

One

She was all surprise and embarrassment.

—Mansfield Park

*I*t is a truth less frequently acknowledged, that a good mother in possession of a single child, must be in want of sleep.

Whatever the habits or inclinations of such a woman might have been prior to her first entering the maternal state, in very short order her feelings and thoughts are so well fixed on her progeny that at any given hour she is considered, at least in the young minds of the principals, as the rightful property of some one or other of her offspring.

Be she a woman of comfortable income, assistants may alleviate many of the demands imposed on her, and indeed there are ladies quite content to consign their little darlings entirely to the care of nurses and governesses until they reach a more independent age. But in most families, occasions arise when even the

most competent, affectionate servant cannot replace a child's need for Mama, and when said Mama wants no proxy.

And so it was that Elizabeth Darcy, wife of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, mistress of the great estate of Pemberley, and presently the houseguest of the Earl of Southwell, found herself the only conscious person in all of Riveton Hall during the predawn hours of an early August morning. Or rather, the only conscious adult, her daughter being so awake to the pain of cutting her first tooth that none but her mother's arms could comfort her.

"Hush now, Lily-Anne. Mama's here." Elizabeth offered the crooked knuckle of her forefinger to the child to gum. Having come to the nursery to check on Lily before retiring, she had found both baby and nurse so overwrought by hours of ceaseless crying (on the child's part, not the nurse's) that she had dismissed Mrs. Flaherty to capture a few hours' rest. The stubborn tooth had troubled Lily since their arrival and rendered futile every traditional remedy the veteran nurse had tried. If it did not break through this eve, the morrow would prove an even longer day for Mrs. Flaherty and her charge. Elizabeth herself would be unavailable to soothe her daughter, her time instead commanded by the event that had occasioned her and Darcy's visit to Riveton.

Darcy's cousin Roger Fitzwilliam, the earl, was hosting a ball to introduce his new fiancée to his family and neighbors. The Pemberley party—Elizabeth, Darcy, Lily-Anne, and Darcy's sister, Georgiana—had traveled to the groom's Buckinghamshire estate earlier in the week, as had the bride's family and numerous other guests. Darcy and Roger's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had been the first to arrive, appearing a full fortnight earlier than anticipated to oversee her nephew's preparations. As the late earl's sister, her ladyship had grown up at Riveton Hall, and continued to generously dispense opinions regarding its management. That

the present earl had little interest in hearing her advice did little to check its flow.

Having herself recently endured an extended visit by Lady Catherine, Elizabeth sympathized with her besieged host.

The earl, however, enjoyed one advantage that Elizabeth, in Derbyshire, had not: Lady Catherine yet maintained a large acquaintance in her former neighborhood, and had absented herself from Riveton for part of each day to call upon them. Her daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh, joined her on most of these excursions. How Southwell's neighbors bore Lady Catherine's company eluded Elizabeth and Darcy, but they were grateful to be subjected to so little of it themselves. Their already inharmionious relationship with Darcy's aunt had been further fractured by the events of her prolonged residence at Pemberley, and the present house party at Riveton marked their first meeting since. Her daily absences had enabled them all to settle into a tacit, if tense, truce.

In contrast, Elizabeth had taken great pleasure in renewing her acquaintance with Roger's younger brother, Colonel James Fitzwilliam, whom she had met two years previous. The colonel's forthright manners and intelligent conversation united to make him the most amiable of Darcy's maternal relations, and she regretted that his military duties prevented more frequent opportunities to enjoy his society.

The only society Elizabeth coveted at the moment, however, were the inhabitants of her dreams. She paced the nursery, murmuring the sort of sibilant nonsense mothers have employed for millennia to calm distressed infants. Despite the stimulus of Lily's wails, her own eyelids burned with the urge to close. Yet even if she roused Mrs. Flaherty and returned to her own quiet chamber, she knew that maternal anxiety, or at a minimum, maternal guilt, would not allow her to sleep while her daughter suffered.

She sang. She rocked. She paced still more.

At last, exhaustion claimed Lily-Anne, and blessed silence settled upon the nursery. It was, however, a fitful slumber. Lily was still in discomfort, unconsciously rubbing her jaw against her mother's shoulder and squirming each time Elizabeth tried to lower her into the crib. Elizabeth sat with her awhile in a chair, but was so tired that she did not trust herself to retain a safe hold on Lily should she, too, succumb to sleep.

She decided to bring Lily back to her own chamber, in hopes that a shared bed would enable them both to rest. Darcy would not mind. There had been a few occasions at Pemberley when Lily, in need of extra comfort, had slept in their bed, and Darcy's presence often had a calming effect on the baby, awake or asleep.

She moved quietly as she carried Lily down the corridor where the earl's relations were quartered. The bride and her family occupied the floor above, and several gentleman friends of Roger's were in another wing altogether. She did not fear disturbing these more distant guests should Lily suddenly waken and complain at full volume, but Lady Catherine's room she passed with extra caution. Her ladyship's tenure at Pemberley had proven her a light sleeper, ever alert to everyone else's affairs.

She rounded a corner and stopped suddenly.

Anne de Bourgh appeared equally startled. They had very nearly collided. "Mrs. Darcy!"

"Miss de Bourgh?"

Both spoke in the lowest of whispers. Anne cast an alarmed glance in the direction of her mother's chamber. In the weak grey light just beginning to penetrate a nearby window, her face appeared pale as usual, but her features had lost some of their sharpness. The angles of her cheekbones had rounded, dissolving her typically haughty expression and softening her countenance. Instead of pinched, she looked almost pretty.

“I—I did not expect to—that is . . .”

“Nor I.” Elizabeth shifted Lily to her other shoulder. The child had entered a deeper sleep as they walked and was becoming heavier by the minute. “I thought none but Lily and I was awake, and even she has finally decided the hour is grown quite late enough.” She tried to formulate a polite query as to why Miss de Bourgh was wandering Riveton Hall fully dressed at half past four in the morning. She doubted that Anne, coddled since childhood for fragile health, routinely kept late hours. But her fatigued mind was not equal to the challenge of clever phrasing. “What draws you from your bed at this time of night?” she finally blurted.

“No one. I mean—” Anne nodded at Lily. “The child did not wake me, if that is your concern.”

It had not been. In fact, the thought had not so much as entered Elizabeth’s mind, which was primarily occupied with calculating how many hours’ sleep she might yet manage to capture if she nodded off immediately upon reaching her pillow. Another part of her brain was attempting to determine whether Anne’s improved appearance were indeed a trick of the light or a genuine transformation. Upon continued observation, the view afforded by their unusually close proximity suggested the latter.

Anne bristled under Elizabeth’s scrutiny. Her gaze strayed to the window. “Actually, I am not up late, but very early. I woke and could not return to sleep, so I thought I would stroll in the rose garden whilst the sun rose.”

Unlike herself, Elizabeth had never known Miss de Bourgh to take pleasure in walking or, for that matter, to walk any farther than necessity demanded. Lady Catherine had always kept her on a short tether, ostensibly to protect her weak constitution. The most vigorous exercise permitted was airings in a phaeton or immersions in the therapeutic waters at Bath.

Until now.

The change of practice might account for Miss de Bourgh's improved looks—Elizabeth had previously entertained the opinion that Anne's health would benefit from more, not less, exercise—though she wondered that her mother allowed it.

Or did she?

Miss de Bourgh's eyes again looked toward Lady Catherine's door. Pity moved Elizabeth as realization dawned along with the sun. To escape her ladyship's disapprobation, Anne had to take her exercise before anyone in the household—her mother, her chaperone, even the servants—awoke. Else an accidental slip of someone's tongue could betray her actions to Lady Catherine, who would bring them to a swift and decisive halt.

Elizabeth had never given much thought to Anne's life. She knew that living with Lady Catherine would be intolerable for herself, but she had never contemplated Anne's happiness. Anne had always seemed a mere appendage to the formidable entity that was Lady Catherine, existing to serve her mother's convenience. Now she wondered whether the "poor health" from which Anne had suffered all these years were the result of smothering—a slow suffocation of the soul.

How long had Anne been rising early to enjoy an hour's freedom before the shackles of life under Lady Catherine's domination closed upon her each day? From her appearance, she had been engaging in the practice for some time.

Good for her. Elizabeth wanted to praise the benign deception, but tact restrained her. She would, however, encourage it.

"I suspect what you are about," she whispered, offering a slight, knowing smile. "But do not be uneasy. Your secret is safe with me."

Anne's eyes widened. She stared at Elizabeth, struggling to formulate a reply.

The Matters at Mansfield

Elizabeth spared her the trouble. “I wish you a pleasant morning,” she said as Lily released an unfeminine snore that was a sweet lullaby to her mother’s ears. “I intend to spend mine lying abed as long as my daughter permits me.”