

## The Pemberley Ball

### Part 1 – Introduction Joy at Last

“Yes.” She had said, “Yes.”

Elizabeth Bennet would be his. Forever. After a year of excruciating heartache, Darcy would finally know her. He had moved heaven and earth to prove his devotion to the woman, and she had forgiven his earlier missteps to declare her desire to be his wife.

Elizabeth Bennet had accepted his proposal, and where winter had once held court, springtime now filled Darcy's heart. Although he was sore to admit it, Elizabeth had fascinated him from the beginning—fascinated him more than anyone in his world ever did. A force bound them: a promise of what could be, which he had recognized sooner than she, but now Elizabeth appeared to be of a like mind.

When they first took an acquaintance, Darcy had scarcely allowed Elizabeth to be pretty; he had looked upon her without admiration at the Meryton assembly; and when they next met, he looked upon her only to criticize. But no sooner did he make it clear to himself and his acquaintances that Elizabeth possessed hardly a good feature in her face, did he discover that her hazel eyes rendered her face uncommonly intelligent.

“Eyes which could haunt a man's sleep,” he murmured as he checked his cravat in the filmy mirror.

“I beg your pardon, Sir,” his valet looked up from brushing Darcy's jacket.

Darcy smiled knowingly.

“It is nothing, Mr. Sheffield...just thinking aloud.”

Although Darcy did not turn around, he watched the man, who had served him for some fifteen years, roll his eyes in amusement. Darcy understood perfectly. Less than a week ago, he was an outsider—an observer of life, but never a participant. He had fought valiantly to maintain his distance, keeping his friends and acquaintances to a minimum. Years ago, he learned his lesson the hard way. Darcy's most trusted friend betrayed him on every level. Even now, as his fists closed tightly at his side, he could taste the bitterness choking him. Yet, despite the fact that his gut warned him to take heed, he chose to place his trust in another: to entrust Elizabeth Bennet with his heart.

Her acceptance had presented him a hope of the world being different. Elizabeth brought warmth and naturalness and a bit of defiance; but there was vulnerability also. With characteristic daring, she had boldly withstood Caroline Bingley's barbs while displaying undying devotion to her sister. More unpredictably, she had verbally fenced with the paragon of crudeness, his aunt, Lady Catherine, and had walked away relatively unscathed. One could find Elizabeth Bennet self-mockingly entertaining her sisters and friends, and despite Darcy's best efforts, the woman made him laugh. She brought lightness to his spirit after so many years of grief.

“Your coat, Sir.” Sheffield held the jacket as Darcy slipped his arms through and permitted the valet to straighten the seams across his shoulders.

“Thank you, Sheffield.” Darcy tugged on his cuffs to set the line. “I will be at Longbourn for the supper hour.”

This evening would bring his first meal with the Bennets as Elizabeth’s betrothed, and he pronounced his entertainment more so to solidify the event’s reality in his mind than to keep his valet informed.

Again, the amused twitch of Sheffield’s lips told Darcy that his man understood how Darcy’s life had changed.

“Very good, Sir.”

Darcy realized that his servants had waited patiently for him to choose a bride and to escort their new mistress to Pemberley. With her acceptance, Elizabeth had pronounced that she was willing to live with him in his ancestral home and to set up a nursery for their future children. It was not a gentlemanly thing to say, but he had recognized long ago that he could see his heirs—his unborn children--only in Elizabeth Bennet’s hazel eyes.

“Turn down the bed, and lay out my things, and then you may be excused for the evening. Upon my return, I will undress myself.”

Darcy accepted the handkerchief Sheffield handed him.

As you wish, Mr. Darcy.”

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Darcy’s heart swelled with happiness. He sat beside Elizabeth at the Longbourn table. The last time he had dined with the Bennets, Elizabeth’s mother had placed him as far away from Elizabeth as the table could divide them, a fact that had played to his misery. Darcy had spent the meal seated beside Mrs. Bennet, which had given pleasure to neither of them, and despite his efforts at cordiality, he had not appeared to advantage. Whenever he and Elizabeth’s mother spoke to each other, Darcy could not shake his practiced formal tone. However, tonight, ungraciousness would not describe him.

With his sole purpose to ease the devastation upon Miss Elizabeth’s features, a devastation that had haunted him after their encounter at Lambton, Darcy had rescued Lydia Bennet’s reputation. He had also encouraged Bingley’s return to Miss Bennet’s side. Both had proved beneficial to a cause he had thought lost forever.

“The venison is excellent, Mrs. Bennet,” he announced, but it did not appear that anyone noticed.

The way the Bennets talked over each other kept him off kilter. This supper was in complete opposition to the quiet meals he shared with his sister at Pemberley or his London Town house.

In truth, he looked forward to sharing such meals with Elizabeth, ones where they discussed their day and whatever else struck their natures. Imagining Elizabeth at his table remained a recurring dream.

Darcy glanced about the table. This was a nightmare, but one he meant to master. At length his eyes fell upon his betrothed, and Elizabeth presented him the smallest of smiles. It was as if she understood his discomfort. It was all Darcy could do not to reach for her. There was a time that he had prayed for her attentions, and now they were his to cherish. With a quick return of a smile, he turned his attentions to the table to pick at the many threads of conversation swirling about him.

"The venison is excellent, Mrs. Bennet," he said with a second attempt at graciousness.

"Why thank you, Mr. Darcy," the lady responded. "I am gratified that the meal pleases you." Mrs. Bennet preened with his praise before returning her remarks to her eldest daughter and Mr. Bingley.

The woman's obsession with Bingley pleased Darcy, for it left him to converse with Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth, the true intellects at the table. Regretting the loss of his favorite daughter, Mr. Bennet had not originally welcomed Darcy's plight, but, at length, the man had accepted Elizabeth's assurances of her regard, and Mr. Bennet had made an obvious effort to address Darcy's interests.

"Elizabeth tells me that you are considering investing in railroads, Mr. Darcy."

Mr. Bennet sipped his wine, but Darcy observed the man's eyebrows rise mockingly. Elizabeth had explained that her father took great pleasure in the foibles of their neighbors. Darcy was determined that the man would not find him wanting.

"It appears prudent to become a partner while the companies are forming," Darcy rushed to say.

"I am considering a small company catering to Derbyshire's needs...carrying Derbyshire products to Liverpool for shipment to the Americas and north toward Manchester and the factories. The cities draw workers from the estates. It seems wise to discover a means to save my father's legacy."

Thankfully, Mr. Bennet's expression changed to one of respect.

"Well, Lizzy. It appears that your young man has a head for business."

Elizabeth looked lovingly at her father, tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

"Yes, Papa." Then she smiled largely. "It is a propitious situation. My future husband shall not bore me with inane chatter at the breakfast table. I fear Mr. Darcy has quite a good mind."

She casually taunted in the playful tone Elizabeth and her father often shared, and although she had spoken kindly of him, Darcy flinched. Being the point of ridicule, even in its mildest form, still injured him as if he were still twelve years old and the target of the neighborhood boys because he was the heir to Pemberley.

At Netherfield, Darcy always enjoyed it when he and Elizabeth partook of what he fondly called “verbal swordplay,” but somehow this felt different, and his tone came out sharper than he intended.

“I pride myself on being well read.” Darcy responded automatically, and he waited for the “attack,” but it did not come.

Instead, Elizabeth looked questioningly at him. Darcy gave his head a little shake, telling her not to ask. He knew instant regret for placing his insecurity to the forefront. He had everything he ever wanted in the form of Elizabeth, and Darcy would not jeopardize his standing in the Bennet family again. Thinking so, he returned his attention to her father.

“Mr. Bennet, what might you tell me of Miss Elizabeth’s childhood? I will require plenty of stories to brighten the long winters of Derbyshire.”

Over the remainder of the four courses, Mr. Bennet, with occasional comments from his wife or one of Elizabeth’s sisters, regaled Darcy with tales of a young Elizabeth’s exploits. Everything that Darcy ever considered that he knew of his intended changed somehow. He discovered the source of Elizabeth’s self-deprecation rested in Mrs. Bennet’s continual praise of her eldest and her youngest. Perhaps, he now understood why Mary Bennet sought refuge in her music, and why the immature Kitty clung to her interest in fashion. Each girl had claimed her niche, and Elizabeth’s strengths were in less feminine accomplishments. She possessed a pleasing voice, but Elizabeth did not play the pianoforte exceptionally well, nor was her needlework beyond being more than adequate. She was not gifted in languages, nor did she paint tables, cover screens, or net purses. Elizabeth owned a quick wit, and she used it as her defense against being found deficient.

*“Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, and I laugh at them whenever I can.”*

She had said those words one evening at Netherfield when Miss Bingley had insisted on Elizabeth’s walking about the room with her. Now despite thoroughly enjoying the flush of pink coloring her skin, Darcy considered how many of Elizabeth’s earlier escapades now appeared quite mortifying in their retellings. It seemed many of her embarrassing moments came at her own hand. She often acted impulsively. Although he understood why she used her “daring” as a diversion, Darcy could not but wonder if Elizabeth would not be happier if known for her merits, rather than her mistakes.

“Off-putting attention is still attention,” he told himself. “But negativity cannot help but injure Elizabeth’s self confidence.”

Such was a sobering fact that Darcy never considered of Elizabeth. On the outside, his betrothed appeared quite self-assured, always speaking her mind and expecting her opinions to be accepted, but beneath her façade, Elizabeth Bennet was as wounded as he. They were quite the pair.

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“I suppose my mother forgets that I, too, have a wedding to plan,” Elizabeth said softly beside him. They sat together in a small Longbourn drawing room.

As was typical, after the evening meal, Mr. Bennet retreated to his study to read. Miss Kitty examined the latest fashion plates, and Miss Mary practiced her music. Mrs. Bennet demanded that Miss Bennet and Bingley join her in her sitting room to finalize plans for their wedding breakfast. So, although others remained in the room, he and Elizabeth were essentially alone.

With a deep sigh, Elizabeth turned to him. "It is abhorrent of me to complain after all your ministrations on my sister's behalf. Forgive me, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy watched her features carefully, expecting Elizabeth to turn her moment of envy into another disparagement on her own failings, but she did not perform to expectations. Evidently, this was one of those private moments. Elizabeth would show him a face, which spoke the truth: Her mother's preference bruised his future wife's ego.

"I would forgive you anything, Elizabeth, if you could see your way clear to call me something less formal than Mr. Darcy. In private, could you not consider my given name?"

Elizabeth's smile broke her mouth's line. "You wish for me to call you Fitzwilliam?"

"If Fitzwilliam does not suit you, the family often calls me 'William.' With Fitzwilliam being the family name for my mother's brother and my cousins, 'William' causes less confusion."

"I would be honored," she said softly.

"Then say it, Elizabeth," he whispered hoarsely.

An inexplicable emotion spread through his veins, and Darcy's breathing suddenly constricted. His gaze slid over her. Elizabeth's eyes mesmerized him. She looked upon him, her head angled to bare the length of her throat. Darcy noted the pulse point at the base of her neck throbbed as prominently as did his. He wished to touch her, to caress her cheeks, to bury his hand in the thickness of her hair. The effect Elizabeth had on him always took Darcy by surprise. A pleasant surprise! But a surprise nonetheless. Elizabeth leaned in, unaware of what her nearness did to his composure.

"William, did I tell you how pleased I am to become your wife?" she murmured.

Darcy swallowed a shot of desire shooting through him. He planned to kiss Elizabeth this evening—actually dreamed how it would be. His finger now traced a line from her temple to her chin.

"You, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, do not know how often I prayed to hear my name upon your lips, and the fact that you express a pleasure in our future joining raises my hopes of our marital felicity."

Realizing the impropriety they practiced, with a slight blush, Elizabeth leaned back, placing distance between them.

"May we speak of the wedding, Sir?"

Darcy frowned with the return of formality, but he said evenly, "Most assuredly, Miss Elizabeth. What do you wish to settle?"

Elizabeth turned to sit more squarely on.

“It would...it would seem, Sir, that we must agree on the ceremony’s date. Do you favor a long engagement?”

Darcy straightened his shoulders, a posture he instinctively adopted when completing business transactions; after all, among his society, marriage was a business.

“I waited to claim you for a year. I must admit that I am of the persuasion to finalize that claim as quickly as possible, but I am not insensitive to the fact that this is a greater change for you. You must leave your home and family behind to start a new life with me. And although I want none but you on Pemberley’s staircase waiting for my anticipated return from a business journey or from a day in the fields with my tenants, I will understand if you insist on a longer waiting period.”

Elizabeth blushed again. “You thought of me with you at Pemberley, William?” she asked sweetly.

Darcy smiled at her return to flirting with him. “You would be quite shocked, Elizabeth, at how often each day that you enter my mind.”

“How often?” she prompted innocently.

“Too often,” he growled in hushed tones. “And in too many ways,” he purposely said to shock her.

If this conversation continued, he would embarrass himself with an increase in his manhood.

“Oh!” she gasped. An elongated pause followed. Elizabeth glanced toward where her sister sketched changes in a dress pattern.

“Other than my father, I do not believe anyone at Longbourn will realize I am absent,” she mumbled. Elizabeth swallowed her obvious moment of regret and then presented Darcy a fresh smile. “A shorter engagement appears advisable,” she said with more confidence. “Mr. Bingley tells me that the roads to the north can become more hazardous as winter approaches. If we are to Derbyshire, it would be judicious to do so sooner rather than later.”

“Mr. Bingley is correct: Derbyshire winters can be quite cruel. Moreover, I would wish to celebrate the festive days at Pemberley. Georgiana and I spent the last few Christmases in London. It is my dream to bring you to my home and for you to share it with my sister. With your acceptance, I instructed Mrs. Reynolds to set plans for a winter ball. We have not held one at Pemberley for more than a decade. I will introduce my new wife to my close family and the neighborhood. It will make your transition as the estate’s mistress easier.”

Elizabeth attempted to hide her apprehension, but Darcy took due note of it.

“Then after the calling of the banns...how much longer after the vicar makes the third call?” she thought aloud.

Darcy smiled at her. It amazed him how nervous Elizabeth was about the reality of their joining. He held the advantage in that manner, for Darcy long ago began imagining their life together.

“Although I do not know why you insist upon a calling of the banns, when I could easily purchase a standard license, if I must name a date, the day following the third calling would suit me best.”

“Mr. Bennet being a gentleman, and my father recognizes a calling of banns is, generally not done among his social class. Even so, Mr. Bennet believes the neighborhood, which depends upon his charity deserve to know of Longbourn’s happiness. But more importantly to the issue at hand, my sister and Mr. Bingley chose the Monday after our third Sunday calling for their date. Had you thought of a double wedding? Is that your wish, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy’s frown lines met. “I never considered a double wedding as a possibility, nor did I foresee our final banns being called so close to Miss Bennet’s chosen day.” In spite of a bit of apprehension, Darcy infused his voice with an encouraging tone. “Notwithstanding my close association with Bingley, I would not be pleased to share the day of your and my joining with him and Miss Bennet. I would have you gloried in your own right as my wife.” Elizabeth expelled a sigh of relief.

“Thank you for understanding, William,” she whispered. “I love Jane, but the day I am named Mrs. Darcy is not a day I would want to half with another.”

“Then a week after the final calling,” he declared. “That is a month from this Sunday. Is that sufficient time, Elizabeth?”

“It is perfect, William. The first week of November,” she said wistfully.