

SNOWBOUND

JACK CALDWELL

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a P&P novelette

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Blurb: What follows is a *Pride & Prejudice* “what-if” novelette in five parts. Elizabeth Bennet, on her way from Kent to London after receiving Mr. Darcy’s awful proposal and life-changing letter, falls victim to a freak spring snowstorm, and the only man who can save her is the one she had totally rejected as “the last man on Earth she could be prevailed on to marry.”



Sequence of Events:

Sunday – *Proposal at Hunsford parsonage.*

Monday – *Darcy’s letter.*

Tuesday – *Aunt Gardiner’s letter from London.*

Wednesday – *Elizabeth leaves Hunsford and beginning of this story.*

Part 1 – The First Day

A HEAVY SNOW PROPELLED by howling winds painfully pelted Elizabeth Bennet’s face as she trudged through the deepening drifts, her bonnet offering scant protection. Elizabeth looked about, trying and failing to find the path through the woods that led back to the coaching station at Bromley. Panic arose in her breast, for the storm grew in intensity, the temperature was dropping, and she was hopelessly lost.

“Help! Help me!” she cried, stumbling in the snow. She fell against a tree. “Help me, please!”

Where had this storm come from? And in April! When she dashed out of the Bell, fleeing from Mr. Darcy and desperate for a mind-clearing walk, the cold air gave no hint of what was to come. She had not realized that the weather was changing, for she wrestled with guilt, pain, and mortifying thoughts. And now, it seemed her inattention was to be her doom.

Elizabeth tried to press on as she had done for the last half-hour, but the cruel snow punished her face exceedingly. There was no relief except to take shelter behind a rather large tree. Her thin coat was as nothing against the killing cold. She gasped, shivering, her tears freezing on her cheeks.

“Oh, God,” she cried, “please help me!”



A little more than an hour before, Elizabeth was taking her rest at the Royal Bell Hotel at Bromley. The coach from Hunsford had turned back, and she expected a carriage from her uncle to arrive within a few hours.

She had not intended to leave Hunsford so soon. She was to stay for another week, but after learning the previous day from Aunt Gardiner’s letter of Jane’s illness, she impulsively decided to go to London forthwith. An express was sent to Gracechurch Street, and Mr. Collins was kind enough to arrange for private transportation as far as Bromley. Despite Mr. Collins’s false modesty at his gesture, Elizabeth expected the kindness was due to Charlotte’s entreaties rather than any innate benevolence in the heart of her husband. An express delivered early that morning from Mr. Gardiner assured his niece that he would send a man to collect her at the Bell by late afternoon.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Collins assured his cousin, was exceedingly distressed by the news from London, and by Miss Bennet therefore being unavailable to accept her generous invitation to dine at Rosings on Tuesday evening. Elizabeth felt this was because Lady Catherine's audience had diminished for her pronouncements, which passed for conversation at Rosings, given that her nephews had already departed that morning, and now it was to be further reduced by one.

Elizabeth reluctantly acknowledged that the letter was very timely, for intense was the turmoil in her mind. Two days before the arrival of her aunt's message, Mr. Darcy astonished her by delivering a most unexpected and dreadful proposal of marriage. The resulting argument had been painful enough, but the extraordinarily letter she received from the same gentleman the next day shattered her completely. Mr. Darcy had delivered an incontestable defense of his character, and Elizabeth could not but give him credit and herself censure. His actions in separating Jane from Mr. Bingley, while officious and wrong-headed, were done in the service of a friend. He could not perceive Jane's affection for Bingley, and that was too close to Charlotte Collins' observation for Elizabeth not to give the gentleman's explanation credence.

It was Mr. Darcy's catalogue of the mistreatment his family had received from Mr. Wickham, rather than the other way around, that destroyed whatever confidence Elizabeth owned in her abilities of discernment. How foolish she had been! Pleased with the preference of one and offended by the neglect of the other on the very beginning of her acquaintance with both, she courted prepossession and ignorance, and drove reason away where either was concerned.

"Till this moment I never knew myself," she had cried at the time.

Now, given the prospect of digesting this intelligence within the pleasant bosom of family rather than the inane company of Mr. Collins or the imperious attention of Lady Catherine, Elizabeth leapt at the opportunity. Maria Lucas declared she would abide by the original plan and leave on Saturday next, so it was that Elizabeth traveled to Bromley alone.

The last person Elizabeth expected to see at the Royal Bell Hotel was the very gentleman that had dominated her thoughts for the last three days. She had thought Mr. Darcy left for London the day before with Colonel Fitzwilliam. To see his tall and stately form was a shock. Worse was his countenance. On the surface he was as cold and expressionless as ever, but Elizabeth now knew better and clearly perceived his exhaustion and agitation by the dark circles under his blinking eyes. What strength of emotion he must suffer! To see the very lady who, in the teeth of his avowal of ardent love, had so harshly declared that he was the last man in the world whom she could ever be prevailed on to marry! No matter how wrong he was about Jane or how prideful he had been in Meryton, Elizabeth could not think of her treatment of him without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd.

She could not bear to be in the same room with him. In a moment, she dashed outside. She knew not where she was going; she only knew she had to be out of his presence. She made for the woods. Surely, a walk through the evergreens and budding trees would soothe her as it had done for all of her life. She meant to stay close to the village, but the sound of a stream drew her further into the forest. Deep in thought, she lost all track of distance, and then the storm was upon her.

This was no soft snowfall, which would be her delight. This was a blizzard, fierce and dangerous, and Elizabeth could not ascertain the way back. She recognized no landmarks, there were no tracks in the snow to follow, and as she left the path some time ago, she could not find it again. There was nothing for it but to trudge on and find either Bromley or shelter.



Elizabeth, frightened and exhausted, crouched at the base of the tree, trying to recover her strength and sense of direction. She knew she could not remain where she was, for to stop moving in this cold was to perish. From time to time she called out for assistance. Certainly her presence was missed. There could be men looking for her. All she had to do was remain strong and she would be saved.

But as the minutes dragged on, helplessness overcame her courage. She was just one young lady in a strange town used to travelers coming through. Why would she be missed? No one knew her; no one would

notice her absence—at least until her uncle’s man arrived from London. If he could reach Bromley, if the weather did not force him to turn back.

Is there to be no deliverance? Is this where I am to die? she wondered.

Something pierced her despair. A faint sound floating over the howling winds. “...issenn...”

It was a voice! “Here!” she shouted. “Here I am! Help!” The sound was growing stronger! Elizabeth staggered to her feet and screamed with all her strength, “Over here! Over here!”

“Miss Bennet! ... I am coming... Miss Bennet!”

The deep, masculine voice was angel’s music to Elizabeth’s ears. “Oh, please, please hurry!” The seconds dragged by. Elizabeth shivered, as much from anticipation of rescue as the cold. *Oh, thank God, thank God!* The words ran like a chant through her mind. She gave thanksgivings to her Lord, vowing that she would use this second chance to be a better person, to treat all with kindness, forbearance and patience, and never make sport of any person ever again!

Elizabeth was nearly blinded by the blizzard. Then, there—a figure was making its way between the trees towards her! A man—a man in coat and top hat! “I am over here, good sir!”

“I will be there... in a moment... Miss Bennet!”

Elizabeth’s heart nearly stopped. She recognized that voice! *No! It cannot be! It cannot be him!*

Ten seconds later she was face-to-face with Fitzwilliam Darcy, and her knees had turned to pudding.



She felt Mr. Darcy’s strong, gloved hands hold her up by her arms. “Miss Bennet, are you well?” he demanded in that earnest, clipped way of his. “Are you injured in any way?”

Elizabeth remembered this was the same tone of voice he used for his proposal. The choice of words then was terrible, but the sentiment behind them had been wondrous. “I am well, only dreadfully cold! How... how is it that you—”

Mr. Darcy cut her off. “We must not linger! Can you walk at all? If not, I will carry you.”

The idea of anyone, particularly *Mr. Darcy*, carrying her was humiliating. “No! I... I thank you for the offer, Mr. Darcy, but I can walk. Lead on, please.” Without another word, the two set off, Darcy holding Elizabeth close to him, warding off much of the wind and snow.

Elizabeth was embarrassed and ashamed. Mr. Darcy, of all people, had rescued her from her folly, a folly caused by her inability to remain in a crowded room with the self-same gentleman. *She* had run off, *she* had not minded her steps or the weather, *she* had endangered her own life, and the man *she* had misjudged and insulted was risking his safety to insure hers. How on earth could she ever repay such goodness?

“Blast it!” Mr. Darcy growled. “I cannot find the path! It should be right here!” Elizabeth looked at her savior in horror. Darcy caught the look, for he added, “Forgive me, Miss Bennet, but I have lost the way. I have been searching the wood for some time to pick up your trail, and now that I have found you, I am quite turned around.” He looked up. “I cannot see the sun. I have no direction. It should be west, but I cannot tell.” He stopped and looked at her most gravely. “Miss Bennet, you must trust me. Can you trust me?”

Elizabeth’s teeth were chattering; she could only nod.

“In my search I came upon a small cabin. It is not far—it is near the stream.”

“I... I passed it, sir.”

“Good. Come, we must take shelter there.”

“What? Stay in a cabin with you—alone? It is impossible! No, we cannot!”

“Elizabeth!” Darcy snapped. “We have no choice! We must get out of this cold, or we will freeze to death!”

Elizabeth could not answer otherwise, for the truth was before her. This was indeed a matter of their survival. She was so frightened she failed to react to Darcy's use of her Christian name. Bowing to the inevitable, she permitted Mr. Darcy to lead her through the woods, pulling her frozen body close to his. She allowed herself to take comfort in his strong arms and protection of his broad chest. Before long, the outline of a building could be made out in the all-consuming whiteness. Elizabeth put aside all feeling of impropriety as they grew closer. At that moment, she would do anything to get out of the cold, blowing snow.

The cabin was rough and small, gable-roofed, derelict in appearance, with a single door and shuttered window. Without question, it was a building Elizabeth never would enter but for the most dire circumstances.

Before the door, Mr. Darcy stopped. "I must see if it is safe to enter, but stay close!" He turned and fiddled with the door. Just when Elizabeth was wondering whether he would have to force his way in, the door opened. Darcy moved quickly inside, and before she knew it he had returned, seizing her arm. "Inside quickly, Elizabeth!"

The two dashed inside, Darcy securing the door behind them. It was very dark; the only light came through the shutters of the windows on either wall.

"A moment." Mr. Darcy's voice hung in the gloom. Elizabeth could see him squatting by what looked to be a fireplace. He seemed to be moving things about the hearth.

A nonsensical thought came to her. "Mr. Darcy, are you attempting to start a fire?" Despite her discomfort, the idea of the proud Mr. Darcy attempting a servant's task was excessively diverting!

Darcy stopped moving. "I am."

His voice, as cold as the wind outside, caused Elizabeth to flinch. She moved away as shame overwhelmed her. After their argument at Hunsford, after digesting his painfully revealing letter, and after he saved her from the raging snowstorm, her first instinct was to insult Mr. Darcy! Was it her fate to forever misunderstand and injure this man?

The sound of scratching drew her attention back to Mr. Darcy. A moment later there was a spark, and the gentleman labored carefully to nurse the glowing embers into open flame. Elizabeth held her breath, releasing it in response to the growing glow in the hearth. Mr. Darcy sat back on his knees, surveying his work closely.

Elizabeth tried to apologize. "Mr. Darcy, that is wonderful. Please forgive me my thoughtless words—"

Darcy cut her off brusquely. "That is quite all right, Miss Bennet. You have no reason to think well of me or to believe I possess any abilities other than what are usually found in men of my station."

She accepted his rebuke with a nod. She had certainly hurt him. His face she could not see, for she was behind him, but his tense shoulders were evidence of his unhappiness. "You are a constant surprise to me, sir. I do not think my own dear father, as well read as he is, has started a fire himself his entire life."

It must have been the right thing to say, for Mr. Darcy relaxed. "That is not surprising. It is certainly no mark against Mr. Bennet, or any other gentleman, to lack such knowledge. We are raised with servants all about, after all, and are intended for other duties." While he spoke, he slowly added wood to the growing flames.

"While I am certain that you carry out those duties exceptionally well, you must admit that fire starting is an unusual talent." Darcy's head jerked around, wonder clearly written on it. Elizabeth was relieved to see it—or any expression other than disdain or derision. "Would it be impertinent to ask how you acquired it?"

"Not at all." Darcy rose, and Elizabeth took a half-step back. Being in a small room with his tall, dominating presence was disconcerting, particularly since he still wore his hat. It nearly brushed the ceiling beams of the cabin. "My uncle taught me," he said as he placed a tinderbox upon the mantle.

"Your uncle? The earl?"

Darcy's lips quirked up. "The same. The Earl of Matlock owns a hunting lodge in Scotland and often brought me there when I was young. While in residence, it amuses my relations to live as rough and wild as their ancestors. Therefore, we mastered many mundane tasks customarily left for servants, such as fire starting."

"Indeed!" The idea of a young Mr. Darcy tramping about the wilds of Scotland was decidedly entertaining. "What other skills were you taught?"

"Stalking game, field-dressing our kills, skinning hides, tent pitching, a bit of cooking."

"Cooking?" Elizabeth could not believe it.

Darcy grinned. "Well, attempts at cooking, then. More often than not, our servants had to rescue us from our endeavors." He chuckled. "We did bring *some* servants. My uncle may be slightly eccentric, but he is not foolish, I assure you. None of us ever starved or got ill from bad food."

"I am glad to hear it."

His eyes grew dark at her words, and Elizabeth thought it would be a good time to survey their surroundings. That intense stare of his brought back too many unpleasant memories.

It was a small, one-room cabin, little more than a shack. The fireplace dominated one wall; the walls to either side had a rough, square window, designed for cross-ventilation. There was no glass in either window, and therefore they allowed in no light from outside. Instead, wooden shutters, hinged at the top, were lowered and fastened to keep out the weather. There was only the one door. The wall opposite the fireplace was solid.

There was a shocking lack of furnishings in the place. By Elizabeth's side was a small table with a rickety chair and a low stool. Two woolen blankets were folded on the table. On the mantle, besides the tinderbox, were a mug and a cooking pot. A small stack of wood was piled near the hearth. In the far corner was a chamber pot. Missing were any other chairs, or a bed—or food.

Darcy's voice broke the silence. "This might be a shepherd's cabin or perhaps hunters'. The men who use this place would bring all their necessities with them."

Elizabeth nodded absently. She had seen such buildings on her rambles about the Hertfordshire countryside. Her curiosity never drew her to peek inside them, and she never dreamed she would find herself in one, especially with Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy! Her mind screamed. *She was alone in a cabin with Mr. Darcy!*

"Miss Bennet!" Mr. Darcy cried. "Good heavens, you are soaked through!" He took her arm. "You must come closer to the fire—this instant!"

Elizabeth belatedly realized she was damp and cold, but her recollection of their unsuitable situation and Darcy's handling of her person was her most immediate concern. She stiffened under his hand, and the gentleman released his hold as if burned.

"Please forgive me," said Darcy, "but I must insist you come to the fire, else you will fall ill." He took the blankets off the table. "Wrap yourself in these."

As Elizabeth did so, Darcy drew the lone chair close to the fireplace. She then tried to untie her bonnet, but her shaking hands could not loosen the ribbons. Darcy saw her struggle.

He stepped close. "Forgive me." His voice was soft, as were his hands, and his gloved fingers gently freed the bow. He removed her sodden bonnet, setting it upon the table, his eyes never leaving hers.

His close attention could do naught but add to Elizabeth's unsettledness. "Mr. Darcy, I—"

"You should also get out of those wet clothes," he added in the same quiet voice.

"What? *Mr. Darcy!*"

Darcy jumped back as if slapped. "Miss Bennet, you misunderstand. You must get warm and dry for your health. Wet clothes are a danger." He paused. "One of those things I learned in Scotland." His eyes were full upon her.

Elizabeth blushed. "I understand, sir. My education is not *that* deficient. It does occasionally rain in Hertfordshire. But I am very uncomfortable with you here. I am sure you appreciate that." He was a gentleman—of course he would appreciate her hesitancy. She had accused Mr. Darcy of ungentlemanly behavior, but that

was in how he treated those beneath him. No matter how rude he had been to people, or how much she had disliked him, she never felt danger in his company.

To her surprise, Darcy's expression closed up. "Of course," he said in a clipped manner. "I perfectly comprehend your feelings. I have overstayed, and you have long wished for my absence." He turned to the door. "I shall make straight away for the coaching station. If I am fortunate, I should return with assistance before nightfall. I shall not fail you, Miss Bennet."

Part 2

"NO, MR. DARCY!" ELIZABETH rushed to take his arm before he could open the door. "You must not go! It is too dangerous!"

Darcy regarded her warily. "But certainly, you must despise my company."

"No, I do not, truly." Her eyes watered. "I am uncomfortable, but it is due to my mortification. I am ashamed of how I acted throughout our acquaintance, and I am so very sorry for the cruel words and unjust accusations I made at... our last interview." Darcy's heartfelt declaration, "*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you!*" returned to her mind unbidden.

"You saw me at the Bell and left directly." There was a decided note of hurt in his voice.

She tried to change the subject. "I was surprised to see you there. I thought you left Kent yesterday."

"My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, did return to London," Darcy admitted, "but I had business for my aunt here in Bromley and spent the night at the hotel." He paused, uncertainty clear in his bearing. "It is not... painful to see me?"

Elizabeth pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. She could not look at him. "Painful enough, but it is due to *my* regretful actions, not yours."

"I would not have you pained for any reason," he said gently, "nor suffer any regrets."

Elizabeth's eyes sought his. "Mr. Darcy, you are very kind, but I was wrong that evening."

"Were you? I cannot say that our interview was not without disappointment for me or that some of your conclusions were based on incomplete and inaccurate information. But I have been contemplating my own behavior, not only at the parsonage, but during the whole of our acquaintance, and I find my conduct... unsatisfying."

Elizabeth could have no answer to that.

Darcy shook himself. "The matter before us is your health. Now, madam, I must insist you remove your wet garments. To give you privacy, I would be happy to step outdoors—"

"My health is no more important than yours, and you must not endanger yourself to comfort me."

"I can turn my back," he offered.

Elizabeth bit her lip. She trusted Mr. Darcy to do as he said, but still... An idea came to her, and she removed one of her blankets. "If you would hang this in the corner, I would be obliged."

Darcy looked at her blankly before the light of understanding filled his face. He quickly stepped to the rear of the cottage and hung the blanket from a rafter. Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised that it nearly touched the floor.

Darcy returned to her side. "There were several nails extending from the beam, which I used to good effect. Your changing room, milady." He bowed and gestured.

Elizabeth smiled as she moved behind the make-shift wall. *Mr. Darcy did have a sense of humor!*

She quickly divested herself of her coat and pelisse. Unfortunately, her dress was sodden, and with a sigh, she took it off as well. While undressing, she felt a draft. It ended quickly, but then, just in her undergarments,

she was horribly cold. She tightly wound the remaining blanket about her body, stepped from behind the cloth wall, and scurried back to the fire. To her surprise, she saw the cooking pot filled with snow on the floor near the flames. She immediately realized the chill breeze before was a result of Mr. Darcy filling the pot outside. She spied him, sans hat and overcoat, resolutely facing the door. She draped her dress over the back of the chair, positioned it close to the hearth, and settled herself on the floor.

"You may turn around, sir."

Darcy turned, sat on the stool, and removed his boots, resolutely keeping his eyes anywhere but on her. After a moment, Elizabeth thought his efforts rather comical, for she had made certain that she was well covered.

Finally, his eyes fell on her. "What do you find so amusing, Miss Bennet?"

"I take pleasure in many things, sir." She certainly was not going to admit she thought it silly that he not look at her! Darcy accepted her cryptic response, set his boots near the hearth, and turned back to her.

"May I?" He gestured to a spot near her.

"Of course. You must keep warm, too."

Darcy took his seat, crossed his arms over his knees, and stared into the fire. He said nothing and Elizabeth was glad of it. Their discussions had a habit of becoming arguments. Elizabeth allowed her thoughts to wander. *How long would they be trapped here, and what would happen when they left?*

Many minutes passed before Mr. Darcy cleared his throat. "We must ration the wood. I believe this storm will be of some duration."

Elizabeth's worries increased. "Do you think so?"

He nodded. "I have seen these springtime snowstorms before. The snow is heavy and plentiful." He paused. "I fear we must remain here tonight."

"Oh." Elizabeth had half-expected it, but to have it verified aloud brought the gravity of their situation into clear focus.

"I apologize, Miss Bennet."

"Apologize for what, sir?"

He gestured towards the fireplace. "That I lost my bearings. Due to my carelessness, you are now forced to take shelter"—he started to say something and paused—"here." He closed his eyes.

Elizabeth was astonished. "I can hardly blame you for saving my life! If anyone is due an apology, it is you. I am the foolish girl who got lost. I put you in danger, and for that I am heartily sorry."

Darcy said nothing. He resolutely stared at the dancing flames.

Elizabeth continued. "I owe you a great many apologies, starting with my defense of Mr. Wickham."

Mr. Darcy took a breath. "You must not be too harsh on yourself. Wickham's one true talent is his ability to charm the most reasonable people. You, with a kind disposition and no knowledge of his base proclivities, would have no reason to suspect him of impropriety. I hope you forgive me my letter. That was ungentlemanly of me, and I am sorry to be the cause of disillusionment of your favorite, but my character demanded that I take the liberty of relaying the truth of him. I do not wish to see you harmed."

Elizabeth was taken aback. "I assure you, sir, I am untouched. Mr. Wickham was a friend—an unworthy friend, it seems—but nothing more."

"I am glad to hear it. Too many have been injured by him, in small ways and large." He hung his head. "Indeed, the fault, I now realize, is mine. I should have revealed his true character to the world long ago."

"I thank you for your effort to preserve my feelings, but I will own up to my faults. I stupidly believed the lies told by a charming rogue for the simple reason that he flattered me and you did not." She fought back tears. "There, what think you now of my vanity?"

He turned his dark gaze on her. "I think you perfectly lovely." At her shocked look, he recoiled. "Forgive me. I should not have said that."

Elizabeth was stunned. She had been surprised that Mr. Darcy did not hate her for her refusal, as she deserved, but this was the first indication that his high opinion of her had not yet died. Did he still love her? Did she want him to love her? These were issues she was not prepared to contemplate.

She returned to the subject at hand. "Why does Mr. Wickham dislike you so? You do not have to say. I know it is none of my concern, but I own a curiosity of why a young man who had been given opportunity and education few of his station could so much as dream about, could throw it all away, insult his godfather's son, and attempt to ruin a young lady with whom he was practically raised."

"Those are home questions, and I wish I could relate, with reasonable precision, Wickham's motives, but I cannot." He sighed. "Wickham was, in my youth, almost a brother to me. My father encouraged our fellowship. Old Mr. Wickham, good man that he was, was my father's friend, as much as a servant could be with his employer. I believe Father felt sorry for George, for due to Mrs. Wickham's extravagance, his family was often in distress.

"My mother never liked George. It was the only discord I know of that ever came between my parents. I always thought it was George's low birth and profligate mother. It was her Fitzwilliam pride—the same pride, I fear, infects me—I had thought was the reason. But now I think she saw his true character more clearly than we. Ladies often are more perceptive than gentlemen."

Elizabeth could not help blushing at that. Her confidence in her discernment had been beaten down, thanks to her misapprehension of Darcy, and surely the man beside her knew that. Was this empty flattery? His attitude suggested it was not, but what else could be his object?

Mr. Darcy continued unabated. "George was always getting into scrapes, and sometimes I was dragged into them. My father was disappointed in me when I was. He said he expected better of me. I was to be an example to George. As for George, he was punished but not severely. Everyone felt sorry for 'poor George.' He learned from an early age how to exploit that.

"The sea-change occurred in the wake of my mother's passing. Father, distraught, found comfort in George's high spirits. My father loved me—I should make that clear—but it was time for me to be sent away to school, and I was not often at home. George did not join me until after his own mother died.

"Away from Pemberley, all the weaker particulars of George's character became more evident. He gambled and drank, and at Cambridge, his habits became even more depraved. His vicious propensities, his want of principle—these are subjects unfit for a young lady's ears. He was sent down in disgrace after a year at university.

"About six months after I had taken possession of Pemberley, Wickham demanded and received funds in lieu of the preferment. That he lost it, and the legacy besides, within three years was by then no great surprise to me. What was unexpected was his unreasonable demand for the living when it came vacant. I suppose it was not until then, particularly after a very disagreeable interview about the matter, that I fully apprehended Wickham's jealousy of my situation. He wanted what I had, not because he deserved it, but because he wanted it.

"All of his life, Wickham refused to use what talents he owns to better himself. To put it plainly, he forever seeks the easy way. He thinks me his equal, so why should I have all of Pemberley? He has no comprehension of, or appreciation for, the responsibilities of my position. The decisions I make affect the lives of my family, my servants, my tenants—even the people of Lambton and Kympton—for good or for ill. Wickham only sees the money." Mr. Darcy fell into a contemplative silence.

Elizabeth took time to consider what she had heard. His words held little news—much of it was in his letter—but his tone of voice revealed all. He imparted his story sadly, with much regret. He saw what a waste Mr. Wickham had made of all his advantages. The patronage of his godfather, friendship with Mr. Darcy—Wickham had disregarded it all. There was no hint of superiority or triumph in Mr. Darcy's manner. Wickham was a tragedy in his eyes.

What depth of feeling this revealed! Mr. Darcy certainly disliked Mr. Wickham, perhaps even hated him, but could still pity him. Pity the man who tried to ruin his sister! Elizabeth's admiration grew for Mr. Darcy. She knew she would not be so generous to any who so misused her family. Already, she dismissed Mr. Wickham as a base scoundrel.

Meanwhile, Darcy retrieved a mug of hot water from the pot by the fire. "Here, drink this. 'Tis only water, but it will do you good." He offered the mug.

Elizabeth accepted it, and Darcy looked on with approval as she sipped the slushy water. "Excellent," he said. "A man can survive a fortnight or more without food, but without water he will expire within a few days." At her look, he added, "Another thing I learned in Scotland."

"Apparently, Scotland is an underappreciated font of information. More young gentlemen should go there."

Darcy laughed. "Would it surprise you that Wickham despised going to the hunting lodge? He thought us all fools for living like savages."

A savage Mr. Darcy? The thought charmed Elizabeth. As she handed back the mug, she noted he had loosened his cravat. For the first time, she beheld the naked neck of a man wholly unrelated to her. Unexpected sensations coursed through her, sensations that brought her mind back to the improper situation in which she found herself.

There is nothing to be done about it, she reminded herself. Neither of us could long survive outside this cabin.

Silence fell between them for a time. Elizabeth's thoughts were occupied with memories of Longbourn. Mr. Darcy's contemplations were a mystery.

The gentleman stirred himself to go to the door. He only opened it for a moment, but it was enough to rob the room of much of its warmth. "As I thought," said he, returning to her side, "darkness is falling, and so too the temperature. You should try to rest." He had his overcoat in his hands. "Here, put this on, or use it as a pillow."

"Mr. Darcy, I cannot. This is yours, and you might have need of it."

He shook his head. "I am perfectly comfortable, and I will venture to state that you are not."

She had to agree. She was shivering in the newly cold air.

"Shall I get the other blanket for you?"

"No. I might have need of it later after my dress dries." She did not remind him that the chamber pot was behind the cloth wall.

"Very well. Rest, Miss Bennet. I shall see to the fire."



Hours later, a drowsy Elizabeth was aware of a heavy, warm presence. "Jane," she complained sleepily, "please stay on your own side of the bed."

"Please pardon my actions, Miss Bennet," a low voice whispered in her ear, "but it is imperative that you remain warm."

"Mr. Darcy!" she cried. She realized it had been a dream: She was *not* at Longbourn, and that was *not* Jane who had snuggled close to her! She was trapped in a cold, run-down cabin with Mr. Darcy! "What are you doing? Release me!"

"Please do not take fright," he urged. "I know this is improper, but to have wood enough to last the night, the fire will be inadequate to keep you warm. We have to conserve our body warmth, and this is *the* most efficient method." He had placed his body behind hers, an arm draped over her, with only the thin blanket separating them.

Unconvinced, Elizabeth tried to scramble out of the blankets. "Mr. Darcy, you are embracing me!" His strong arm tightened its hold on her, despite renewed protests.

"I *know!* Please stop fighting! I only mean to keep you warm."

Elizabeth never dreamed that things would come to this! Forced, for her own safety, to behave improperly, even scandalously, with Mr. Darcy! Horror battled with a strange feeling of... was it reassurance? She labored to calm herself.

Darcy lowered his voice. "If there were any other way, it would be done. Our lives are at stake; we have no other choice. I promise you will be safe. You *must* trust me, Elizabeth." He sighed. "I know you have little reason to do so and would wish me elsewhere. I am so very sorry."

Mr. Darcy's regret was obvious. *And, after all, I have been trapped for hours with him. How much more can I be compromised?* She took refuge in her wit. "It seems I must place my trust in more of your Scottish wisdom, sir. But I must ask you not to refer to me in such a familiar manner."

She felt Mr. Darcy relax somewhat. "Indeed, and I do beg your pardon. I meant no disrespect. Perhaps if I roll over, it would ease your discomfort."

Mr. Darcy removed his arm and repositioned himself. When queried, Elizabeth assured him that she was satisfied. She was not. How could she, lying next to a man she was not even promised to, much less married? She was unsettled. Emotions of shame, guilt, revulsion, and even attraction warred within her. She doubted she would get much sleep that night.

Part 3 – The Second Day

ELIZABETH'S FEAR OF A sleepless night was proven correct, and it was Mr. Darcy's fault. It was bad enough to be unwillingly placed the unsuitable position of sleeping on a bare floor in her shift and forced to share a fire with a man whose proposal she had refuted—with good reason, she reminded herself. But that man kept waking her each time he got up during the night to manage the fire. When he returned to her side, he would lay with her back-to-back, but often would turn to embrace her in his sleep. She believed him unaware of what he was doing, but it was enough to drive one distracted!

To be fair, the fire needed to be tended, and Mr. Darcy moved as quietly as could be, and he often caught himself when he did cuddle her and turned to face the other way. He also had retrieved the other blanket, adding slightly to their warmth.

As a result, Elizabeth was exhausted, cold, distraught, and hungry. She had not eaten since a late breakfast at Hunsford the day before. To her shame, her stomach made very unladylike rumbles. All this combined to give her a blinding headache.

When Elizabeth awoke a final time, she could not tell whether it was morning, but she could not bear to be on the hard, rough wooden floor a moment longer. Fortunately, Mr. Darcy must have come to the same conclusion.

"Pardon me, Miss Elizabeth," he said in a rough voice, "I must see to things outside. I will not be long." He rose from the floor, pulled on his boots, retrieved his overcoat, and rehung his blanket in the corner. He then walked stiffly to the door, pulling his on overcoat. Elizabeth could not help but notice that the man was fatigued. *Perhaps Mr. Darcy is human, after all*, she thought.

Once Darcy left the cottage, Elizabeth threw off her own blanket and made a quick toilette. She despaired of a vessel of water to wash her face as she donned her dress and pelisse, now toasty dry from the fire. She was able to do up the buttons, for it was a traveling dress, rather than a gown. She attempted to do something with her hair when Darcy returned. The blast of cold air from the open door made her close her eyes, so she did not see his burden until he was almost to the fire.

"There was not much wood left by the cottage," he said as he placed a few sticks on the greatly diminished woodpile by the hearth. His voice had a slight apologetic tone that left Elizabeth unmoved. She was exhausted, suffering from hunger and headache, and her mood was not charitable.

"I am sure you did the best you could," she observed. She retrieved the chamber pot and made for the door.

"Where are you going with that?"

Elizabeth turned to her companion, taken aback at his abrupt question. "Undoubtedly you have seen one of these before." She indicated her burden. "If you would excuse me—"

"I will take it."

Elizabeth was stunned. "You certainly will not!"

"If you believe I will allow you out in the snow without protest, madam, you are sadly mistaken." Darcy was resolute as he held out his hands. He shook his head. "I will not be moved. Hand it over."

She glared at him, but his stone-face did not change. Defeated, she practically shoved the chamber pot into his hands. He nodded and left the cabin.

Elizabeth fell into the lone chair, furious. Knowing that at that moment, he was—she could not bear to think of it! She put her face in her hands, thinking she would die of humiliation.

She lifted her head at the sound of the door opening. Mr. Darcy resolutely walked across the floor, returning the empty chamber pot to its place behind the blanket wall. Elizabeth noticed his look was attentive as he took off his overcoat and hat and returned to the fire. Neither spoke for a while.

Darcy was the one to break the uncomfortable silence. "Did you sleep well?"

Elizabeth could not trust herself to say more than a word. "Tolerably."

He offered her a mug of hot water. "All the breakfast available, I fear." Elizabeth did not respond, her pounding head filled with thoughts of the surplus of beefsteak at her mother's table.

Darcy retrieved and refilled the mug. Elizabeth declined a second drink, so he sipped thoughtfully. "The snow is quite deep, and the wind is undiminished. I would not suggest attempting to walk out this morning. Perhaps if the wind dies in the afternoon..." He let his voice trail off. There was nothing to say to that, so Elizabeth said nothing. Her irritation with her present situation grew.

A few minutes later, Darcy said, "That is a pretty dress."

Elizabeth looked up at his *non sequitur*. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your dress," he waved his hand at it, "it is... becoming."

Elizabeth could not believe what she was hearing. Certainly Mr. Darcy was not truly complimenting her dress! It was a traveling frock she had worn many a time. It was nothing any lady of the *ton* would ever wear. It was the second time he had engaged in empty flattery. What could be his motive in acting so strangely? "I thank you, sir," she managed.

"I was thinking of my sister. She would like it, I think."

Now she *knew* he was lying! "Mr. Darcy, I know not to what you are referring. I imagine your sister's style of clothing is far above those of a simple country miss!"

"I do not contradict you. Georgiana does patronize the best dressmakers in London. The difference is slight, however. Only in the... umm... style, I believe. I was speaking of the color and the fabric. It is very fine."

Elizabeth looked down at her clothing. "For my uncle, I thank you." She caught his quizzical expression. "The fabric is from my uncle's warehouses."

"Ah, the one in trade." Mr. Darcy fidgeted uncomfortably.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. "My uncle Gardiner is an importer of fine fabrics and spices. He used to handle French wines and American tobacco, but with the troubles overseas—"

"I see," Darcy said shorty. He seemed to contemplate something. "Perhaps my sister and I should visit Mr. Gardiner's warehouse."

"Ha!" Elizabeth laughed harshly. "If you are attempting to appear as an amiable gentleman for my sake, please save yourself the trouble! You do it ill, and I find it offensive."

Mr. Darcy frowned. "Miss Bennet, I fail to see how I offend."

"And *I* fail to see your purpose in empty promises."

"I have taken my sister shopping many times."

"I say nothing against your sister, but I find it hard to believe she even knows where Cheapside is, much less ever been there!" Elizabeth was incensed. "I know well your opinion of my family, particularly of my mother's roots in trade! You made it quite clear in your letter. I would prefer honest conversation from you rather than this obsequiousness."

"Miss Bennet, I do not believe you recall my letter accurately. You must acknowledge that the situation of your mother's family is regrettable, but—"

"My Uncle Gardiner is one of the finest men I know!" Elizabeth cried, despite her raging headache. "He is honest, hard-working, and generous! He is also very learned, well-read, and polite! He may not be a gentleman, but there are some gentlemen of my acquaintance who could learn from his example! *He* would never dismiss people below him as dirt on his boots!"

Mr. Darcy, wide-eyed and pale, said nothing, and Elizabeth continued. "You may treat the world as you will, sir, and I would say nothing. *I* am not harmed. But when you harm those dear to me—"

"You speak of your sister." Darcy's voice was cold and controlled.

"Your wit does you proud, sir!" Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, my dear Jane, condemned to a life of ridicule and regret due to *your* unwarranted interference, just because my family was not fine enough for your friend!"

"But fine enough for me."

Elizabeth started at his calm response.

Darcy's face was tight and expressionless, his arms crossed. "You forget, madam, that I set aside those same objections to your family when I made those offers which were four nights ago so disgusting to you. And in my letter, I stated I would have advised Mr. Bingley differently had I had any idea of your sister's attachment to him. She gave no evidence of it to me, so when my judgment was solicited, I gave my honest opinion. I could do no less for *my* friend."

"Yes, your honest opinion of my ridiculous family!"

"Miss Bennet, it is impossible that a lady of your intelligence can be unaware of the total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly, betrayed by your family, save for yourself and your elder sister. It is a decided fact. However, it is not a crime to suffer a ridiculous family, as you so put it, if one can be assured of all the *other* advantages that marriage should bring."

"Like wealth and connections!" Elizabeth snapped.

"Like *mutual affection*!" Darcy shouted. He then turned away, back to the fire, as his impassioned words rang through the cabin. "I beg your pardon for raising my voice."

Elizabeth sat blinking at the forceful display of passion.

He took a long breath. "People of my station are expected to marry on the basis of *wealth and connections*." He practically spat out the words. "I bear witness to the results of that evil every day amongst my friends and acquaintances, even in my own family. Men and women hopelessly trapped in arrangements that offer little more than existence, their children shunted aside as mere ornaments or used as chess pieces in the game of influence." He wagged one finger in the air. "Ah, but they have *money and position*. Strange how it fails to keep one warm in the night." He leaned on the mantle. "Many lose respectability as they seek the affection they crave in dissolute ways." He snorted. "The *ton* may forgive their indiscretions, particularly those of the gentlemen, but *I* am not such a hypocrite."

"It is wickedness and sorrow complete, in every particular horrible. I think it better my friend remain unmarried than to be in circumstances that should injure all proper feelings."

Darcy's heart-felt declaration stunned Elizabeth utterly silent. He had opened the door to his soul for her inspection, and what she found was unexpected. She could not grasp it at present. As was her wont, she needed time to digest it properly.

Darcy spoke on, this time in regret. "Do not think for a moment that I do not know what my advice to Bingley has cost me. I have forever lost my one chance at happiness." He put a hand to his forehead. "Or, perhaps I deceive myself. I never was truly worthy of you, was I, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth, her tears redoubled, could only look on mutely.

"I thought after yesterday we could yet be friends... but that was only an illusion, I see." Darcy then moved over to the door and began to put on his overcoat.

Elizabeth shook off her stupor. "Mr. Darcy, where are you going?"

He refused to face her as he tugged on his gloves. "I go to acquire more firewood. We have insufficient for the night, should we be forced to remain." He put on his hat and reached for the door latch.

"You must not go outside! You said it was dangerous!"

He stopped. "I am sure it is nothing to you." With that he quickly left the cabin.



Elizabeth spent the next hour in wretched recrimination and dreadful suspense. She could not believe that once again she had misjudged Mr. Darcy and, due to her lack of wit, lost her temper. And now, because of her bad behavior, Mr. Darcy was risking his life out in the cold and snow.

Had she learned nothing from his letter? She dug it out of her reticule and read the dreadful thing for what seemed the twentieth time. There, in his precise, close penmanship was his explanation of his actions in regards to Jane and Mr. Bingley as well as his horrifying description of Mr. Wickham's offenses against him. As her eyes scanned the familiar phrases, ones she had thought she had committed to memory, she was ashamed of herself once again. How blind she had been! How partial, prejudiced, absurd, even despicable!

It was true that Mr. Darcy had labored to separate Mr. Bingley from Jane. The conclusion he drew from observing Jane was very flawed. Jane was deeply attached to Mr. Bingley, she knew. She had revealed it to her.

However, Elizabeth had to give credit to Charlotte's warning. Jane did keep her feelings and opinions to herself to an extraordinary degree. Elizabeth had always admired her for it, but might her sister have gone too far? How was a man to act if he was unsure of his lady's feelings? Should he and declare himself, exposing himself to the scorn of the world if he was wrong?

As Mr. Darcy did.

With a shock, she saw that Mr. Bingley, for all his virtues, lacked Mr. Darcy's courage. Perhaps Mr. Darcy was over-confident, but he still *acted*. Mr. Bingley was very different in his uncertainty. He sought the advice of his relations and friends and did not trust his own observations. Elizabeth could not speak as to the motivations of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. As for Mr. Darcy, he gave his honest opinion. Would Elizabeth do less for Jane if she sought her advice?

Mr. Darcy was wrong in his advice to Mr. Bingley, but he was not spiteful. No, the only spiteful person in the matter was herself. The poor man had declared his ardent love for her less than a week ago. She spurned it then, and she spurned his attempts at cordial friendship today. No matter how awful a proposal he had delivered, his feelings were true and worthy of gentle handling. But no, that was not Elizabeth Bennet's way! Why be kind when one could be cruel? Thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Generous instead of ungrateful? The man saved her life, and she might as well have spit in his face! Hateful, hateful girl!

How could she make amends? How did one go about apologizing to a gentleman so high, so justifiably proud? Proud not just of his position in life, but of his talents and generosity. How was such a man to be worked on? Would he believe a word she said?

On and on Elizabeth thought and schemed, and rejected and despaired, until she noted a long time had passed since Mr. Darcy's departure. A new fear arose in her. What if he was not to return? What if, disgusted by her unladylike behavior and unable to remain in her presence, he had attempted to walk out to the coaching station? The fire was low, the wood almost gone. Would he return with help in time?

Or far worse, what if he met with misfortune? What if, at that moment, he lay injured in the freezing snow, a victim of a falling limb or thin ice? *What if Mr. Darcy was dying?*

She dashed to the window that looked out the back of the cottage. She fumbled with the latches before the crude shutter could be swung up. Sticking her head out of the open window, she saw naught but a train of footsteps leading to a small, crude structure about ten yards away. She immediately saw the significance of it.

This morning, when Mr. Darcy left through the door, he trudged through knee-deep snowdrifts to the privy, for the singular purpose of giving me privacy! This man continuously suffers discomfort for my sake! Not only do I fail to recognize his service, in return I humiliate and mock him! How despicably have I acted!

She closed and latched the shutter and went to the front window. This one was jammed. No matter how Elizabeth tried, she could not work the latch. She reached for the door when a wild thought took her.

Stupid girl! What good is it to look for Mr. Darcy from a window? He may need my aid! I must find him!

Quickly she donned her coat and bonnet. Then, steeling her courage, she opened the door. The cold wind struck her face, forcing Elizabeth to duck. It was then she noticed a substantial pile of tree limbs near the cabin wall, the snow trampled with numerous footsteps. Instantly, her thoughts turned to Mr. Darcy—surely this was the result of his labors. She looked up towards the woods.

The grey sky was cloudy, and the fallen snow danced in the brisk wind. A trail of footsteps led into the wood. Elizabeth was determined to follow the trail and took a few steps when a tall figure emerged from the gloom. In moments it became clear it was a man in a top hat, carrying a burden in his arms. Elizabeth's spirits soared.

"Mr. Darcy!" she cried.

The figure stumbled, and Elizabeth's fears returned. She began to make her way through the drifts to his side as the man struggled to his feet.

"M-M-Miss Bennet!" The weakness in his muffled voice would forever be planted in her memory. "Go b-b-back! This is no p-p-place for you!"

Heedless, she trudged as quickly as she could to the staggering gentleman. "Let me help you!"

"I-I-I am w-w-well. Go back, I b-b-beg you."

Darcy had pulled up his cravat and affixed it to cover his nose and mouth, and it was covered in snow and ice. Exhaustion was clearly written in his eyes. The bundle of wood had to be heavy, and his steps were uncertain. He was falling, and but for Elizabeth driving her shoulder under his, he would have fallen in the snow. Darcy was done in.

With strength she did not know she possessed, Elizabeth half-carried Darcy to the cabin. She reached out, pushed the door open, and the pair stumbled in. Elizabeth retained her footing, but Darcy did not and fell face first on the floor, the wood he carried flying everywhere. Elizabeth shut the door and knelt at his side.

"C-c-cold... s-s-so cold..." Darcy mumbled. The man rolled onto his side, drew his knees to his chest, and shivered uncontrollably. His overcoat and boots were soaked. Elizabeth removed his frozen cravat and, to her horror, saw that his lips were blue. Terms like frostbite and exposure filled her mind.

"Mr. Darcy, I am so sorry. This is my fault. Please let me help you. We must get you warm." Keeping her voice as calm as she could, she coaxed Mr. Darcy to crawl closer to the fire. Once there, she began to remove his overcoat.

"E-E-Elizabeth, you s-s-should not..." Darcy protested, but Elizabeth was having none of it. She ignored his pleas, and in quick order, divested him of not only his outer coat but his inner one as well. She wrapped him in one of the blankets, and turned her attention to his boots. That task was harder to perform, and not until

she sat down on the floor, seized his left boot in both hands, and braced her left foot against his right was she able to pull the boot off. She repeated the process with the right boot, and then removed his drenched silk stockings.

“Mr. Darcy, you must lie still—I insist!” She dashed to the hanging cloth wall, gave it a yank, and it came away from the nails with a small ripping sound. She returned to Darcy and wrapped it around his legs. She then scooped a mug full of hot water from the cooking pot. She had to hold the mug for him to drink, for his hands shook too hard to hold it without spilling its contents.

Elizabeth got to her feet, thinking of what else to do. She removed her own coat, folded it, and placed it under Darcy’s head as a pillow. She then gathered the scattered firewood, fed some of it to the fire, and deposited the balance in the woodpile next to the hearth.

After hanging her bonnet and his hat by the door, she returned to Darcy’s side. She recoiled when she touched his face, for it was ice-cold. The blankets were not enough, and the fire would take too long to warm the space. Mr. Darcy needed aid *now*. There was only one thing to do.

Taking a moment to hang his stockings and coats on the back of the chair, she removed Darcy’s blankets.

“M-M-Miss Bennet?” Darcy tried to lift his head.

“Shush, sir. Be still, please.” Following the example he set the day before, Elizabeth lay down behind Darcy, wrapping her warm body around his chilled one, pulling both blankets over their bodies. Elizabeth heard his teeth chattering. “Do not speak, sir. Rest. All will be well. I will care for you.”

He moaned, “Elizabeth,” and fell asleep.

No longer in the immediacy of the crisis, Elizabeth took stock of their situation. They had wood aplenty and water from melted snow. But they still had no food, no promise of deliverance from without, and Elizabeth had no idea whether she could save Mr. Darcy’s life—a life she felt she endangered by her intemperate words and thoughtless behavior.

Elizabeth buried her face in Darcy’s shoulder and cried as she prayed for help.

Part 4

ELIZABETH KNEW NOT HOW long she slept, but she awoke to Mr. Darcy’s movements beside her. She rose on one elbow to look over his shoulder and see his face. “Mr. Darcy, are you well?”

“I am better, I thank you,” he said weakly. “And you? Are you harmed at all?”

“I am very well, sir.” *And very hungry*, she tried not to dwell on. “Shall I get you some water?”

“Do not trouble yourself. I shall get—”

“Mr. Darcy,” she said with a small edge to her voice, “I require you to stay where you are. I said I shall care for you, and I mean to do it.” She got up, replacing the blanket on top of him.

“You shall be my nursemaid?” There was a hint of amusement in his tone.

She decided to match it. “I shall—or I shall be *seriously displeased*.” The gentleman’s soft chuckle was her reward. Darcy drank about half the mug and then insisted Elizabeth drink her fill. Elizabeth then used the mug to refill the cooking pot, requiring several trips to the snow outside to do so. By the time she was done, it was very cold inside the cabin. More wood was required on the fire before she sought shelter beneath one of the precious blankets.

At first, Elizabeth sat up next to her patient but, finding that aspect unprofitable as regards to warmth, resumed her position lying next to Mr. Darcy. She resisted embracing him, however, and lay on her back.

For some time she stared at the ceiling, pondering her circumstances. She was hungry and tired and weak. Her body ached from lying prone on the hard wooden floor. Fortunately, her headache had not returned. Her

short time outside revealed that the snowdrifts had blown very high and darkness was falling. There was no likelihood of deliverance that day, which meant another night with Mr. Darcy.

That brought her thoughts to the man beside her. He was, for all his faults, a very good sort of man. He *did* have faults, chiefly his stubborn reliance on his own abilities, but the dear man had nearly killed himself in her service, gathering wood in horrible conditions. When he left after their argument, Elizabeth supposed he would salvage a few limbs as before. Had she any idea that his purpose was to stock enough firewood for the next day or more, she would have insisted on helping. Together, they could have accomplished as much or more in half the time. But the headstrong gentleman had given no clue to his intentions. Obstinate reckless fool! She could just scream!

Elizabeth realized that her anger was due to her growing respect and admiration for Mr. Darcy. She now knew that Darcy was wise, caring, loyal, courageous, industrious, and clever. He thought things through, sometimes to an exhausting extent, but once his mind was made, he was resolute. This was a man of action; *his* family would never suffer due to indolence or negligence.

As mine has, she thought sadly.

Her eyes flicked to his broad back. *Would Mr. Darcy respect his spouse's thoughts, dreams, and opinions, or would he be as most gentlemen and dismiss his wife as silly and inconsequential?* Both examples existed in Elizabeth's immediate family.

She had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behavior as a husband. She had always seen it with pain, but respecting his abilities and grateful for his affectionate treatment of *herself*, she endeavored to forget what she could not overlook. She banished from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. She could do that no longer.

Mr. Gardiner was the opposite. United in affection with a woman he both adored and respected, he gave her the deference due to the mistress of his household and mother of his children. But more than that, there was a wonderful similarity of thought and opinion. They were of like mind about almost everything, and her uncle constantly sought the counsel of his wife without fear of diminishing his role of master of his house.

The more she considered it, the more Elizabeth believed Mr. Darcy's behavior as a husband would be like her uncle's, rather than her father's. Painful as she found the recollection, Darcy had been remarkably consistent in his praise of *her* abilities and qualities, even in his anger and disappointment. He had fallen in love with her, even though she could bring nothing to him but herself—no fortune, no connections, and no influence. He had considered her worth greater than all those assets in revulsion of all that he had been taught his entire life. His incredible letter had not blamed her for his disappointment or condemned her for her faith in Wickham's lies. Instead, it stated that she was a woman above her family, and he was willing to withstand society's scorn for her sake. In their last argument, he clearly stated that *he* had been unworthy of *her*, a woman he should despise, and not the other way around.

His impassioned declaration earlier had sent shivers down her spine. He had rejected utterly the conventionally dissolute conventions of his class. His ideas and desires closely matched her own seemingly unattainable dreams, hidden deep in her heart. Was there another man in England who would more suit her in disposition and talents? His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes, and she had thrown it away.

"Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth was startled out of her remorseful contemplations. "Yes, Mr. Darcy?" She dashed away her tears, hoping he was unaware of her weeping.

He was. "Your sister was truly in love with Bingley?"

"She was, and she is."

"I saw no evidence of it." Darcy's tone was not haughty or defensive but wistful. "She remains enamored of my friend?"

"Yes. Jane does not give her heart lightly." She considered his first comment and continued. "Jane is a quiet, reserved person. Her kindly disposition and gentle temperament hide deep feelings, feelings she is loath to reveal to the world. That many are unaware of her true nature does not make it any less real." She smiled sadly. "She is much like a certain gentleman of my acquaintance."

She heard the hiss of a quick breath taken and felt somewhat pleased that she was permitted to give him this little acknowledgement of his hidden character. She was happy in her weariness, for it gave her the courage to speak plainly.

The revelation sprung upon her like a lightning bolt. *Not speaking openly has been our downfall. This must end.*

Talking ceased for a time, Elizabeth lying in anxious concern over Mr. Darcy's understanding of her words. His breathing was normal, his body still, but there was a tightness to his shoulders. He was not sleeping; he was thinking.

He finally broke the silence. "I propose to bring Bingley with me when I call upon you at Longbourn. Do you approve of this plan, or would your sister find it painful?"

Several emotions raced through her body, but she labored to quiet them all. Mr. Darcy had said something important in a very offhanded manner. She would no longer *assume*; she would no longer *guess*. She would *know* his meaning, there and then.

"I should hope that I am charitable enough to forgive Mr. Bingley of unsteadiness. I would be happy to see him, and I can speak with reasonable assurance that Jane would feel the same. But you allude to a plan of which I was uninformed. I take it your design is to call upon me in Hertfordshire."

"Of course, there and in London," he said instantly. "I believe it essential, given our current... circumstances. I hope you do not find the idea too distressing."

"Distressing or not, I notice that you intend to carry out this scheme with or without my consent." Elizabeth was amused, not angry, but the effect upon Mr. Darcy seemed the same. He rolled over to face her, his expression earnest and concerned.

"Elizabeth—Miss Bennet, do you not see? I must! We have shared a cabin alone for two days! At the *very least*, I should pay court to you. I would do more if I could be assured—"

Elizabeth smiled gently as she placed two fingers on his lips, silencing him. "Just because a plan was not of my creation does not make it at once distressing. I suppose you find this necessary."

"I do." He spoke, even though she had not removed her fingers from his lips. "I know your opinion of me is not the highest—"

"Mr. Darcy, you really must allow a lady to change her mind." She dropped her hand. The absolute confusion on Darcy's handsome face was adorable, Elizabeth found.

"You—you have changed your mind?"

"I am not a frivolous creature, given over to following the whim of the moment here and there, like a butterfly fluttering in the breeze." *At least, not any longer.* "I think myself rational enough to weigh the evidence presented and come to a better understanding of any given question, even those of very vexing gentlemen from the north."

"You have a better understanding of me?"

"I do." Elizabeth delighted at the look of uncertainty and happiness she beheld in his countenance. How much more agreeable it was to engage in playful teasing rather than hateful mocking! Mr. Darcy, for all his admirable abilities and qualities, could be so amusingly obtuse sometimes. Perhaps it was true of all his sex. She gave him a cheeky smile. "Very well, sir, you may call on me if you wish."

"I do wish it, very much. Thank you, Elizabeth. You honor me."

Nay sir, you honor me. "But back to the matter at hand. You wish to reunite Jane and Mr. Bingley. Is this for her sake, his sake, or mine?"

"For all—and none. I propose to do this to right the wrongs I have done. I suppose it could be said I also do this for myself if a man's honor is himself."

Elizabeth nodded. "Do you think Mr. Bingley will be angry when you tell him of your actions? He may not wish to accompany you."

"I have no intention of telling him what I have done, or of your sister's feelings, until he has met with her."

Elizabeth was surprised by his answer. She felt her anger rising, but she fought to hold it under regulation. "Will you share your reasons with me? Did you not believe me when I said Jane still loves him?"

Darcy was plainly uncomfortable. "Elizabeth, I believe that *you* believe that your sister loves Bingley still, but as to the truth of the matter—" He paused. "Let me answer you in this fashion. You have exchanged letters with Miss Bennet while you were in Kent, have you not?"

"Yes, Jane is an excellent correspondent." This bouncing back and forth between *Miss Bennet* and *Elizabeth* was quite confusing. Perhaps it was for the best that he made use of her Christian name. He had certainly earned the right.

"No doubt. I do not wish to violate any confidences, but did Miss Bennet write *specifically* that she regretted Bingley in those letters?"

"Of course not! Jane would never put those words to paper. That is not in her character." She then saw to what Darcy was alluding. "Mr. Darcy, Jane is reserved, in speech and writing, but I can read between the lines."

"Can you? Then you have a power I lack." He smiled. "Your list of accomplishments grows."

"I fail to see the humor in that."

"Forgive me. But still, are you *certain* that Miss Bennet pines for my friend and has not grown somewhat indifferent? It would be very understandable and no mark against her if she has, given her disappointment and the length of time that has passed."

Elizabeth was almost ready to voice her disagreement with his assessment when she recalled her own opinion of Mr. Darcy. After her most hateful refusal, she was *certain* that Mr. Darcy's admiration had died, that he reviled and wanted nothing to do with her. Yet, with all that had passed between them, he risked his life more than once on her behalf, all the time believing that she despised him. She now knew his love had not died; he adored her still. Perhaps she was not as great a judge of feelings as she thought.

"I take your point, sir. While I think it most likely she still cares a great deal for your friend, I cannot say with certainty that she does."

"Then, do you have any other objection to my plan?"

"Have I heard the entirety of this plan?"

"In principle, yes. Should Bingley agree to accompany me to Hertfordshire, we shall call upon Longbourn, and we shall see."

"And what is it you hope to see?"

"Besides yourself?" he retorted with a small smile. "I will observe your sister as closely as propriety allows and determine her state of mind."

"So," she said as neutrally as she could, in a generous effort to allow Darcy to remove the foot wedged in his mouth, "it still falls to you to determine your friend's happiness."

He sighed. "I have displeased you. Forgive me, I spoke poorly." Elizabeth shrugged. Apparently, she was as unsuccessful at hiding her feelings as she was in judging others. It did little harm, though, as Darcy spoke on. "I anticipate Bingley will ask my estimation of the matter afterwards. If so, I will share with him what I perceive."

"And that is?"

"What I *perceive*, Elizabeth." Darcy rubbed his forehead wearily. "I will be as honest with him as I am honest with you. In truth, I would wish that he place trust in his *own* judgment rather than *mine*, unlikely as that seems. I will give my honest opinion should he ask it with the caveat that it is just that—my opinion. What weight he places on it is *his* choice. Should he decide in your sister's favor, I will reveal all."

It took a moment for Elizabeth to fully appreciate Darcy's statement. It showed courage she knew she lacked. She did not ever intend to tell Jane what was in Darcy's letter and would only do so under pain of death. "I see. That is generous. You could well lose his friendship."

"Yes." There was a world of concern and regret in that word.

"But you will do it anyway." Remorse filled her heart. "I cannot ask it of you."

"Thank you. But the matter is out of my hands if I am to be true to myself. Disguise of any sort is my abhorrence, as I believe you know."

With anyone else, that statement would display conceit and condescension, but Elizabeth was coming to understand that *this* was the essence of Fitzwilliam Darcy—honorable to a fault, stubbornly determined to follow his personal code of conduct, and always endeavoring to do what he saw as the right thing, no matter how much pain it might cause him. *It is unsupportable how I have misjudged this man!*

"So, we should expect you both at Netherfield soon?" She could not add, *assuming we are rescued from here*.

"Not so soon. Bingley is in Scarborough with family at the moment. This is not something I can put in a letter. Once he returns to London, I will call on him." He gave her a half-hearted grin. "I fear you must make do with only my company for a time."

She unconsciously licked her lips. "I believe I will survive the experience."

"You were planning to stay in London until your sister recovers?" At her nod, he added, "Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce *my* sister to your acquaintance during your stay?"

Such an application should be no great surprise, given his previous declaration, but she was taken aback, nevertheless. "I would like that, but I will be at my relations in Gracechurch Street." She would never be embarrassed about the Gardiners and waited in dreadful suspense his reaction.

He blanched at her tone, but he sustained the blow with fortitude. "We should be happy to call on you there."

The words leapt unbidden from Elizabeth mouth. "You—you would bring your sister to—" She stopped herself in time and tried to repair the damage. "Sir, that is not necessary. Certainly, I would be amenable to other arrangements."

"I wish to pay court to *you*, and I am willing to do so *wherever* you are, Elizabeth. I know my pride has ill-served me, and I marvel that you have been so generous as to offer me another chance. You are your family, and your family is you. I will abide anything to earn your favor. Surely you must see that."

"I do, and I—" she could not finish. It was totally unnecessary what he was proposing, and she knew what he thought of her family. "My relations, the Gardiners, are superior people. I am certain you would like them. Indeed, they are my favorite people in the world."

Darcy smiled. "Then I am doubly determined to meet them."

He did not understand! Elizabeth's eyes filled. "Part of my anger with you at... at Hunsford was due to what you said about my family."

"Forgive me my stupidity! I assure you that I have been most heartily ashamed of what I said."

"You should not be, for it was the truth!" The two stared at each other; tears ran down Elizabeth's cheeks. "Everything you said I knew and agreed with, and I was humiliated. I have been embarrassed over my family's behavior from the time I understood what it meant to be embarrassed. I saw how our neighbors comported themselves and knew the Bennets suffered by comparison. I was hurt not only by your observation, that you saw my secret shame, but that you *voiced* your reservations—reservations that I share. I am a hypocrite, sir."

"I am a bigger hypocrite, Elizabeth," Darcy said softly. "While it is true that your parents are unconventional, even eccentric, no one can question the affection they hold for and receive from their children, or the hospitality they offer their guests. Compare that with the behavior of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She prides herself on her condescension and generosity, but in truth she is an arrogant tyrant. Her manners are abominable and her understanding suspect, yet she considers herself well-informed on all things. Instructing Mrs. Collins on how to clean her furniture! My aunt, who never did manual labor in her life, ordering the wife of her parson to scrub chair legs!

"That evening at Rosings, when you so graciously entertained us with your performance, Lady Catherine rudely suggested you needed to practice more, and then, with great indulgence, offered the use of the piano-forte in her daughter's companion's room! *To you*—the daughter of a gentleman! You cannot know how angry, how mortified I felt on your behalf. But I kept silent, as I have done these many years when in the presence of my aunt's ill-breeding. Is that polite behavior or cowardice?"

Elizabeth's tender heart wrenched as she heard his painful confession. "Sir, I should never call you a coward."

Darcy offered a half-smile. "I thank you, but I must face my shortcomings. Even my most excellent parents were not without fault. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves, allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing. I was expected to care for none beyond my own family circle and to think meanly of all the rest of the world.

"Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty, and such I might still have been but for you. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased."

His words touched her heart. She could only shake her head. "You give me too much credit. I have been nothing but trouble for you. You should not care about me at all."

"Far too late for that, I fear."

"*Why?*" Exhaustion, confusion, and curiosity overruled what propriety demanded. "*Why* do you love me? *How* can you love me? I have been so hateful and foolish and careless. I have mocked you and teased you and insulted you to your face! In return, you bear it all as if I was flirting with you! You risked your *life* to save me after I declared I detested you!" Tears filled her eyes. "I do not understand!"

"Elizabeth," he said brokenly, his own eyes filling, "I do not know when I knew I loved you; it is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun. I am certain of only one thing—that you are the only woman for me, the only lady I can love. If you tell me again you want nothing to do with me, I shall leave you in peace, but I shall always love you, always wish the best for you. It is like breathing. I will stop breathing the day I die, and *that* will be the day I stop loving you. And if what we are taught is true, not even then."

Elizabeth sobbed. "Oh, Fitzwilliam," she cried, allowing herself to use his name for the first time, "'I do not deserve such devotion! I have been so wicked and foolish!'"

"It matters not, for you have my devotion in any case." He touched her cheek, his fingertips tracing the trail of her tears. "But do you feel nothing for me?"

"No! I do feel... something, but I cannot name it! I admire you. Sometimes, I am in awe of you. But is that what you seek? Is that enough to build a life upon?" She covered her face in her hands. "Oh, what is wrong with me? I *should* love you! I *want* to love you! Have I no heart? Why do I hesitate giving you what you deserve?"

"Elizabeth!" He pulled her hands away and she could see the high emotion on his face. "I do not *deserve* anything from you! Love is not gratitude. It is not coin to repay a debt. Love must be *earned*, and I have done *nothing* to earn your love!"

"You are wrong, Fitzwilliam. If there is a man on Earth who deserves his heart's desire, it is you."

In that moment, Elizabeth lost herself in his damp, dark eyes. In the next, his lips descended on hers, and all thinking stopped. She was shocked at the warm touch of his mouth. It was unexpected, alien. As he deepened the kiss, it all changed. It was now warm, natural, exciting. Her body reacted without thought. Her hands

reached for his face, to cup his as he cupped hers. He moved closer, his body lying against hers, and she arched into him. She ran her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer, closer. His rough beard, lightly scratching her cheek, only increased her hunger for his kiss.

She gasped when he released her, only to gasp again as he trailed kisses down her neck. Fire raced through her body. She was born for this. Could anything be as sweet?

As soon as it began, it was over. He rolled on his back, and the cold air washed her overheated body. She came to herself again, and she remembered where she was and who she was with.

"God in heaven, Elizabeth!" cried Darcy. "Forgive me."

For her part, she found it difficult to forgive him doing something so indescribably pleasurable. Her only guilt was wondering whether she deserved such lovely attentions, given that she had not pledged herself to him.

"I had no intention of doing that, you must believe." He draped one forearm over his eyes. "You need not fear for yourself. I *am* a gentleman, although I have given you no reason to believe that. I *shall* control myself. I shall *not* do that again."

An amused Elizabeth seriously doubted he could keep his vow but thought it wise not to contradict or tease him. Instead she sought to relieve his remorse. "I forgive you, sir. I am unharmed, but it might be best if we speak of other matters." She waited until his gaze returned to her.

She lay on her side facing him, her hands pillowing her head, and smiled at the man who loved her. "Tell me of your home, Fitzwilliam. Tell me of Pemberley."

Part 5 – The Third Day

ELIZABETH AWOKE IN DARCY'S arms, this time facing him. He had spoken about Pemberley for hours the evening before, and Elizabeth lost herself in his tales. He spoke of his amiable father, proud yet loving mother, and shy sister. He talked about his complicated relationship with his Fitzwilliam cousins—his stern uncle the earl, his irascible Aunt Catherine, the wastrel viscount, and the dependable colonel. She did not know when she fell asleep, but she was content, and her dreams were sweet.

She was almost sorry she woke up. Her body ached, and her stomach was empty. To take her mind from her hunger, she rolled over on her back and gazed at her companion.

Darcy was still asleep, and she took the opportunity to take her fill of him. He was certainly handsome—she always granted that even when she disliked him. But in sleep, he was *different*. The public mask fell away, and she now saw the man underneath. Dark, full eyelashes that many a lady would envy rested on pale cheeks. His aquiline nose, which so suited him, appeared less severe while in repose. Jet whiskers covered his chin. With his tousled hair, he wore an air of relaxation, openness, and vulnerability. He looked younger, especially with his lack of cravat.

That was how a young gentleman of twenty-eight should appear without the weight of responsibility and expectation that threatened to crush him. So much rested on one so young. Everyone depended on him: his sister, his servants, his estate, his best friend—even his otherwise formable aunt and charming cousin, she did not doubt.

Who did *he* depend on? Who was there to give *him* comfort? She knew that he had chosen *her* for some unfathomable reason. What did he see in her that led him to believe she was capable of caring for so great a man—perhaps the best man she had ever met? She was contemplating his lips, which could be so soft, yet were capable of uttering strong words, when she noted his eyes had opened.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," he said.

Adverting her eyes, suddenly shy, she said, "Good morning, sir."

Darcy stretched with a groan, raising his strong arms above his head. He got to his feet and fetched a mug of hot water from the pot. He offered it to Elizabeth first. She accepted with a small smile, drinking about half the

mug. Darcy finished the rest in a gulp. He stood up, excused himself and put on his overcoat. A moment later he was out the door.

Elizabeth shook her head at her stupidity. After everything that had happened in the last week, she was too shy to speak to him? She quickly made her ablutions, straightened her dress, and gathered the chamber pot. Sure enough, Darcy was outside the door when she opened it. She surrendered her burden without protest, trying to take offence at Darcy's knowing smirk and failing. She retreated to the fire, feeding a few branches to the flames, resolutely not thinking of breakfast. It was here Darcy found her when he returned.

"The weather has moderated," he said as he replaced the chamber pot. "The sun is shining, and the air is still. I believe an attempt for the coaching station might be in order."

Elizabeth turned as he approached her. "Do you plan this soon?"

He shook his head. "Better at mid-day, or even a little later. It is always warmer in the afternoon." He noticed her expression. "What is amiss?"

How well he could read her now! "It is nothing. I only wish I could wash my face and hands."

"Why not use the water in the pot?"

She gave him a look that questioned his wits. "That is our drinking water."

He laughed. "Elizabeth, water we have in abundance! Use what you like. I can get more clean snow."

She had to laugh in return. "I cannot believe how silly I am! Pray excuse me."

Feeling his eyes upon her, she knelt and rinsed her hands in the steaming water. She then bent over the vessel and slowly washed her face. There was no soap, of course, but the hot liquid was delightful. Oh, how she wanted a full bath! She ran her wet hands over the nape of her neck, idling thinking of his kisses there yesterday, when a handkerchief appeared before her.

"Here, you will need this to dry yourself." His voice was strained.

Puzzled, she glanced up at Darcy as she dried her face. He wore the same intense look he so many times had at Netherfield and Rosings. Knowing now what it meant, she flushed. "Would you like to refresh yourself?" Her voice was relatively level.

"I thank you, no," he smiled. "There is but one handkerchief." Once she rose, he gathered the pot, using the damp handkerchief to shield his hand from the hot handle, and carried it outside. A minute later he returned, the vessel filled with snow.

The pair resumed their places before the hearth, their shoulders touching, fighting the cold air that had invaded their sanctuary.

"Lord, I am hungry!" Elizabeth cried. "Forgive me. I should not have said that."

"I cannot condemn you when I feel the same. Here, drink more of the water. I saved some for you."

Elizabeth drank a bit and offered the mug to Darcy. He took it, but she noticed he set it aside without drinking. She suspected he was saving the water for her, and feared the noble sacrifice could prove to be foolish. Fitzwilliam needed water, too. "Perhaps waiting until the afternoon to walk out is unwise. Is it a long walk, do you think?"

"I have no idea. Here, let me show you." Darcy scooted away, closer to the fire, and began to draw something on the dusty floor. "I believe the stream is east of Bromley, and that we are actually a mile or two south-east of the town." He drew a long, straight line. "This is the road from Hunsford to London. It parallels the stream, see? I intend to walk due west until I reach the road, and then follow it into Bromley." His finger moved again, leaving a triangle on the floor. "As I do not know how far we are from the road, an exact prediction is impossible. However, I doubt we are more than a mile from it." He sat back on his heels. "It would be longer than walking straight into the village, but since the path is completely obscured by the snow, I suggest the longer route is safer. I have turned this over in my mind constantly since we arrived, and I can think of no better plan."

"How long do you think it will take us to walk three miles in the snow?"

"Only one mile, to the main road. There, the going should be easier. And you are not leaving in any case."

"You expect me to stay here?"

"Of course. I shall walk to Bromley, get assistance, and return here with a sled or some other means of safe transportation."

"That is very kind of you but unnecessary. I shall be going with you."

"Elizabeth, you are *not* going with me. That is final."

Elizabeth steeled herself for battle. Before today, she would have let her temper get the best of her and rail at the obstinate man before her. She now knew better. Reason and logic were the only tools capable of moving Fitzwilliam Darcy, particularly when he was being nonsensically selfless.

"Fitzwilliam, I know your intentions are for my safety and comfort, and I thank you kindly for the consideration, but I must insist you rethink the matter." She raised her hand at his attempted protest. "Pray hear me out. Walking through the snow is a hard business. It may take three hours or more to reach Bromley. What follows then? Gathering help, sleds, and horses to pull them takes time. An hour, at least—agreed? Then returning here. It will be shorter, I know, but it will not be quick. Truly, I do not think it can be accomplished in less than six hours. It could well be dark by then."

"Then I will leave this instant!"

She laid a hand on his. "And what do I do? Wait six hours for your hoped-for return? What if misfortune befalls you? What happens then?" Her eyes filled at the thought of Darcy injured, lying in the snow, and no one to help him. She shook her head. "It is best I go with you. You are big and strong and can break a trail for us."

"Elizabeth, I cannot bear to place you in danger!"

"I placed myself in this danger and you too. It will not do. Can you not see? Far better I go with you and face our fate together."

Darcy took her hands in his, piercing her with his gaze. "This is not what I intended when I asked you at Hunsford to be with me forever. I can deny you nothing, but please do not ask this of me."

Elizabeth was lost in his dark eyes, her heart torn by his tender words, even while her mind rejected his entreaties. She tried to answer him, but common sense battled with the force of his personality and stilled her tongue.

Darcy dropped her hands with a start. "What was that?" He turned to the door.

It took a moment for Elizabeth to respond. "What? What do you hear?" His answer was to spring to the door. He opened it carefully. Elizabeth scrambled to her feet, her spirits rising. "Is someone outside?"

"Hello!" Darcy bellowed without. He waved, and then retreated, closing the door behind him. "Quickly!" he cried. "Move over to the far corner." He took their coats in his hands. "Put on your coat and wrap one of those blankets about you."

"What is wrong?" she asked as she took her coat from his hands. "Were you not calling to someone?"

"Yes," he hissed between his teeth as he shrugged on his overcoat. "Two men approach. We must be ready." He looked about. "Blast! Is there no staff about?"

"Why are you acting this way? We are saved!" She frowned. "Something is wrong."

"Perhaps! They *might* be rescuers looking for us. They *might* be farmers heading for this shelter. Or, they might be *others*."

"Others?"

"Thieves, highwaymen, gypsies—I do not know. I will not take any chances. Just do as I say. Stand behind me and say *nothing*—nothing at all." He grasped her shoulders. "Please trust me."

Fear squeezed her heart. She nodded and took her position behind him. For dreadful long moments she waited, her feelings alternating between elation and trepidation. She could now hear footsteps crunching in the snow, growing ever louder. She jumped at the knock on the door.

"Enter," said Darcy, his voice level.

Elizabeth peered from behind Darcy's broad shoulder. Two men entered the room, shaking off the snow from their heavy coats. One man pulled off his hat. She saw that he was rough and bearded as he scrutinized them.

"We're searchin' fur two gentle-folk who got themselves lost in th' storm a couple of days back. Be ye them?"

Elizabeth felt Darcy relax. As for herself, she wanted to scream for joy, but she promised she would stay quiet, so it was Darcy who spoke.

"I am Mr. Darcy," he started as if he was in a sitting room in London, "and this is Miss Bennet. I believe we are the people you are looking for. May I have your names?"

If the first man was taken aback by Darcy's calm, prideful behavior, he did not show it. Elizabeth knew he had once again donned the armor he persistently wore to protect himself from the world. *That is something we will have to change, Mr. Darcy*, she vowed.

"My name's Cartwright," said the first man. "I work in th' stables. An' this here's a gent from London, sent to look fur Miss Bennet."

The second man, who had retained his hat, gave a short bow. "I am Mr. Billings. I am in service to Mr. Gardiner."

Delighted, Elizabeth stepped forward. "Oh, Mr. Billings! I should have recognized you but for all the heavy winter clothing! How good it is to see you again!" She held out a hand in welcome, which Mr. Billings readily took. Meanwhile, Darcy remained where he was.

"I cannot say how happy I am to find you well, Miss Bennet!" cried Mr. Billings. "I barely got here through the storm. The roads were terrible."

"Aye, twas as bad a storm as I've ever seen," chimed in Cartwright. "We feared for ye, that's th' honest truth. Today's th' first day we could get out to look for ye." He looked around the cabin. "Have ye been in here all this time?" There was a suspicious note to his voice.

Elizabeth expected Darcy was valiantly attempting to conjure up some explanation, so she answered for him. "Yes. Mr. Darcy was fortunate to find shelter, or things would have been very bad, indeed. But as you can see, my betrothed and I are quite safe, and we thank you for your efforts to find us."

Elizabeth felt, rather than saw, Darcy's astonishment. As for the other men, Cartwright smiled in understanding while Billings looked confused.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Bennet," said he, "but Mr. Gardiner said nothing about your betrothal."

Elizabeth's smile beamed. "That is understandable, for he had no time to learn of our happy news. Mr. Darcy proposed only last Sunday, and today is—my goodness, I have quite lost time. May I ask what day it is?"

"Friday, ma'am. May I take this opportunity to wish you and Mr. Darcy joy?" Billings held out his hand, which Elizabeth shook. After a moment, Darcy came forward and did the same.

"I should've known," said Cartwright with a grin as he did the same. "I remember ye, Mr. Darcy. Ah, miss, he was in a fine state when he learned ye were missin' and th' storm brewin'. Organized th' search, he did, runnin' around orderin' men about like he was th' Iron Duke hisself. I wondered why he be so desperate, but now meetin' ye...well, I can't say I blames him!" He honored her with a wink.

Darcy cleared his throat. "Umm, yes. How far are we from Bromley?"

"'Bout a mile-an-a-half, as the crow flies. A bit more on foot, workin' yer way through th' woods," said Cartwright. "Don't ya worry 'bout walkin' out, though. We got a horse an' sled over on th' main road, an' that's 'bout a half-mile away. We'll go fer it, so you folks just stay close to th' fire."

Billings grinned. "I am so relieved to find you safe, Miss Bennet. Praise the Lord! I was not looking forward to delivering any bad news to your uncle."

"Oh, dear, he must be frantic!" cried Elizabeth. "And Miss Darcy!" She turned to her companion. "Your poor sister must be worried sick!"

He turned unreadable eyes to her. "We shall be in London soon to comfort our relations, Miss Bennet, thanks to these brave souls. I shall not forget the service you have done, my good men."

"Thankee kindly, Mr. Darcy," said Cartwright. "We'll be back afore ye know it."

"Wait!" cried Darcy. "Forgive me, but would you happen to have any food with you? Miss Bennet has had nothing for the last two days—"

Billings cried, "What a fool I am. Here, I have biscuits in this pouch, and you've nothing to eat for two days!" He handed it to Elizabeth.

"When we leave, ye will hear two pistol shots," said Cartwright. "Don't ye be startled—it's just so's th' others know we found ye." The two took their leave and exited the cabin.

Elizabeth had moved to the table and opened the pouch. She extracted two biscuits, offering one to Darcy while beginning to eat the other just as the shots rang out. She jumped a little before asking, as archly as she could with a mouth full of biscuit, "Is there something wrong, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy's blank, unbelieving face was quite diverting. "Elizabeth! What you said...I did not intend...I would not have you regret...you must not feel trapped into something you—"

Elizabeth swallowed and ended his babbling. "Mr. Darcy, upon entering this dwelling two days ago, I knew full well I was utterly compromised, and if we were discovered together, there would be nothing for it but to marry." Her smile proved she was not opposed to the idea as she took another bite. "Please eat. You must be starving."

"I would not have you do something against your will."

Elizabeth smiled. "I can think of worse things, sir."

Darcy made an inarticulate sound. "You are too generous to trifle with me! If your feelings are still what they were last week, tell me so at once!" He grew close. "My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever. I will find some way out of this for you."

Elizabeth cocked her head. "I think silence on your part would be unpleasant and boring, especially as we are to marry."

Darcy shook his head. "You are exasperating and impertinent, Miss Bennet!"

"I thought that was what you liked about me. My beauty you had early withstood." At his frown, she added. "I refer to your remark upon first seeing me at the Meryton assembly."

Darcy thought for a moment and then groaned. "You heard! No wonder you disliked me."

"You do improve upon acquaintance, Mr. Darcy. Eventually."

"I can improve on other things as well, madam." With that, Darcy dropped to one knee. Overriding Elizabeth's protests, he said with great emotion, "My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. "You have said that before. As charming and pleasing as those sentiments are, what followed was not."

"Then I must correct my mistake. Let me say now that for many months I have considered you the handsomest lady of my acquaintance. But my admiration is not just based on the loveliness of your face and figure,

but your character as well. I am enchanted by your wit, impressed by your intelligence, touched by your kindness and goodness, and captivated by your ability to charm all about you. You have bewitched me, body and soul. I want to be a better man, so that I may be a worthy husband to you. Please allow me to care and protect and love you always. End my sufferings, I pray, and agree to become my wife."

Elizabeth could not help crying at such a declaration. "I would be pleased and honored to be your wife, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy rose and kissed the back of her hands. "Elizabeth, you have made me very happy. But I do not deceive myself. I know that the love is all on my side."

Elizabeth reached up to stroke his whisker-covered cheek. "Fitzwilliam—" Her voice broke. "Fitzwilliam, you must not despair. It is true that my present feelings are not the equal of yours. How could they be when I have only lately begun to see the man you truly are? But I have always held strong feelings about you, and my admiration and affection has grown so much in such a short time. I know not what the future holds for us, but I promise that I will honor and respect you and be a good wife to you."

"I will honor and cherish and love you all the days of my life. Anything you desire, Elizabeth, anything that would make you happy, if it be in my power, you will have it, I swear."

Elizabeth smiled shamelessly. "How fortunate it is for you that I am a creature unused to expensive gifts or grand gestures! But such is the woman with whom you have agreed to share your life. I require only two things of you, sir."

"Name them, and they are yours."

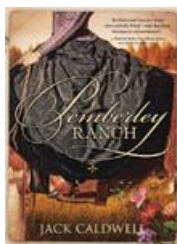
"They are these, and they cannot be negotiated. Promise me, most earnestly, that I will never lose your affection." She smiled wider. "And swear that I will NEVER be hungry and cold again!" She reached for the biscuits. "Are you certain you are not famished, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy swept Elizabeth into his arms to prove there was hunger for things greater than biscuits. For her part, Elizabeth was not disinclined to learn.

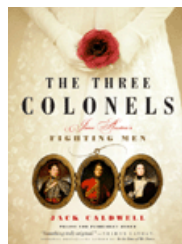
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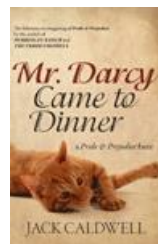
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