

Prologue

“There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.”

—Darcy to Elizabeth,
Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 11

1781

*D*amn this mortal coil.”

Sir Francis Dashwood muttered the words under his breath, though he had no audience. He sat alone in his bedchamber, surrounded by the opulence he’d enjoyed all his life but experiencing the poverty every man knows when his years on earth run out. Time was no longer his to command. Once he’d had it in abundance, spent it as liberally and recklessly as any other commodity in his possession. Now it was in dreadfully short supply.

Servants had left a simple meal on the bedside table. The sandwich went untouched, but the glass of brimstone he drained in two swallows, relishing the familiar taste of the sulfur-laced brandy.

He stared at his reflection in the ornate gilded mirror across from his bed, resenting every wrinkle that etched his ruddy face. Where had that faded hair come from? The liver spots on

his hands? The slight tremble that seized his fingers? Eyes watery with age stared back.

As a young man, he'd reveled in his vitality. He'd mocked mortality along with morality, dared death and the devil to catch him if they could. He'd lived each moment to its fullest, leaving no desire unindulged, no curiosity unexplored. And he harbored no regrets. If he had his life to live over again, he would change nothing. It had been a good run.

But it was not enough.

Fiery orange light slanted through the window to stripe the floor. Sunset might claim the bleak late autumn landscape of West Wycombe Park, but it would not claim him so easily. No, he would not go quietly into the darkness. His spirit was too strong to meekly concede the battle his body waged with time.

He gazed beyond his own image in the glass, to the reflection of the portrait that hung behind him. That, too, was an image of himself, but at one-and-twenty. The painter had captured him in the full vigor of youth. Just as the adventure that had been his life was beginning.

Inside, he was still that young man. Yet now he scarcely had the strength to even rise from his bed.

He twisted the sheets with arthritic hands, cursing his physical weakness, cursing the corporeal shell that could no longer keep up with him. He cursed the mirror that bore witness to his frailty. He'd paid handsomely for the artifact, one of many treasures that he'd acquired in his lifetime. He'd been drawn to it by the images of ancient Greek champions that adorned its frame, but now they seemed to taunt him with their puissance. Tonight, he would gladly trade the mirror—nay, his whole estate—to inhabit once more the body of a young man, to again take health and strength for granted.

He could not tear his gaze away from the reflections: Two images of the same man, separated by mere inches but a gulf of more than fifty years. Dawn and twilight.

Suspense and Sensibility

He wanted another sunrise.

His vision grew cloudy, as it often did now at the end of the day. The dual images of himself became less distinct, fading at their edges and drifting toward each other. He blinked rapidly and rubbed his eyes, trying to stabilize the view, but in vain. His eyesight, like the rest of his body, was failing him.

This last failure, however, was welcome, for after another minute, the two images merged completely. Despair fled, replaced by satisfaction.

Slowly, a smile spread across his face. He was a young man once more.

If only in the mirror.

One

“If any young men come for Mary or Kitty, send them in, for I am quite at leisure.”

—Mr. Bennet to Elizabeth,
Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 59

1813

Elizabeth Bennet Darcy tried very hard to concentrate on the letter in her hand, but the intrusion of her own thoughts conspired with the fine prospect outside her window to distract her.

When the post arrived, she had withdrawn to her favorite sitting room at Pemberley. Such had become her morning custom in her few months as mistress of the house. The room, she understood, had also been a favorite of her husband’s mother, and Elizabeth suspected the late Mrs. Darcy had shared her opinion that it offered a view of the river and valley superior to any other in the house. Today, though patches of snow stubbornly resisted the caress of the late winter sun, the smell of damp earth nevertheless carried the promise of spring.

Fitzwilliam Darcy’s ancestral house bore the imprint of so many generations that Elizabeth had not yet found her place here. Home was anywhere her husband was, and Darcy had

done much to ease her way, but the greatness of his estate required her adjustment. She did not want to depart Pemberley before she truly felt settled. But family duty beckoned, and they were obliged to answer.

She left the window, returned to her desk, and read once more the cross-written, blotted lines. As she contemplated her response, Darcy entered. His tailcoat, leather breeches, and top boots indicated his intent to go riding.

“Good morning, again.” Darcy kissed her cheek. “I came to invite you for an airing.”

She set aside the letter with a heavy sigh.

A frown creased his forehead. “Perhaps instead I should enquire what I have done to merit such a reception? I realize riding was never your favorite pastime, but I do not recall your ever greeting the suggestion with despondency before.”

“It is not your invitation that dismays me.” Under her husband’s influence, she’d developed greater interest in riding, though in truth, it was the company more than the activity that appealed to her. She looked up into his face and smiled wistfully. “I am afraid, sir, that you have committed crimes of a more grievous nature.”

“Indeed?” He set down his hat and leaned against the edge of her desk. “Name the offenses.”

“Like a nursery-tale knave, you have carried me off to your secluded castle and kept me to yourself for nigh on three months, with no thought of returning me to the companionship of my family.”

“Are you not enjoying our privacy at Pemberley?”

“I did not say I was the one harboring objections.”

After the turbulent events that had marked the first few weeks of their marriage, Elizabeth and Darcy had both relished their retreat to Derbyshire. As Darcy’s seventeen-year-old sister, Georgiana, was the only other resident of Pemberley, they’d enjoyed a quiet transition to married life. Now that March had

begun, however, their idyllic sequestered state seemed destined to end as society made its claims upon them. “Do you think my equestrian skills can bear the intense scrutiny of a trot through Hyde Park?” she asked.

“Where London society rides to be seen?”

He tactfully avoided further response to her query, but his silence formed reply enough. She arched her brows, merrily daring him to put his thoughts into words.

He cleared his throat. “Perhaps it is best that we have no plans to visit town any time soon.”

She laughed. “You know that you need not spare my vanity. I harbor no illusions about the quality of my horsemanship—my goal on any outing is simply to sit a mount without embarrassing myself.” She gestured toward the letter. “Unfortunately, our rides may indeed take place on Rotten Row in the near future. I have received another note from my mother this morning. She reminds me again what a wonderful thing it would be for us to sponsor a London season for Kitty.”

“Have not Jane and Bingley already committed themselves to that noble cause?”

“Mama now fears that, given Jane’s delicate state of health, the excitement of escorting our sister to balls and concerts might overtax her.”

“But the Bingleys do not anticipate their new arrival until September.”

“Surely you cannot seriously expect my mother to defer the pleasure of fretting over Jane’s condition? She has but six months remaining in which to describe her anxiety to all her acquaintance.”

“Ah, yes—I had forgotten about her nerves.”

“My father would envy you, for I am sure he is continually reminded of them.” Elizabeth suspected her father spent a good deal of time in his library of late to minimize the reports of her mother’s daily visits to Jane. Mr. Bennet cared about his eldest

daughter, of course, but didn't require updates as detailed or as frequent as those Mrs. Bennet was inspired to provide. Simply show him a healthy grandchild and safe new mother at the end of it all, and he would be satisfied. "Perhaps we ought to take pity on him and invite him to London along with Kitty."

"You have agreed to this scheme regarding Kitty, then? When did you intend to tell me?"

"I have agreed to nothing yet. You know I would much rather remain here at Pemberley with you than leap into the social whirl of town—"

"But Kitty has been out for three years now, and Hertfordshire holds few prospects for her," he finished. "A London season would improve her chances of meeting an acceptable young man."

"Precisely. And it sounds as if Jane has her hands full enough dealing with my mother. Besides, you know how disposed Jane and Bingley are to always think the best of everyone. When it comes to assessing potential suitors, you and I would prove more discerning chaperones for Kitty."

"True." Darcy's face clouded.

She knew he thought of Bingley's sister Caroline, whose own recent courtship could have profited from greater vigilance. She attempted to divert his musings. "Georgiana would benefit, as well."

"You wish to marry off my sister along with yours this season?"

"Only if she herself wishes it." Georgiana, unlike Kitty, possessed an inheritance sizable enough to grant her comfortable independence should she choose never to wed. "I meant that she might enjoy Kitty's companionship since they are so close in age."

He leaned over to drop a light kiss on her forehead. "Write to your sister. Shall we invite Mary, too, while we are about it? Complete our whole family's husband-hunting at once?"

Suspense and Sensibility

“I shall ask her, but I doubt she will accept.” Elizabeth’s other unmarried sister, critical of the frivolity of society’s elite *ton*, had already expressed disdain for the whole enterprise.

“Besides,” she added, dipping her pen, “if all five of us sisters married within a twelvemonth of each other, my mother’s joy would be too great for anyone to bear.”