He shifted again in his seat. He should not have said that. Yet, despite whether he should have or not, the words had been said and hung thick in the air.

She startled and her lips parted a hair before she shook herself. “I believe it is your turn. What do you hold so dear?”

He resituated himself and rubbed his palms up and down his thighs before lifting his hands to sign. “I took you to the bluebell wood with the best of intentions. I could not imagine what you had to cry over when I found you by the stream, but I wished to cheer you. What I had not accounted for was the sight of you, the joy upon your countenance, and the sunlight shining through the trees in such a way you glowed. You were so beautiful, and I was angry.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “You were angry you found me beautiful?”

He shook his head. “No, I was furious that I could not have you because you deserve more.”



“We both deserve love,” she said with definitive hand movements. “I suppose us finding what we seek depends upon our determination to have it. In my case, I am too untrusting of most men to expose myself to them—they would have no opportunity for the intimacy a marriage requires.”

“Were you so timid before what that bastard did?”

She flinched a little at his description. “No, I was shy, but the experience in Ramsgate did me no favours.”

He tipped the glass so the last of his brandy slid down his throat and stood to pour himself more. At her stepping beside him and setting her own near his, he startled. The decanter shook some while he poured her another measure, then placed the crystal bottle back on the tray.

His body stiffened when she covered his hand with hers to draw his attention. “Are we to become friends?”

He nodded somewhat. The notion was probably not his most prudent, but what was done was done. He had answered her and would not alter his impulsive decision now.

“Can I ask you to do something for me—as a friend?”

She wanted a favour? What could she desire from him?

“The only kiss I have known is what occurred in Ramsgate. Would you...?” Her hands trembled as she began, then faltered. She wanted him to kiss her? Why did that seem ill-advised—as though he were releasing some mythological beast from its restraints?

Before he thought better of agreeing to her request, he leaned down and with a gentle

sweep, brushed his lips against hers. Good God, they were softer than he had imagined. Their breaths mingled for but a moment before he claimed her mouth again. She was not passive but attempted to move with him until she became accustomed to the rhythm and returned his kiss with more confidence. He unclenched his fists and drew her against him, his tongue running along the seam of hers and dipping in to taste her.

The brandy upon her tongue was addictive when combined with the taste of her. He would gladly submerge himself in her delights and never surface for air if given the opportunity. His hand cradled her throat, his thumb caressing between her chin and her collarbone, when the flesh vibrated beneath his fingers. Had she groaned? The sensation of the sound sent a jolt through him and made the pressure in his breeches more difficult to ignore.

Blast! He would have to pay no mind to that part of him demanding satisfaction. She had entrusted him to do this, and he would not sully the sweetness of her request with behaving no better than the miscreant who attempted to ruin her. Despite everything in him longing to take her, he tempered the kiss until he drew a hairsbreadth from her.

Her eyes opened, her pupils wide. As she stared at him agape, her chest rose and fell, the swelling of her breasts against the fabric making his breeches tighter by the moment. His body protested when she backed away, her fingers touching her now swollen lips. She reached for the brandy, took a sip, and shivered.

“Are you well?” he asked.

Her head bobbed. “I thank you for indulging me.”

“You are lovely. Any man would be grateful for the opportunity you have given me, but I maintain that you should seek a gentleman who is not lacking in any way.”

“You are not lacking!” Her hands moved with vigour, betraying the emotion behind her words. “If only you could see that.” Her arms fell to her sides, but she reached back for her brandy before she departed the room, leaving him to stand in place. Lord, but he wished more than anything to follow!

Georgiana hastened back to her room, closed the door, and pressed her back to it, squeezing her eyes closed. She had opened Pandora’s box without one forethought of what would occur when she did.

What had possessed her to request a kiss from Lord Bath? If she had only the one kiss to last her the rest of her life, she could not deny the earl’s was worthy in every way. His lips cradled hers so delicately when he began, but she had not counted on how her body would light from within from such a simple act. When his mouth opened and their tongues mingled, that light transformed into a heat that threatened to engulf her. She had been almost faint as his hand rested upon her neck with the gentlest of touches, his thumb tracing a line that had sent a current through her.

His body had stiffened around that time. The change was barely perceptible, but with her hands upon his chest, the difference had been discernible. What had occurred to make him uncomfortable? She had been so overcome that her memory was reduced to the sensations coursing through her.

Grabbing her glass, she finished the brandy, then shed her dressing gown and climbed into bed. Her hand clutched her nightgown, and she shifted under the coverlet. How long would the effects of his kiss linger? She would never sleep until they did, but in some strange way, her heart pained her at the thought of them disappearing altogether. This was maddening!

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

The breakfast room was empty when Georgiana entered the next morning, a rarity since she had come to Hemel Hill. Even though Lord Bath did not always join them for the repast, both Henry and Jane were early risers and were usually present when she arrived. She was not particularly early, so where was everyone?

The footman drew out her chair and helped her to be situated. "I shall let the kitchen know one of the family has come down. We did not want the tea to become cold."

"You mean no one has risen at all as yet?"

"No, miss. I have not heard of the duke and duchess taking a tray, so I still expect their presence at some point, and Lord Bath went out for an early morning ride. He departed soon after sunrise."

"I see." She folded her hands in her lap. "If it helps, I should prefer coffee to tea this morning."

He nodded. "I shall ensure that comes to the table first."

"Thank you."

As she glanced about the empty room, she sighed. If she had known she would be on her own, she would have brought a book to read while she ate. Fitzwilliam did not care for when she read at the table, but she only indulged when he and Lizzy took their breakfast in their sitting room. It was not as though she harmed anyone by the activity. Her brother tended to be concerned of some mishap and food getting on the precious books, although she had not soiled one thus far.

Thankfully, she did not have long to wait before the footman returned with the coffee. He poured her a cup and set the silver vessel on the table where it could be easily reached. “Cook is sending up the toast and muffins. Would you care for anything in particular?”

“I would...” Footsteps from the doorway made her turn. Lord Bath entered and glanced around, giving her a nod before sitting across from her. At the sight of him, her cheeks had heated, and it was all she could do not to press her palms upon them in a futile attempt to cool them. How would he behave after their kiss last night?

Lord Bath’s gaze met hers, but she could not hold it. She cleared her throat. “I would like some bacon.”

The footman gave a slight bow and angled so he was facing Lord Bath, who pointed at the silver pot on the table.

“It is coffee,” she signed.

“Perfect.” He pointed to the coffee so the footman could pour him a cup. “What did you request?”

“I asked for bacon. Would you like for me to mention something in particular for you?”

No sooner had she asked than the butler entered and began speaking with his hands to the earl. In the end, she had not been required to be of aid to him since the butler had been learning how to sign with Mrs. Dereham. It was exceedingly kind of them to do so. Lord Bath was certain to appreciate the servant’s thoughtfulness on the matter.

The butler gave instructions to the footman, who hastened below to the kitchens while the butler stationed himself to one side of the room in the event he was needed.

Her entire body was tense and a little shaky. All she could think of was what happened the night before, and she could not very well mention that as polite discourse over a meal! Not to mention the butler's presence meant it was not prudent, even if she had a wish to speak of it.

Lord Bath, meanwhile, sipped his coffee as though without a worry. Once again, their gazes met and his lips curved to one side, making her insides flip. He knew of her discomfort and found humour in it! What impudence!

"How was your ride?" The question had taken a great deal of effort to say without her voice wavering, but somehow, she had managed.

"The ground is sodden, but I believe I have ridden in more mud this summer than in my entire life." He chuckled at what was, no doubt, an exaggeration.

"We have had a prodigious amount of rain." When in doubt of proper discourse, the weather always seemed to become the most interesting topic available.

"Not that the roads are good. They are not much better than the fields."

Georgiana could have laughed if it was not so sad. First the weather, then the roads—the two subjects were intertwined depending upon whether it had rained or not—but it seemed they were to discuss each and every topic of polite conversation before breakfast was completed.

The chatter of happy little girls reached her just before Emmeline and Juliana, Henry's daughters with his late wife skipped into the room with their governess following close behind. Thank the Lord for the reprieve!

"Uncle Charles!" They rushed around the table as Lord Bath turned to greet them. With their energetic behaviour, he had not missed their entrance.

“We are to go for a walk,” said Emmeline with her hands. The girls had learnt the language much quicker than Georgiana. How they had managed was a mystery she would have liked to have known. One day they were muddling through their first letters and words and now, they could hold conversations with their uncle on any variety of matters.

“The sun is out, and the day seems as though it will be a beautiful one.” Lord Bath smiled softly while Juliana climbed up onto his knee. “I bet Jules will be searching the paths for squirrels, will you not?”

The younger nodded. “Miss Fletcher prefers the birds, but the squirrels play and get up to all sorts of mischief. They are my favourite.”

“They are mine as well,” said Lord Bath.

Emmeline bounced on her toes. “Would you like to join us?” She turned to face Georgiana a bit. “Miss Darcy, we would be pleased for you to come too.”

She bit her cheek at the child’s prim manner. “I appreciate your offer, but I have not yet eaten breakfast, and I am hungry.” She signed while she spoke aloud.

“I just returned from my ride and was to eat as well,” said Lord Bath. “Why do we not take a short walk through the gardens before dinner? Would you like that?”

Both girls’ heads bobbed up and down.

“Come, Lady Emmeline and Lady Juliana,” said Miss Fletcher. “Your father wanted to read with you after the walk. We do not want to keep him waiting.”

Without further coaxing, Juliana slid off her uncle’s lap and waved before following her elder sister and governess from the room.

Lord Bath shook his head with a grin. "I find it so difficult to say 'no' to them."

"I understand. I feel the same."

The footman returned with the meals, and neither spoke while they ate. The silence was awkward in a couple of instances when they looked at each other, but both would swiftly return their attention to their food without a word said.

When Georgiana was finished, she stood. "Excuse me." She executed a brief curtsy and made for the music room. Before she could close the door behind her, Lord Bath slipped inside. She startled at the quick intrusion. "Did you need something, my lord?"

He pressed his back against the door to close it. "Forgive me, but if we cannot learn to behave as though last night did not happen, then my brother and his wife will know after one glimpse of the awkwardness."

Behave as though last night did not happen. How was she supposed to do so? Perhaps she had been naïve in believing it was possible, but now... "How would you suggest I do so? I have never been required..."

His hands clasped hers. "I would suggest you dismiss whatever embarrassment you harbour. I do not think less of you for what happened with that reprobate, nor do I look down upon you for your request of me. As far as I am concerned, we are friends. Do you not agree?"

Friends? She supposed he was correct, so she nodded.

"Good. Then do not dwell on last night a moment longer. Do you understand?"

"I do." Before she could ask a single question, he peeked through the doorway, then



with a hand lifted he slipped into the hall and in the direction of the library.

Charles sipped his brandy, relishing the warmth of his chest as he swallowed the smooth liquor. His eyes closed as he relaxed and allowed his head to loll onto the back of the sofa. While he had once taken pleasure in a moment's silence, at times, the isolation now ate at him. He would have never got on well if he had remained secluded in his own home. Whether Henry had brought him to Albemarle House or not, Charles would have made his way to Henry's doorstep sooner or later.

He dragged his eyes open and blinked. A slight movement out of the corner of his vision made him turn his head to the side. The sight before him almost made him laugh aloud.

Tiptoeing along in front of the shelves was Miss Darcy. She was obvious in her desire to remain quiet, creeping from step to step as she was. Had she thought him asleep or was she avoiding his company? Since he had cornered her in the music room two days ago, she had been more at ease in his company.

The meals with Henry and Jane had passed as any others. Neither his brother nor his brother's wife seemed to hold any suspicion that aught had occurred between him and their guest. He had done all in his power to hold himself in the strictest regulation since the kiss. He had said he would not marry, yet Miss Darcy appeared to be the only lady in England who could tempt him to change his mind.

Her delicate fingers traced along the spines of the books. The manner in which she stood and how she leaned into the shelf showed she was enthralled in her study.

He grinned as he lifted his hands and clapped them together hard. As the sound bounced through the room, Miss Darcy's entire body leapt and her hand flew to her heart.

She rounded on him with a glare. “That was uncharitable. And here I was attempting not to disturb you.” Her cheeks were a becoming shade of pink, and her eyes flashed in a way he had not seen before. He rather liked her when she was angry.

“By tiptoeing? Do remember, I am unable to hear you, so you need not walk on eggshells. Besides, I was not asleep.”

“Well, I had no way of knowing you were awake. At least I showed some consideration rather than charging in without any care for whether you were resting or not.”

He withheld a chuckle. She would not appreciate the humour. “What were you seeking?”

“I saw a book by Radcliffe a few days ago, but now, I cannot find it.”

“I have not taken note of any Radcliffe.”

She turned back to the shelves and resumed her search, the arch of her neck tempting him to rise and stand behind her. His fingers tightened around the arms of the chair as he endeavoured to resist the lure of the pale flesh that called to him. If he were to surrender and approach her as she stood, that soft place just under her ear would be right there for him to kiss.

He shook himself. Those considerations needed to be buried somewhere deep down to never see the light of day.

Her body drooped, and she turned. “Of course, now I cannot find it. Next time, I shall remove it in the event I want to read it.”

“You did not want to read it when you first found it?”

“No, but I craved it this evening for some unknown reason.”

He rose to pour himself more brandy, then held up the crystal container with a tilt of his head.

She lifted her eyebrows. “I am unsure if the flavour appeals to me, but I suppose I should try it more than once to see if it suits.”

A small amount was poured into another glass, and she took a measured sip. As she swallowed, a small droplet clung to the edge of her bottom lip, and his body seemed to lean forward as her tongue peeked out to swipe it from the soft flesh. He cleared his throat and stepped back.

“I should retire.”

She frowned. “What of your drink?”

“I shall take it with me. I hope you find what you are seeking. Good night.”

His feet were heavy as they carried him from the room, but the escape was necessary—very necessary.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

9th June 1815

The needle pierced the muslin with ease and Georgiana pulled the sunny yellow thread through the fabric, ensuring the stitch hugged the rim of the material before lining up her next. She was not as accomplished as Jane at embroidery, but she could claim a better mastery than Lizzy, who preferred just about any ladies' diversion to holding a needle in her hands. Georgiana much preferred the pianoforte, yet maybe if she improved her skill with a needle, she would enjoy it just as much.

“How is the edging for your handkerchief coming?”

She glanced up to Jane, who watched with her eyebrows slightly raised. Jane had been teaching her to make a scalloped border, which had not been as difficult as Georgiana had expected.

“I suppose it looks well enough.” She pressed it across her lap. “It does not curl, so the stitches are not pulled too tight.”

“You are doing splendidly for a first attempt.” Jane returned her attention to her own needlework. “We are having a special dinner tomorrow for Charles's birthday. I thought you would wish to know.”

“Tomorrow is his birthday?” Her head had shot up at the mention of it. “Why did you not tell me sooner?” While they had not sought each other's company every moment of every day, they had been friendly enough at meals as well as in the drawing room afterwards, and of course, there were those two nights in the library.

Jane frowned and paused her stitches. "I had not thought it of such consequence to you. The two of you get on better at meals, but you are not friends, are you?"

"I suppose we are more than mere acquaintances, though." Georgiana cleared her throat and tried to avoid Jane's observant eye by returning her attention to her handkerchief. "As a guest in this house, I shall attend his birthday dinner. I shall feel rude not having a gift for him."

"Oh, well, I am certain he is not expecting one from any of us. Nonetheless, Henry has an expensive bottle of brandy and another of Port for him. Mrs. Fletcher has had the girls draw pictures for him. He will be more than satisfied, so you need not feel obligated." Why could Jane not understand that she did feel obligated? She could not feel any manner but.

"Excuse me," said Georgiana. She set aside her needlework and hurried from the room. She made her way to the duke's study and knocked upon the hard oak door.

"Come!"

She left the door open when she entered. "Forgive me, but may I use a carriage to go into town?"

The duke sat back in his chair, his eyebrows drawn down somewhat in the middle. "What is it you need to do in London?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Jane just mentioned that your brother's birthday is tomorrow, and I feel remiss in not having a gift for him."

"He would not expect it of you."

"Which is beside the point, Your Grace."

“Henry.”

She started. “I beg your pardon?”

“You are staying in my home and are part of the family. I do not expect family to address me so formally. Since we are not exactly new acquaintances, I would have you address me by my Christian name.”

“Oh, then you must call me Georgiana.”

He sighed and picked up his pen. “Should you wish to make the drive into London for a gift, I shall be happy to provide you with a carriage and driver. I do ask that a footman accompany you and your maid for safety’s sake.”

“Thank you.” She relaxed her arms to her sides.

“Do you still want to go?”

“I do.”

He quirked his head in the direction of the bell pull. “Then you had best tug on that before you prepare yourself. I shall have the carriage awaiting you in front of the house when you return.”

So he had no time to change his mind, she hastened to ring the bell then hurried to her bedchamber. Ambrose soon had Georgiana changed and ready to go and accompanied her to the hall, where she came to a sudden halt. Why was Lord Bath in the hall and why was he wearing his great coat and carrying his walking stick?

“Miss Darcy, my brother tells me you are to London?”

After taking her reticule and gloves from her maid, she fumbled for a moment. What was she to say? “I had a last-minute errand. Are you to ride this afternoon?”

“No. I should like to stop by Bathwick Place to collect something, so I thought we could share the carriage. I hope you do not object?”

“Of course not.” She could hardly hold any protest since it was his brother’s equipage. But how was she to visit any of the shops, much less purchase him a gift, with him in tow? His presence would not allow her to search for what she wanted.

Nevertheless, they made their way to the equipage with Ambrose accompanying them. Once they were settled into the carriage, they set off.

“What is this errand you need to accomplish?”

She set her reticule between her and Ambrose. “I have not decided just yet.”

“You have not decided?”

With all that was in her, she tried not to show any consternation with his questioning or his accompanying her, but how to do so? If she knew what she was to purchase, it would all be so much simpler.

He relaxed back into the squabs while she pulled a reticule-sized book from her bag and tried to read. Would that he would cease his staring, though! It was impossible to concentrate when his gaze bored into her as it was.

The calling of hawkers selling their wares as well as horses and more carriages greeted them after a time, but Georgiana did all that she could to keep her focus on her book; however, when the equipage came to a stop, she looked up.

“Is this your house?” The structure was a handsome one: large, with a great many windows.

“It is. Would you care to refresh yourself before your shopping? My housekeeper can be of aid.”

“Yes, removing the dust of the road would be welcome. Thank you.”

When the butler admitted them, she handed off her spencer and hat to a maid before the housekeeper, a formidable-looking woman named Mrs. Baxter, led them up the stairs to one of the guest chambers. Once they were inside and Mrs. Baxter left, Ambrose chuckled.

“She is rather terrifying, is she not?”

“She does seem rather stern.” Georgiana glanced about the room. If she remembered correctly, this was once the elder brother’s home. Jane had mentioned Simon Granville preferred decoration that was uselessly fine, and this house had lived up to that description. The furniture was in gold and ivory as was the trim on the panelled walls and the rug upon the floor.

“’Tis a bit much,” said Ambrose.

“Jane mentioned the former earl had spent most of his money decorating this house. Seeing this room, I can understand how. Can you imagine that if this is a guest room, how richly appointed the master’s and mistress’s suites must be?” She shook herself. “I should refresh myself. I am certain Lord Bath will expect me down soon.” After wiping her arms and face with some warm water and towelling, she returned to the hall and glanced about her.

“May I be of aid, miss?” asked the butler.



“No, thank you. May I just wander until Lord Bath is finished with his business?”

He gave a slight bow. “The library is two doors down on the left, the master’s study is the door after, and the drawing room is through there.” He pointed to a door to his right. “I am certain Mrs. Baxter would be pleased to bring refreshments should you desire them.”

As she wandered through the sparsely filled shelves in the library, she made a review of what was before her. The shelves mostly contained older volumes—ones that could have been a part of the library when the former Lord Bath occupied this house. However, a stack of books lay on a side table next to the sofa as though they had been more recently read. Perhaps this stop was fortuitous. If he had set these titles aside, she could better discern what type of book he may prefer.

“ Blast! ”

She came to a sudden halt. The voice was familiar, yet different from the last time she had heard it. Tiptoeing towards a door on a nearby wall, she peered around to find the earl within his study, holding his pocket watch while he attempted to secure it back on the chain. He fumbled with the clasp, but it would not hold as he continued to struggle.

Before he could notice her presence, she crept into the hall as Ambrose returned. They waited no more than five minutes before Lord Bath joined them.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I believe so. I should like to go to Hatchard’s if you do not mind.”

He walked them out to the carriage, and the trip to the prestigious booksellers took little time once the equipage was moving. They all stepped down, and once they were

inside, Lord Bath rubbed his hands together. “I should like to see what they have on agriculture.” He signed close to his body and in small movements. He was trying to hide it. After she nodded, he left her with Ambrose.

“What are you seeking, miss?” asked her maid.

“We are to go to the jewellers two doors down. I discovered what to buy while at Bathwick House.”

She ignored her maid’s strange expression and bustled out of Hatchard’s then into the jewellers. Her brother had purchased items here in the past. She only hoped they would have what she sought.

The older man behind the counter smiled in a welcoming manner. “Good afternoon, miss. May I help you?”

After a great inhale, she slowly released the breath. She could do this! “Yes, I am looking for a watch chain. A relation of mine has broken his, and I wish to replace it for his birthday.”

“Ah, we have some very nice pieces. Would you be wanting an engraving of his family crest on the piece?”

She had not considered doing so, which showed how little she knew of gentlemen’s fashion. What did the Earl of Bath’s crest even look like? “Just the chain for today. If the gentleman wanted to return for the addition of the crest?”

“It would be no problem at all. I assure you.”

Once she had selected a lovely gold chain, she had it added to her brother’s account. Ambrose took the package for her, and they hurried back to Hatchard’s where she

selected *The Corsair* by Lord Byron and *Waverly* by Scott.

Lord Bath was at the counter when they approached and glanced at the titles. Once their purchases were charged and wrapped, they alighted into the carriage, and the earl rapped his walking stick on the roof.

“You will need to tell me if *Waverly* is worth reading,” he signed. “I do enjoy Scott, but I had not yet realised that was published.”

One side of her lips tugged upward. “Perhaps I might let you borrow it if you are so inclined.”

“Might?”

“Well, you will need to be amiable to earn it.” Amiable to earn it? Where had that come from?

His mouth twitched, but he did no more than cross an ankle over his knee while he watched her in a way that made her insides warm. “I eagerly await what you expect of me.”

“What? No!”

A chuckle slipped from him before he could stop it, but he cleared his throat and pressed his lips together.

“I wish you would not hide your laugh from me. You smile so seldom. I enjoy hearing your good cheer.” Why did that need to ruin the pleasant afternoon they had been having thus far? His voice nor his laugh were objectionable. They were him after all. Anyone who truly cared for him would never ridicule him—or she would censure anyone who did without reserve. She blinked and fought the sting of her

eyes. When had she made herself his protector?

10th June 1815

Charles set down his fork, dabbed at his mouth with his napkin, and set it beside his plate. "The meal was wonderful, Jane. Thank you for the menu. I shall need to give Mrs. Barnett my appreciation for her skills in the kitchen."

"Well, shall we adjourn to the withdrawing room?" said Jane. "Since tonight is special, we shall eschew the separation of the sexes. Henry and I decided the ladies will drink sherry or claret while you drink your brandy, and we shall have a lovely evening, despite the weather."

Henry and Charles had intended to ride today, but the rain pouring down upon the earth would not allow it. They would have been soaked through before they were a half-mile from the stable. This summer had been uncommonly wet. Being trapped inside was becoming tiresome, and he had spent the day pacing and huffing.

His brother offered his wife his arm, so Charles followed suit and offered his to Miss Darcy. He would have been rude not to do so, and they had formed a truce of sorts, though her almost flirty behaviour yesterday had haunted him since—the arch curve of her brow, the gleam in her aquamarine eyes. He had told her that night they kissed that she was pretty, but in truth, she was the most beautiful lady he had known. When he was in her company, being a gentleman was becoming more and more of a trial.

When they entered the withdrawing room, several parcels sat on a table. He had said he had no need of gifts. What had his brother and Jane done?

"I see that expression upon your countenance, Brother. Do not argue over the presents. We insist. You are part of this family, and we love you." He held out his hand towards the lady on Charles's arm. "Even Miss Darcy has a gift for you."

Her hand tightened on his bicep as his heart cracked down the centre. He had done naught to deserve such kindness from any of them—especially Miss Darcy. Until not so long ago, his behaviour towards her deserved the severest reproof.

After he brought the lady to the sofa, he sat on the other side of the furniture as Henry handed him a glass of brandy. “I hope you will not be offended, but I did not wrap mine as the ladies did theirs.”

Henry placed two bottles before him, and he lifted the first to read the label. It was a fine bottle of French brandy indeed! His brother would have paid a tidy sum for the smooth liquor. The second bottle was a costly Port he knew well. Both were favourites of his.

“Thank you,” he signed.

A small parcel was held out by Jane. “This is not much.”

He untied the package and opened the wrapping to a small stack of handkerchiefs folded neatly with the Bath crest embroidered in one corner.

“I thought you may not have had any made as yet.”

After a dip of his chin, he breathed to contain whatever it was in his breast that threatened to escape. “Thank you.” He had not done so. Some part of him still associated the earldom with Simon, even though the servants had called him Lord Bath since his brother’s death. Perhaps one day, he would feel the part, but he had yet to do so.

Jane handed two parcels to Miss Darcy, who placed them in front of him. “I hope you like them. I had little time to shop.”

When he unwrapped the first, he had to suppress a laugh. “Was this intended for me when we departed the bookseller’s yesterday?”

“I had an interest in both, but I did intend to give you one. When you indicated you had not read Waverly ...”

“Thank you.” He placed the book to his side and reached for the last. Inside was not another book, but a wooden box with a seal he recognised. At his first glimpse of what was within, he paused and breathed for a moment.

“The jeweller has the ability to make the Bath crest to be attached if you wish it.”

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “My old chain broke, so I do require a new one, thank you. As for the crest, perhaps you would accompany me on Monday. We could go by curricule if weather permits, and place the order.”

Her mouth curved a bit. “Should you wish it, yes, I would be pleased to join you.”

While Henry and Jane watched from their seats nearby, he removed his watch and swapped out the chain while Miss Darcy looked on. How had she known his had broken?

What occurred the rest of the evening, he could not remember. He sat facing the room, his hand upon his pocket watch, his mind dwelling on the lady sitting no more than a few feet from him. Had she somehow been in the library when his pocket watch had come loose? The chain had needed replacing for some time, but he had not wanted to shop for it himself. If she had been in the library, she would have heard him swear. He rubbed the watch until he finally stood.

“Forgive me. I am fatigued and should like to retire.”

Jane hurried forward and kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday, Charles."

His brother clapped him on the back, and Miss Darcy rose.

He departed the room and was almost at the top of the stairs when a tug at his arm made him stop.

"Are you displeased with the gift?" asked Miss Darcy. "If so, I shall not be offended. Perhaps when we go to town, you could select another. I am certain the jeweller has more to choose from."

"The gift is wonderful. You selected well." He meant to continue without her, but she followed, hastening to step in front of him.

"You have been distant since you opened it. Pray, speak to me, and tell me what is amiss."

While she spoke, he had paused in front of his bedchamber. When she followed him inside, Jennings, his valet, startled and hied through the dressing room door.

"Naught is amiss."

"I do not believe you." She propped her hands on her hips.

"Do you often pursue a gentleman into his bedchamber to ask questions?"

Her complexion paled when she glanced around them. "I only want to know why my gift seemed to disturb your equanimity."

"Because I am certain you witnessed my watch coming free of the chain yesterday. You did, did you not?" He held his breath.

“I did.”

“So you heard me swear.”

She covered her face for but a moment before she shook her head. “I had not meant to. I refreshed myself and returned to the hall. Upon informing the butler of my intention to wander, he told me where to find the library. I was searching the shelves when you said what you did—the door to the study was ajar. I knew you did not want me to hear your voice, but I had not done so on purpose. Besides, I see naught amiss with it. Your tone is not so dissimilar from when I first met you.”

“Pray, stop.” He gripped his hands into fists then released them while he stared at the floor. “I am attempting not to be as maudlin, though I do sometimes ride or remain in my chambers should I feel unfit for company. I had not wanted you...” His hands fell to his sides. He desired no one to hear his voice as it was now. His brother, Jane, and Jennings, his valet, were the only ones to whom he still spoke aloud.

Cool palms cradled his cheeks and lifted his head. “Do you not see? I care not if you are deaf, or if your voice has altered. The man in here,” she placed one hand upon his chest, “is who we all care about—who I thought of much longer than I should have when I first made his acquaintance. Do you remember? You spoke to me at Jane’s wedding and made an effort to put me at ease. I was anything but comfortable at the time. You are also the man who was kind enough to indulge me when I told you of Ramsgate and kissed me when I requested it of you.”

“’Twas no hardship; I assure you.”

She tilted her head while her mouth curved on the ends. She had such a gentle way about her as she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. He hesitated no more than a moment before his hands slipped around her back. His face buried into her neck, and he breathed her in as he accepted the embrace, inhaling the scent of



lilacs in a summer meadow. He could lose himself in that scent, in her, if he let down his reserve.

He could not say how long they remained in that attitude, but at the press of her hands to his shoulders, he released her.

“I should retire.” She made to depart, but he placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Wait. I shall ensure no one is about.” After peering through the door and confirming that the passage was empty, he saw her out. A few steps from the room, she smiled back at him over her shoulder. “Good night.”

16th June 1815

In the end, the trip to the jewellers in London had been delayed by almost a week before Lord Bath and Georgiana were able to make the journey. Yet, another succession of rain had made the ground so sodden the poor state of the roads had made travelling impossible. So today, as the weather was the finest it had been in some time, Georgiana sat atop the duke's grandest curricule while Lord Bath drove them to town.

The bright rays of the sun heated her skin, and she tipped her face up towards the sky so the brim of her bonnet did not impede the warmth of it kissing her cheeks. She gasped when a sea of brilliant red poppies beckoned to her from an upcoming field. She set her hand upon the earl's arm and pointed as they drew closer.

"I want to see them," she said when he had stopped the carriage.

She made to stand, but he pressed her back into the seat. "We have hardly been on the road. I believe these are still Hemel Hill lands. We can always return."

"We are not in any rush, are we?"

"No, I suppose we are not." He stepped down from the tall vehicle and held his arms up so she could climb down.

With no hesitation, she placed her hands upon his shoulders as he gripped her waist. Once her feet were upon the ground, she rushed around the curricule and came to a halt at the edge of the field before she took her first tentative step into the flowers.

She removed her gloves as she trod with care into their midst. The blooms were so plentiful, one could barely make out the green of the stems. As soon as her hands were free, she tucked her gloves between the buttons on her spencer and held out her arms to brush the petals with the tips of her fingers.

The back of her neck broke out in gooseflesh, and she glanced over her shoulder. How had she known he would be there? She pivoted around and walked backward while facing him.

“Are they not beautiful?”

His gaze followed her as she moved through the crimson blooms. “Stunning.”

She bit her lip and turned to continue her wander through the field. The intention of his compliment was not lost on her, but she could not hold his eye. The hitch in her breathing forced her to return her attention to the flowers.

After she took four more steps, she came to a halt and bathed in the beauty of the scene. Footsteps behind her and that familiar prickle on the back of her neck made her inhale deeply in the hopes of calming her from within. She reached back without glancing over her shoulder. After all, she knew well who stood behind her. Then, a hand, his hand, wrapped around hers. A current travelled up her arm and spread throughout her body.

As much as his touch heated her body, the breeze at least managed to cool her cheeks. The gentleman behind her had been different of late—well, maybe not so different. He still had his moments of brooding, which he indulged while in his chambers or during a ride—or so he had confessed the night of his birthday. Otherwise, he spent more time with family and had even joined her on a walk about the gardens near the house during a break in the poor weather.

As she revelled in the beauty before her, Lord Bath's forehead came to rest upon her shoulder, and she reached up to curl her fingers into his soft hair. At some point while her back was turned, he had removed his hat. Her eyes closed. Was it so horrible that her heart craved this closeness to him since that night they kissed? His body was not pressed against her back, but how she wished it was! Those moments in his embrace in the library were the most emotion she had ever experienced. Who would not want to feel that again? Her heart had been full in a way that had been missing for a long time.

His face buried into her neck, and she made no protest. Although he had family around him every day, he likely had no one for physical comfort. She opened her eyes to the poppies swaying in the breeze. Yes, he could wallow in his own misery and behave in a boorish manner as he did so, yet in particular moments, he showed the man he was despite the pain he had endured.

He nuzzled just under her ear before pressing a soft kiss. The beating of her heart quickened, and her breath stuttered. After one last brush of his lips to where her neck and shoulder met, he was gone.

Her body swayed, and she took a deep breath to steady herself in the wake of his abandonment. His hands had limited themselves to touching hers, but brought to mind how they gripped her sides when they kissed, and she was wanton enough to desire that again. She would need to tread with care! Her heart was in a fair way of being broken if they continued, and though her mind insisted upon caution, her heart yearned to plunge ahead. She wished to experience love at some time in her life, even if her heart was broken in the process.

Everything inside her shoved her concerns into some remote part of her mind. She would worry about those later—if later ever came.

With heavy feet, she returned the curricule. After Lord Bath helped her to her seat, she

glanced back at the poppies. Her favourite flower had always been snowdrops, but now she could not imagine a more handsome bloom than a poppy, especially when it was surrounded by its brethren in such a picturesque prospect. If only they could remain for hours on end!

As soon as Charles alighted from the curricule, he handed the reins off to a young lad who stood outside the jewellers and passed him a coin. The boy was one who oft times hoped to earn his next meal along that kerb, holding the carriages and horses of those who shopped along Piccadilly Street. He had no qualms trusting the young man since Charles had given him a coin or two in the past.

The moment he moved to be of aid to Miss Darcy, his palms itched to grasp her waist. Before continuing towards London, he had put his gloves back on, but that did not matter. His body came alive when he touched her in some fashion—even when she touched him. His mind had been consumed with her since the night they kissed, and now he was forced to restrain himself whenever in her company. He succumbed to temptation and lost all regulation in the field of poppies. The picture she presented, smiling and open and surrounded by the deep crimson blooms, had beckoned him to her. He could not resist. How he had not wrapped her in his embrace and claimed her lips, he could not say.

Despite the urge to take her in his arms and press her down into the flowers, he had shown some restraint. He had limited himself to touching those small parts of her so not to be tempted. Lord, but he had longed to caress so much more.

Their gazes held when he lifted her down, then offered his arm to lead her inside. Upon entering, the jeweller grinned when he noticed Miss Darcy. His mouth moved, but Charles recognised nothing.

Miss Darcy smiled and responded as they approached the counter. He, at times, discerned a word here and there on the lips of someone speaking, yet with his view of

only one side of her face, he understood naught. She did not sign, but after his concealment of their speaking at Hatchard's on their last trip into town, she likely knew he had no wish for any undue attention.

She pivoted to face him. "The crest?" appeared to be what she said as she pointed to his waistcoat.

He stiffened and stared at the shop owner while he removed his watch. The man's eyebrows had drawn down a little in the centre, but he accepted the piece with a nod.

Charles withdrew a seal of the Bath crest and placed it before the man, who picked it up with a bob of his head while his mouth moved once again. It was just the two of them with the shop owner, so he placed his hand on Miss Darcy's shoulder to get her attention.

"Will I need to leave it with him?" He had not planned to sign, but with it just being the two of them and the shopkeeper, he would not be so cautious for the moment.

"He will make a rubbing, so you need not leave it," said Miss Darcy, her eyes darted to the shopkeeper and back to him.

With a nod, the man departed, then returned in minutes with a sheet of paper in one hand and a stick of black lead [4] in the other. After transferring the image, he pushed the seal to Charles and spoke more to Miss Darcy before he pulled a card from a stack in a nearby drawer. The name Darcy stood out at the top. Before the man could write on it, Charles placed his hand over it and shook his head.

"I am paying for it," he signed when Miss Darcy looked at him.

"'Tis part of my gift."

“No, you bought the watch chain and a book. Your thoughtful gesture will be treasured, but I shall not take advantage of your generosity.”

“Must we argue over a gift?” she asked with a slight curve to her lips. “After all, I believe I would win such a trifling by telling this man that the custom of the Darcy family depends on whether this is charged to my brother’s account.” The man’s eyes widened, and his nostrils gave a hint of a flare.

Blast! He had not counted on her arguing. “Your brother will wonder at the expense.”

She shrugged. “I told him I purchased a gift for your birthday from us all in my last letter. I am certain he will not object.”

“You lied to your brother or to me then?” He could barely hold in his chuckle at the hitch back of her chin and the gaping of her mouth.

“I did not lie!” Her countenance, combined with how her mouth moved, told him she had raised her voice.

“You did not? You told me the gift was from you.” He bit back his grin. “Maybe I should pen my own letter enquiring who the gift is truly from.”

“I told my brother to take the funds from my pin money. The gift is from me, as I am certain he will know.”

“I do not require you to give me the extravagance of the crest as well. Your gift was heartfelt and required nothing to make it complete. I truly thought of today as one we could spend together away from the house.”

Whenever he was not speaking, his palm was placed back on the ledger, but she drew his hand from the card. Damn his weakness! He could deny her nothing.

“And you wished to come to town?”

“A necessary evil in this instance.”

“Yet, a picnic in the poppies would have been preferable.” She spoke to the jeweller for a bit before taking his elbow and leading him towards the door.

When they stood once again on the pavement, he gave the boy with the curricule another coin, but before he handed Miss Darcy to the seat, he tipped her chin with his finger.

“You would wish me to haul a table and chairs to that field of poppies for a picnic?”

“I do not require such formality. A rug spread upon the ground would suffice.”

Her head turned to the side suddenly, and she wrapped her hand around his arm again to turn him. A gentleman stood with an older woman a few feet away. Miss Darcy curtsied, but beside him was not the lady he had come to know. She was stiff, incredibly stiff, and her hand clutched at his bicep as though she might be ripped away. Even from the side, the smile she wore was forced, and her pulse fluttered at the base of her neck. She was uneasy.

The woman spoke, and eyed him more than once, but since Miss Darcy never ventured to introduce him, he could only assume they were of rank and had not requested to make his acquaintance.

Meanwhile, the man looked Charles up and down before returning his attention to Miss Darcy. He was, no doubt, the son of someone, but who, Charles did not know. He obviously held an interest in Miss Darcy. His gaze darted to her bosom, even if it was covered by her spencer, while the woman spoke, but he would peer from the woman to Miss Darcy so as not to give away his surreptitious glances.



Charles clenched his free hand. If the young buck took one more look at the lady's breasts, covered or not, he would break the rascal's nose! After all, Charles was taller and broader in the shoulders than the man before him. One forceful swing of his fist would be all that was required.

Before the rake could take advantage of another glimpse, Miss Darcy gestured to Charles and curtsied. The two strangers went on their way, and Miss Darcy's grip subsided on his arm.

"Who was that?"

"Lady Grafton and her son Viscount Linley. Forgive me. I would have introduced you, but I thought you would prefer not to be exposed, so to speak."

"You were not comfortable. You were tense, and you barely spoke." They signed, but they had returned close to the curricule. One would need to stand with them to see their conversation.

"Conversations with those not known well to me make me uneasy. Her son also stares at places he should not when his mother is not looking. If Lady Grafton were not friends with my aunt, Lady Fitzwilliam, I would avoid speaking to them altogether."

He aided her in climbing the curricule, then followed her up, lifted the reins, and cued the horses forward. When they reached Bathwick House, a groom took the curricule as he led her up the stairs. Once inside, they shed their coats and hats.

"I thought we could have refreshment here before we return."

The housekeeper bustled into the hall. "Oh, sir. Cook apologises, but she requires another quarter hour."

“We are early, so tell her not to fret. We shall await the meal in the library.”

When they were settled on the sofa, he pivoted to face her. “You gestured to me once.”

“Lady Grafton asked where I was staying. I told her with my sister-in-law the Duchess of Albemarle and her family. You are part of that family, so you were included. I hope you do not mind.”

He shook his head. “I was merely curious.” He shifted a little closer. “I did not like the viscount sneaking glances at your chest.”

She covered her face with her hands for a moment before letting them drop to her lap. “He has done so before at one of my aunt’s dinners. Fitzwilliam levelled such a haughty glare on him that the viscount shrank in his seat. He likely saw an opportunity without my brother present to notice.”

“I wanted to do more than glare. I had to stop myself from breaking his nose.”

“Ladies receive such scrutiny often. Are you to break every man’s nose for sneaking a peek at a lady’s front?”

“No, only yours.” He took her hand and rubbed his thumb over the back. The emotion that had overtaken him had been one of possession. Since when did he consider Miss Darcy as his? She was anything but.

“My lord—”

“Pray, no more of that formality. We are friends, are we not? I would wish you to call me by my name.” He proceeded to show her how to say it.

“Then I am Georgiana.” She had needed to spell her name.

He shook his head. “You are...” Then he made a sign that made her cheeks pink.

“If you call me thus, you can call nothing beautiful without making it seem like you are speaking of or to me.”

His knuckles grazed down her cheek, and she gasped in an inhale that made her chest heave, but she jerked away in a moment, making him frown.

“Your housekeeper says the refreshments are ready.”

After a glance over his shoulder, his shoulders sank. His housekeeper stood in the door. She would say naught, but regardless, he should not tempt himself so. With the exception of the servants, they were alone, and no one would be the wiser if they spent their time flaunting propriety, yet they certainly should not. Yet, why did that thought make his heart split in two?

22 nd June 1815

Another day of dreary rain fell outside the window, making it impossible to go riding or enjoy any part of what should be a lovely summer day. After standing for a good ten minutes watching the droplets fall upon the glass as well as the park outside, Georgiana sighed in a way that made her entire body almost drag. Would that they could have more than three days of sunshine in succession! Or even have the rain fall overnight! The weather this year could easily make one despondent.

At the door opening, she glanced over her shoulder as the butler entered with the post and what appeared to be the newspaper. The duke had a personal messenger come from Albemarle House every day with the post and the paper as well as the post from Bathwick House. With the steady shower, the rider was late, but that obviously could not be avoided.

Jane perused the letters and cards and took what pertained to her before handing her husband and Charles their correspondence. Charles picked up *The Morning Post* and sat up straight as a rod.

“ Good God, Napoleon has been defeated .”

“What?” replied Henry, who had paused sorting his own letters, his eyes wide. Charles using his voice was rare, so when he had done so before the group, his brother had taken immediate notice, as had Georgiana. After all, he had only used it once before in front of her, and he had been unaware at the time.

Henry required no more than Charles holding the paper towards him to take it and

gasp. “It says ‘ Great and Glorious News. Annihilation of Bonaparte’s Whole Army and his own narrow personal escape .’ [5] If only they had captured him! But they did take his staff and personal carriage as well as two hundred and ten pieces of cannon.”

“I imagine they will catch him soon, will they not?” asked Jane.

His brother lifted one shoulder. “Without his army, we can but hope.”

Charles glanced at Georgiana as she began biting her thumbnail. Richard had gone to fight in February and had said little of why or how long he would be. Was he well? Had he been in that final battle to defeat Napoleon?

With a firm tug, Charles grasped the paper from Henry, who frowned at him. “What are you doing, man?”

At Charles’s jerk of his head in Georgiana’s direction, Henry took one glance at her and paled. “Forgive me. I had not thought of Colonel Fitzwilliam. He left for Europe a few weeks after we recovered Jane, did he not?”

She nodded and leaned against the window frame. Her legs threatened to give way. Richard had to be well—he had to be.

His face drawn, Charles lowered the paper to his lap. “Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam is listed under the wounded.”

With a gasp, her body sagged against the wall, and she blinked madly while she took in great gulps of air in an attempt to remain upright. “Pray, excuse me.” She hastened from the drawing room and through the front door before she allowed her sobs to overtake her. Her hands gripped the stone railing in front of her as she stood on the edge of the portico gasping with each breath. She had never needed to worry over Richard in the past. He was not always near the battle but with some general or

another—at least that was how he made it sound. All this time, had he been making the danger to himself seem non-existent? Had he lied so she would not worry? It would be like him to do so. Why could he not have been honest with her? She was not some small child who required protection from the truth!

At the light touch of a palm to her back, she turned and buried her face in Charles's chest. Without looking, she had known it was him. Jane would have said her name and not relied on touch to announce her presence. Jane's hand was also not as large as Charles's.

He rubbed up and down her back while holding her close, his free hand cradling the back of her head while she cried into his coats. She wrapped her arms around his chest, taking the comfort he was willing to provide without reserve.

She had been a simpleton. Her shock was her own fault. She should have known, should she not?

She breathed in the cedar notes of his cologne. If she could, she would have nestled herself further into him. From the moment Charles had taken her into his embrace, a part of her had calmed, even though she still feared for her cousin. Would Richard survive? Would he be the man he was before, or would he be forever changed?

Charles brushed a kiss to her temple as she tried to rein in her tears. She lifted her chin so their gazes met. His fingers trailed down her cheek.

“Better?” he asked with his voice.

Their gazes held, his hazel eyes not wavering from hers. She wanted more. Her insides took flight as she lifted to her tiptoes and pressed a kiss on his mouth. He made to withdraw at first, but she threaded her fingers through his hair and tugged at his bottom lip with her own.

With a groan, he accepted her offering and let her take him where she would. She was so adrift. How she yearned for some connexion to this man—for a time at least. Blood rushed through her ears and her body came to life as they clung to each other. Something pressed into her lower stomach, and he groaned. Her skin erupted into a prickling gooseflesh at the sound. His use of his voice was so rare around her, and the utterance was surely involuntary, which made her crave more—their bare flesh mingling while he touched those hidden parts that heated when they behaved as they were. She was shameless.

His attempt at tempering her ardour was noticeable and most unwelcome. Despite his best efforts, she attempted to resist, but instead, he persevered, softening his lips as they teased hers with gentle caresses. When he kissed the corner of her mouth and pulled back, she bit her lip. Would he make a hasty retreat, or would he pretend they had shared nothing?

His chest rose and fell quickly with his rapid breathing, and as he stepped back, a protrusion that was not evident before was now outlined by his tight breeches. His eyes followed hers before he turned his back to her.

“Are you well?”

He cleared his throat but lifted a hand. “Yes,” he signed.

She leaned back against the railing. Would that she could calm her body after what they just shared, but her breasts were heavy and ached, and the frisson he created in her had not yet dissipated. Was it possible for your body to hum?

He adjusted his shoulders when he turned to face her once again. “Forgive me. I would never take advantage—”

She waved him off. “No, I wanted—nay needed to feel close to someone, and you are

the one person here I would turn to for such a request.”

“Not Jane?”

“Jane and I have been friends—we are practically sisters, of course, but I feel as though I can speak more freely with you than with her. I could tell you secrets I would not tell her—I have told you confidences I have not told her. I would never think to kiss her as I did you.”

He chuckled. “I suppose you would not. I cannot express how much I value the faith you have in me. You must know that I desire nothing more than your happiness.”

“I feel the same of you.” He stole a small part of her heart every time he revealed more of his. “I should pen a letter to Fitzwilliam. Whenever Richard returns to England, I would imagine my brother will journey to London to collect him. I should see if he wishes for me.”

His nostrils flared ever so slightly. “Of course, I am certain you could be of aid to your cousin in his time of need.”

“Pray, excuse me.”

Her chest pained her when she walked away, but what else could she do? He was not ready to acknowledge any deeper feelings he may hold for her, and she would not force him to acknowledge what was swiftly becoming a deep attachment to him. As much as she now longed for him to confess he cared for her, he was not ready or willing to divulge more than he had. Even if his spirits seemed much improved, he still had bouts of melancholy and, no doubt, still thought himself unworthy of her—a ludicrous assumption if you asked her!

Henry handed him a glass of Port as they relaxed into the sofa in the library. “Have



you decided to court Miss Darcy?"

Charles's attention jolted from his glass to his brother. Where had that question come from? "I beg your pardon?"

His brother placed his wine on the table and rotated it almost absent-mindedly. "Your demeanour towards her has altered. When she first arrived, you avoided her more often than not. You even seemed at odds with her after she learnt of Jane's and Mrs. Darcy's matchmaking scheme."

After wincing, Charles took a sip of the tawny vintage and swallowed. "I revealed their plan in a way that was hurtful. I should have never behaved in such a harsh manner. The fault of that was wholly mine. I let my temper run away with me." He still had not quite forgiven himself for injuring her so.

His brother's eyebrows lifted as his head tilted. "Both of you seem to seek each other out more and more. Your eyes have always sought each other, but now, more is behind those looks. Do the two of you have an understanding?"

"We have no understanding. We are friends, nothing more."

"Jane followed Miss Darcy to the portico. She said she found Miss Darcy in your embrace."

He straightened, his insides squeezing mercilessly, and glared at his brother. Why had Jane followed, and what precisely had she happened upon? Hopefully, it was the embrace and nothing more. "Georgiana was overwrought when she learned of her cousin being wounded at Waterloo. What would you have had me do? Shove her away and tell her to go find Jane? I have now witnessed her demeanour before those not in our family circle. We were approached by a friend of her aunt Lady Fitzwilliam's in town outside of the jeweller's shop. She attempted to show herself at

ease, yet she was anything but.

“ Having witnessed that encounter, I can tell you she shows her true feelings and herself unreservedly to very few. Even with you and Jane, she holds back. I do not know why, but of late, she has seen no reason to conceal her deepest feelings from me, and I shall not turn her away if she requires comfort. As I said before, we are friends. I shall not abandon her. ”

Henry’s brow gave an almost imperceptible jump, and he lifted his hands between them, palms out. “No need to raise your voice, but pray, do understand I am responsible for her while she is under my roof. While her brother is not here, I must act in his stead.”

He had raised his voice? Of course, he had not intended to do so. He had signed as well and had not even realised he was speaking aloud. His hand clenched into a fist then released. Over the past few months, Georgiana had become more than he had thought possible, but while she initiated this morning’s kiss, she had been vulnerable, which was why he had tried to withdraw before it started. The problem at hand was that she was perfect for him—would have been perfect if he could offer for her. She deserved so much more from life than he could provide, did she not? He had not wanted to be in her company before, and this was why. Now, he was irrevocably attached to a lady who should want another. She should have the opportunity at all this world had to offer.

At a hand to his wrist, he lifted his gaze from where it had fallen. He had been staring at his drink while lost in thought.

“Charles, I know you believe yourself to be less, but must I beat you over the head to make you understand that you would be enough for someone? If Miss Darcy is so reserved with most and is her true self with you, do you not think that demonstrates her depth of feeling—her attachment to you? You must open your eyes before you

miss what is before you. You do not have to be lonely for the rest of your life. You must know not one person on this earth is happy every second of every day. We all have moments of utter joy and moments of despair, but it is who we choose to join us on the journey that can make the most trying of times worth enduring.”

With a shudder, Charles took the last large draw of his Port, set his glass on the table beside him, and rose. “ I know you mean well, but you must leave Miss Darcy and me to sort out our own lives. If you will excuse me, I am tired and wish to retire. ”

He rubbed his forehead as he climbed the stairs. More than anything his heart and his mind were more and more at war over Georgiana. His heart longed for her in his embrace and at times, under him in his bed where he could worship her all night long. But fear whispered that she would not be happy for a lifetime with someone of his limitations, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not banish fear’s voice from the back of his mind.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

30 th June 1815

28 th June 1815 Darcy House, London

Dearest Georgiana,

Pray forgive the delay in responding to your letter and for not breaking my journey at Hemel Hill on my way to town. I am certain you must be beside yourself with worry over the notice of Richard in the paper, but I know little aside from what was printed. Before departing Pemberley, I sent a note to Lord Fitzwilliam in hopes of learning something of our cousin, but I have yet to receive a response. Tomorrow, I shall visit Horse Guards with the aim of discovering when Richard will return to England. I assure you; as soon as he has returned, I shall see him to Darcy House and if he is able, to Pemberley to recuperate.

Do not fret until we know more. Richard is a tough, solid sort and not prone to illness or weakness. I almost expect him to appear at the door upon his arrival, demanding brandy and a cigar and proclaiming he had a devil of a time during his voyage home.

In the meantime, I understand you are to depart within a fortnight for Yorkshire. Until we know of when Richard is to return or his condition, little can be done here. Enjoy your time with Jane and her family. Richard would not want you waiting and despairing over him.

Elizabeth and the children send their love.

Your brother,

Fitzwilliam

Georgiana let the letter fall to her lap and lifted her head to take in the roses around her. Hemel had a lovely and well-tended garden near the house, and after a few days of sun, the grounds had dried enough to finally venture from the gravel paths.

As she lifted her face into the sun to soak in the warmth, a movement in the corner of her eye drew her notice. The tall form, clad in breeches and an expensively tailored blue topcoat, strode towards her. The butterflies that seemed to now reside in her belly took flight in large soaring circles. Charles was so handsome with his broad shoulders and those muscular thighs wrapped in buckskin breeches. Her cheeks flamed. If he caught her scrutinising him thus, she would be mortified!

“Jane said you received a letter from Darcy,” he signed as he approached.

“Yes, he has told me to remain with Jane and her family until he has reason for me to join him.”

Charles nudged her over a little on the bench as he sat beside her and took the note from her hand. After perusing the contents, he returned the paper.

“He is correct, you know. You would do naught but sit around and wait if you returned to London. All of the gentry are departing for the country, and the heat always brings disease and pestilence. You are better off coming to Bathwick Abbey.”

“I do not want to be an imposition.”

He lifted her chin with his knuckle. “You would never be so. Pray, you are welcome at Bathwick whenever you like, for as long as you like, and for whatever reason.”

“You make it sound as though I could come and stay forever if I wished it.”

He stiffened some with a slight change in his countenance she could not place. “I would not object if you did.”

“It would hardly be proper.”

With the use of his walking stick, he stood and held out his hand, which she took as he tugged for her to rise.

“Where are we going?”

“You will see.”

He brought her to the stable where the curricle was prepared, and a groom held the horses while they waited. “I thought one more ride before we depart for the north, but if you would prefer, I can drive you into London to see your brother.”

She bit her lip. Would she wish to journey to town? The distance was not prohibitive, but not one she would prefer to take. “Fitzwilliam mentioned going to Horse Guards and enquiring of Richard. I am certain he is busy, and I would not want to deter him from being of aid to my cousin. We should probably leave him to it.”

He tipped up her chin. “Do know I shall take you if you wish it. All you need to do is ask.”

If a groom had not been nearby, she would have risen to her tiptoes and kissed Charles’s cheek. His consideration meant everything to her.

“So, how about that drive?”

His strong arms lifted her to the seat, and in moments, he sat beside her. The groom handed him the reins, and Charles gave them a flick to send the handsome dappled

greys into motion.

They did not speak while they sped along the drive away from Hemel Hill. Instead, Georgiana breathed deeply of the air and took in the scenery. The day was warm, as was the wind, but the movement helped keep her cool. The weather was perfect.

After almost ten minutes, Charles turned onto a smaller road before pulling onto the verges. Georgiana took in the field to her right with her hands clasped to her chest. The field of poppies had seemed full when they last visited, but now it was teeming. She could not contain her joy when she looked back at the gentleman who had thought to bring her here. On their journey to London, she had longed to spend more time in the poppies, and he had ensured she returned.

“They will go to seed soon, but I thought we would enjoy them one last time. I was correct before. This field is on Hemel lands, so we need not worry of someone intruding.”

She lunged forward and hugged him, then kissed his cheek. This was the most perfect thing he could have done for her.

“This is just what I would wish to do today. Thank you!”

After he helped her down, he lifted a rug from the back of the curricule and removed a basket secured to the board. They wandered into the sizeable field until a small clearing appeared right in the middle of the vivid blooms. He spread the blanket and set the basket on one corner.

“Are you hungry? Cook packed cold chicken, bread, some cakes, and strawberries.”

“It all sounds lovely, but I would be content to sit for a time.” He offered his hand for her to lower herself then sat a small distance away while she glanced in all directions.

The poppies swayed in the breeze, and she could have sighed, her heart was so full. She was engulfed in a sea of crimson, and she desired to never leave. As she took in the view, her fingers worked at the ribbons of her bonnet, and when they were loose, she tossed the hat beside her. The covering kept her head too warm, and she longed to let the air cool her scalp.

That familiar tingling covered her cheek, and she glanced over her shoulder to Charles's unreadable gaze. "What are you thinking?"

He shook his head. "Nothing of importance to most."

"Maybe I am not most." She tilted her head, and his serious expression gave way.

"No, I conceded long ago that you are not like most people." He glanced off into the field of flowers and back. "Henry questioned our friendship. I believe he is concerned for you."

Her stomach tightened a little. "And what did you tell him?" The last thing she wanted was for Jane and her husband to realize how close she and Charles had become. Either they would insist upon their engagement or return her to Fitzwilliam. While she would not object to marrying the gentleman in front of her, he should not be forced by his relations but by his own depth of attachment. She would not have him any other way.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said we are friends, and what Jane witnessed on the portico that day was me offering you comfort."

"Comfort I heartily required."



“I want you to know I care for you. I cannot be certain I can provide what you need, but...”

Was he declaring a certain attachment to her? She covered his hands with one of hers. She did not want him to rush his feelings. “One day at a time. You need not know anything now, but we shall take matters day by day. We have all the time in the world, do we not?”

“I do not want to hurt you,” he said, his striking eyes tugging at her heart.

“’Tis too late. My heart has been engaged for a while now. I do not know when it happened. One day I was going along charmingly and the next, my heart was full of you.”

He shifted closer and pressed his forehead to hers. Her entire body thrummed as his fingers traced along her cheek and down her neck. When he drew back, he touched her hair. “You may refuse, of course, but would you consider releasing your hair?”

She balked for but a moment, then one at a time, she removed the pins and placed them in his palm. When the last of her tresses fell around her shoulders, his eyes flared for a moment. She glanced down to where her finger picked at the rug.

“You are stunning,” he said aloud. After setting the pins on the basket for safe keeping, shaky fingers touched near her crown and wove into the strands, combing through to the ends. “So soft.”

He dropped back onto the blanket and stared up at the sky. After a few moments, he looked at her and stretched out his arm. She curled next to him, her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes. How did such a simple embrace bring such contentment? The only sense of home she ever received was at Pemberley, but within Charles’s arms had somehow become where she belonged.

His heart beat into her ear, and she committed the sound to memory. How long they lay there, she could not have said, since a welcoming darkness overtook her soon after.

Charles lay on his back while the fluffy clouds passed overhead, and the poppies swayed to and fro around them. How could one gentle lady stir him so? Even now, curled to his side, the urge to defend her—to see she was never harmed prevailed, not to mention the more lustful longings he tamped down and struggled to keep under regulation.

The arm underneath her curled up so his hands could continue to comb through her long mahogany locks. Her hair was not straight, yet it was not the curls possessed by her brother. Instead, the texture was something in between. His dreams of her with her hair down did not do her justice, but he had wrongly assumed her hair was straight. This look suited her better.

She shifted closer to him and raised her knee to rest over his hips. He gritted his teeth. This was an exquisite torture, but one he would not trade for all the riches in England. Her delicate hand rested at the top of his belly, the heat travelling through his waistcoat and lawn shirt to brand his skin. What he would not give to have that mark be permanent!

He nestled his nose into the hair at her crown and pressed a kiss. She needed to wake. He had let her sleep for two hours, but they would need to return soon. Jane had made him promise to return Georgiana for tea.

His fingers brushed down her cheek. “ Georgiana, ” he said aloud. Speaking in front of her still caused unease, but the spark in her eyes when he used his voice proved she had no care for the alteration. On the contrary, she seemed to pay closer heed to him when he spoke.

“ Georgie. ” He used a bit more force this time, but not much. He had no wish to startle her.

She groaned and rubbed her nose against his topcoat. With a grin, he tipped up her chin. Her plump lips were pouted just so, and he could not deny himself.

He made an effort to cradle those bits of flesh with care, then indulged in pecks to her eyelids and nose. “ Georgie, beautiful, you must wake up. ”

Crystal blue eyes looked up at him as her eyes drowsily blinked open. A lazy smile he had only seen in his dreams tugged at her mouth as her palm found his cheek, drawing his lips back to hers in a languid connexion.

He sucked in a deep breath at the riot of sensations filling him: his heart began to quicken and a current ran through him from where they were joined to travel the rest of his body. More than anything, his body screamed for him to roll her under him—to meld her to him, but he could not, especially in an open field where anyone could happen upon them!

As he had before, he tempered her ardour, and his own, and made each kiss smaller, though no less heartfelt.

“ Are you hungry? ” he asked before pressing his lips one last time to her forehead.

She shook her head. “Poor Cook will not know what to think if we return a full basket.” His body protested when she drew back enough to sign the answer to his question.

“I can tell her we were enjoying the ride so much we never stopped to eat.”

“You came up with that lie without much thought.”

He grinned. “Well, I cannot tell her we chose to sleep in each other’s arms in a field full of poppies, can I?”

Her shoulders shook indicating she chuckled. “No, I suppose that would cause a scandal amongst the servants.”

Much to his chagrin, they sat up, and he handed her pin after pin while she tended to her hair. He despised watching her tame it into what society deemed appropriate, but driving up to Hemel Hill with her tresses blowing in the wind would also cause a great deal of talk.

He picked up the basket while she folded the rug, and hand-in-hand, they made their way to the edge of the field. She turned at the road, making his arm cross over her stomach as she gazed back at the prospect.

“What is it?” he asked aloud.

She tucked the blanket under her arm. “The flowers will be gone in a few weeks. Even though we will be for Yorkshire soon, I like the idea of this scene waiting for us. ’Tis silly of me.”

He shook his head. “No, I know what you mean.”

Without further sentimentality, they tied the basket and rug to the back of the curricie, he lifted her to take her seat, and they turned for home.

18 th July 1815

Georgiana shot straight up from a deep sleep. Was that a bang? She blinked and glanced about the room blearily. Where was she? Had there truly been a loud noise or had she been dreaming?

A repeat of the banging made her startle once again. Oh, yes, after staying with Amelia and Sir Anthony for a week, they had journeyed from Dereham Hall in Nottinghamshire, and now she was sleeping at an inn near southern Yorkshire. She swayed and rubbed her eyes as the booming continued. Who was at her door? That was when the further commotion of voices and yelling filtered into her room, or perhaps she had not been awake enough to notice before.

“ Georgie, open the door!” She flinched at Charles’s voice carrying over the din. Even in his flat tone, he was significantly louder than was his wont.

She rushed from the bed and let him inside. No sooner had he entered than he slammed the door behind him and locked it with haste. Though he wore a deep burgundy dressing gown and boasted of bare feet, he held a pistol with an unwavering grip. Why would he need a weapon? She lifted her hands to ask what was happening, but before she could sign one word, he pushed her behind him as he backed away from the door, the pistol held with a steady aim at the only entrance to the room.

The pounding of someone running filtered in from the passage before more yelling erupted and a shot rang out. Her entire body jolted at the sound, and the blood rushing through her veins began to race at breakneck speed.

“ Georgie, I need you to tell me if someone is trying to enter the room. ” He turned his head to face her while he spoke aloud, which did nothing to help her mounting nervous energy. “ Promise me. Yank on my sleeve or some other sign. Do you understand? ”

She nodded while whatever was occurring in the rest of the inn continued to create enough noise to wake the dead. She must have slept through the beginnings of it for Charles’s banging to wake her so suddenly. How had she been so oblivious to it all?

She shifted from his arm to the side and waved a hand to draw his attention. “What has happened?”

“ My valet awakened me after a fight broke out in the tavern below. I had given him a few coins and told him to enjoy an ale before he retired. He is a loyal servant, and he has done a great deal between learning to sign and helping me since...well, since. ”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“ The fight broke out after a man was accused of cheating at cards. Jennings hastened from the room as soon as the fracas began and hurried to my bedchamber. When we peered down the stairs, the brawl had expanded into the front room, and someone was thrown over the innkeeper’s counter. Just after, another man ran by with a pistol, so we rushed back, woke Henry and Jane, then I retrieved my own weapon before waking you. ”

Footsteps ran down the passage once more, making her head whip around towards the sound. They did not stop, but continued on before the footsteps dissipated. How was she to understand what was happening outside with the odd mix of sounds?

“ What is it? ” He had used his voice more in the past few minutes than she had ever witnessed. Signing would take longer and require him to lower the pistol. Surely that

was the reason.

“Someone running.”

A clicking made her pause. Then the sound stopped. Then the same occurred closer. Someone was going to try to enter. She pressed her hand to his shoulder. “Someone is trying the latches of the other rooms on this floor.”

He stiffened, wrapped his arm around her, and drew her behind him once more. When the jangling of the latch on her door filled the room, she yanked on the sleeve of his dressing gown without mercy.

She trembled and shook as whoever it was continued to work at the locked door. At a loud thud, she pulled Charles’s arm away and stepped out from behind him. The thud occurred again, making her flinch. The door had rattled with that one.

“They are trying to break it down,” she signed. Charles’s eyes stared straight ahead, but he signed his acknowledgement with one hand before attempting to secure her behind him again. Were they to wait while whomever was at the door broke inside for whatever nefarious purpose? She could not take it! She would not take it!

With a pivot, she rushed back around Charles and faced where whomever it was tried to enter. “My husband is armed and pointing his pistol at the door,” she cried. “If you force your way into this room, you will be shot!” While she yelled, she also signed, so Charles would not be unaware of what she was saying.

The movement of the latch stopped, another thud made the door shift, and a crack came from some part of it.

“My wife does not lie. Go about your business for you will die if you make it inside this room.” His voice rang out clearer than she had heard of late. How had he

managed it?

This time, the footsteps made their way down the passage and away from them.

“They are gone.”

The arm that held the pistol lowered to his side, and his body let go of some of the stiffness he had held. When he sagged to lean against the bed, he scrubbed his face with his free hand. Another shot rang out downstairs, which made her flinch, but the overall noise level seemed to be subsiding. Charles raked his fingers through his hair and dropped the hand holding the pistol to his side. His locks stood up on end in places, and his dressing gown was haphazardly tied. His appearance was typically so fastidious, his current dishabille was a far cry from his usual look.

His entire body almost sagged before he pulled her into his embrace. One arm wrapped around her as his temple pressed to hers. His warm breath fanned against her neck and shoulder, penetrating her thin summer nightgown. Without pause, she welcomed the safety of his arms.

He brushed a kiss where his temple had been, then to her cheek. She drew back just enough for their gazes to meet and hold. Her insides would not cease their trembling as she rose to her tiptoes and sought out his lips. In moments, their tongues sought a connexion, and Charles groaned when she nipped at his jaw.

“Georgie,” he said. “We should —”

Whatever protest he was to make ceased when she took possession of his mouth once more. She pressed into him as they continued, forcing him to step back until they came to a halt at the side of the bed.

With care, her knuckles trailed down the arm to the revolver by his leg. He startled



when she lifted the weapon, but he said naught as she removed it from his grip and set it on the bedside table.

His head made to shake, but before she could consider it further, she reached down and lifted her gown over her head. Charles's eyes widened, and he dropped to sit on the mattress. His hand lifted to her collarbone, his fingers tracing the ridge and down until they circled her breast.

After some incomprehensible sound, he leaned forward and took her nipple into his mouth. The searing heat of his tongue upon the sensitive peak was a shock at first, but acted like kindling to the rest of her body. She ignited from within, pressing closer and wrapping her arms around his head, holding him to her.

Her heart began to pound, and she could not breathe through the sensations he evoked, nor did she want to. Instead, she held onto him for dear life so her knees would not collapse beneath her. He now commanded every inch of her, and she would not fight him to wrest back control. She was his, whether he could accept her or not.

Just when she could take no more, he nipped the side of her other breast and bestowed the same attention upon it. Her hands clenched at his hair, surely tugging in a way that was painful, yet he did not complain. In fact, he drew her into his lap to straddle his thighs.

The longer he continued, the more his palms explored the flesh beneath them, caressing and squeezing until that place between her legs throbbed as it had never done before.

Somehow, her fingers managed to release the tie of his dressing gown and with frantic movements, made to shove it from his shoulders. He let go of her just long enough to free himself from the restriction before one hand shifted between her legs.

The moment he touched between her folds, she gasped.

He drew her head down to kiss him while he teased that ache to build and build. One finger entered her but did not alleviate the urgency threatening to overwhelm her. How did such a simple touch evoke such shattering reactions?

Her hips moved of their own accord with his ministrations, seeking whatever was eluding her. With a shift of his finger inside of her, she cried out into his mouth. As he doubled his efforts, he held her to him and continued to kiss her without pause, swallowing greedily every sound that flew from her lips. When the burning he created within spread and enveloped her, she could not move—she could do naught but succumb to the wave pulling her under.

While her forehead rested upon his shoulder, he pressed his cheek to hers. “Georgie, if we do not stop now—”

“I do not want to stop,” she said. “I want to be yours.” They could have been killed if matters earlier had gone differently. She no longer wished to wait for him to come to terms with himself. She wanted to be his now. Then there was the possibility he would never fully accept his hearing loss and also never accept their attachment. No, she wanted this with him; whatever was to come of it would come. She would not deny herself his embrace one moment longer, no matter the outcome.

He shifted back on the mattress, then drew his nightshirt over his head. Her breath caught in her chest as she took in the beauty of him. His body was lean and taut from fencing with his brother as well as the hours he spent riding. Her fingertips grazed along his chest and down his stomach to the part of him that protruded and pointed towards her. When her hand wrapped around him, he ceased his ministrations and wrapped her arm around his shoulders while his other arm lifted her hips until that part of him was poised just under the unbearable aching between her legs. What she had wanted more than anything was to be his—to be joined with him, so as he was

guiding her down to take him, she shifted and pressed further to welcome him as far into her body as she could manage. She winced at the sharp tearing sensation that accompanied the intrusion.

His head dropped back, his jaw tense and his eyes hooded. As he lifted her by the waist, he held her gaze in a way that made her breath hitch. When he lowered her back down to settle fully onto him, he groaned.

“ My God, Georgie.”

She pressed herself against him and breathed through the stinging that remained, but the stillness caused a restlessness that made her tremble. Holding still as she was would render her mad. All of her screamed for more. She lifted some. Maybe an adjustment would be of aid. Before she could try, one of his arms enfolded her and guided her into a steady rhythm, rising and falling upon his erection.

The stinging ebbed and was replaced with a fire similar to the one she experienced before. Her eyes burned, and a sob stuck in her throat as she pressed as close to him as possible and assisted his movements with her own. He was so perfect, and they fit as though they were made to be together like this.

She sought his lips and kissed him. Emotion ruled every last bit of her. But could she convey all she was feeling with a simple kiss? Regardless, she made the attempt and prayed he was experiencing exactly what she was at this moment. How could he feel anything but bliss?

At one point, he penetrated deeper and touched something that sent a shot of pleasure through her. She gasped into his mouth, her eyes flying open. Their eyes met, and his lips curved as he angled her to touch her so with every single thrust.

What began as her whimpers grew into cries that he again swallowed as he kissed

her. She was lost. Her mind exhibited no control whatsoever over her body while her instinct ruled. She climbed higher and higher until she soared into the heavens then plummeted back to earth.

Charles crushed her mouth to his in a bruising kiss that muffled any sound she made. No sooner had she returned from her peak, than her lover's movements became erratic. He would have as shattering a release as she had experienced. She would ensure it.

One hand threaded into his locks while the other clung to his shoulder as she attempted to lever herself upon him once again. Both of his arms wrapped tight around her until he buried his face between her breasts and bellowed.

His shoulders heaved as he drew in great gulps of air, the quick beat of his pulse thrummed against her palm on his neck, and he tightened his embrace.

When he drew back, he frowned and touched her cheek. "You are crying," he said. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, you were wonderful."

With a slight lean towards him, they kissed in languid movements as he lay back upon the mattress, still buried within her. She would have him remain there forever if she could. She had no wish to put an end to this peaceful lassitude that had settled over them. What followed was just as intimate as the act itself, if not more so.

She pressed a kiss to the centre of his chest before resting her ear against his breast once again. Meanwhile, his fingers lazily trailed up and down her spine, sending shivers through her with every long pass.

Charles blinked and frowned before the events of the night came rushing back. He

reached to his side and touched the pistol, still where Georgie had moved it.

As they had recuperated from their earlier exertions, his body had not remained sated for long. He had stirred, and Georgie had certainly noticed. No sooner had she begun to move upon him than he had rolled her under him and loved her again. Now, he was curled around Georgie, his arm around her waist and her back pressed flush to his chest, his stomach, and his morning erection pressed snugly between the globes of her behind.

He gritted his teeth. This was an exquisite torture. God, how he wanted her again! Now that he had allowed himself to love her body and soul, he would never have enough of her. She was cool water to his parched tongue. He would never drink his fill.

With careful movements, he rolled away. No sooner had he sat up, than Georgie's slender arms wrapped around his shoulders, her bare breasts pressed flush to his back. This was not helping his current state in the least!

"Do not go yet," she signed in front of him.

"You know I must. We are to make an early start this morning."

Her entire body stiffened, so he turned to face her. "Someone is at the door," she signed.

His hand reached for the pistol while Georgie stepped out of the bed and grabbed her dressing gown. Once she slid her arms inside, she tied it at the waist. She startled again and pointed to the door. "'Tis your brother."

He rose and set down the weapon long enough to put on his nightshirt and cover it with his dressing gown. After he tied the robe, he yanked the bedclothes to tidy them

some, lest Henry discern what they had done.

Out of an abundance of caution, he brought the pistol with him and cracked the door before opening it further to allow Henry inside. Charles then leaned against the dresser as far from Georgie as possible. It would not do to make Henry any more suspicious of them than he already was.

“I have sent a man down to the public rooms,” said Henry, “and all seems to be in order this morning. The innkeeper apologised for the fray last night and will have breakfast served in a private dining room in an hour. I assume you are both well?”

Charles, who had been biting his thumbnail, nodded when Henry glanced to him for a response.

“The innkeeper may want to ensure the latch on the door is sound,” said Georgie. “Someone tried to break down the door during the commotion.”

Henry glanced over his shoulder with a frown. “These doors are solid oak. I would wager the addle-pate who attempted that will have a sore shoulder for the next week.” When he sobered, he looked between them before settling upon Charles. “You stayed in here last night?”

He did his best not to visibly go rigid. He could give away nothing. He would never embarrass Georgie so. “I stayed in the chair while Miss Darcy slept. Even though the commotion had died down, I took no chances with her safety.”

Their gazes held while Charles breathed in an even cadence. He did not let his eyes waver in the slightest lest his brother comprehend more than he should.

“I am certain I would have done the same were I in your position. According to Sutton, Miss Darcy’s maid should be up soon. I shall see you both at breakfast in an

hour.”

As soon as the door closed, Charles dropped his head back and shook himself. Henry’s warning was clear. He needed to depart before Ambrose came to tend to her mistress.

“Do you think he knows?” signed Georgie. Her mouth did not move. She, no doubt, did not want Henry to hear if he was still outside—not that Henry was one to eavesdrop.

“I do not know. He has warned me to be certain of myself where you are concerned, but he would never question me until I am alone with him.” He pushed himself from the dresser when he finished signing. “We should talk, but I need to return to my room before your maid finds me here. Should you require anything at all, send Ambrose to notify Jennings.”

After she nodded, he turned his back to her and departed without a glance over his shoulder. He could not lest he drag her back to bed and keep her there for the rest of the day.

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As soon as Charles shut the door to his own room behind him, he squeezed his eyes closed. What had he done? As his eyes drifted open, Jennings had turned from tending to Charles's travelling clothes and lifted his eyebrows. "I trust Miss Darcy is well?"

"Yes, I kept watch in the event more trouble arose ." Not true, but Jennings had no need to know what actually occurred last night.

Jennings held Charles's gaze for a moment, then nodded. "Of course, my lord. I brought warm water for you to wash."

"If you would not mind leaving me for now. I shall ring for you when I am ready for your help ."

His valet departed without a word. His man knew him too well. Had he seen through the lie Charles just told? The way Jennings held his gaze could mean he had—or perhaps Charles was reading too much into one look?

With a sigh, Charles removed his dressing gown as he approached the stand holding the basin of water and towelling. Truly, he had no desire to wash as it would remove Georgie's scent from him, yet he had no choice. If even a hint of her perfume lingered upon him, Henry might notice while in the confinement of the coach. He could only hide so much when sitting in such close proximity, and he would be sitting beside his brother, which would afford no opportunity for him to claim the scent came from Miss Darcy.

After dampening and soaping the cloth, he wiped his arms and started to scrub his



chest but paused. Blood covered parts of him below the waist. She had never seemed in pain. They had joined a second time during the night. Had he tortured her when they were together? His heart split in two as he made to remove the evidence from himself, but when he rinsed the rag out in the basin, he paused and dropped the cloth into the water. It had turned a pale pink. Blast! He trusted Jennings but would never reveal this secret about Georgie. The discoloration of the water would be enough to rouse his valet's suspicions, even if they were not by his spending the night in Georgie's rooms.

He completed his ablutions and tapped his foot in a steady rhythm. Only one solution remained to divert his valet's notice. He would have to draw some of his own blood. Near a chair to one side of the room rested his open razor in preparation for Jennings to shave him.

His fingers shook a little as he picked up his shaving supplies and returned to the basin. He had tended to himself enough for this to be passable. After lathering his cheeks, he ran the blade up his cheek twice before nicking his jawline and cutting his thumb. He let the wound on his finger drip several times into the soapy water.

“Damn! Jennings!”

When his valet entered, he continued to hold his bloody finger over the water. “I thought to shave myself and had a mishap. I require your aid.”

Jennings attended him without question. He stopped the bleeding of the tiny cut upon Charles's jaw and wrapped the finger until it ceased to bleed. A light plaster was applied to protect his leather gloves from ruin during their journey.

Breakfast proved to be awkward. Jane and Henry, after remarking on the plaster on Charles's finger, spoke of the day's travels and provisions for Clarissa while Georgie remained silent, sipping her tea and nibbling at a muffin. He had gone to the private

dining room with every intention of speaking with her—enquiring of her well-being—yet he could not do so before his brother and sister. The muscles of his shoulders bunched and released with the need to talk to her. The last thing he desired was to wait until their arrival at Bathwick, yet what if he could not find a moment with Georgie before they departed?

Georgiana stood with Jane and Henry outside the inn, awaiting the carriage to be brought around from the stable in the back, while Clarissa awaited their journey with Jane's maid inside the private dining room. The morning was warm, which did not bode well for the journey. The inside of a closed carriage would be stifling by the afternoon.

A robin landed upon the branch of a nearby tree, warbled a greeting, then flew away. Georgiana's attention was then captured by a squirrel across the road. The impudent little creature bounded up close and rose on his hind legs as though studying them before fleeing and racing up the next tree. By his antics, one would have thought he had been threatened, yet no one had made a move towards the flighty creature.

At the ring of the bell on the door, she glanced over her shoulder as Charles joined them in their vigil. His eyes met hers as soon as he closed the door behind them, and after a word to his brother that she could not see, he moved to her side.

“Perhaps we can walk to the pond and take in the prospect while we wait.”

“I thought the carriage would be but a few moments.” Had a problem arisen she was unaware of?

“I do not anticipate it being long.” Some quality in the dip of his chin and his countenance, as he signed, made her nod.

“Yes, I would welcome the diversion. I am certain the pond is quite lovely in the

morning light.”

He offered her his arm, and they ambled across the road to the edge of the water. A small brook fed the pond from one end and another flowed away from on the opposite. A fine mist hung over the surface as well as the field behind it. No doubt, the fog would burn away when the heat of the day descended upon them.

“Are you well?” asked Charles aloud when they reached the edge.

She furrowed her forehead. “Yes, why do you ask?”

“When I returned to my room and made to wash, a good amount of blood was still on me.”

Her cheeks burned. It was no wonder he was speaking aloud. They were far enough away that Jane and Charles would not hear them, but they could possibly discern what he was signing.

“You never mentioned you were in pain. Why did you let me continue?”

She exhaled. How was she to answer without giving away what they had endeavoured to keep secret? She faced the pond. “At first, yes, it hurt, but the discomfort faded quickly. I assure you; I did not merely endure your attentions. I took great pleasure in them, in fact.” Was it possible for her cheeks to burn any hotter than they were at this moment? “I hope my admission does not offend you—”

His hand clamped over hers. “I wished for nothing more than your pleasure. That said, what occurred should not happen again.”

A sharp pang pierced her chest, yet she glanced towards some sheep in the distance to compose herself before looking at him. “I disagree. We both deserve love as much as

anyone else. Your lack of hearing does not mean you should be alone for the rest of your days.”

He released her to scrub his face with his hands. At the rhythmic beat of horses’ hooves upon the hard road, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “ We must go .”

She walked to the coach with her hand in the crook of his arm. His bicep was so strong under his coats, and her palm fit so well tucked within just as the two of them had fit so well last night. He obviously cared for her. Mayhap she just needed to prove he could not live without her. How difficult could that possibly be?

They had to be nearing Bathwick by now! Georgiana looked out the window at the verdant green of the dales and bounced her knee under skirts. As picturesque as the prospect was, she could not rid herself of the suffocating air in the carriage. How was she to breathe?

At the moment, Clarissa was with Jane’s maid in the equipage that followed, yet her fussiness when she was last with her parents was surely caused by the sweltering heat within the carriage as well as the tension between the four of its occupants.

She had not mentioned what had occurred at the inn after Charles departed her rooms, yet speaking to him at breakfast had been impossible, and in front of the inn, he had been more concerned about her welfare before delivering the blow he did. No time had existed to tell him more.

Once they arrived at Bathwick, Georgiana would need to corner Charles alone and inform him of Jane’s visit to her room and her subsequent questioning. She had wanted to know what had occurred with Charles during the night. What could Georgiana say? She would never reveal that she and Charles had flaunted propriety, so she repeated Charles’s words to Henry almost word for word. Jane did not seem pleased that Georgiana would not say more, but her almost sister did not attempt to

force a confession. Thankfully, although the bedsheets were exposed, their position when he took her maidenhead prevented any blood from spilling upon the sheets. Jane possessed no evidence to prove any suspicions she may have had.

When she had entered the breakfast room, Henry and Charles had both stopped speaking abruptly, with Henry's hands falling to his lap as though they had been silent the entire time. Then, aside from pleasantries about the weather and the state of the roads, naught had been said except between Jane and her husband—an awkward meal indeed!

Now, it seemed Charles had even closed himself off from her. A shade existed in his eyes that was not present before, shielding her from the emotions she had previously been able to read in his gaze. More often than not, he stared out the window, and for a time, even dozed. Her eyes stung at the barrier between them. She could not bear it.

Her heart leapt in her chest when they passed through a stone gate and descended into the valley below. She leaned closer to the window in an attempt to see what was before them. After another curve, a great stone building came into view set before a winding river in the distance. Fertile hills and fields spotted with the white of grazing sheep composed the remainder of the picturesque scene.

As soon as the equipage drew before the front of the grand home, the step was placed, and the men disembarked before handing the ladies down. Jane took her husband's offered hand, leaving Georgiana to take Charles's arm.

When she stood before the great house, she took in every inch from a sort of arch that seemed almost a gateway on the path to the front door, to the curved wing of the structure that appeared to wrap around a turret. The row of windows that surrounded the ground floor of that portion of the house would be a lovely place to sit in good weather. Charles's home was certainly older than Pemberley—without a doubt a great deal older—but resembled a castle you would imagine existing in a children's

story. She loved it almost as much as she did its master.

A heavy weight landed on her chest. She had recognised the first stirrings of her heart, but that had still not prepared her for the overwhelming realisation of her affection. A sizeable gulp was attempted to relieve herself of the lump that had risen into her throat, and she blinked to keep from crying.

“I have never seen the like,” she signed with the best smile she could manage. “Your home is like a castle in a fairy tale.”

“It was a castle when it was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but became an abbey in the 14<sup>th</sup>, then with the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it became a property of the Granvilles. My father gave it to Simon, so I suppose it is now the seat of the title. I am grateful Simon never sought to change the exterior. He was able to alter little on the inside as well.”

“You mentioned you were here before?”

“Yes, we journeyed here once after Simon’s death to see the property. I am hopeful some of the changes I requested at that time have been carried out. Simon’s finances before his death kept him from decorating the estate similarly to his house in town, which is just as well since the country suits me better than town these days.”

As they made their way inside, Georgiana released Charles’s arm and fell to the back of their grouping. She needed to speak to him before they retired this evening. Not only about Jane, but also about his own feelings about what had happened between them. How else would she know what he was thinking?

With Jane’s keen eye watching them, she could not avoid being shown to her rooms. Ambrose helped her change, and without delay, Georgiana hastened back to the hall in an effort to find Charles.

She wandered from room to room during her search. What she could only assume were small touches made by the late Lord Bath could be found here and there. He must have placed them in the rooms he favoured or used more than others. She paused at a particularly odious vase. The pattern was overdone and the colours not to her liking. She crinkled her nose. The piece appeared very old—it was likely valuable as well. Perhaps Charles would sell the eyesore. She could not imagine him enjoying it either.

The beat of her heart accelerated when she reached the library, but Charles was not within. Instead, he stood before a tall window in the attached study with a brandy in his hand.

Carefully, she pressed the door closed behind her as well as the connecting door to the passage before she approached him. She took the drink from his hand and took a sip, ensuring she drank from where his lips touched the glass.

His whiskey-coloured eyes never wavered while she sipped. “What are you about?”

She set down the glass. “We should talk.” He would not deny her, would he?

“Our emotions ran away with us last night. We both hold feelings for the other, but you would be better off with someone whole—”

“Stop saying that!” Her signs were forceful. “You are no less. Why can you not understand that?”

“If I were no less, I would not have required your help last night.”

She scoffed. “You required little from me. I only told you what was occurring. If someone had entered, you would have shot them and protected me. I would have done no more than stand there. Do you not see that?”

He shook his head. “After last night, we must marry, but I believe you should return to your brother. We would be husband and wife in name only.”

She stiffened. “I would never agree to such an arrangement.”

“Georgie, you could be with child—even now.”

“Then I shall have my brother release my fortune to me and live as a widow in a small village somewhere I can raise the child. I shall not wed a man only to be sent back to my brother as though I am the source of some...some...sort of shame.” Her signs became rougher and larger as she continued. “Do not attempt to force the matter either as I will deny any claims of an engagement between us.”

“You do not want to marry me.” He appeared oddly calm despite the conversation.

Her eyes stung, and she took a great gulp of air in an attempt not to cry. “If you wanted to give me your heart and spend your life with me, then yes, I would happily accept your offer of marriage.” She swiped a traitorous tear that still managed to escape her feeble attempts to stave off crying. “But the offer you make, I will never accept.”

He stepped towards her. “Georgie—”

She held up a hand between them. “Damn you. Do not ever address me as such again, not unless you intend to give me your heart.” She covered her face for a moment. “After you departed my room at the inn, Jane came and enquired of what occurred last night. I thought you should know she is suspicious of us.”

His hands lifted, no doubt to sign some argument, but she did not wait to find out what he had to say. Instead, she fled the room and hastened out of doors. The gardens around the house were extensive and well-tended. Within minutes, she found a quiet



nook where she could cry without interruption. What was she going to do?

21 st July 1815

Three days! Three days had passed since their arrival at Bathwick Abbey, and Charles had been little more than a ghost. Since their confrontation in his study, he had been absent at dinner, claiming a headache due to the dust of the road on the first evening, which was unlikely in a summer that had boasted of more rain than sun. The second, he had spent the entire day out on the estate with his brother. She never happened upon him when she went riding, but she did not venture out near the tenant farms where he was more than likely spending his time. Her stomach sank low in her belly. Charles had been scarce today as well. Thus far, he had taken great pains to avoid her. Not that she had expected any less from him.

She paced in her bedchamber, walking to and fro in the richly appointed room. The wall coverings featured a simple pattern of birds and flowers in the palest of pinks and fern greens, while the fabrics on the furniture and draperies were various shades of ivories and greens to complement the wall coverings. The effect was one she enjoyed immensely.

Her hands grasped and fluttered her nightgown as she attempted to cool herself. The day had been unseasonably warm, and the evening proved to be no better. The weather had been hotter since they arrived in the country—a much better place to be than London when the heat was unbearable. They had not had many such days this summer, yet the two or three they had endured were not to her liking, and truth be told, the heat was not of aid to the situation with Charles—the intolerable stickiness only added to her frustration.

She bit her lip and stared at the door for a moment before tiptoeing over and peeking

into the passage. The heat was too great for a dressing gown, at least to her it was, but no one would be about at this hour, so she crept out and in a slow meander, wandered the house much as she had the day of her arrival.

The hour was beyond late, and as she had presumed, no one was about. A clacking sound at the end of the corridor drew her towards a room she had yet to enter. With quiet steps, she made her way past Charles's study to the last room on the left where she found him standing before a table—a billiards table, his stick propped on the floor beside him. Her brother had a similar room at Pemberley. He and Richard often played late into the night when they had important matters or business to discuss.

At that moment, the man before her—the man she loved—stood with his back to her. His topcoat and waistcoat had been shed and thrown over a piece of furniture to one side and a glass of what had to be brandy rested on the edge of billiards table.

Before she could second guess herself, she entered and placed her hand between his shoulder blades to garner his attention. He gave a bit of a start but did not turn around.

“ You should be asleep ,” he said aloud.

She stepped around to his side. “I cannot sleep when the air is so thick. Do you object to my presence?”

“ That depends why you are here. I made my feelings and wishes known as did you. I believe there is little left for us to discuss. Do you not agree? ”

“Your proposal was an insult.”

He sighed and shifted to lean over the table. After aiming his shot, he drew back the stick and hit the white ball that, in turn, struck another, sending the red ball into the

corner pocket. “ I am offering what I can—what I am able to provide. Would you prefer I lie to you? I have no wish to hurt you. ”

With a hand to his shoulder, she tugged him around. “’Tis too late for that. Every day that you endeavour to separate yourself from me only serves to rip my heart further from my chest.” She levelled him with a hard glare. “And do not dare pretend you do not feel the same. You may not have expressly said what was in your heart, but your eyes give away your every emotion, as did the way you loved me that night at the inn. So do not feed me falsehoods, for I know better. I know you love me as much as I love you or you would never have become so free with me.”

“ Miss Darcy, I am grieved to know I have injured you so. It was never my intention to engage feelings in you that I could not reciprocate— ”

“Do not.” The motions of her words were unforgiving.

“ You may stay at Bathwick as long as you need or wish, but I shall never offer more than what I have. ’Tis the sole way I can protect you in this world .” Her chest caved at the blow his words created, yet his countenance remained impassive. “ If you recall, we never had any understanding .”

“No, we avoided speaking of that, yet you held me and kissed me. We had agreed to take our friendship day by day. You insinuated we could become more when you were ready. Do you not remember how happy we were together in that field of poppies? You have spoken more and smiled more since then. You have even laughed from time to time. Yet, since the inn, you have even gone so far as to avoid looking at me. You would not behave so if you did not—do not care.”

He shook his head. “ Pray, do not —”

“Charles—”

He snapped back from her. “ Pray, do not be so informal with me .”

She clenched her hands into fists until her fingernails dug painfully into her palm. “You were the one who invited me to call you Charles, or have you forgotten?”

“ A mistake on my part. Forgive me .”

His words made her flinch as if another hard strike had been made to that hollow place now forming behind her ribs. “No, I do not believe you.”

“ Believe me or not, I tell the truth .”

The wound his words had formed began to wane, and in its place, another wave of emotion began to rise, coursing through her and making her step boldly up to his chest. “Very well, do as you will, you coward.” She spat the last as she signed.

This time he flinched, but she gave him no time to respond before she strode with purpose from the room. She could not return to her bedchamber. She was not tired in the least, and her entire body hummed in a manner that made her restless. The next room was the library, so she hastened inside and straight to the glazed glass doors that led to the gardens.

Since she had been in the billiards room, a steady rain had begun to fall upon the grounds. Her hand released the latch, and she stepped outside into the night. The air was milder and provided a modicum of respite. As she stepped from the protection of the house, the cool droplets covered her heated flesh and provided some much-needed relief. She plodded down onto a patch of grass off the small terrace and let the blades tickle between her bare toes, her head tipping up towards the sky, her eyes closed. What she needed was to be soaked through—to let the rain wash the heat as well as her confusion and anger away. Perhaps then her heart would not ache so.

Hot tears leaked from her eyes and mingled with the rain droplets upon her cheeks. Charles had once declared that he could be husband to no one, but she had allowed the barriers to her heart to fall, and now, she was paying the price. She could have and should have protected herself, but she had been naïve and thought having love for a time and losing it would be better than not experiencing it at all. Charles had slipped through the cracks in her armour, and he had required little effort. After all, he could be kind and attentive when he was not guarding his own heart. He could also be affectionate. How could a lady not fall for such charms in a gentleman?

She also could not forget how Charles had journeyed to London with her from Hemel Hill and braved the jewellers, despite his discomfort around those who may not have accepted him. He also arranged their picnic in the poppies, which had become more of a nap amongst the brightly coloured flowers. That day, more than any other, had caused her to hope as she had not allowed herself to hope before. She had been a fool.

Her feet carried her to a row of lavender planted around the perimeter of the rose garden, and the scent of the tiny violet buds combined with the larger blooms was fragrant in the warmth of the night. As she started towards a nearby bench, a pull at her elbow turned her around.

“What are you doing?” said Charles aloud. “You will catch your death.”

In the darkness, he would not know what she signed, so she pushed him back and made to continue. The pull to her elbow occurred again, but this time, he made no attempt at speaking but instead, lifted her over his shoulder and began striding back towards the house.

Georgiana beat at his back. “Put me down this instant.” Only he could not hear her demands, so she twisted and pushed in an attempt to free herself, but the endeavour was fruitless. He was too strong.

When they entered the house, she ensured she did not voice her frustration with his treatment lest the entire household be alerted to what was afoot, but she continued to struggle as he carried her up the stairs, which only made him add his other arm so she was secure.

No sooner had she been set back upon her feet than she let her hand swing, slapping him across the cheek with enough force to make a sharp pain shoot through her wrist. “Do not ever treat me so again! Now, get out!” He had brought her to her bedchamber, so now, he was the interloper.

His jaw worked while he stared for a moment, then gave a curt bow and departed without delay. As soon as the door closed, she ripped her drenched nightgown over her head and threw it onto the floor. She used the towelling with the basin to dry herself. After she found another nightgown amongst her belongings, she paced.

Charles strode to his bedchamber and leaned against the door once it was shut. He squeezed his eyes closed and dropped his head back. Of all the stupid, foolhardy things to do. He had told Georgie that she would catch her death, but in truth, the night was so warm and uncomfortable, the cooling effect of the rain was welcome, even for him. He should have just left her to wander the gardens. He could have stood guard from the window of the library to ensure she came to no harm, but no, he had to drag her back inside. The slap had been unexpected, though he welcomed the sting. He deserved it.

What he had not planned was the sight of her when he lowered her to the ground. Her white nightgown soaked through, almost transparent, and clinging to every part of her. The rosy peaks of her nipples were easily discernible as was her navel and lower. His tongue craved the flavour of her bare skin, craved the sweetness of her.

He swallowed hard. She was a tempting siren who would lure him to his demise, and now, he would go mad with wanting her. He had long desired her, but this only added

further kindling to the inferno.

And what was worse was that while his traitorous body had responded to the vision before him, he had almost missed the red-rimmed eyes that had meant she had been crying. He had hurt her yet again. He would need to keep his distance as he had endeavoured to do before. She was not the only one whose heart was engaged. He had gone and fallen in love with her, and only now, after the reminder at the inn of why he should never marry, did he know the truth of his own heart. He had doomed himself to live in misery without her. What other choice did he have? She surely hated him by now.



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The next morning, Georgiana slept late and woke with bleary eyes. She had paced through her anger and frustration for at least an hour before trying to sleep, but while lying in the dark and staring up at the canopy, thoughts of Charles preyed upon her. She could not purge him from her mind no matter how hard she tried, so she tossed and turned until she fell asleep sometime in the early hours of the morning.

Now, she descended the stairs with a slight ache behind her eyes and a throbbing in her temples. She could not remain where she was so obviously unwanted. As soon as she had breakfast, she would seek out Jane and speak to her about returning to Pemberley as soon as possible. At least at home, she did not have the reminders of Charles everywhere. She could concentrate on Alexander and Sophie as well as Richard's recovery...when he finally returned home, that is.

When she entered the breakfast room, the butler peered in and raised his thick brows. "I beg your pardon, miss. When you did not appear early as is your wont, we expected you to take a tray." He hastened in to pull out a chair for her to sit. "What would you like? I am certain whatever you wish, Mrs. Bunting will be happy to provide."

"Coffee and toast will suit me well, thank you."

He tilted his head. "Nothing more? I promise it will not be an imposition."

"Nothing more. I am not very hungry this morning."

After a quick bow, he hurried from the room, and she looked through the row of windows along the wall. The view into the gardens was certainly lovely from this

room. The rain had stopped during the night, so everything had to be sodden, but the bedraggled blooms still provided a wealth of colour. The mud, however, would either keep her to walking the paved paths or remaining indoors all day when she was of a mind to lose herself in a good ride. Even with the damp earth, she would still venture out. She did enjoy the horse Charles had designated for her use. The mare was spirited, but not in a way that was overtly challenging to the rider. The grey wanted no more than to be allowed her head when the circumstances arose.

The coffee helped with the ache in her temples, and as soon as she had finished her toast, she consulted the clock. Jane would be in the parlour meeting with the housekeeper, but not for much longer.

When Georgiana entered, Mrs. Grant stood and curtsied before departing. “I hope I did not disturb the two of you.”

“No, we had just finished going over menus for the week. She is not accustomed to the master residing here for any length of time—the former Lord Bath preferred town—but Charles thought it might be beneficial for me to oversee the house while I am here, just to ensure all is as it ought to be.”

Georgiana nodded while she sat on the sofa. “I wanted to speak to you about returning to Pemberley.”

With a frown, Jane sat back and clasped her hands in her lap. “Return to Pemberley? Why? What has happened? You and Charles were getting on well, so much so that Henry and I spoke to you both on the matter, as you well know. Thus far, we have been a very merry party. I had hoped—”

“I know what you had hoped, but Lord Bath said from the beginning he was not seeking a wife. We became friends for a time, yet he now withdraws from the entirety of our acquaintance. As this is his estate, I believe I should depart as soon as possible.

He should not feel ill-at-ease in his own home due to my presence.”

“He has not indicated you are unwelcome, has he?”

After sighing, she shook her head. “Not directly.” If she spoke of his comments about returning her, it would be impossible without discussing his proposal and the reason behind it. In this instance, lying was a better option.

Jane lifted her eyebrows. “And you are going to leave it at that?”

The words caused Georgiana to give a slight startle. “What would you have me do?”

“Yes, when you first arrived, Charles rejected our matchmaking attempts, but as you said, the two of you formed a friendship of sorts, and he began to shed the melancholy that has lingered around him since losing his hearing. He accompanied you to London, to that jeweller, for Pete’s sake. Even when we were in town, he would do naught but ride Rotten Row early in the morning. He avoided any interaction outside of family, yet he agreed to go to town with you . Do you not believe that to be significant?”

Georgiana rubbed her temples. They were beginning to throb again. “I understand what you are saying, but since the inn, he has been different. What occurred changed matters.”

As Jane bit her lip, she tapped her fingers on the armrest. “He had initially said he could not take a wife because he did not want to be resented. He also felt he could not protect a family. Perhaps what occurred reinforced that belief. Do remember, he remained in your room to ensure you were safe. He may not be pushing you away due to a lack of feeling, but rather that he cares too much and is fearful that he cannot keep you from harm.”

“I agree. But we worked together to keep us both safe. I do not see why he has to be so stubborn about needing help. As Donne said, ‘no man is an island,’ so why he must isolate himself so is beyond my comprehension.”

“You must make him see sense, Georgiana.”

“Me,” she said with an incredulous laugh. “Why would my arguments make any difference? He has rejected every single one at this point.” Why should seeking a life with someone be so difficult?

“Because he is in love with you.” Jane stated it so simply, and of course, Georgiana’s traitorous heart gobbled it up. She was pathetic. She needed to be stronger.

After shaking her head, she stood and moved to the window. “If he loved me, he would not dismiss me so easily.” He would not have carried her upstairs last night and deposited her as he had—as though she was a sack of grain.

“I disagree. If he believes himself to be protecting you, he may be quite capable of pushing you as far from him as possible.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Am I supposed to let him break my heart at every turn?”

“Love is not always easy. You cannot say your brother did not suffer some heartbreak over Lizzy before they came to an understanding. After all, he left Hertfordshire to escape his feelings for her, did he not? If they had not been thrown into company together once again at Lady Vranes’s exhibition, they may have never found their way to each other.” Jane gave a half-smile and toyed with the ring her husband gave her as a betrothal gift.

“After a bevy of callers who all made successful matches with other ladies, I had a

difficult time understanding that Henry really did want me, yet he convinced me. Now, you must convince Charles that it is not an evil to need someone—and that he needs you .”

Georgiana squeezed her eyelids together. She would not cry! “Jane—”

“Do you love him?”

She turned and hugged her arms to herself a little tighter. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it does!” Jane rushed forward and grasped her by the shoulders. “You are likely not comfortable speaking so to me, but I am certain your feelings for him run deep, and if you do truly have such a depth of attachment, you must fight for him, Georgiana. Do not let him go so easily or you will regret it for the rest of your days. Do not run from what could be a wonderful life with him.”

“It is not so simple.” Yet she truly wished to believe it could be so!

“I disagree,” said Jane. “I am certain the two of you love each other, and moreover, he needs you. Without you, he will continue on with these doldrums, and one day, when he reflects upon a life spent alone and with no one to love, he will regret his own recalcitrance. I am thinking of you both when I give you this advice. You must not give up on him. Think of your brother encountering us for the first time at Lady Vranes’s. He made the decision to pursue Lizzy, and they would not be where they are today if he had not risked his heart and made the attempt.”

Georgiana rubbed her forehead. Why did Lizzy and Fitzwilliam’s courtship seem so much simpler than what she now faced? Could she truly convince Charles their love could conquer his fears of the future?

“I require air.” She blinked back the burning of her eyes once again. How did she

have any tears left to cry?

“Give him a fortnight, but do know you must try,” said Jane. “If left to himself, I do not believe he will relent on his own.”

After she sighed, Georgiana made her way to her rooms, donned her sturdiest boots, fetched her spencer and bonnet, and sought out the peace of the gardens. The gravel path was drenched under her feet, and the remnants of the rain dripped from the flowers and trees, providing a music of sorts for her ramble. One attempt at putting her foot in the grass was proof enough of the soggy state of the earth. She could not and would not venture further, but would remain along the tended paths lest she sink.

Her restless spirit wished more than anything to lose herself in a good ride, but would the mud and the muck make for a worthwhile outing?

When she returned to the house, she sought out the pianoforte, the constant movement of her fingers and the melody providing comfort. As much as Charles’s rejections hurt, could Jane be correct? But what if Georgiana tried and failed? Jane did make a point in that if Georgiana returned to Pemberley, she would end up regretting her cowardice, whether it was in a few days or a few years. But did she have the strength to risk her heart once more?

The shadows lengthened and changed in the music room while she continued to lose herself in the well-loved chords and strains of the sonatas she favoured until a familiar gooseflesh travelled along her neck.

Her fingers stopped, and she lifted her head. Charles stood in the doorway, his strikingly beautiful hazel eyes latched onto her with an intensity that made her insides take flight. When he disappeared, she closed her eyes and let out a heavy exhale. She lacked the bravery to approach him today. Last night’s wounds were still too fresh.

Charles closed the door to his bedchamber and dropped back against it. If only he could thrash himself soundly for what he had done to Georgiana. She was this light—this beautiful young lady—and he had made her as morose as himself.

A part of him wished to return to those days at Hemel Hill when he had just begun to believe he could indeed make her his wife, that he was not the burden he had convinced himself he would be without his hearing, and attempt to be happy once more.

At the sight of her at the pianoforte, he had clenched his hands at his sides in an effort not to take her in his arms and kiss away her melancholy. He had raised her hopes once, he would not do so again. Even now, she could be carrying his child. He squeezed his eyes closed and shook himself. He had to find a way for her to accept what he could provide.

“Sir, I had not realised you were here.” Jennings stood just inside the door that led to the dressing room. “Did you require something?”

He blinked and cleared his throat. “ In fact, I do .” He cleared his throat again. Why was this so hard to confess? “ That night at the inn, when I spent the night in Miss Darcy’s chamber, more occurred than should have. ”

Jennings did no more than raise his eyebrows.

“ How close are you with Miss Darcy’s lady’s maid ?”

“We have spoken, my lord, but she does not speak of the lady’s concerns. She is as circumspect a maid as I have ever encountered. I assume you wish to know if Miss Darcy begins to show signs of being with child?”

“ I do .”

Jennings shifted on his feet. “If I may be so bold, why not simply offer her your hand? Your feelings for her are obvious. Below stairs at Hemel Hill, the servants had spoken of the match due to the openness of your countenance for a time.”

“ I did make her the offer of my hand, but with the understanding that she would return to her brother after we wed. She refused .”

His valet’s forehead furrowed. “Forgive me, sir, but anyone with eyes can see she is in love with you as well. Can you imagine how hurtful and insulting such a proposal would be?”

Of course he did! “ I am not ignorant, Jennings .”

“Again, forgive me, but if you did not hold so to your fear, you would accept that the lady could be your salvation and that you can be happy again. I know I have overstepped, but you deserve as much as anyone to have a fulfilling life—” His valet’s mouth clamped shut when Charles faced him. Jennings bowed. “If you will excuse me.”

“ Jennings ,” Charles said.

His valet paused. “You have no need to worry. I shall do as you ask unless you see fit to propose to her in earnest and no longer require me to play the part of spy for you.”

Charles stood in the middle of the room stricken dumb. His valet had never spoken to him with anything less than the utmost respect, yet Charles could not deny that his behaviour demanded the severest reproof. He deserved no less than Jennings’ utmost contempt.



3<sup>rd</sup> August 1815

Georgiana peeled herself up from the mattress and glanced about her bedchamber. The sunlight peeking through the draperies was bright. What time was it? By the foggiess of her thoughts, she would have believed it to be early if not for the angle of the sunbeams upon the floor. She dragged herself up to stand and stepped to the clock on the mantel. Nine? She never slept so late!

“Good morning, miss. You certainly have been sleeping later than is your wont!”

She blinked at Ambrose for a moment. Her maid carried a tray laden with a pot of coffee and toast. Her head spun, and she swayed on her feet for a moment. After a hand to the mantel to steady herself, she belched and swallowed down whatever was rising in her throat. What was wrong with her?

Her foot tapped in a steady cadence. She had barely eaten dinner last night. Perhaps her stomach was protesting the lack of food. As a little girl, if she refused to eat a food she disliked, one of Georgiana’s governesses would send her to bed without her dinner. The result the next morning was always similar to this one—her stomach unsettled until she ate.

After a deep breath, she sat and slowly ate the toast, chewing thoroughly. The texture did not offend, nor did it make matters worse. Somehow, the toast did indeed settle the upset as it had when she was a girl. Well, that settled the matter once and for all. She should make a point of eating more at dinner tonight.

A welcome breeze flowed in from the open windows of her bedchamber, which

beckoned her to come take in the prospect. At Charles's appearance, striding across the lawn, she leaned against the edge of the window as he disappeared around the corner. She had played his game since that night she had confronted him. Why was that? Jane had said she should prove to Charles they could be together—that they could work together to build a life. Mayhap she should finally heed Jane's advice. After all, she was no coward. She had only required some time to lick her wounds.

"I believe I should like to ride. I believe the fresh air would do me good. Pray, fetch my habit."

Ambrose gave a quick bob of a curtsey. "Yes, of course, miss."

Ambrose aided her to dress with her usual efficiency. As she was fastening the back of Georgiana's gown, her maid caught her eye in the mirror.

"Word in the kitchen is that Lord Bath is riding out alone with his steward this morning." He had not been walking towards the stables when she saw him. Of course, that did not mean he would not ride out. He could have been managing some other bit of estate business.

"What of His Grace?" asked Georgiana.

"Lady Clarissa was feverish last night—teething if you ask the housekeeper. His Grace wishes to remain with her and his wife today. I heard Miss Fletcher mention their plans to take a walk in the gardens around the house with all three little girls."

"The duke has been quite solicitous to his brother. He has also been busy between his own estate endeavours and those of Lord Bath. His respite is, I am sure, well deserved."

"Yes, but Lord Bath will have a devil of a time of it today. From what I have learnt of

the steward, he is a simple-minded and unpleasant little man.”

Georgiana allowed her maid to slip the riding coat over the underdress. “How so?”

“Well, I know the housekeeper has been learning to speak with her hands. She and the butler asked the earl’s valet to teach them. Some of the maids have joined in the lessons as well. The steward is the sole person below stairs who refuses. He has said Lord Bath is a dullard.”

Georgiana’s spine went rigid. “He believes Lord Bath an imbecile?”

“Oh, do not believe Lord Bath lacked anyone to defend him. The footmen pulled away the earl’s valet after one heated exchange. I thought Mr. Jennings would strike Mr. Pitt if he had been afforded the opportunity.”

She bit her lip as she once again tapped her foot. Was Charles riding out with the steward alone? What would that accomplish if he was? From what Ambrose claimed, Charles would manage little, or most likely, nothing at all. What could be his purpose?

As Charles neared the stable, his steward followed close behind. The man had been insistent two of the tenants required his presence, yet what could he do? The steward did not sign, and it was not as if Charles could hear these men’s complaints. Moreover, Henry wished to remain behind with Jane and Clarissa, who had been pestered by a fever, and Charles could not begrudge his brother’s need to ensure his family was well. Mrs. Grant, his housekeeper, had insisted the babe was teething, and despite the dangers of cutting teeth, they all hoped it to be true. Even teething was preferable to illness.

Yet, the problem remained that he had no one to translate what would be said by the tenant or his steward, Mr. Pitt. He peered at the man out of the corner of his eye.

Upon his inheriting Bathwick, the steward had claimed a willingness to work with Charles and to continue in his position. The problem was the situation, as it was, was untenable. Despite Henry joining their meetings, the steward had not made an attempt at so much as a “yes” or a “no” without speaking it aloud and requiring Henry to translate. His steward had no intention of learning to communicate and, aside from the occasional note, conveyed whatever was necessary through Henry, who could not and should not have to give up his own concerns to ensure Charles was well.

A week ago, Charles had even demanded additional information on certain business, yet the answers were not handwritten. Mr. Pitt had come to Charles to speak of what he knew. Without Henry remaining at Bathwick indefinitely, the situation was impossible unless Mr. Pitt changed or was replaced. The latter was the preferable option at the moment.

Upon arriving at the stable, his horse, along with that of the steward, had been saddled, but a third horse stood waiting—the horse he had designated for Georgiana’s use. He paused for a moment and stared at the mare, her white blaze striking against her dark, dappled grey coat. The mare was perfect for Georgiana, a good size with an excellent disposition and smooth gait. He had selected her for Georgie before they had even reached Bathwick.

He startled when the lady herself strode into the stable.

“I heard you were to visit tenants,” she said, “but I thought you would have departed by now.”

“No, Mr. Pitt insisted I should return to the house and read a letter first.” One that held no great importance, particularly in comparison to the visits they were to make this morning.

“Ambrose said you were riding out alone with him.”

“Mr. Pitt insisted the matter could not be delayed.”

“And I assume also cannot wait for your brother to come as well?”

“So it would seem.”

She chewed on her cheek. “I can accompany you.”

Her? They were keeping their distance from each other, were they not?

“Last I heard, Mr. Pitt could not communicate with you. Has something changed I am not aware of?” Her eyes and the slight tilt of her head held the hint of a challenge. He either accepted her company and aid, or he allowed his steward to waste his time.

With an exhale, he allowed his shoulders to fall. “No, naught has changed.”

“Then you require someone to translate. I am here to ride. Should you have no desire to solve the matter, I can ride the paths through the hills as I had planned.” Her eyebrows lifted.

What choice did he have? Jane had mentioned Georgie had asked to return to Pemberley, yet his new sister had persuaded her to remain for the time being. His sister had also said the Darcys could not arrange for Miss Darcy’s journey until her brother returned from town and could come for her. Her brother would not have her travel on her own, and Charles could not blame him. What if something happened?

“Well, do we not have tenants to visit?”

He scrubbed his hand across his forehead before bending forward and offering her a boost into her saddle. Had she suppressed a smile as she placed her foot into his laced hands?

While she awaited him and his steward, she steered her mare into some grass outside the stable and rode in large circles. As much as he had been seeking solitude away from her, he required someone's aid. He found himself trusting Mr. Pitt less and less since their arrival at Bathwick. Despite their current predicament, Georgie would never lie to him. That much was certain.

Charles had been acutely aware of her proximity for the entirety of the time they spent together since the inn. Dinners had been interminable. A place deep down pressed him to whisk her away and ignore what was likely best for her. Even now, the urge to retreat to some secluded spot with her was ever-present. He needed her to return home. Her continued presence only made the yearning to keep her with him forever more difficult to ignore.

With a sigh, he brought his horse outside and lifted himself into the saddle. Once the steward was atop his own mount, the man led the way to the east portion of the estate.

They moved at a steady pace but not with such haste that Georgiana could not keep up, and when they reached the small but well-tended cottage in a clearing near the river, the steward led the group in dismounting.

The tenant, a Harold Grigg, emerged from the small stable at the edge of the wood and strode over. His mouth moved as did that of his steward, so Charles looked to Georgiana. She was signing what both men were saying, pointing at them to indicate who was speaking.

“‘Tis John Morris who lives upstream. He dams the river and prevents the water from flowing downstream. I have argued with him that the river feeds all of the tenant farms on this part of the estate, but he insists it is for him to use as he pleases since it flows through his parcel of land first.”

Charles's chin hitched back. This was the dispute the steward insisted he needed to

sort? Had Mr. Pitt even made an attempt to rectify the situation? “What has been done thus far?” asked Charles.

The steward and the tenant were astonished when Georgiana voiced the question; that much was obvious. His man shrugged, then his mouth moved up and down more than once, as though he had difficulty speaking.

“So, what you are saying is that you have done nothing?” asked Georgiana, her hands mirroring what she spoke. “Is it not your job to be tasked with such matters in the absence of the master?” She turned to Harold Grigg. “How long has this been happening?”

“Nigh on six months, miss.”

“And you have let this continue while Lord Bath was recovering with his brother’s family?”

The tenant’s eyebrows lifted while Mr. Pitt became red in the face and his chest puffed as he became more animated. “I have no need to answer to a woman.” Charles could only gape at the words as Georgie signed them.

“I may be a woman, but I am not ignorant of a steward’s duties. I have ridden out with my brother and his own man on a number of occasions while being of aid to Pemberley’s tenants. As I see it, you have ignored a situation, for whatever reason, for Lord Bath to manage upon his return. Now, I want to know why, and how many other frivolous squabbles you have left unattended for your master to repair?”

Charles bit his lips together to keep from letting one side curve at Georgiana’s chastisement of the man. He had never seen her so vehement or forthright. Her eyes flashed and her countenance brooked no opposition. She was a sight to behold.

“I need not answer to you,” the steward replied.

Before the man could stride away, Charles grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back. He pointed to Georgiana before he began to sign. “She speaks for me. Whatever questions she has, you will answer or you will lose your position without reference.” Thankfully, Georgiana showed no hesitation and appeared to translate without delay.

The man’s eyes flared, and he stood at an angle where Mr. Pitt’s vehemence could be witnessed while Georgie translated. “I shall answer to no woman. You should just let me run the estate, since you are of no use. The former Lord Bath let me do as I see fit. Now, I am to answer to a man who is addled in the mind.” Georgie’s hands trembled as she signed the last.

“ Pack your belongings and leave Bathwick ,” Charles said aloud. While he would have preferred not to speak before those he did not know well, no doubt should exist that it was he who was releasing the man and not Georgie. He would not have the former steward’s wrath turned upon her.

Mr. Pitt’s chest puffed out and his complexion turned an almost purple shade before he stormed to his horse. At least the man had not seen fit to argue further.

As soon as Mr. Pitt rode away, Georgiana returned her attention to the tenant. “Forgive us the interruption. Lord Bath is very interested in your concerns and would like to address your problem as soon as may be.”

The tenant looked to him, so he nodded. Then, with Georgiana’s insight and aid, he questioned the man further so he would best know how to solve the dilemma. They assured Mr. Grigg that they would settle the dispute as soon as possible, and he bowed, grasping Charles’s hands as he did so.



“They had said our new master had lost his wits, sir, but I did not want to believe it. The former Lord Bath was hardly here, and you were coming to live on the estate, from what was said at the great house. And thank goodness for you, miss. I fear if left to Mr. Pitt, I would be in dire straits. If not for the abundance of rain this summer, my sheep would not have survived! ’Tis how I have kept them with water to drink.”

“Mr. Grigg,” said Georgiana. “I assure you, Lord Bath is as capable of managing his lands now as before he lost his hearing. Naught has changed but his ability to hear. His mind is as quick as it ever was. We shall come by after visiting Mr. Morris and let you know what happens. Would this be acceptable?”

The man nodded and bowed. “Yes, miss. Quite.”

When they moved along to John Morris’s plot, the man blustered and complained. His cattle required more water than Mr. Grigg’s sheep, which was a ridiculous explanation. The river was not about to run dry! Finally, under threat of removal, Mr. Morris agreed to dismantle the barrier that had been keeping the full current of water from travelling downstream.

After stopping back by Mr. Grigg’s cottage, they returned to the stable and handed off their mounts to the grooms. Georgiana enquired of the steward, who was reported to have returned not long after he had parted from them.

After a genuine smile aimed at him, Georgie carried a lightness to her she had not possessed when they had first met that morning in the stables. She almost danced on her toes with a slight spring, even turning and biting her lip just so at him while she walked backward from time to time. His heartbeat quickened at the happiness etched upon her countenance. She had not appeared so free since coming to Bathwick. That was his fault, of course. He had been hard-pressed to resist her before, but as she was, his hands itched to hold her to him—to make her his once again.

Upon entering the house, Georgiana informed Mrs. Grant of the steward's release. The housekeeper glanced to him for confirmation, and at his nod, hurried off to inform the butler so they could oversee the man's removal. He would require a new steward, and soon, but perhaps, if he could find one that would work with him instead of fighting him at every turn, he could manage without aid.

Georgie removed her bonnet and coat and handed them to a maid, glancing back at him through her lashes with another one of those smiles that made the blood course through his veins. She had not been as animated when they had first met in the stable, but with each encounter of the day, her confidence had grown and her mood had lifted. He did not need words to understand what was before him.

After handing his coat to the footman, he was helpless not to follow her to the library, where she turned to him with a wide smile.

“What has made you so pleased with yourself?”

“I do not know if I am pleased with myself as much as I am simply happy. Despite all that has occurred between us, we spent the day together—working together for the benefit of your tenants. From what I have heard of Mr. Pitt, I cannot care for the man, so I am also relieved he will not remain. You deserve better than he was willing to give.” She shook her head. “I do not know if I could muster the will to confront a man again as I just did, but I must admit to—”

The words died on her tongue since he claimed her mouth, his arms wrapping around her and holding her to him tightly. He could no longer resist the picture she presented—carefree and revelling in her success. As he pulled her against him, she did not make an effort to withdraw but clung to him as he walked them into his study, kicking the door closed behind him.

He turned her around and pressed her against the hard wooden panel, one of his hands

wandering up her side to cradle her delicate throat. His lips tasted the soft flesh under her jawline before nipping her chin and taking her mouth in another passionate kiss.

Before today, he would have never thought an assertive lady would have appealed to him so, but to watch Georgie defend him as she had—to see her exert herself for him had been his undoing. Her satisfaction at being of aid to him only increased his ardour.

His palm found the soft, plump mound of her breast and he kneaded. God, he was desperate to touch her—to make her as consumed with him as he was with her at that moment. His fingers found the buttons at the back of her gown, but before he could release a single fastening, he was being pushed away. He glanced down to where her palms were flush to his chest.

She shook her head. “As much as I love you, I want more than you desire to give me. I thought I could accept the part of yourself you originally offered and be satisfied, but I was wrong. If you are not willing to put aside your fears and spend your life with me, then I shall not continue to press you, but I shall not allow more than a friendly association. I can only take so much heartbreak.”

Her small hands cradled his cheeks, drawing his attention from where it had fallen to his feet back to her face. “Whether you accept it or not, I love you more than I have ever loved anyone or anything. I want to be with you as you are. I do not care if you can hear, or if you can protect me. Should we require it, we can hire those who will ensure our safety. You are no less in my eyes and in my heart. I want none but you. You only need choose to accept me since I am not perfect either—no one is.”

“I disagree. I believe you are all that is lovely and good.”

“Then your feelings for me have made you blind.” One side of her lips curved as she toyed with the buttons on his waistcoat. “Charles, we do need to talk as we once did.

If only we had a field of poppies. We seemed to do so well there.”

She kissed his cheek, though she pulled away before he could reciprocate the gesture. The moment she departed, he slumped onto the sofa and scrubbed his face with his hand. He was a despicable human being. He should not have touched her in the first place—should not have even flirted with the idea of marrying her. She deserved the world, and all he could give her was Bathwick. She deserved more.

7<sup>th</sup> August 1815

Charles set down his pen and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He was so fatigued, his eyes seemed as though sand had found its way in to irritate them. Nevertheless, he had immersed himself in his ledgers and the business of the estate in an effort to divert his mind from Georgiana. But the ploy had yet to work. Instead, his mind spun incessantly, and he longed with every bit of his being to seek her out.

His heart was quite clear on the matter: it wanted her regardless of what his mind insisted was the eventual outcome—the reality of their situation. More than once, he had made to find her—to succumb to his feelings—but eventually, he would clench his hands into fists and return to his study to find oblivion in a glass or three of brandy.

He shook himself. This would not do!

Clarissa's fever, though never severe, had broken, and Henry had accompanied him on rides around the estate since that day she had been of aid to him. Much to Charles's surprise, his brother, weeks ago, had dispatched letters to friends and family in the hopes of finding another steward who was not averse to working with a man who was deaf. Henry had not mentioned his queries to Charles in the event his enquiries bore no fruit, but Lord Richmond had penned an immediate response with the suggestion of his under-steward. The man had arrived just after luncheon and had proven a pleasant surprise indeed. He even knew how to sign.

His now steward, Mr. Jasper, possessed a brother who was born not quite deaf, but did not possess enough hearing to get by without learning to speak with his hands. As

it happened, the brother had attended the Braidwood Academy for the Deaf and Dumb [6] in London, and subsequently, his family learnt the art.

Thus far, Mr. Jasper seemed eager to fulfil his role and for the first time, had accompanied Charles that day without the benefit of Henry. The conversations with the tenants had gone exceptionally well. So well, it seemed Henry would be free to return to Clitheroe before the end of the summer.

Of course, his brother's departure would mean Georgie would leave with them to return to Pemberley. A piercing pain shot through his chest at the thought of her leaving, but what else could he do? She might even depart before if her brother could make the journey. Word had arrived yesterday that Darcy had returned to Pemberley a se'ennight ago with Colonel Fitzwilliam who was now recuperating. His initial injuries had been severe, but he had survived and was, thankfully, on the mend.

Charles was too restless and fatigued to continue with his ledgers, yet it was dark outside and raining—again. This summer had been wetter than the few before it. Hopefully, the kitchen garden as well as their other plantings would not suffer from the surfeit of water.

After pouring a glass of brandy, he wandered from his study into the library. A book rested on the sofa. He lifted it. *The Romance of the Forest*. Jane read mostly in her sitting room while Georgie, who was accustomed to using the library at Pemberley, would sit with her feet tucked under her and nibble on her lip while she read novels. She had once claimed a preference for Radcliffe, had she not?

With a great exhale, he continued to the music room and trailed his fingers along the Broadwood grand Georgie played daily. She did not know he had happened upon her practicing two or three times in the past week. He loved to watch her graceful movements while she performed, swaying as her fingers nimbly glided across the keys.

He turned his back on the instrument, his eyes wandering up the staircase. Georgie had smiled at him as she had come down that morning for breakfast. He swallowed the last of the brandy in his glass and returned to his study. Even if Georgie left with Henry, she would be a spectre at Bathwick, who would remain the rest of his days. He would regret her. He could not avoid the grief that was sure to follow if he continued to push her away.

His legs carried him up the stairs and again up the next set that brought him to the family wing. When he entered his bed chamber, his valet made quick work of helping him remove his clothes and leaving his dressing gown on the bed.

The water in the basin was warm, and a part of him cursed his valet for being as efficient as he was. The chill of cold water would do a great deal to shock some of the restlessness from his flesh, yet it was not to be.

Once he slipped into his dressing gown, he opened the doors to the small balcony off his room. Due to the constant rain, the night air indoors was stagnant. No breeze flowed in through the windows, and the muggy air was thick and a struggle to draw into his lungs.

He sipped his brandy and let his gaze roam over the dark gardens. His rooms, as well as those of the mistress's suite, had a prospect of the rose garden with its borders of lavender. In the summer sun, the view was stunning, and in ideal weather, one could see the lake in the distance.

He stepped to the edge of where the rain fell. The line where the roof protected him from the drizzle was clearly noticeable on the stone beneath his feet and allowed him to remain dry while taking in the view down the side of the house. His gaze paused, and his entire body stilled.

Georgie stood on her own balcony, further out since her face was turned up into the

shower. In the dim light from the doors to her bedchamber, she was not clearly visible, but the rain was heavier than a mere mist. She would not need to be in the weather for long to be soaked through.

Without even setting his glass down, he strode from his room down a floor to Georgie's. He did not knock but walked inside and straight to the balcony doorway.

“What are you doing?” he said aloud.

She whirled about with wide eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“You will catch your death.” He placed his drink on a nearby chest of drawers without removing his gaze from her.

A slight laugh bubbled from her throat. “You said that the last time I was in the rain. Naught came of it. The night is not cold enough for me to take a chill.”

When she dropped her hands to her sides, his heart began to beat through his sternum at the picture she presented. Her nightgown was drenched and clinging to every part of her. He swallowed hard at the sight of her rosy nipples, easily discerned through the thin white cotton. Even the juncture of her legs was visible. He shook himself. She was trying to kill him. She had to be.

“I insist you come in and dry yourself at once.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Do you mean to frighten me by making such forceful signs?”

“Will it make you come in out of the rain?” Without laying hands on her, how was he supposed to get her inside?

“No. The cool shower is refreshing.”



He gripped his hands into fists. She was going to make him scream. At a sudden tug to one of his arms, he was pulled into the rain.

“There, now you will be wet as well.”

He flinched at the first drops, and she laughed again. “On a few occasions, Lizzy and I have walked about the gardens of Pemberley during a shower, especially during inordinately hot weather. Mrs. Reynolds has always expressed her disapproval upon our return, but we never took ill. After all, we never do so when it is cold.”

His shoulders dropped, and he shook his head. “ I cannot argue with you, can I? ” He raked his fingers through his hair. “ I cannot do this anymore; I am done quarrelling .”

“I beg your pardon?” Her eyebrows drew down in the middle.

“ It is all too difficult—trying to protect you; to keep my love for you contained so I do not ruin your life .”

“You would never ruin my life.”

“ I suppose we shall find out then. Georgiana Darcy, I have been in love with you since we napped together in that field of poppies. As much as I should let you go, I am helpless to continue as I have. I cannot breathe, I cannot eat—I cannot live without you. I am miserable when I am apart from you. I know not what else to do but make you the offer of my hand. Would you do me the honour of being my wife? ”

Before he could react, she had leapt forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his. She laughed between kisses as his arms enfolded her waist. Her body fit in his arms as though she was meant to be part of him. Whether they were doing what was right or not, he was weary of resisting his love for her. His heart

begged to be happy. The only recent instances of contentment for him had been in her company. If she had departed Bathwick a fortnight ago, he would have eventually run after her to fetch her. He was too weak to withstand their separation.

As they parted, his gaze left her face and made its way down to her toes and back up. She frowned and glanced down, her hand trailing between her breasts and resting on her stomach. It was no wonder he kept looking down; her nightgown was almost transparent. A part of her startled at the instinct to cover herself, yet he had seen her breasts as well as the rest of her when they were together at the inn. Her cheeks were aflame at the memory of his hazel eyes watching her while she came undone.

Her breasts became heavy, and an ache formed between her legs. He had tried so hard to ignore his feelings for her. Regardless of how it injured her, he had behaved so out of love. He cared or he would not have fought his own heart as he had.

His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. He was not wearing his usual waistcoat and topcoat. Instead, he wore a dark silk dressing gown that was becoming wetter by the minute. His sizeable feet were also bare.

She stepped forward and slid her hands up his chest, embracing him around his neck while pressing herself to him. He was strong and solid against her. She brushed her lips against his neck in a soft movement that made him stiffen.

“Georgie,” he said in almost a groan.

She kissed his jaw, his chin, and before she could lay claim to the tip of his nose, he stopped her with his mouth upon hers. His confident lips moved over hers without hesitation while his tongue licked and caressed hers in a way that made her breathless.

His fingers dug into her hips and anchored her to him while his kisses became more

and more consuming. One palm covered her breast and began to knead and toy with her nipple while the other cupped her rear and held her tightly against his hips. A hard object pressing into her lower belly made that ache in her core become more of a throb. When his mouth covered her breast over the thin fabric of her nightgown, she fought to remain standing. She would fall at his feet if he continued as he was.

She wanted to be closer—no, she needed to be closer! Her fingers found the tie of his dressing gown and released it in order to get her hands inside. When her palms met with the warmth of his bare chest, he gasped in response.

His chest muscles quivered under her touch, as did those along his sides, as she wrapped her arms around him once more. In her embrace was where he belonged. He had finally asked her to marry him! They would belong to each other for the rest of their lives.

At her feet being swept out from under her, she inhaled sharply to find herself scooped up into his arms and carried inside. He deposited her near the bed and gathered her nightgown, separating just long enough to draw it over her head. The garment was tossed away as he drew her flush to him. She pressed her forehead against his chest and drowned herself in the remnants of his cologne. This was where she belonged. As much as she had always cherished Pemberley, this was home.

She kissed the centre of his chest then moved to bestow another over his heart while his fingers threaded into her hair. He had removed her plait, though she had been unaware of it until he combed her locks over her shoulders.

After nuzzling the soft skin over his heart, she mimicked what he had done to her before and grazed her teeth over his nipple. What she desired more than anything was his lips upon hers, so she rose to her tiptoes so their mouths would come together—so she could express every feeling, every emotion coursing through her.

They kissed while he lifted her just enough to lay her back on the bed. Their bare flesh met once again when he moved over her, and she gave a sharp inhale at the contact that became more intense with each touch. She needed to be closer! As much as she could, she curled against him in an effort to become so. Her leg wrapped around his to urge him to come into her. She wanted him, all of him. No, they were not yet wed, but she would not hold back from the one person she loved more than anything and anyone.

She could have wept when his lips left hers, but he continued to kiss down her chest, trailing his tongue and nipping at her hip bones before settling between her legs. What was he about? She lifted up onto her elbows as he dipped down and licked until he reached that place that throbbed and began to suckle. With a harsh cry, her head dropped back, and she gripped the coverlet under her. What was this madness? She could not think or speak if she tried. He had taken control of her body and soul, and she would be hard-pressed to stop him—not that she wanted to.

Her breathing began to resemble panting and her heartbeat quickened until it was so rapid she could have been running. The more he bestowed his attentions upon her core, the more insensible she became. Then, she shattered and floated into the heavens. Meanwhile, he continued his ministrations until all she could do was sob.

“Pray, no more. I cannot take it.”

When he came up over her, she reached for the hardness between his legs, but he stopped her by the wrist. “Not now; I will spend if you touch me.”

“More,” she signed.

His mouth came down over hers again while he rubbed the tip of himself through her folds. Did he not understand? She would expire if he did not do something!

She reached down and grasped his buttocks, drawing him closer, as that part of him finally began to push inside. He stopped and made to withdraw some, but she grasped his buttocks and pulled him into her until he was fully seated.

With a groan, he began to move while she lifted her hips to ensure she took every bit of him on every thrust. While their time together at the inn had been special, this was more. She had never experienced anything so intimate. They had at last become betrothed, so as close as they had been before, they would now be one forever. He kissed her, and it was all she could do not to weep at the tenderness of the moment.

Before long, her insides coiled and tightened in a way that was familiar. Much to her dismay, he lifted some from her and dropped his forehead to her shoulder. When she followed his gaze, he was watching himself as he plunged into her, then drew back out and repeated the motion again and again. She could not help staring with him, the sight of them together creating a burn that threatened to engulf her.

He suckled at her neck as his movements became more forceful, demanding more and more of her, yet he could never take more than she desired to give him. She would hand over every last part of herself to him if he demanded it.

Her toes curled and her ankles flexed as she was being sucked into the surging tide. Her head fell back against the mattress. She lacked the strength to hold its weight.

He increased his pace as her body succumbed a piece at a time and a cry overtook the sounds of their coupling—or was it a sob? She was too overcome to know, as she could only let the most exquisite sensations engulf her once again.

Charles pressed his cheek to hers as his breaths became ragged. Moments later, he bellowed into her hair and collapsed atop her. She brought her arms around him and stroked her fingers through his hair while tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I will love you forever.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

Charles inhaled deeply as his eyes fluttered open. A sliver of light filtered through the small gap in the draperies, and he blinked as he stretched his legs towards the foot of the bed. Through that same gap, water droplets could be discerned trailing down the window. He closed his eyes once more. No one but the servants would be up and about so early this morning, and he had no desire to rise and pry himself away from Georgie just yet.

She nestled further into him, and he slid the hand upon her back down to the curve at the small of her waist. As much as he had fought this from the beginning, then again after the happenings at the inn, he was lost without her. How had a slip of a young lady crept into his heart so indelibly? She was so interwoven into his very soul at this point that he could not remove her without permanent and ruinous damage to himself.

He brushed her long locks from her face with his fingers. She appeared so peaceful and innocent in repose, when in truth, she had turned his world upside down.

His morning erection was made painful by her position sprawled atop him, her breasts were crushed against his chest, and her leg was thrown over his waist. It was an exquisite torture.

Her fingers flexed before curling into his shoulder. Her back rose with her own deep inhale as she turned so her lips brushed against the centre of his chest before wandering across and nipping at his nipple.

He struggled to keep from grabbing her and taking her mouth with a fierceness that was new to him. Last night, he had been rougher than was his wont. The reality of her in his arms and of being inside of her had been his undoing. She had not complained

or seemed averse to his attentions, yet he had no wish to hurt her.

When her lips finally reached his, he welcomed them and the rest of her when she straddled him, the heat of her core against the length of him that was so desperate to be inside of her once more.

Their lips tangled and their tongues met and caressed each other. A jolt of pleasure ripped through him when her hips began to grind down upon him. His head dropped back. She would drive him to madness with little effort if she continued.

She licked and grazed her teeth against his earlobe. He gritted his teeth. Somehow, he needed to restrain himself. As much as he longed to adjust and bury himself in her, her innocent exploration of him was worth the delay. He would not deny himself or her the experience. His fingers dug into her hips and lifted his own to meet her in an effort to aid in her endeavour.

As her body spiralled towards her peak, she paused in her ministrations and rose enough to quicken her movements against him. Her fingernails dug into the muscles of his chest, her head was tilted back and her mouth gaped open, chasing her release. The sight of her so uninhibited was a wondrous thing. She took his breath away.

He met her with each and every stroke until her eyes rolled, and she froze over him. With a quick shift, he slid inside of her easily and sat up so he could wrap her in his embrace.

He supported her head so he would watch every expression upon her countenance. As she was, she was the most incredible sight he had ever seen, her pleasure writ upon her face. He would never tire of it!

His arms lifted her and drew her back down on him over and over while she struggled to regain her wits. He desired her this way—so overcome by him. She was beautiful,



and she was his.

Somehow, she managed to draw slightly back from him. “More,” she signed.

“ I do not want to hurt you.” He had been holding off his release, so he could not be sure how clear his words had been.

She shook her head. “You cannot.”

He was bereft of her when he disengaged and guided her to lay on her stomach. He put a pillow under her hips, then covered her with his own body as he loved her once more.

His lips kissed every bit of her neck and shoulder while he buried himself to the hilt. Her chest made an abrupt lift, so he rose just enough to see her face while he loved her.

“ Are you well?”

Her free hand reached around to grasp his hip and attempted to prevent his withdrawal. At her unspoken plea, he plunged deep and held nothing back. No distress appeared upon her countenance. Instead, her expression matched her earlier peak—her mouth opened and her eyelids squeezed shut. Her hand interwoven with his squeezed his while her fingers dug into his hip without mercy.

He could not take it! She tightened around him until he thought he would expire from the pleasure, then she went rigid, her passage mercilessly attempting to milk his release from him. In the end, he could not hold off his peak and followed her over that precarious edge, burying his face against her shoulder as he attempted to muffle whatever sound he was making.

When he returned to the moment at hand, his entire weight was upon her while they both breathed heavily. No part of him wanted to move. Her every delicious curve was pressed against him, and he was still snuggled deep inside of her. Unfortunately, he had to be crushing her.

No sooner had he disengaged than she rolled over and moved into his embrace.

He kissed her, though with a gentle touch. They needed to rise. It would not do to get caught up in each other again. They would be late to breakfast. While he would marry Georgie without question, he would not see her embarrassed or humiliated by Jane and Henry discovering that they had broken with propriety.

After one last press of his lips to her forehead, he drew back. “ We need to rise and dress. I would not want to be caught thus by my brother. ”

She pulled back. “I do not want to leave.” She then nestled back against him.

As much as his own wishes matched hers, they would both be disappointed it seemed.

He rolled to the window side of the bed and rose. He put on his dressing gown and picked up Georgie’s still damp nightgown, hanging it near the fireplace. Unless a fire was lit, the garment would never dry.

When he turned, he frowned at Georgie frantically trying to wrap herself in the sheet. “ What is it? ”

“Ambrose knocked on my dressing room door. She never knocks.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “ She knows I am here .”

Georgie nodded. “I am certain of it.” She bustled towards the door and cracked it.

Once or twice, she glanced at him while she spoke.

“Ambrose said the servants are up and about. She took the liberty of fetching your valet. He awaits you in the servants’ passage to ensure you reach your bedchamber without being seen.

After nodding, he drew her into his embrace and kissed her forehead. “ I shall pen a letter to your brother today, requesting his consent for us to wed. I wish to do so as soon as can be arranged .”

“I would marry you tomorrow if we had the license and Fitzwilliam present.”

He kissed her once more, then made his way to the servants’ passage where his man indeed awaited him. They were required at one point to wait while the housekeeper passed on her way back down to the kitchens, but otherwise, he had an uneventful return.

Charles dressed and hastened down to the breakfast room where Henry was already seated, a footman stationed to the side of the room.

“The weather is still dreadful,” said Henry. “If the rain continues as it has, I fear we may need to contend with flooding by the river.”

“The bank is rather high, though I suppose we have had a lot of wet weather of late.” As soon as Charles stopped signing, Henry returned his attention to the newspaper before him, so Charles rapped on the table. “I intend to pen a letter to Darcy today. I shall request his permission to marry Miss Darcy.”

His brother grinned, stood, and before Charles could fully stand, embraced him. When he pushed him to arm’s length, Henry shook his head. “You were being so stubborn. I suppose she finally wore you down, but I am glad of it. You deserve every

happiness, and Georgiana's love for you is obvious in how she looks at you."

"I still worry I shall fail her."

"Whether we have hearing or not, we all stand to fail our wives somehow. I feel I failed to protect Jane when she was taken by Simon. She is too good and has reassured me that I am not at fault, but a part of me still believes I am responsible."

"Simon would have found a way, even if it meant somehow killing you, Jane, Emmeline, and Juliana to gain the dukedom and the wealth he so coveted. When we were at the inn, I could not hear the person at the door. Georgiana had to tell me he was there and rattling the latch."

"But I am certain you had your pistol aimed at the door in the event he entered, did you not?" Henry levelled a direct gaze at him.

"I did, and Georgiana insists I would have protected her if they had gained access, but that she had to warn me of what was happening was madness."

After nodding, his brother relaxed into his chair. "I can imagine how frustrating it must have been, but it makes you no less capable."

"She has said it does not."

"Then maybe you should believe the lady," said Henry. "I heard how she helped you settle the dispute between Harold Grigg and John Morris. Now that you have a steward who can speak to you, you should not require her aid in that quarter."

"No, although I do not believe I would mind her assistance." He could not help one corner of his mouth from twitching upwards.

Jane entered with Clarissa in her arms. The child chewed on her chubby little fist, her fingers shiny from her slobber. “Ah, Charles, your niece was enquiring of you this morning. You have not held her in some time, you know?” She barely managed to sign with the babe still on her arm before she held the child out to him.

He took Clarissa and set her in his lap while Jane dropped into the closest chair and poured herself a cup of tea. “She has not wished to be put down for the past four hours. Lizzy had said teething could be a trial, but I confess I did not believe her.”

Clarissa looked up at him with wide eyes. He gave a little wave, and the child gave a wide grin.

He looked closer. “Jane,” he said. “I think I see the tooth.”

Jane’s and Henry’s chairs scraped along the floor and they hastened to where he sat.

With gentle hands, Henry tipped his daughter’s chin up.

“Where?” asked Jane. Charles took Jane’s finger and ran it along the babe’s bottom gum.

Jane gasped. “I feel it. Look, Henry, there.” She pointed to the faint white spots where the first parts of the tooth were emerging.

His brother lifted Clarissa and held her over his head as his mouth moved. Henry’s countenance boasted of a wide grin while he, no doubt, cooed over his daughter.

“He has told her ‘Well done’ as though she pierced her own tooth through her gums,” Jane signed while smiling.

After nestling Clarissa back into his arms, Henry kissed Jane’s cheek as Georgie

appeared at the end of the table, her eyebrows raised.

“I seem to have missed some momentous occasion.”

“Clarissa’s first tooth has come,” signed Charles.

“Oh, I am so glad we have no need to worry over fevers any longer.” Georgie hastened forward so Henry could show her his daughter’s most impressive tooth. Once she had made a fuss over the babe, Henry placed Clarissa back in Charles’s lap.

“I understand my recalcitrant brother has finally proposed marriage.”

Jane’s countenance was such that she surely gasped. “Why did you not say so sooner?” She backhanded Charles’s arm, making him flinch.

“Why does that require you to hit me?”

She gave a dismissive wave. “I did not hurt you.”

Georgie glanced at them each in turn. “Charles has not yet requested Fitzwilliam’s blessing—”

“Which he will give, or he would not have allowed you to come,” said Jane.

“We shall never persuade an express rider to journey to Pemberley in this weather.” Georgie looked to the windows with her lips pressed together.

“Has your brother written anything new of the colonel?”

“His leg seems to be improving, yet the physician believes he will always have a limp. Of course, no one can know with any certainty until Richard is able to walk on

it again. Fitzwilliam regrets moving him to Pemberley so soon, but with the disease spreading in Seven Dials and St. Giles, he feared Richard taking ill should they have remained in London.”

“At least the colonel did not lose the leg,” said Henry.

“I do not believe he would have lived if he had.” Georgiana shook her head. “He has been a useful sort for his entire life. He would not do well confined or requiring a crutch to get around.”

Henry clasped his hands and rubbed them together. “Well, as soon as we get the two of you wed, Jane, Emme, Jules, and I shall return to Clitheroe. I am certain you will be anxious to be rid of us anyhow.”

Charles’s gaze caught that of a pink-cheeked Georgie’s. Henry’s words were never truer than in that moment, yet Charles would be pleased if they were already wed so he would bear no shame in whisking her away to his bedchamber.

11th August 1815

Once again, the pitter-patter of rain against the window roused Georgie from a deep slumber. She turned her head and stared at the rivulets of rain coursing down the window. When would the cursed weather improve? They had managed to send out an express rider to Pemberley the day after Charles had finally proposed, then, of course, the weather had turned, and the rain began anew—that time more of a misty nuisance rather than a true shower.

After two days of poor weather, the express rider had returned, having ridden through the mud with Fitzwilliam's response. Her brother, Elizabeth, Richard, and the children were supposed to arrive today, yet whether they would choose to travel in this much rain was certainly in question at the moment.

She shifted and toyed with Charles's hair. After his proposal, he had insisted they behave and not sleep in each other's beds until they wed; however, before midnight, he had appeared in her bedchamber complaining of an inability to sleep without her. She had experienced the same affliction, but how was that possible? They had only spent two nights together. Years or even weeks would be required for the presence of the other to be so necessary, would it not?

Yet, these moments in the quiet before he woke were some of her favourites. The way he held her against him or nuzzled her in his sleep spoke of his affection for her. This morning, he slept with his head pillowed on her breasts, one arm nestled against her side and the other splayed out from his body.

He groaned and rubbed his face against her. Without warning, his mouth closed over



her nipple, making her gasp and clutch at his russet locks. He lavished attention on one before moving to its twin while his hands wreaked havoc on the rest of her. She could lose her mind with the sensations he evoked in her, but she welcomed the mindlessness of it all.

At the moment, she needed the connection with him she so craved and cradled his cheeks in her palms to bring his mouth to hers. He had become adept at awakening every part of her and making her ache for him in ways she had never imagined possible. From the moment he touched her so intimately, she became desperate to have him inside of her. When he finally joined with her, she could have wept in relief. He was hers, and that was all that mattered.

Charles's body was a lead weight as he recovered. This was the first morning he had awoken in such a position, and if asked, he would have to admit the advantage of having Georgie's breasts as a pillow. With his morning erection begging for release, he had been roused in the best way imaginable.

"It is raining again," he said aloud. "Do you think they will wait out the storm?" As much as he despised moving and separating himself from her glorious flesh, he lifted onto an elbow so she could respond.

"I would guess Fitzwilliam will remain at the inn until the weather improves. He will take no chances with Lizzy, Alexander, and Sophie. I doubt Richard will travel ahead of them. He is still recovering."

"I hope your brother will not make us endure the usual engagement period."

"He had no wish to wait when he was betrothed, so I would hope not." She took him by the cheeks and guided him to kiss her. As it so often did, the kiss deepened until he rolled away.

“ We cannot. We must make an appearance at breakfast .”

She sat up and faced him, the sheet falling from her chest and allowing him to admire her beauty. “I shall do what I must to be married sooner rather than later. I tire of hiding and sneaking through the servants’ passages.”

“ I do as well .”

Georgie startled. “Someone is knocking.”

Charles rose and donned his dressing gown. While they had stayed in her bedchamber at first, the past two nights had been spent in his. He drew the bedcurtains that faced the dressing room before opening the door to Jennings who wrung his hands.

“ What is it? ”

“Sir, Mr. Jasper has requested your urgent presence in your study. He has had word of flooding on the estate near the river. Your brother is being awoken as well.”

After sighing, he nodded and lifted his hands to sign. At times, it seemed quicker than trying to speak it all. “With the surfeit of rain lately, we have been waiting for the river to break its banks. Pray, tell them I shall be down directly. Once Miss Darcy is dressed, she will require aid to return to her rooms.”

“I shall let her maid know,” said Jennings.

As soon as he closed the door, Georgie slipped through the curtains. “I heard. How bad do you think it will be?”

“I cannot know until we go out and see. If the water has risen too high, the tenants who live along the river could lose their homes. I just hope they do not lose any

livestock or their crops. Most of the sheep and horses have access to water, and the fields closest are planted. The ground is more fertile, and the nearby water supply is helpful if we have a spell of dry weather.”

He handed her the nightgown she had worn to his rooms the night before. A part of him protested when she covered herself, but as much as his heart despised leaving her, he had no choice in the matter. He had to see to his tenants.

Jennings made quick work of helping him dress before he met the steward and Henry in the hall. His brother stared at him for a moment, and Charles frowned in return. The way he regarded him was odd, and he could not place the expression.

Their mounts were in front of the house waiting, so together, the three of them climbed atop and galloped in the direction of the Grigg farm as Harold Grigg’s parcel of land was the closest.

Charles glanced to the portion of the river that was some distance behind Bathwick. The water had obviously swelled over the banks, but not enough to reach the great house. It had some distance to go before that would occur. Hopefully, the rain would abate before they had a flood of such dire proportions.

Harold Grigg was out in the storm when they arrived, moving what livestock he could into the small stable, which was situated near the cottage, uphill from the river. His livestock should be safe if he could gather them all inside.

The three of them dismounted and helped Mr. Grigg bring in a couple of goats, another horse, and a milk cow.

“If the sheep have any sense, they will find a place to shelter from the storm away from the river,” said Mr. Grigg while his steward and Henry translated.

His steward pointed to the water. "The river is not terribly swollen here, yet the reports from upstream are more severe."

Charles glanced at the banks that were higher than usual, yet not as bad as he would have expected. "Likely due to the damming." He had told Morris to remove the dam, but by the looks of matters, he had not done so.

"When the obstruction clears, it will be dangerous," said Henry.

"We should continue on." His steward waved towards their horses, which were tied inside the stable while they had helped Mr. Grigg.

The next farm was also affected by the dam, and again, the men aided the tenant in bringing in the animals that had been outside in the weather. At the moment, the cottage and stable were not flooded, but if the water from upstream was released, the resulting deluge would wipe away the man's home.

As soon as the draft horse had been secured, Jasper looked at the sky before turning his attention to the man. "We are certain John Morris has not yet removed the dam on his property. When it gives way, your cottage could be swept away by the water. I would take your family and shelter from the storm in the barn. You will be safer there. The ground is higher."

"You may come to the great house if need be," said Charles while his steward translated. "We can find a place where you and your family can remain until this subsides."

The man shook his head. "I cannot leave the animals, but if the weather worsens, I shall send my wife and son to the house. I thank you for your offer."

Upon reaching the next farm, it seemed they had happened upon a number of tenants

working together to bring their animals to safety. Mr. Long from the next parcel over was wrestling with a stubborn ox that insisted upon remaining knee-deep in the mud.

Henry, Charles, and Jasper all secured their mounts and waded into the mire to be of aid, his brother and steward taking positions along the beast's chest to push on either side while Charles rushed around the back to push at the animal's rump. He shoved with all his might, but the animal would not budge. The stubborn beast did not know what was good for him. They shoved again and again. Blast it all! The beast could rot here if he so chose!

One more great heave forced the ox to take one step when Henry's entire body whirled around. "Leave it! Get out of here!" His signing was so careless. Why was he frantic?

Charles straightened. "What is happening?"

His brother grabbed his arm and pulled with so much force a pain ripped through his shoulder. Before he could follow, he was off his feet, engulfed in a torrent travelling at great speed. He shed the weight of his greatcoat and fought his way to the surface to take a huge gulp of air, only to be sucked back under. John Morris's dam had surely broken. It was the sole explanation for this. None other existed.

Something hard struck him in the chest, purging the air from his lungs, which now burned. Air! He needed to breathe! He dug towards the surface as the current thrust him upwards. An enormous gasp filled his lungs with some much-needed air while he swung his arms to take great pulls of water. He needed to make it to the side!

The current whipped him around. His attempts at swimming did nothing, so he attempted to float upon the rapids. A branch extended over the river just ahead. This could be his sole opportunity to reach the safety of solid ground. He reached for the limb, yet he was moving so fast, his fingers barely brushed the bark before he was

swept under and past. Damn!

Once again, he was tossed, this time plunging back into the depths of the racing water. Bubbles surrounded him. Damn! How was he supposed to know which way was up? He took great pulls of water in the hopes of making his way to the surface once again. His stomach lurched when he seemed to fall over a cliff, a sharp blow to his back making him wince as he landed. The drop was not significant. He had to have plummeted over Miller's Falls, a small cascade with a rocky ledge and great boulders where he would have landed—those were what likely struck his back. The spot was more picturesque than dangerous in good weather. Now, in its current state, it was treacherous.

He scrambled once again in an attempt to breach the surface, his lungs threatening to explode if he was not allowed to breathe. His arms flailed to remove his topcoat and boots, and he kicked with all of his might. They had become sodden and were weighing him down. He needed desperately to shed himself of them lest he drown. He could not drown!

Georgie! His arms began scrambling for purchase once more. He had been impulsive in claiming Georgie for his own, and now, would she pay the price? She could already be with child. If he died, who would protect her? How he wished he was still lying with her in his embrace!

His hands grasped at anything he could find, but they only slid along the rocks, which were slick. His fingernails hurt from him clawing in an attempt to grasp any surface he could. His lungs were once again begging for air, but no matter how hard he tried, the surface was unattainable.

Every part of him ached with the effort of fighting the current, but he continued to struggle. He had to return to Georgie!

A moment later, a piercing pain tore through his skull, and he knew no more.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

Georgiana held the last chord of the sonatina for a moment longer before releasing the keys. Now, what should she play next?

As soon as she had returned to her bedchamber that morning, Ambrose had ensured she was dressed and able to go downstairs in good time. Henry and Jane tended to rise early, as was Georgiana's wont, so she and Charles did not want the couple suspicious of her being late to breakfast. No matter what had happened at the inn or since they had come to an understanding, she and Charles would be married, so her brother and Lizzy need never know that they had anticipated their vows.

Jane had given her some odd looks while they discussed the weather, followed by their plans for the day trapped inside—again. At times, she would pause after enquiring of the plans for the wedding. What had Jane expected her to say? Charles had purchased a common license so the banns need not be read. Once Fitzwilliam and his family arrived, they would set the time with the vicar, who was amenable to marry them at their convenience.

She stroked one of the lower keys on the pianoforte with a reverent touch. The instrument did not appear very old and was in excellent condition, so she had enjoyed the opportunity to play every day since her arrival. Some of those times had been to settle herself due to Charles's capriciousness, yet matters were finally where they should be—or would be as soon as they were wed. Becoming Charles's wife could not come quickly enough.

In fact, since their betrothment, she no longer required the instrument to bring her solace. For the first time since they arrived at Bathwick, she was at peace. She and Charles would spend their lives together. She could not wait!



She flipped through the meagre selection of music. She would need to bring more of her music books down from her trunk. A nocturne that she had never before played caught her eye, and she followed the progression of the notes to have some idea of the melody.

The door in the hall slammed, making her startle. The shouting that followed drew her from her perusal to search out the source of the commotion. Her knees nearly buckled at the sight before her. Oh, Lord!

“What has happened?”

Henry and the new steward carried a bedraggled and insensible Charles between them, the duke with one of her betrothed’s arms over his shoulders and the steward propping his master’s other side. Meanwhile, her beloved’s head lolled back onto his brother’s shoulder as they started for the stairs. He looked dreadful!

“That dam his tenant built upstream must have collapsed with the rain and sent a deluge that swept him away. We followed as best we could until we found him caught on a log that crossed the river about a half-mile from the house.”

“Thank God for it,” said Mr. Jasper, who was noticeably out of breath. “He could not have taken much more of the bobbing in and out of that torrent. He is fortunate to be alive.”

“Good heavens!” Jane covered her mouth as they passed on the way to Charles’s chamber where Georgiana had run ahead to open the door. As soon as they had him inside and laid out on the floor, Mr. Jasper rang the bell.

“He needs to be relieved of those wet clothes!” Georgiana rushed forward and began struggling with his cravat while Henry pulled off Charles’s boots.

“Why would you not put him on the bed?” asked Jane.

Henry wrested one boot off and began on the next. “Despite it being summer, he is chilled. After a hot bath, he will need to be put into bed without delay, so I do not wish to wet the bedding through.”

Georgiana tossed his cravat aside and untied the top of his shirt.

“Georgiana, his valet can do this.”

When she glanced over her shoulder, Jane stood over her. “His valet has yet to arrive, so I will do what I must to be of aid.” Jane would need to pull her away if she wished her to desist!

“I really must protest Georgiana.”

Her back stiffened, and she levelled a hard look at Jane. “If this was Henry, could I make you leave?”

“But we are wed. You are not yet—”

Her fingers began working at his cuffs. “Do not trouble me with what I consider a trifling. I will remain. If you want to go, then go.” Georgiana would not sit in the drawing room sipping tea while Charles was in such dire circumstances!

A moment later, Jennings was in front of Charles and helping Henry remove her betrothed’s breeches while she cradled his head in her hands.

“Charles, wake up. Pray, come back to me.” She caressed his cheek and rubbed at the damp shirt in the hopes of warming him. He was so cold! The effort was fruitless, yet what did that matter? At least she was doing something.

While Jennings and Henry hauled Charles's upper body off the floor, Georgiana pulled and tugged at his shirt to remove it. As soon as he was completely bare, Jennings tossed rugs over him that they tucked around him.

"I shall see about the bathwater." Jennings hastened from the room.

Henry knelt on Charles's opposite side while she again cradled her betrothed's head in her lap, stroking the damp hair back from his dear face. "Jane is right. You should not be in here. It will cause talk amongst the servants."

"I care not for what the servants say. I shall not leave him." With Mr. Wickham, she had worried so that her reputation would be in tatters. This time, let those so wholly unconnected to her gossip!

"When the physician comes, he will insist."

"Let him."

With a heavy sigh, Henry shook his head. "You can be as recalcitrant as he is."

"Then we suit each other well."

"And what happens if the worst occurs? You will have been in a gentleman's bedchamber while he is undressed. You will be ruined—you likely are already ruined."

She looked up and caught Henry's gaze. Lines marred his forehead. "I understand what I am doing, but I shall not leave him, even if it means I am not accepted in polite society from now on. After all, if the worst happens, I shall never marry. I could never marry anyone but him." Henry gave a frustrated growl as Jennings entered.

“The hot water will be up soon, sir. Thankfully, the housekeeper thought you would want hot water when you returned, so she was keeping it ready.”

“How fortunate for us then,” said Henry.

Moments later, Jennings returned to indicate the bathwater had arrived, so he and Henry carried Charles into the dressing room and put him in the tub. While Henry ensured his brother did not slip under, Jennings bathed him. Meanwhile, Georgiana took the liberty of washing his hair to remove the river from as much of him as possible. If it had been stagnant before the storm, it could carry disease.

Once Charles was in bed, Georgiana sat upon the side and held his hand. A tear finally tracked down her cheek. “Charles, dearest, do wake up.” With the size of the bump on the back of his head, it was doubtful he would open his eyes soon, no matter how she wished it.

“He has bruises forming in several places where he must have been struck,” said Jennings.

Henry shook his head, his eyes solemn. “Likely whatever was caught in the current with him.”

“I believe the lump on the back of his head is the worst of it.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks while Henry and Jennings felt for the knot.

“I beg your pardon.” They all turned to stare at the housekeeper at the door. “The young lad we sent out fetched the apothecary, a Mr. Gibbons, in the next village. He was the closest. The groom I sent for the physician returned saying the man had gone to London for some reason.”

“Very well,” said Henry, “send this Mr. Gibbons in.”

Within minutes, an older man entered, his bushy white eyebrows lifting when his gaze landed on Georgiana. She steeled herself and returned his look with an implacable one of her own. She would not be intimidated!

He came to a halt and bowed near the bed. “Good morning, Your Grace...and madam. I am not often called out in such weather. ’Tis truly dreadful. I thought my horse would be stuck in the mud along the road.” He chuckled then stepped to the side of the bed and looked down at Charles. “The servant said he was swept away by the river?”

“Yes,” said Henry. “We were ensuring the tenants with homes close to the banks were safe as well as aiding in securing their livestock. My brother was swept quite a distance until we found where he had been caught on a sizeable tree that had fallen over the water.”

“Was he awake when you found him?” The man was feeling over the back of Charles’s head. “He has a good-sized knot here.”

“No, and he has not been awake since we found him.” Henry ran his fingers through his own hair.

After pressing on Charles’s shoulders, the man glanced at her. “If I am to examine him fully, the lady should leave.”

“I will go nowhere.”

Henry scrubbed his face with a growl. “Pray, forgive the irregularity. My brother is newly wed, and his wife has been adamant since we found him that she is not to be excluded. If you would indulge her. Otherwise, you may never have the opportunity to examine him.” The only reaction from Jennings was a slight cough.

The older man's gaze returned to her. "I have laudanum should you require some."

Georgiana gritted her teeth. "I am not some hysterical female who requires laudanum. I only wish to know the current state of my...husband for myself and not as told to me by others."

"Mmm," hummed Mr. Gibbons before looking back at Charles.

A vase stood upon a pedestal within reaching distance, yet she clasped her hands in front of her and clenched her jaw shut lest she hurl it at the old goat, who drew the sheet down and continued as though he had said naught that was offensive.

"I believe he has several broken ribs, and his shoulder is out of place. I shall need to set it." He drew the sheet back up over Charles's chest before checking his legs. "He seems well other than the injuries I noted, although the head injury is what I consider the most alarming. The bump is large, and we shall need to see how he fares for the next couple of days."

Mr. Gibbons waved Jennings and Henry over. "Now, if you could hold him, I shall return the shoulder to where it belongs."

Despite remaining asleep, Charles cried out as the arm was forced back into position, then began to heave.

Georgiana gasped. "Turn him to his side!"

The men rolled him over just in time to expel the contents of his stomach over the edge of the bed. As soon as he seemed to have finished, they returned him to his back while Jennings rushed to fetch towelling to clean up his master as well as the floor.

The apothecary grimaced. "That does sometimes happen when one has taken a

significant blow to the head. I would prop him on pillows so if it happens again, he will not choke. He will need to wake if he is to take fluids or laudanum to help with the pain. I am certain he will have a devil of a headache as well as nausea when he finally regains his senses. His recovery will take time.”

Georgiana hurried around the bed and took Charles’s hand. “Is there nothing we can do for him?”

“Besides make him comfortable, no. I had heard Lord Bath had returned to Bathwick, although no one mentioned he had wed.” He glanced at where her hand was joined with Charles’s. “He is young and other than the loss of his hearing, appears to be a healthy sort. I shall pray he rallies, and you may have a long marriage.”

“I thank you.” Her eyes burned, and a great lump formed in her throat.

Mr. Gibbons opened a bag and pulled out two bottles. He held up the first to show Jennings as he entered. “This is laudanum for pain. The second is a tincture in the event he becomes ill from inhaling water. Do send for me if he worsens. I shall return on the morrow to check on his condition.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gibbons,” said Henry. “If you wish to wait until the rain slows, I am certain the housekeeper can see to some refreshments. She can also give you a guest room where you can stay if it is required.”

“I appreciate your generosity, Your Grace.”

The moment the door closed behind him, Henry rounded on her. “The moment he wakes, no matter how confused he may be, the two of you will wed. I only pray the apothecary does not comment upon your presence here while he is in the kitchen.”

“Your Grace,” said Jennings, “I took the liberty of informing Miss Darcy’s maid of

what you said. She rushed to the kitchen to let the housekeeper know of the falsehood. For what it is worth, they are aware of how Miss Darcy has been of aid to the master, and I do not doubt both the cook and the housekeeper will do what they can to protect her.”

Henry rubbed where his neck and shoulder met. “I hope you are correct, yet you must understand that her brother entrusted me with her well-being. If her reputation suffers, he will hold me accountable.”

Jennings glanced at her. Charles’s valet knew all. “I understand, sir.”

Her entire being relaxed when he responded as he had. She could only be thankful Jennings was trustworthy and would never reveal their secrets.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

Georgiana startled awake and blinked two or three times before frowning and lifting her head from the mattress. What was that noise?

“Forgive me, miss,” said a maid who stood near the fireplace. “With the chill in the air, Her Grace thought a fire might be of aid to the master.”

She rubbed her arms. The girl was right. For summer, the rain and lack of sun the past week had definitely made the house seem colder. Whether it was so in truth was in question, but her concern for Charles’s comfort was paramount.

“No, of course, he needs to be kept warm.”

The maid made quick work of starting a fire, then stood with her pail in her hand. “If you’ll pardon me for sayin’, miss, your devotion to Lord Bath is quite romantic. He is a good master, and I am happy to know he found someone who obviously loves him. When we were told of his hearing loss, we all had concerns about what would become of the estate if he did not find a bride. We are relieved all will be as it should be.”

She forced a smile. The hour was too early for pleasantries. “Thank you.”

The maid dropped a curtsy and hastened out the servants’ entrance. As soon as she was gone, Georgiana shifted to sit on the bed beside Charles and brushed his dark locks from his face.

“Will you not wake? Two days is far too long without seeing your eyes, dearest.” As much as she wished him to wake, he remained in his insensible state. He had, on

occasion, fits of coughs, which made the apothecary concerned over how much water he had inhaled while being washed downstream, but he never showed any hint of returning to her. While she caressed his cheeks with her thumbs, his eyes slowly blinked open, and he groaned. Her heart leapt.

“You likely feel as though you will be sick,” she signed.

He nodded and again groaned.

“Do you think you can take sips of broth? We have kept some waiting for when you wake. I also have laudanum for the pain as well as willow bark tea.”

She held the cup to his lips. He took four sips before he shook his head and weakly pushed the broth away.

“You will drink more with time. Here, take the laudanum. It will be of aid.”

Dutifully, he swallowed the tincture and grimaced. When she held up the cup of broth, he took two more sips before his eyes began to droop.

After placing the cup back on the tray, she took his hand and squeezed. Her heart settled some when he returned the pressure. He would be well. His recovery might take time, but he would be well. He had to be.

The chiming of the clock on the mantel drew her notice. Those in the kitchen and the maids would be about by now. She stood and rang the bell, and Jennings appeared not long after. He replenished the water in the basin for some that was warm, then disappeared with the tray and to bring fresh tea and broth.

She wiped Charles’s face with warm water, as well as his arms. When Jennings returned, she handed him the towelling. “I shall return. I would like to refresh

myself.”

“Of course, miss.”

Her maid was in her rooms to assist her, and while she washed, the familiar sound of hoofbeats made her draw near the window. A lone rider approached the front, dismounted, and strode to the front of the great house. She had no need to see the rider’s face clearly to know his identity. His seat on his horse as well as his long stride as he made his way to the house told her all she needed to know.

Fitzwilliam had come.

After a fortifying inhale, she crept to the stairs and down until the voices that carried from the hall could be discerned.

“Darcy,” said Henry. “I had not expected you for another day or so. The roads must be quite poor since the rain only abated last night. When my valet woke me to say a rider approached, I was not certain whom I would find.”

“I fear I hastened my arrival after your express reached me of Bath’s injuries. How is your brother?”

“He has not awakened as yet, but your sister is hopeful. As much as we have tried to convince her to remove herself from his bedchamber, she does not leave his side. She has been quite the devoted nurse.”

“I fear she has learnt a certain amount of stubbornness from my wife. Elizabeth would not hesitate to remain with me were I in a similar state. As soon as I am cleaned up from my ride, I shall speak with her.”

“Ah, yes. Forgive me. This is Mrs. Grant, the housekeeper. She will show you to your

chambers so you can refresh yourself. Once you are ready, ring the bell, and I shall take you to see Charles and your sister.”

Before Fitzwilliam could discover her thus, she hastened back to Charles’s room. For the most part, a maid had been present while she was with Charles. This morning had not been the usual since she had persuaded the girl who had been falling asleep to retire to her chambers at about two in the morning.

Upon entering the room, Jennings straightened and smoothed Charles’s bedclothes. “He stirred some a moment ago.”

“I forgot to mention he woke not long before you returned. I encouraged him to drink some broth and take laudanum, though he was not awake for long.”

His man nodded. “’Tis a good sign he has awakened, yet the cough concerns me. ’Tis deep.”

She approached and brushed his hair from where it had fallen near Charles’s temple. “I agree.” The times Charles had coughed had made her wince. The horrible wracking fits sounded painful.

A young maid entered and sat in a chair by the servants’ entrance. Meanwhile, Georgiana withdrew to her seat beside the bed, picked up the embroidery she had been doing to pass the time, and attempted to soothe the sudden urge to fidget. Her brother’s appearance had never conjured such a response before, which was odd indeed. Yet, here she sat, attempting to appear serene. Her blasted foot bounced. She had no way of stopping it.

She steadied herself as best she could and pulled the blue thread through the fabric until it lay flat against the background before poking the needle through for the next stitch. Over and over, she concentrated on the repetition and counting of the stitches

in an effort not to think of what would come next. Would Fitzwilliam force her to leave this room? He would surely try, but she needed to be stronger than she had ever been in her life. She would ensure she remained with Charles.

At an odd sound, she lifted her head to look at Charles, whose face contorted. A second later, a stream of hard, deep coughs burst from him as he doubled over with the effort.

She tossed aside her needlework and wrapped an arm around his chest, holding his opposite shoulder, as Jennings hit him on the back with the method the apothecary recommended in an effort to help expel whatever was causing the fit.

He gagged at one point, but those sips of broth he had taken stayed down. Thank heavens!

When they leaned Charles back into the pillows, her palm to the side of his face gave her pause, so she pressed her cheek to his forehead. “He is warm—not much, but a little warmer than he should be.”

Jennings placed his palm to his master’s forehead, his lips pressed in a flat line. “I shall have the cook make more willow bark tea. We should extinguish that fire in the grate.”

“The maid just started it.” Would they not need it to keep Charles from becoming cold? When one of the maids at Pemberley had a terrible fever, the poor girl’s teeth had chattered.

“I am aware most apothecaries and physicians believe a hot room is of aid with a fever, but my mother’s brothers both took fevers at different times. One had been kept in a room with a fire as Lord Bath is now, and the other was kept in a cool room, the fever tempered. The latter survived.”

“Then I shall defer to your greater knowledge.”

His valet opened the windows and let the breeze sweep away the warmth of the fire while Georgiana dampened towelling and sponged her betrothed’s face.

“Georgiana?”

She startled and turned to find Fitzwilliam standing beside Henry at the foot of the bed. “I had not heard you come in. He woke early this morning and took a few sips of broth and some laudanum, but now, he is feverish.”

Henry strode around the side of the bed and felt his brother’s forehead. “Likely from being submerged in the river for so long. The apothecary warned of this before he departed last night. I am certain Jennings has all under control.”

Her brother placed a hand between her shoulder blades. “Georgiana, his valet can do that. You will make yourself ill if you do not rest.” While not in her hearing, Henry must have mentioned her remaining night and day. She could only be thankful he did not know of her becoming ill yesterday. Jennings had been a godsend and helped her conceal the matter.

“I am well. If he wakes, I want to be here.” She placed the rag back in the basin and began pressing it to Charles’s cheeks. “Jennings has been quite busy, even with my aid.”

“I do not doubt it. I am certain you have been a great help.”

She paused and studied Fitzwilliam’s gaze. He was placating her. When was the last time he had done so? She could not remember. “Pray, Fitzwilliam, if all you wish to do is persuade me to depart this room, you are wasting your breath. I shall not leave.”

“What if the gossip spreads from this house of your actions?”

“If you will pardon my presumption, sir,” said Jennings. “Mrs. Grant held a meeting of the servants in the kitchen the night of Lord Bath’s accident. She threatened to remove anyone from service to the household if they spoke about what has occurred here outside of the house. His Grace told the apothecary that Miss Darcy is Lady Bath in an effort to protect her. That said, the servants are grateful for her care of our master. We are pleased to see he found such a devoted lady to be his wife.”

Fitzwilliam exhaled heavily. “I agree with Albemarle that you must wed as soon as may be—even if Bath must do so from his sick bed.”

She continued to press the compress to Charles’s cheeks. “I have no objection to marrying Charles as soon as may be. I would wed him this moment were it a possibility.”

“Elizabeth, Richard, and the children follow as soon as the roads are more passable.”

“I am certain Jane will be thrilled to spend time with her sister,” said Henry.

Fitzwilliam moved behind her chair and leaned against the back. “Yes, well, we require a special license so they can wed here, but would one be granted?”

“I sent an express to the Archbishop of Canterbury after this occurred,” said Henry. “His mother and mine were cousins. I should be receiving some response any day now.”

Her body jolted straight. Charles had never mentioned such a connexion. They did not speak of those matters much, however.

Fitzwilliam chuckled. “I suppose having the head of the Church of England as a

relation is helpful in situations such as these.”

“I have also called on the connexion but rarely, so I have no reason to believe he will deny me. Jane and I were wed by common license, so I did not even request a special license then. Favours are more likely to be granted when one does not take advantage.”

“I agree,” said Fitzwilliam.

She returned to mopping Charles’s brow. In most situations, she might bristle at plans being made for her without having any say in the matter, but at the moment, their officiousness was not off-putting. In this instance, it allowed her to concentrate on her betrothed and getting him well. Her most important duty was returning him to good health. She needed him.

Her brother placed a hand on her shoulder. “I will insist you join us for dinner.”

Her wont of late was to take a tray at Charles’s bedside, yet she would say nothing. She did not want an argument. Discord would only make matters more difficult.

As soon as Fitzwilliam and Henry departed the room, she waited a moment, then handed the cloth to Jennings and tiptoed after them. Voices came from a sitting room down the passage, so she crept close to the door and leaned against the wall.

“She will make herself ill if she continues so,” said Fitzwilliam.

“I agree, but she has been obstinate. Would you have me haul her out kicking and screaming?”

Her brother sighed. “No, but I would not have expected her to argue either.”



“Your shy little sister accompanied my brother and his steward to visit tenants before the hiring of Mr. Jasper,” said Henry. “She not only translated what Charles required, but from what I have come to understand, she made her opinion of Mr. Pitt’s incompetence known to the man in no uncertain terms.

“You should also know that we have reason to believe they have anticipated their vows.”

Georgiana stiffened.

“What proof do you have?” asked her brother.

“I was walking around the house with Clarissa the night before the accident. She was fussy and my wife needed the respite. As I passed Charles’s bedchamber, I heard them.” Henry cleared his throat. “My brother’s rooms are in a different wing. I also imagine my brother was unaware...” He cleared his throat again. “The express rider I sent to London was most displeased to be riding due to the state of the roads, but the sooner we have them wed the better since I am not certain when they first broke with propriety. I can only pray he does not take a turn for the worse. If she is with child...”

Her cheeks burned. How would she look Henry or Fitzwilliam in the eye again?

“If he was not fighting for his life, I am not sure I could restrain myself knowing this.”

“I would not have expected you to.”

Georgiana bit her lip and tiptoed back to Charles’s bedchamber. Jennings moved aside for her to resume her earlier occupation, and with a shuddering breath, she dipped the cloth in the cool water and pressed it against his cheek. Thus far, the fever was but a trifling. Charles would be well. He had to be.

31 st July 1815

“Georgiana,” whispered a feminine voice.

She lifted her hand and pressed it against her forehead. “What time is it?”

“‘Tis one o’clock. Why do you not take a nap while Lord Bath’s valet tends to him?”

She blinked until the blurring lifted from her eyes and Lizzy’s features sharpened. “Lizzy, I am happy you are here.” Had she slept so soundly she had missed the sounds of a carriage arriving? Charles’s chamber looked out over the front of the property and allowed for one to see those who came and went with ease, yet she had not awakened until now.

“I have missed you, and so have the children. Alexander will not like leaving his Auntie G behind once you wed.”

Georgiana dragged herself up and wiped the vestiges of sleep from her eyes. “They are such dear, sweet children. I have missed them and you as well...” She paused and swayed on her feet. Before she could move, Jennings ran forward with a chamber pot that he thrust in front of her just in time to catch the contents of her stomach.

Lizzy wrapped an arm around her and rubbed her back until the sickness abated.

“When did you arrive?” said Georgiana as she took the glass of wine Jennings held out to her and rinsed her mouth.

“But an hour ago. The children are sleeping in the nursery, Richard is resting as well, and I have refreshed myself. Fitzwilliam mentioned that since the accident you have not left Lord Bath except to refresh yourself. You cannot sleep well in that chair, and you must rest if you are to be of aid to him. Pray, take to your bed. One of us can wake you if he takes a turn. You are obviously making yourself ill.”

After spitting the second rinse of her mouth with wine into the chamber pot, she straightened. “I believe it is simply my nerves. I wish nothing more than for Charles to improve.” The night before, they had given Charles a tonic for his cough, which did seem to help through the night, although he was now somewhat flushed.

“He was warm three days ago, but it turned out he was not feverish.” She pressed her cheek to his forehead. Her palm had always been unreliable for detecting the warmth of someone’s face, and this was her best method for determining if he had a fever. “He is indeed hot today.”

She hastened to bring the basin to the bedside table and began to sponge his face, much as she had done before.

“Georgiana—”

Her betrothed flinched and groaned as he opened his eyes. “ ’Tis like ice .”

“You are burning up. You should drink some. I am sure it will do you good.” She motioned to the maid who sat in the corner to ring the bell and lifted a cup of cooled tea to his lips.

He grimaced. “ I have never liked cold tea. Vile stuff .” He spoke with his voice as he had been doing since injuring his shoulder. The tone was off, and it was scratchy. She had first attributed it to him just waking, but even with the sips of tea, the hoarseness was not abating.

The bedchamber door creaked open, and soon, Henry stood at the foot of the bed.  
“Brother, it is good to see your eyes open.”

“ I feel like the devil ,” said Charles.

Lizzy’s hand settled on Georgiana’s shoulder.

“Well, I hope you do not mind remaining with us for a short time. I have Mr. Crowley in your sitting room.”

“ The rector who has the living in Bathwick village? ”

“He is here to marry you and Miss Darcy.”

Charles’s eyebrows drew down. “ We have but a common license. ”

“A special license arrived from the archbishop yesterday.” Butterflies took flight high in Georgiana’s stomach. She had not thought this would all be sorted so soon. How much had they told Lizzy? “Miss Darcy has refused to leave your side since the accident, and even if Darcy had not insisted this be done sooner rather than later, I would have done so. As it is, I lied to the apothecary and told him the two of you were already wed.”

“ She deserves better .” Charles dissolved into a fit of coughs.

“I am sitting here if you do not remember.”

Jennings entered and immediately went to his master to do what he could.

“But I have no objections to marrying today if all of you insist,” she said when Charles’s coughs ended. “I do not require a new gown or an expensive breakfast. I

only wish to be his wife.”

“Come, Georgiana,” said Lizzy. “Let us get your hair put to rights and tidy your appearance. We do not want to shock a man of the cloth, do we?”

Georgie stood and smoothed her morning gown. Was she truly so dishevelled? Yes, she had slept in the chair beside the bed with her head upon the mattress, so it was possible she was not fit to be seen. She glanced back at Charles.

“I shall be well enough,” he said aloud before he doubled over with another round of coughing.

Jennings waved her off. “I shall tend to him. Do what you must.”

The last thing she wished to do was leave him, yet if they were to be wed...Without a word, Lizzy followed Georgiana to her chambers where Ambrose was pressing a gown.

“I took the liberty of having your maid prepare this for you. We brought another trunk with us and will send anything you lack when we return to Pemberley.”

With a gentle touch, Georgiana caressed the pink silk she had ordered before Fitzwilliam and Lizzy had departed town. Lizzy had insisted upon the confection, while Georgiana had argued that she would have no need of such finery. The uneven rosettes on the arms were paired with an edging of expensive lace that trimmed the cross-front and down the side of the gown until it wrapped around the hem.

Her maid set aside the iron as she removed the gown from the table and hung it. “Mrs. Grant indicated a couple of maids will assist in moving your belongings to the mistress’s chamber, so you will be closer to the master from tonight on. I am certain that will be a relief. I know you do not like to leave him. The housekeeper also

mentioned the rooms can be decorated to your liking if you do not care for them.”

“Thank you.”

Lizzy stepped closer and looked at Ambrose. “Will you leave us for a moment? I should like to speak to Georgiana alone.”

After her maid curtsied and disappeared into the dressing room, Lizzy stepped forward and took her hands. “You do understand why this must occur today, do you not?”

“Of course, I have been caring for Charles day and night. If rumour were to get out, my reputation would be in question.”

“’Tis not just that,” said Lizzy. “Jane told me that before the accident, the duke was walking with Clarissa during the night. While passing the door to his brother’s bedchamber, he heard noises.”

Georgiana’s cheeks burned. No, Fitzwilliam had not told Lizzy, but Jane had. “Pray, do not say it. I confess I eavesdropped on a conversation between Henry and Fitzwilliam after his arrival. I had hoped my brother had not told you.”

“He may not want to speak of it. I am certain he may tell me some version of events when we have the opportunity to talk. Even if you had not anticipated your vows with Lord Bath, your remaining in the gentleman’s rooms during his convalescence would be enough for Fitzwilliam to agree to an immediate wedding.” Lizzy pressed her lips together for a moment and wrung her hands. “Georgiana, do you know the signs of being with child?”

“I remember you were quite fatigued at first.”

“I was, but there are other signs: nausea, becoming sick, particularly on an empty stomach, and sore breasts. You cast up your accounts this morning.”

Georgiana scraped her lip with her teeth. “I have been ill a couple of times in the last week and my breasts are sore.”

“And any fatigue you would attribute to the situation, so you are likely feeling that one as well. Which is all the more reason for you to be wed as soon as may be. Let me call for Ambrose to return. We need to get you dressed.”

Before Lizzy could turn, Georgiana placed a hand on her sister’s forearm. “Pray know that I do not regret one moment of the time we spent together. This courtship has been far from the usual in many ways. Charles lost so much of his confidence when his hearing was taken from him. He has feared being unable to protect a wife and family, yet he finally gave in to his affection for me when he proposed, so at least now, we will be wed and that is that.”

“And had the duke not arranged matters, and Lord Bath had died in that flood, if you had found yourself with child then—”

“I would not have imposed my shame upon you or the children. A small cottage where no one knew me would have been agreeable. As long as I would be able to keep my child.”

Lizzy’s lips pressed into a flat line. She was not best pleased, but she would not receive the contrition she desired. They were to finally be wed, and most of the world would not be any wiser.

“I should ask if you have any questions,” said Lizzy. “Despite how this all came to be, your brother and I wish for nothing but your happiness. I hope you know that.”

“I do. I do not believe I have any questions for you to answer, and even if I did, I am certain I could ask Charles.”

“It is good you have that sort of intimacy. Such openness will benefit your marriage a great deal.” Lizzy sighed. “We should have your maid return. We shall require her to have you changed as soon as possible.”

Ambrose was called from the dressing room, and she helped Georgiana remove her morning gown, repaired her hair, and was of aid with donning the pink gown. After, her maid tugged, tucked, and pinned to ensure the fabric hung as it should.

Upon their return to Charles’s room, the rector was present and stood with Fitzwilliam, Richard, and the duke while they talked in soft tones. Jane stood at her husband’s side. Meanwhile, Charles’s head lolled to the side. He was asleep again.

Richard approached and kissed her cheek. Her beloved cousin walked with a slight limp and had dark circles under his eyes. He appeared exhausted. Due to the travel to Bathwick, he surely had no time to recuperate fully before their departure.

“Darcy has told me some of what has occurred,” said Richard. “While I am not best pleased, I do hope he endeavours deserves you, my dear.”

“He does deserve me. I vow it.”

“He said to rouse him when you returned,” said Henry.

Georgiana hesitated. “He needs sleep.”

The duke dipped his chin down and levelled a stern look upon her. “He also wants you as his wife and understands this should happen now rather than later.”



With care, she sat on the mattress and placed her palm on Charles's heated cheek. Her stomach clenched. He was warmer than ever, and the cough was deeper. Once this was done, they would need to send for the apothecary.

Regardless of how gentle her touch was, her betrothed startled and covered her hand with his own. He straightened and cleared his throat before nodding to Mr. Crowley, who began the ceremony. Henry stood by the clergyman and signed so Charles would understand what was happening.

When the time came for their vows, Charles recited his aloud even though he had been required to stop and gain control of his coughing before finishing.

"Do you have a ring?" asked the rector.

Jennings handed the man something that glinted in the sunlight from the window. A ring? Yes, she would have expected at some point to receive one, yet she had not expected Charles to ensure she had one now. He was too ill to worry about such triflings.

Sure enough, when the time came, he placed a ring with three bands on her finger while her eyes burned with unshed tears. No sooner had the vicar pronounced them wed, than the first droplet fell to her cheek.

"You are lovely," signed Charles before his eyes fluttered closed.

They roused him once more to sign the register, and after she had done so as well, Mr. Crowley congratulated them and departed.

"Should you like to join us for luncheon?" asked Lizzy.

"I would like to change back into a more serviceable gown. Though pretty, I would

not wish it ruined. Then, I should be by Charles's side."

"My lady," said Jennings, "he would want you to spend time with your relations before they leave."

Fitzwilliam placed a hand on her shoulder. "We shall not leave for a fortnight. As long as you are in agreement, we should like to be here should we be needed and the journey with the children is always trying."

Lizzy laughed. "We require a respite before attempting to return."

She glanced at her brother and his wife. "I shall join you for a short time, but I do not want to be away from Charles for long. I am certain Charles would also extend an invitation for you to remain as long as needed." Richard hobbled towards the door. Some time before returning to Pemberley would certainly help with his recovery as well.

"We shall be of whatever aid you require until Lord Bath is well," said Lizzy.

Jane and Henry waved them to the parlour, and all but Georgiana and Jennings departed, which gave her the opportunity to gaze upon Charles's beloved face. He was her husband. Hopefully, he would be so for many years—if he could just endure this trial.

She placed her cheek to his and closed her eyes while she attempted to calm the unease in her gut. He would be well. She needed him to be well!

"I love you." The words were whispered near his ear, then after kissing his temple, she hurried from the room to change.

4<sup>th</sup> August 1815

Georgiana held her breath and winced while Charles coughed and coughed. Would this ever end? The fever still raged, and it was all she and Jennings could do to keep his temperature managed. Between the willow bark tea and cool, damp cloths, they had kept it from becoming too elevated, and when they worried it would become so, they had helped Charles to the tub for cold baths where he shivered while they continued to sponge the water over his head. When he finally ceased the coughing fit, Jennings helped lean Charles back onto the pillows.

“He cannot continue thus,” said the valet.

“Yet, he must until the fever breaks. Today, the willow bark seems to be keeping him from becoming too heated. I just wish the cough would subside. His rest is fitful as a result. He needs sleep if he is to recover.”

Charles’s eyes fluttered open, and he smiled at seeing her. “Do we still have a houseful of guests?”

“We do indeed, but Jennings is here to ensure you do not hasten downstairs to see to their comfort.” She mentioned the valet because otherwise, in those moments when Jennings was not present and Charles woke, her husband would tease her about ridding themselves of guests so they could kiss and be completely improper in every public room of the house. The number of times she had blushed at the mention! Her cheeks had to be stained pink.

He laughed weakly. “I do love to entertain,” he signed.

He gave a wracking hack and grimaced. "I am fatigued of coughing."

"I am sure it is tiresome, but while you are awake, you are in need of willow bark to keep the fever at bay. After, I have the tonic for the cough and some broth." She held a cup to his lips.

His face twisted when he swallowed the warm liquid. She could not blame him. Willow bark was always bitter, no matter how it was prepared. He made a similar expression when she spooned the tonic in his mouth, then swallowed greedily at the warm broth as though ridding himself of the awful flavour. Thankfully, she had given the broth time to cool!

"I wish to be done with these remedies and tinctures. They are vile and do little to make me feel better."

"You do not know that."

His gaze held hers with a steadiness he only used when truly serious. "No more. I beg of you. I do not wish to die as yet—we have just wed, after all—but I cannot abide more."

Too many times to count, she had cried since his accident, and now her traitorous eyes filled once again with tears, blurring her vision. "I want you well so we can be together."

He glanced to where his valet sat on the opposite side of the bed and made a gesture that caused Jennings to leave. "We are together and alone now," he signed. "Allow me to hold you."

She pressed herself to his side, her head upon his chest. His heart beat strong against her ear, which caused some of her disquiet to melt away. The beat was rapid for one

lying in bed, however.

He coughed, and she made to rise, but he held her tight against him. The fit did not last long this time, and after, his thumb rubbed circles on her shoulder once again.

After a time, his breathing evened out, and he slept, and it was all she could do not to weep once more. What would she do if this did not subside, and the worst came to be? She needed him. Without an heir, the earldom would revert to the crown, and Henry would gain Bathwick Abbey, as it had been a gift to Simon from his father. Henry would, no doubt, allow her to live there if she wished, but it would not be the same without her husband. No matter the brevity of their marriage, she could not live here without him, even if the child Lizzy believed she carried was a fact and a boy. It would be too painful—a reminder of an unfulfilled vow.

She breathed and relaxed against him while she prayed to God for him to be well. Not long after, everything faded, and she found herself walking near the river with Charles and a boy with the same hazel eyes who held their hands and would swing between them while laughing riotously.

When Charles bent to kiss her, she woke with a start. She sat up and glanced around the bedchamber. It had been so real. A sharp pain ripped through her chest. It had been a dream. How she wished for that very scene to occur in reality!

8 th August 1815

Georgiana woke with a start and sat up in bed. She glanced down at her nightgown and paused. Why was she soaked through?

She pressed her hand to Charles's forehead. Thank God! It was cool. She cradled his cheeks in her hands, then smoothed his wet hair from his brow before she covered her mouth and wept. How she had any tears left was a question she asked herself often

enough. She had cried pailfuls of tears since Charles had been swept away by the river, and somehow, she still cried.

Two days ago, when he had refused any further willow bark or tonics, she had panicked. How could he survive when his fever would rage so without them? And what of the horrible, wracking cough? To the surprise of all and sundry, he seemed to improve steadily afterwards. She could not credit it.

With a gasp, her husband's entire body flinched. "I am wet," he said aloud.

Her fingers trembled as she lit a couple of candles to give him enough light to see her hands. "Your fever broke. I shall fetch Jennings to help change you."

During Charles's illness, Jennings had either slept in a chair in his master's room or on a cot in the dressing room. As soon as Georgiana and Charles were married, Jennings had not spent another night in Charles's bedchamber, giving them privacy to sleep through the night. After all, they no longer required a chaperon.

The moment the door opened, Jennings sat up. "What is wrong?"

"His fever broke, and his nightgown and the bed are damp."

"Thank heavens," said the valet as he rose. "He could not continue as he was for much longer."

"I agree."

Charles was exceedingly weak, but they managed to change his nightshirt and move him to sit in a chair so they could remove the sheets.

Jennings ran a hand over what was beneath. "The mattress itself is wet. It will need to

remain uncovered so it may dry. We do not want it to mould.”

“What of the mistress’s chambers? I know Mrs. Grant said if I wanted to redecorate I could, but I have done no more than walk through to the dressing room. Is the bed in good condition?”

“Before you were wed, Mrs. Grant had the mattress exchanged for a new one from one of the guest rooms. I am certain the bed should be comfortable. She said the wall coverings have not been changed in at least ten years. She was not sure if you would prefer more fashionable ones. But that can wait. As it is, the solution is a good one.”

He hurried around her and into the mistress’s bedchamber. As soon as he returned, he moved to help Charles from the chair. “The bed is turned down. Once he is settled, I shall open the doors and air out the room. The night is a pleasant one.”

While Jennings helped situate Charles in the bed, Georgiana opened the doors to the balcony of the mistress’s suite and stepped outside. The valet was correct: the air was not overly warm or humid, and stars lit up the night sky in a stunning tableau.

When she re-entered the room, Charles was sitting amongst the pillows watching her. “Leave the doors open. The breeze is nice.”

He held out an arm, and she climbed in beside him. “I love you,” she signed before cuddling to his side.

“ I love you too.”

Charles slept within minutes while she lay with her head upon his chest once again. Her heart calmed with the steady beating of his heart beneath her ear, yet her legs twitched to walk—to remove herself from this bed and relieve the restlessness lurking within. One would assume her to be relieved by Charles’s recovery, and it was true: a

great burden had been lifted from her shoulders. But now that he would surely be well, she could not settle.

She slipped from his side, put on her dressing gown, and grabbed a chamberstick. Without a destination in mind, she slipped from the room and wandered. The public rooms of the house were almost eery without light and people. She paused in the library at a portrait of a young Charles over the mantel. Henry had indicated the work had been brought from Clitheroe not long after Charles had become master. He was a young man without the burdens life had thrust upon him—a young man with an open world before him.

“Georgiana?”

She whirled about at Fitzwilliam’s voice. “What are you doing awake?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Charles’s fever broke.”

A long exhale flowed from her brother. “That is excellent news, but it does not explain your presence in the library.”

“After we had him settled, I could not sleep. I cannot explain why, but I needed to walk.”

Fitzwilliam nodded and stepped closer. “I had a similar experience after each of the children were born. As you are well aware, childbirth can be dangerous, and I pushed my worry down deep so I would not make Elizabeth annoyed with my hovering. Once all was well and Alexander and Sophie were born, I found myself in a similar state as you at the moment—unable to settle. I wandered Pemberley and finally fell asleep in my study. I had decided that if I was awake, I may as well work on my



ledgers. It was Mrs. Reynolds who found me the next morning. I had spent the night with my head upon the open book. The numbers I had last written were indelibly printed on my cheek, and I suffered from a fearsome headache as well as a stiff neck.”

She smiled and tilted her head. “So we are not so dissimilar then?”

“It seems not, although you have had more sense than to pen notes then fall asleep on the fresh ink.” Fitzwilliam chuckled. “You and I both share our father’s reserve. We have always known that, but I suppose, like him, we have also bound ourselves to someone we feel we cannot live without. I have come to understand that the restlessness is a certain relief combined with the realisation that we almost or could have lost that one person who makes us whole.”

Georgiana bit her lip for a moment, then nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. I could not understand why when he was finally well that I was so unsettled.”

“Love is a strange beast. We seek it and yearn for it, yet it can be as difficult and terrifying as it is fulfilling. It is why we must ensure we give our heart to the one person who is worthy of it, and we must always strive to be worthy of their love in return.”

She glanced back up at the portrait. “He has faced a great deal in the last two years.”

“And I am certain he has managed as best he could. Losing his hearing had to have been excruciating. His brother has mentioned how he feared not being able to protect a wife or children. He also mentioned how Bath withdrew from you after your journey here.”

“It seems Henry has told you a great deal.”

“He has. I could have insisted Lord Bath marry you for staying in your room at the inn, even though I would have done the same in his situation. Thankfully, all has worked out as it should, and I have not been forced to confront your husband. Now, if he does not treat you as he should—”

“I do not believe you will have reason to take him to task, Brother. The incident at the inn did make him withdraw for a time, but I can also understand why the situation caused him such disquiet. Charles could not hear the rattling of the latch, and I had to be his ears. The assistance he receives from Henry is different, since they are brothers, and Henry’s help is also understood to be temporary. Charles had to understand that there was no shame in accepting aid from me.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. “At times, those of our sex are resistant to being beholden to a lady. We want to be able to provide and protect those we love ourselves. He is not so unusual in that regard.”

“I suppose. I had not considered our predicament in that manner.” She levelled a bit of a frown at him. “You do not mind accepting help from Lizzy.”

“In the situation at the inn, I am certain I would insist Elizabeth and the children be shielded behind me. Where were you?”

“Charles attempted to push me behind him, but I moved away and more forward. Otherwise, he would not have known what I was telling him.”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “You exposed yourself to protect you both. I would also be upset if Elizabeth did so, but I have my hearing.” He sighed. “I would wager you both will struggle with these little battles for some time. How you weather each will determine the strength of your marriage. He will need to feel useful—to feel worthy of you.”

After she nodded, she hugged Fitzwilliam. Since their parents’ death, he had been

more of a father than a brother. She had always been able to rely on him for advice when she was troubled, and now was no different.

He withdrew and cleared his throat. “That said, if your husband was in better health, I may have considered thrashing him for the two of you anticipating your vows.”

Her breath was forced from her as though someone dealt her a heavy blow to the chest. “I had not expected you to say a word on that matter.”

“Elizabeth spoke to you, did she not?” he asked.

“She did.” Her cheeks burned as though aflame.

“Even if Albemarle had not told me the way you behaved with him, you were too free for a lady who had not experienced such an intimacy. Do you not remember the difference between Elizabeth and me before and after we wed?”

She drew her eyebrows down. Had they behaved so differently? “It has been some time now, though I do recall how often the two of you broke with propriety.”

“Yet, we did not anticipate our vows.” He pinned her with a heavy gaze. “From what Jane told Elizabeth, your courtship was not an easy one, but if he had died in that river and you were with child—my wife has mentioned you show the signs.”

“I do, and by the day, I am more convinced of my state. Even had that occurred, you must understand that I would not have brought shame upon you or Elizabeth. I would have been fine living in some small village and calling myself a widow. I have no desire to move within the ton, and I would not have given up my babe.”

He did no more than dip his chin. “Well, we need not worry over that, do we? You are a married lady now. If the babe comes a few weeks early, most will not blink an

eye, though I am certain your husband will delay notifying those who would hope to spread mischief.”

“I am certain he will. More than anything, I am pleased I shall not be a widow so soon after my wedding. My husband will be well, albeit a bit weak for a time, and we shall have a long life together.”

“A relief indeed.”

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Charles awoke and blinked several times. Something was amiss. He glanced down where Georgiana preferred to sleep, tucked against his side with her cheek pressed against his chest, but she was not there. As he looked about the bedchamber, he dragged himself up to sit. Three days had passed since the fever had broken, and he was still weaker than he would have preferred.

With a frown, he turned so his legs fell over the side of the bed. A small amount of light filtered through the door to his dressing room. Had someone lit a candle?

On shaky legs, he stood and made his way to the connecting door. When he stepped inside, he paused, leaning against the doorframe, at the sight of Georgiana casting up her accounts into the chamber pot.

The brief respite allowed him to make his way to her and kneel at her side. “What has made you sick?” he asked aloud.

She shook her head while she gagged. “I have been so for an hour now. I cannot stop.”

He forced himself to his feet and pulled the bell. He poured a small amount of water into the basin in the corner and removed it from the stand to set it at Georgie’s side. Thankfully, some remained. It had cooled, but the chill on her cheeks and neck would be beneficial to her current condition.

As soon as he dampened a cloth, he pressed it against the back of Georgie’s neck before sitting on the floor beside her. “Breathe.”

When the retching slowed, he bathed her cheeks and forehead. “Come. Lean against me.” She had just settled into his embrace when Ambrose bustled in with a tray.

“The poor dear is sick again, is she not?” She signed before the maid poured a cup of tea and brought it over. “’Tis ginger,” she said after he took it. “I also brought dry toast when she is ready to try.”

His wife was almost limp as he held the cup to her lips. Once she swallowed, she shook her head. “I should be caring for you.”

“I am much improved. Besides, you are in no condition to be caring for me tonight .” He tipped the tea into her mouth again. “You must tell me when you wish for the toast .”

She winced. “Not yet.”

Ambrose swapped the chamber pot for a clean one. “I shall take care of this. The windows are open to help air out the room.”

“Thank you,” he signed.

The maid departed, and he tipped up Georgie’s chin. “Your maid knows how to remedy your sickness. How long has this been happening?”

She swallowed the last sip of ginger tea. “It has come on gradually over the last fortnight. This is the worst it has been thus far.”

Charles kissed her temple while he closed his eyes and breathed. “Georgie, could you be with child ?” He had continued to speak aloud since her maid was not present.

“Lizzy believes I am. My courses have not come, I have been nauseous or sick in the

mornings or when my stomach is empty, and my breasts are sore.”

His fingers trailed circles over her abdomen. Thank God they had wed. Even though Henry was likely furious with him, his brother had ensured Georgie was protected in the event the worst came to pass. Charles could only be grateful. His child would have legitimacy and a legacy as a result.

“Are you upset?”

He covered her hands with one of his and turned her to face him. “ Why would I be upset ?”

She bit her cheek and shrugged. “You said nothing, so—”

“ I was thinking how fortunate I am to have Henry for a brother. He suspected what had happened at the inn, and whether we had crossed that line or not, you were protected as was the child. My only regret is that you were forced to wed me while I was feverish and bedridden .” He was certainly no dashing and besotted groom.

“I cared little for how the ceremony occurred. My brother, Lizzy, and Richard were present, as were your brother and Jane. Those are the most important people as far as we are concerned. If we had waited, the only guests I would have added were Lord and Lady Montford, Nicholas and Fiona, and Amelia and Sir Anthony. As it is, I am certain they will be pleased we are wed. After all, Nicholas and his wife are returning in a month or two from Ireland. I am not unhappy.”

“ You are content matters happened as they did .”

“Yes, though I would be ecstatic if this child would stop making me ill. He must take after you for stubbornness.”

Charles grinned. “ And I shall be even more stubborn now that I know you carry my child. Drink your tea and eat your toast for you must sleep. ”

“Me? You are the one recovering from almost drowning.” Her forehead furrowed.  
“Did you walk in here unaccompanied?”

“ How else would you have had me help you?”

“Charles! You are still too weak to make such a walk without Jennings or myself! What if you had fallen?”

He laughed, which made him bend over with a heavy cough. The racking, painful coughs had subsided some, but at times, his body seemed intent on purging whatever water remained in his lungs. “ I would have simply gotten back up ,” he said when the cough subsided. “ Drink your tea .”

When the cup was empty, he brought her more. “ If you are feeling better, we could sit on the sofa in your bedchamber. ”

“Must I? The floor is not the most comfortable, but I am so tired.”

“ I could carry you .”

“No,” she said as she rose. “I shall walk. You are not strong enough to carry me as yet.”

He followed her into the bedchamber while he carried the plate with the toast. She sank into the corner closest to the open windows and tilted her face up a little to catch the breeze.

His heart was not content until he was seated beside her. He placed the plate onto her



lap. “ I can only assume your maid brought you toast so it would make you feel better. You should eat it. ”

She chewed slowly and thoroughly until naught remained but a few crumbs. At least she would have something in her stomach after she had purged her dinner. Regardless of his attempt to keep a distance from her, he would not see her come to harm—he would do what he could to keep her healthy. After all, he would never survive without her. Her heart was too entangled with his own for that.

“I want to go back to sleep,” she said. “I cannot keep my eyes open another second.”

He made to lift her into his arms, but she swatted his hands away. “You will do yourself harm by trying to pick me up.”

As soon as they were both under the covers, he tugged her back to his chest and rested his hand over her belly. Not long after, her breathing evened, but he could not find sleep. A babe. They were to be parents. Without a doubt, the child was conceived that night at the inn. If Georgie had not fought for him, she would have been alone. He would have abandoned her in the cruellest of ways. Only she had not given up—surrendered to his cowardice as he had—she had forced him to see reason, and his brother had arranged the rest.

He could only be grateful.

The problem with pushing away the one person he loved most was the future was a dismal prospect. Years and years on end of living in not only silence, but also isolation. Yes, he would have had servants around him and sometimes his brother and his family, but no family of his own. He would have never braved another London Season. What would have been the purpose? No lady would have had him—other than the one in his arms, and she would not have returned.

“ I am not unaware how fortunate I am to have earned your devotion, and I shall endeavour to make you happy—to make up for my recalcitrance .”

She did not stir, so he had not said it loud enough to awaken her, which was what he had wanted. He had no idea how long she had been up and sick before he had found her. Her condition demanded rest, and he would not disturb her for the world.

With care, he hugged her a bit closer to him, closed his eyes, and let the dreams of a future with Georgie and whatever children came lull him to sleep.

17 th August 1815

Dinner was a happy affair with Henry, Jane, Richard, and the Darcys. Tomorrow, his brother’s family as well as that of the Darcys would depart Bathwick and make their way to Clitheroe and Pemberley. Henry had been away from his estate for far too long, but he was fortunate to have a skilled steward in place who required little from his brother while he was at Bathwick.

Darcy had not spoken much to Charles since his arrival and the wedding—not that he had said much at the wedding either. No doubt existed in Charles’s mind that Henry had told whatever suspicions he held about Georgie to her elder brother. Darcy was once friendly towards Charles. Now that they were family, he could only pray his brother-in-law would forgive him. The last thing he wished was for Georgie’s relationship with her brother to be affected by the distance between the two men in her life.

As soon as dinner concluded, Georgie stood. “Perhaps we should leave the gentlemen to their brandy and conversation.” The sexes had not separated since he had returned to the dining room, but since it was the last night, Georgie had expressed her desire for him to extend an olive branch to Darcy.

The ladies departed, Georgie glancing back at him over her shoulder, and Charles waved forward the butler with the tray of spirits.

Once each of them held a glass, Henry held up his hands, then signed, “To the Earl and Countess of Bath. May they have many happy years together.” Henry lifted his glass, but Darcy said nothing but brought his own up to touch theirs.

Charles waved off the butler, who quit the room. “ Before you return to Pemberley on the morrow, I must beg your forgiveness, Darcy. ”

Darcy merely lifted his eyebrows. He had not heard Charles speak since he lost his hearing. But Georgie’s brother deserved the respect of hearing the avowal of all Charles felt.

“ When I first understood the matchmaking plot that was afoot, I resented the situation. I had no desire to be matched with anyone, much less Georgie, who I thought of fondly. The loss of my hearing made me believe I should never fall in love or marry, but after I apologised to your sister for my initial anger at the position in which we both found ourselves, we became friends. I lied to myself and believed the intimacy —”

“Intimacy?”

He shook his head. “ The closeness that grew between us was nothing more than friendship. Then I decided maybe I could love her and all would be well. The night at the inn made me believe otherwise. I remember standing with my pistol aimed at the door and trying to keep Georgie behind me. Of course, naught of what was happening could be heard, so Georgie resisted my efforts of protection and exerted herself to the benefit of us both.

“ All I could think of after was that if someone had breached the door, she would

have been in harm's way before me. I could not live with myself if my lack of hearing brought her harm, so I withdrew. No excuse exists that can make up for the pain I caused her. She has forgiven me, which is more than I deserve. I just want you to know that I love her more than anything, and I will endeavour, for the rest of my life, to deserve her .”

Darcy pressed his lips together for a moment and exhaled as he set down his drink. “I shall not pretend to like the circumstances of how your marriage finally came to be. If you had died, Georgiana would have been ruined. Thankfully, the two of you are wed and Georgiana is safe—as is the child from what I understand.”

One side of Charles's lips curved. He could not help it. As much as he had tried to deny his longing for a family, he would have not only a wife, but also a child. He had penned a letter to the physician who had treated him for his hearing. According to that man's knowledge, the affliction that caused his deafness could not be passed to his child. A relief indeed!

“Yes, it does appear I am to be a father.” His gaze met Henry's.

His brother, who had stood to pour another drink, clapped him on the shoulder. “Let us know when the babe is expected to be born. I am certain the entire family will come to be of aid to you and to your wife.”

“She needs to feel the quickening first.”

“But all the signs are there, are they not?” asked Henry.

“Yes, they are, but we still have almost three months, from what Mrs. Darcy told Georgie, before we can know for certain.”

Darcy shrugged. “Well, if she is not, then one day, a child will come. I would not fret

over it. For what it is worth, Elizabeth believes Georgiana with child.”

“To the heir of the Bathwick Earldom,” said Henry.

Charles chuckled and shook his head. Nothing was set in stone, yet Henry was willing to toast to the possibility of the pregnancy being true and a boy at that. His brother was positively giddy. He narrowed his eyes. “Henry, what has caused this positively jovial mood?”

“Jane may be with child again.” Henry stretched out his arms and grinned after his pronouncement. Darcy stood and slapped Henry on the back before Charles embraced him. He would have wanted Henry by his side while Georgie gave birth, but if the two ladies were expecting at almost the same time, it would be understandable Henry might not be available. His priority was his own wife as Charles’s was Georgie.

Regardless, he could not bemoan a new life and a new niece or nephew to spoil. He was wed to the lady who suited him best and they would have their own child—likely in April. Life would go on, and he would not hide from any of it.

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Georgiana hugged Alexander and Sophie before the nursemaid took charge of them and ushered them inside the Darcy coach. They were such sweet darlings. Georgiana would not see them for some time. How she would miss them!

“Grandmamma and Grandpapa have mentioned Christmas at Richmond Castle,” said Lizzy as she grasped Georgiana’s hands. “I am certain the two of you will be invited. Do say you will come. We are not accustomed to you being away for so long. In the meantime, we shall need to ensure we visit each other often—whether your husband is feeling sociable or not.” Lizzy chuckled and embraced her with the last before she moved over to farewell Charles. “Do not forget to send me letters. We would know how you are faring.”

As Lizzy stepped to the side, her brother moved in front of her after shaking Charles’s hand. “If you need to return to Pemberley at any time, do not hesitate to come. You will always be welcome.”

She let a hint of a smile cross her countenance. “He is a good man, Fitzwilliam. I have no doubts he will take care of me.”

Her brother’s dark eyebrows drew down a bit in the middle. “I know he is a good man. I believe he has always been such in principle, but the loss of his hearing made him lose his way for a time. Elizabeth and I just want to make sure you are well.”

Georgiana rose on her tiptoes to hug Fitzwilliam and kiss his cheek. He was the best brother she could have ever asked for. “I shall be. You need not be concerned.” Richard kissed her cheek and joined Lizzy, who was farewelling her sister.

After Jane and Lizzy gave each other a tearful embrace, Jane rushed over to Georgiana with Clarissa in her arms. “I do expect you to write to me as well.” She wrapped Georgiana in her free arm. “If you have any questions at all about being with child, you know you can always ask me or Lizzy. We have both been where you are...more than once at this point.” She smiled and placed her free hand over her lower belly. “We shall see you at Christmas, yes?”

“We shall see. I shall not force Charles if he wishes to remain at Bathwick. You know he does not like crowds now.”

“I know, but he has you to persuade him. I would wager he will do so if you ask.”

Henry embraced his brother, then came over to press his hand to his wife’s back. “Come, Janey. They are newly wed, and I am certain wish our absence more than we are willing to admit.”

Fitzwilliam appeared as though he had swallowed the foulest thing imaginable, making Georgiana stifle a laugh. Her poor brother needed no reminders of her married state or what occurred as a result of it. He had not been afforded any time to become accustomed to the idea before understanding she was likely with child.

Lizzy and Jane both kissed her cheek before climbing into their respective equipages. One at a time, the coaches both began to move, carrying those they loved away from Bathwick. It was unlikely either would return soon. Jane would have her confinement in February, and Bathwick was out of the way for Fitzwilliam and Lizzy to stay on the way to London—not that they would go for the Season. They avoided it more often than not.

Her husband’s arm came around her back. “If you would like to journey to Richmond Castle for Christmastide, I am amenable.”

Her entire body gave a small jump. “You would not object to leaving Bathwick?” she signed.

“ The Montfords and the entire family are welcoming and treat me as they would anyone else. Why would I hide from them? ”

She lifted her eyebrows. He had a point. “Then you are eager to journey to Pemberley for a fortnight. We could depart in a couple of days.”

He stiffened and faced her. “ We just farewelled our family and have the house to ourselves for the first time since we wed. Whyever would we do that? ”

She laughed and turned to enter the house, but a hand to her arm turned her back to him.

“ You were teasing me? ”

“Of course. I love my brother and his family, but I would like some time with just you before we welcome anyone more into our home or visit someone else’s.”

He took her hand and led her across the hall and to the library where he closed the door behind them. Before she could protest, he dropped onto the sofa and pulled her into his lap. “ I am pleased you see matters as I do. We are blessedly alone at last, so what would you care to do first? ” His lips found a sensitive place on her neck that made her shiver.

“The servants could always walk in.”

He frowned as she signed. “ They had best not .” He drew closer, nuzzling under her ear.



“What would you do? Release them from your employ? We would have no servants left within a few months.”

He took her hands, entwining their fingers. “Hush, now,” he said aloud.

She grinned as he claimed her mouth, kissing her as though parched and she was the only relief. They had shared a bed since their marriage, but he had been recovering. Neither had initiated much besides holding each other and kissing some. Charles had seemed to regain much of his vigour over the last few days—a welcome happenstance indeed!

Her hand found its way to his chest, and she pressed him back. “Are you certain you are well enough?”

His eyebrows lifted just before the world tilted on its axis.

She blinked as he stood and began striding towards the door. How had he thrown her over his shoulder so quickly? He could not hear her, and in her current position, she could not sign so he could see, so all she could do was laugh as he carried her up the stairs.

A couple of maids giggled as he passed. Her cheeks burned at their stares and their hands cupped over their mouths as though they were swapping secrets.

When they finally entered a room, she recognised the rug without hesitation. He had brought her to his bedchamber? They had not used that one since his fever had broken. The mattress had been dried out, and the bedclothes laundered of course, but they had not had reason to return.

All of a sudden, she was dropped to the bed. Charles stood over her with a smile he had not worn since Hemel Hill—one he had worn when they were carefree that day

in the poppies.

She rose to her knees and ran her fingers over his lips and his forehead, peppering kisses in their wake. When she drew back, his beloved features were blurry from the tears welling in her eyes.

“What is it?” he asked.

“At times, I thought we would never reach this place. I am merely so happy I believe my heart might burst.”

Charles shook his head. “If you had given up on me, I do not believe I could have lasted long without you. I would surely have been on Pemberley’s door within a fortnight, begging for you to accept my hand. You see, I had lost my heart to you long ago; I believe it was the night Clarissa was born. But for some reason, I just had to make my life more difficult than it was in truth. I had to realize my lack of hearing did not make me any less worthy.”

“No, you are the most worthy gentleman for me, and that is all that matters as I do love you so.”

He grinned and pressed his lips to hers. “I love you as well. As much as I want every moment to last, I am also eager for our future. I am excited for all we shall experience together. You stole my heart, Georgie, and I shall never demand its return. It belongs to you forever and not a day less.”

Her heart melted. “As my heart belongs to you, my love.”

15 th April 1816

Charles tapped his foot in a furious rhythm upon the floor. Would this interminable night ever end? A hand pressed upon his knee.

When he looked over, Lord Richmond smiled. "Driving us all mad with that incessant tapping of your foot will not force the babe to come any sooner." The earl had surprised Charles by signing upon his arrival to Bathwick. The family he had gained by his marriage to Georgie was more than he could have ever imagined. They accepted him without reservation. He could not have dreamt of such a family, much less being part of one.

"It has been ten hours. Something is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong," said Henry. "Janey and Mrs. Darcy are both with Georgiana. One of them would have come down if a problem arose. They would not withhold such information."

A glass was shoved into his hand by Darcy. "Here. This will be of aid," he signed.

Lord Richmond took the glass and set it on a side table. "Yes, because Georgiana would want him in his cups when he finally meets his child."

Charles scoffed. "One glass will not put me in my cups."

Henry took the brandy and handed it back to him. The strong liquor stung as he took a sip. It was no use. Charles rose and handed the drink back to Henry. When he

paused at the window, the beginnings of dawn were creeping over the forest in the distance. They had just been about to settle for the night when Georgie's pains had begun. He had wrapped his arm around her, his chest to her back, when the muscles of her abdomen had clenched mercilessly against his palm.

They had sent for the midwife, who had ejected him from the bedchamber the moment she had arrived. At least if Georgiana screamed, he would have no knowledge of it.

"You could not have remained if you were going to worry as you are. Darcy and I were both present for the births of our children." Henry had leaned against the edge of the window while he signed.

"I would have been no good to her. I could not bear to see her in pain." Henry's gaze shot to the ceiling as he winced. "What is it?"

"You do not want to know."

No, if she screamed, he certainly did not!

Charles clenched his hands into fists, his knuckles white. "I never thought it would take so long."

"Lady Richmond once laboured for over a day," said Lord Richmond. "That was our son's birth—our first. Like you, I did not remain. I was in my cups by the time I met James. My younger brother had given me brandy and port until I even became insensible for time. They had awakened me when I was to finally see the babe. My wife was not best pleased, though she did forgive me."

Charles poured himself another glass of brandy, but Hatton stopped him before it was full. "No more. I know this is hard, but she will be well. The birth of Seamus was

difficult for Fiona. She laboured for what felt like days then screamed with every push. No one had told me at the time that our babe came out buttocks first. We have no guarantees of more children, but Fiona is hopeful. Even after the misery she underwent, she wants more. I do not understand it. I do not know if my heart can withstand another birth such as that one and I was not in the room.”

“Just because the first was positioned wrong, does not mean they will all be,” said Darcy. “My mother had a child after me who was positioned in such a way, but from what Mrs. Reynolds has told me, Georgiana’s and my births were not unusual in any manner.”

Lord Richmond wagged a finger. “I remember your brother. Harold became ill at four months of age and did not survive. The fever was too severe. We visited Pemberley to condole with your parents. Only we had not lost any children at that time. We could only imagine what they endured.” The older gentleman’s gaze became distant. No one would mention that Lord and Lady Richmond no longer needed to imagine such a circumstance. They had not lived it once, but twice.

After clearing his throat, Lord Richmond clapped his hands together. “I can tell you my wife and I would be pleased to be honorary grandparents to your children—if you do not object. Georgiana’s parents were our good friends, and we would welcome telling their grandchildren tales of them, their uncle, and their mother.”

“You are family,” said Charles. “You are welcome to act as their grandparents if you wish it. Georgie and I would never object.”

Charles downed the finger of brandy in the glass, but when the door opened, he nearly choked. Was it finally over?

“Georgiana has requested you come meet your child,” said Lady Richmond.

Hatton stepped forward. "You will not tell us if it is a girl or a boy?"

"I am not to say a word while Lord Bath is present. He has to meet the child to discover its sex."

Each of the men slapped him on the back as he walked towards the door. Everything in him was poised to run, to hasten to Georgie as fast as he could. He would not calm, after all, until he was assured with his own eyes she was well. Regardless, he kept his composure until he reached the hall.

He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the floor with the family suites. His feet carried him with swift steps until he stood in front of the door to the mistress's bedchamber where his hand shook as he released the latch and stepped inside.

Georgie sat propped against a headboard of pillows with a swaddled bundle in her arms. Dark circles framed the undersides of her eyes. She was exhausted but wore a smile that drew him to her like a bee to honey.

He sank onto the mattress and leaned forward to kiss her. Every bit of his love and relief was meant to be conveyed in that meeting of their lips, so he drew out the connection. Until this moment, he had been a nervous, frightened, and shaking mess of a man. He needed Georgie. He would never be able to breathe without her.

As soon as he released her, he turned to sit beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. His free hand drew the swaddling back from the baby's face. The babe's mouth puckered, suckling.

Georgie bent towards him as her eyes met his. He accepted his child into his arms as he continued to stare at the little one's features.

"What do you think of your son?" signed Georgie.

A pang tore through his chest and his eyes burned. A son? He would have been pleased with any child as long as it was healthy, but a son? He had never considered how such news would make his life seem richer.

After swallowing hard in an effort to relieve himself of the lump in his throat, he blinked rapidly. “ I believe he is the most handsome child I have ever seen. ” He turned his head so his gaze could meet his wife’s. “ But I should not be surprised. He has the most beautiful mother in England .”

One side of Georgie’s lips quirked up. “In just England?”

“ Very well. In the world .”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “I am exhausted,” she signed.

“ Then sleep. I shall keep watch over the two of you .”

“You will need to sleep too. I know you were likely awake all night as well.”

He laughed and shook his head. “ I was not pushing this one into the world .”

“No, you were likely sitting in a chair, staring into the fire, and tapping your foot until my brother or Lord Richmond ordered you to stop.”

He frowned. “ How can you know that?” Had she a spy in the library ?

“Because I know you.”

“ I am not sure I could have remained in the library wondering what was happening much longer .”

Her tired eyes took in their son while she adjusted his blanket. “We never seriously discussed names, so what shall we name him?”

“Darcy?”

“You would name him for my family?”

“He is a part of you, so why not?”

She glanced down at their son. “Darcy Christopher Fitzwilliam Granville.”

“Viscount Landsdowne.”

Her eyes widened. “He has a title?”

“Yes, Simon never had children, so the title had yet to be used.”

“That is a mouthful of a name.”

He caressed his son’s head. Darcy had a shock of chestnut hair, but whether it would curl as his uncle’s did would not be known for some time. “Maybe, but he will live up to it. Will you not, little one?”

The babe’s face screwed up and he yawned.

“At the moment, I believe he would prefer to sleep, as would I.”

Charles stood and set his son gently in a cradle beside the bed. He shed his coat and his shoes before climbing in and taking Georgie in his arms. She was safe and where she belonged—in his embrace. Forever.



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:01 am*

### 27 Years Later

A change in the surrounding light made Charles look up from his book. Georgie strode gracefully to where he sat on the sofa in the library and situated herself beside him.

“Tomorrow, Darcy will marry. He has become a man before my eyes, yet my heart does not want to believe it is so. I long for the little boy who ran through Bathwick’s corridors giggling madly.”

Charles could only smile. He had no memory of Darcy’s laughter, yet the grin that would overspread his son’s countenance, which would even show in his eyes, was one he would never forget. In some ways, the same expression existed, yet the features around it had altered as he grew. Instead of the devilish sparkle of a small boy, those same hazel eyes shone from the visage of a grown man.

That said, he was prodigiously proud of his eldest son. Darcy had an aptitude for estate management and, for the most part, had been running Bathwick with success for the past two years, allowing Charles and Georgie to visit family more often. They had even journeyed to Paris last year.

“Will you not say something?”

He let his book drop to his lap and wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “You have claimed to approve his choice in a wife. Have you changed your mind ?”

“No, I could not have chosen a better Viscountess Landsdowne than Aoife.” He could

not have agreed more. Darcy had seemed to find Aoife a pest when she was young, yet the Montford Cousins all partook of the same hi-jinks as their predecessors, and Aoife's pranks resembled those of Jane's—well planned and well-executed. She had once made a powder from dried roses and had somehow found a way to sprinkle it in Darcy's breeches. Charles could not help but smile at the remembrance of his son returning from his ride that day. The poor boy could not stop twitching and scratching at his legs. The homemade powder had given him an uncomfortable itch he had to bathe to remove.

Aoife had confessed her misdeed to her mother, who had told them that evening over tea in the drawing room. Darcy's retribution had been less clever. He swam out into the river and overturned Aoife's rowboat from the bottom. She had no warning and had found herself soaked to the bone.

"Fiona has ensured her daughter is competent. She could run an estate five times the size of Bathwick."

"And she loves Darcy as he loves her."

"They belong together. I suppose I am feeling maudlin."

"Do not become too maudlin. You have four other children to marry." He bit his cheek to keep from laughing. Georgie had, on occasion, partaken of these fits of nerves since Darcy's engagement.

The door opened and Fitzwilliam Darcy and his wife entered. His brother-by-marriage took one look at Georgie and smiled. "She resembles Elizabeth the day before Alexander married. My wife was beside herself at losing her little boy."

Lizzy elbowed her husband in the ribs. "I most certainly did not."

"You most certainly did," said Amelia as she followed them inside. "I remember well

when you came to my chambers in tears.”

“I adore Genevieve.” Lizzy pursed her lips.

“We never said you did not,” said her husband. “Yet, you were still out of sorts. You were even more so when Sophie wed.”

“At least Jane has some time,” said Amelia.

Henry and Jane’s son had been born last, so the next Duke of Albemarle was a mere twelve years old. They had resigned themselves to Charles or young Darcy being the eventual heir, when Jane had begun showing signs of being with child once more. After six girls, Henry finally had his son, a strapping young lad they had named Oliver.

Georgie glanced about her. “Where is Jane?”

“She and Henry were to take a walk,” said Darcy.

Lizzy wrapped her arm around her husband’s “I believe they are enjoying the respite before they journey to London. They have had little time to themselves. I still cannot believe Mr. Collins died from a bee sting and Longbourn now belongs to Oliver.” Mr. Bennet had died a year after Georgiana and Charles had married. His wife, upon learning of her husband’s demise, had a fit of apoplexy and followed him into the next life. The Gardiners and Philips had managed what became of the three youngest Bennet daughters. Naught had made marriages of much consequence from what Charles understood.

“Clarissa’s confinement should be soon, should it not?” asked Georgie.

“Yes, any day now. Nicholas and Fiona will return to town as well. Since becoming the Earl of Richmond, he has had many demands upon his time. Not to mention Fiona

holding her father's title. Seamus has been quite sought after in town this Season, yet he has not shown any inclination to take a bride as yet, and it is not for lack of the ladies trying. Being the heir to two earldoms is enough that he receives more attention than he desires. Fiona is becoming impatient."

"Much like Grandmama was with Nicholas. The lady meant for Seamus will likely be thrust upon him just as Fiona was thrust upon Nicholas," said Amelia, "without warning and when he is least expecting it, and he will be in love no matter how much he resists."

Amelia crossed her arms over her chest. "Grandmama and Grandpapa would have enjoyed seeing the next generation marrying and having their own children." Lord Richmond had died ten years ago. He had gone to sleep one night and not awoken in the morning. Lady Richmond had followed a year later. A spark had left her eye with the death of her husband. At least they were together now.

"They will be with us tomorrow," said Lizzy. "They viewed Georgiana's children as their own grandchildren. They would not miss Darcy's wedding. I know I felt them when Alexander wed. It was no more than a breeze, but I could swear it carried the scent of Grandpapa's cologne."

Amelia nodded. "I had a similar experience when Isabella married."

All turned, and Charles followed their gazes to where Sir Anthony, Richmond, and Fiona entered the room. "What is this?" asked Fiona.

Elizabeth grinned. "We are commiserating with Georgiana. She is mourning the loss of her son."

"I am not mourning, Lizzy! He has not died. He is merely marrying Aoife."

"Do I need to take my daughter home with me?" asked Richmond with a mischievous

curve of his lips. "I do not want her to be unhappy. Your son has caused her enough torment over the years."

"Our son?" signed Charles. "Your daughter gave as well as she got."

Fiona gave a wave of her hand. "Besides, the two of you have no need to mourn a son lost to marriage when you have two more sons and three girls still at home."

Charles shook his head. "Gregory has the living in Bathwick village. He will be moving into the cottage across from the chapel in the next fortnight, and Richard is following his namesake into the army next year." Georgie put a hand to her chest. His wife worried for her youngest son. "We shall have the girls, yet they will, no doubt, wed when they are ready." Elinor was nineteen and more concerned with books, which did not upset him in the least. She could remain at Bathwick forever if she wished it, and Marianne was seventeen, still too young in his opinion.

"I shall call for tea and refreshments," said Georgie. "If we are all to be together, we should do so properly."

"What about Jane and Henry?"

The two in question entered. "Are we missing a party?" asked Henry.

Charles shook his head. "No, you are just in time."

The End