

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Darcy

Darcy hovered in the parlor doorway, from which he could see Netherfield's entrance hall. Though aware Bingley and Miss Bingley looked on with amusement, the later possibly with hidden disdain as well, he didn't care. He hadn't seen Elizabeth since that morning. Over the past week, since Sunday's first reading of their banns, they'd established a routine of walking each morning and again in the afternoon but, as the Bennet family was to dine at Netherfield, the sisters had required that afternoon for preparation.

Darcy couldn't imagine what could take so long. He'd seen Elizabeth shivering and bedraggled from being doused in the ocean. Awoken too early after too little sleep in a stable loft. Freckled and tanned by the Scottish sun. She looked lovely under any circumstance with no primping at all.

Finally, Bingley's butler opened the manor's imposing front door. In the parlor at Darcy's back, Bingley surged to his feet. Darcy hid a smile. Bingley teasing him for being besotted was definitely a matter of the pot calling the kettle black.

Mrs. Bennet entered first, followed by her husband. Bingley reached Darcy's side as Miss Bennet and Elizabeth entered together. Both smiled at the butler as they offered their outerwear. Elizabeth said something to him and he dipped his head in acknowledgement. Then her gaze found Darcy where he stood down the corridor. What had passed for a smile before was shown to be the merest shadow of happiness. Her expression turned radiant when she saw him.

Darcy didn't realize he moved until he'd nearly reached her. Elizabeth, still smiling, stepped around the butler. Mrs. Bennet appeared before Darcy, bringing him up short. He bowed, hoping the gesture covered his surprise. He hadn't even seen her approach. "Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet."

"Mr. Darcy, how handsome you look this evening," Mrs. Bennet said. "Quite dapper. Mr. Bennet, isn't Mr. Darcy looking smart?"

"I'd say he dressed with his usual care," Mr. Bennet allowed. Standing slightly behind Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Bennet offered Darcy a wry smile.

"But you didn't come down the hall to see me," Mrs. Bennet said. "Let me be out of your way. Yours as well, Mister Bingley," she added, nodding at a point over Darcy's shoulder. "You must wish to greet Elizabeth... and Jane." She dropped a curtsey, then shuffled off to one side of the entrance hall before Darcy could compose a reply.

Darcy, Bingley coming to his side, resumed his way to where Elizabeth and Miss Bennet stood.

"Mister Bingley." Miss Lydia's voice rang out in the entrance hall. "Mister Bingley, I was think--"

"Lydia, let's go say hello to Miss Bingley," Mrs. Bennet said. She grabbed Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty by the arms and all but hauled them to the parlor. "Mary, Mr. Bennet, come along."

"But Mama," Miss Lydia protested as the rest jumped to obey. "I need to ask Mister Bingley about another ball and..."

Her voice, though penetrating, faded from Darcy's awareness as he reached Elizabeth and her sister. He bowed. "Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, you both look lovely this evening."

"Why thank you, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth's smile turned mischievous. "And might I say that you look quite modish. Smart, even. Handsome as well."

"Lizzy, behave," Miss Bennet said, voice touched with laughter.

"You look amazing," Bingley said to Miss Bennet.

She blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Bingley."

"May I escort you into the parlor?" Bingley offered Miss Bennet his arm.

She nodded and he led her away.

"It seems we've been left unchaperoned in the entrance hall," Elizabeth said. She glanced about. "Even Mister Bingley's butler has abandoned us to the temptation of misbehavior."

Darcy took in the devilish twinkle in her eye. He knew the look for the challenge it was. Along with their custom of twice daily walks, they'd developed a truly deplorable habit of kissing whenever they were alone. He knew they should wait until they were wed. If asked, he would have sworn he wasn't the sort of man to steal clandestine kisses. That was, before he'd held Elizabeth in his arms.

"We're hardly alone," he forced himself to say. "The butler will return from stowing your cloaks and anyone who sticks their head out the parlor door could see us."

"Yet, the butler is still away and no one seems to be peeking."

"I would never have taken you for a temptress, Lizzy Bennet," he said, stepping closer.

"I've never before met a man who inspired tempting," she whispered, rising up on her tiptoes.

"Lizzy, Mr. Darcy, come on," Miss Kitty called down the hall. "Miss Bingley is going to play Jane's favorite piece for us and you know how well she performs it."

"Kitty," Mrs. Bennet called from somewhere in the parlor. "Come here."

Elizabeth rocked back down into her heels, expression rueful. "It seems you are correct about the parlor door."

"I've never enjoyed being right less," he said and offered his arm.

They headed down the corridor at a slower pace than warranted and entered the parlor to find everyone clustered about the pianoforte. It struck Darcy that it was a happy scene. Everyone wore a cheerful countenance. No one appeared the least bit discontent. He brought Elizabeth to a halt a few steps inside the doorway. Mrs. Bennet glanced their way, smiled indulgently, and turned back to the pianoforte.

"Your mother has been uncommonly..." He paused, aware he must choose his next word with care. What Mrs. Bennet was could only be described as calm. Not annoying. Well-behaved. How to put that without offering insult, though?

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed, saving him from finding the words. "She's so pleased we're to wed, she's been nice to me as well." She cast him a quick smile. "It amuses me to find a similar change in Miss Bingley, and not only to me," she added in a whisper.

Darcy nodded. He'd noticed that Miss Bingley's behavior to Elizabeth had become, of late, almost as deferential as her behavior to him. As well, Miss Bingley was very friendly to Miss Bennet, who generally received the overtures with a puzzled expression.

"I believe she's even encouraging Mr. Bingley to court Jane," Elizabeth added in that same low voice. "As for me, I suppose I must endure her kindness."

"She does seem to like you better than she did before," he agreed in bland tones.

"She likes my connections better," Elizabeth corrected. "I think she knows we will never really be friends but Jane will accept her. If Jane marries Mr. Bingley, then Miss Bingley will still move in your circles. Who knows, if you introduce her to one, she might even catch a duke."

Darcy cast a sharp glance Elizabeth's way to read laughter in her eyes. "I doubt she'll catch a duke."

"I don't think Lydia will either," Elizabeth replied.

Miss Bingley brought the piece to a close. Everyone clapped, though Darcy bemoaned the loss of Elizabeth's hand on his sleeve. Miss Bingley, who did play well, preened.

Miss Mary moved to the bench. "I've been practicing a pi--"

"Lizzy, come play that song," Miss Lydia called. "The one that was written at Pemberley."

Darcy raised an eyebrow.

Elizabeth blushed. "Only the words were written there. There's no harm in telling where they were written."

"No, no harm." No one would know, after all, how close the song Georgiana and Mr. Everett had written came to the truth. "It is a good song. Georgiana will be pleased it's well received. I'll write her and tell her and," he added as Elizabeth made to go to the pianoforte, "I have a letter from Mrs. Annesley I'd like your opinion on."

"Lizzy, come on," Miss Lydia called.

"Certainly," Elizabeth said.

She offered Darcy a smile and headed to the pianoforte. Miss Bingley vacated her place with all cordiality. Miss Mary wore a slightly sullen expression but didn't intervene.

Elizabeth played the song well now. She sang it even better, her lovely alto heavy with emotion. Darcy watched, bemused he'd forgotten Mrs. Annesley's letter until mention of the song. He'd intended to bring it up to Elizabeth immediately. He'd had every opportunity to do so in the entrance hall but all he'd been able to think about was kissing Elizabeth.

The song was so well liked, they asked Elizabeth to play it a second time. After that, the pianoforte was finally turned over to Miss Mary, which seemed to signal the time had come for everyone to break into small groups about the room and chat. As Elizabeth made her way back to him, Darcy watched Mrs. Bennet's machinations in amusement. A quick word here, a pinched arm there and soon Bingley and Miss Bennet were seated alone on a settee off to one side of the room. He suspected, had Miss Bingley protested the match, she and Miss Bennet would be near to blows, but much seemed to have changed since his official engagement to Elizabeth.

Likewise, he and Elizabeth were being afforded space. He'd no complaint about that. He retrieved Mrs. Annesley's letter from his pocket. "As I said, I should like your opinion."

Elizabeth took the proffered page and unfolded it to read, turning slightly to catch the candlelight of a nearby sconce. As she read, she raised her eyebrows, occasionally glancing up at him.

The letter, which Darcy had read three times now, told of a visit from Mr. Everett. Apparently, he'd returned to Pemberley not long after they'd left him, to call on Georgiana. Mrs. Annesley reported that they talked about music for three hours. She said she didn't have the heart to insist he leave, because fifteen miles was a long way simply to make a call.

Elizabeth folded the letter and proffered it to him.

"I believe he's courting her," Darcy said, accepting the page.

"It wouldn't surprise me."

Darcy liked Mr. Everett, but... "She's young."

Elizabeth shrugged. "So, make them wait a year."

"It's not that simple." Darcy looked about. How could he make her understand without betraying Georgiana's secret? "I question her ability to make a good decision."

Elizabeth stole a quick glance about the room, then angled more fully to him. "I realize something happened between her and... a certain gentleman. Her reaction made that very obvious when I told her the details of our journey." Elizabeth's eyes narrowed slightly. "By the by, you could have warned me. I feel our relationship will recover fully in time but that didn't start Miss Darcy and me off well."

Darcy winced. "I did come to that conclusion. Belatedly."

Elizabeth nodded. "As to the relationship with the gentleman, I'm assuming it involved that gentleman's avarice and her naivete. I don't know how far things went. Nor do I need to. That's between her, him, you and, possibly, Mr. Everett one day. What I do know is that people make mistakes. Especially young people. It's perfectly reasonable for you to make her wait but don't belittle her, or drive her away, by questioning the reality of her feelings."

Darcy considered her words, likely for longer than required, since Elizabeth was generally correct. Though, not always. His lip twitched with the desire to smile. "It is true that people make mistakes."

"Of course, it is. Don't tell me you consider yourself infallible, Mr. Darcy?"

"Oh no, you've cured me of that particular malady." His smile widened. "I was thinking of you."

"Me? As the woman you love, I believe you're meant to find me perfect."

"You are perfect but you do make mistakes."

Elizabeth raised delicate eyebrows. "Such as?"

He lowered his voice even further, though no one stood near. "Such as mistakenly refusing my first offer of marriage."

"That was not a mistake."

"Yet, you changed your mind."

She smiled suddenly. "No, you changed my mind."

When she looked at him that way, love shining in her eyes, it was all he could do not to take her into his arms. He cleared his throat and forced himself to look away. They were in a parlor full of people, after all. He drew in a long, slow breath and let it out.

"Charlotte came by today," Elizabeth said lightly in an obvious change of subject.

"Oh?" Darcy didn't care about Mrs. Collins. He cared about getting on to dinner and having it over with so morning would come and he and Elizabeth could walk alone.

"My mother all but ordered her to speak with me." Elizabeth's tone was longsuffering. "You see, Mr. Bingley was already there, speaking with Jane, and I was their chaperone."

"Ah." He did see. Mrs. Bennet was admirably single minded.

"Charlotte told me about something good that came out of our kidnapping."

He could definitely think of something good that had come from their ordeal but he doubted that was what Mrs. Collins had spoken to Elizabeth about. "What was that?"

"She told me that Mr. Collins no longer believes Lady Catherine is infallible. All of the servants she selected for them behaved poorly. Only the one, Rose, had a good reason, her sick mother. The other maid was off with a man and, well, you know what sort of choices Fiona and Jeb were."

"Indeed." If pressed, he would label them as disastrous, both as servants and kidnapers.

"Lady Catherine even wrote Charlotte a letter of apology."

"Aunt Catherine did that?" Darcy asked, surprised. Lady Catherine never apologized. She allocated blame, or even reshaped the truth, but she did not apologize.

Elizabeth nodded. "She did." Her voice brimmed with amusement. "Charlotte plans to keep it and bring it out as needed."

Darcy nodded. He loved the way Elizabeth's eyes sparkled when she was delighted. Such lovely, expressive eyes. He tucked a wayward curl behind her ear, then dropped his hand, recalling where they were.

Elizabeth narrowed her gaze. "Are you listening to me?"

"Certainly. Mrs. Collins has a letter to use as leverage over her husband." He was listening not because he cared overly about the details of Charlotte Collins' marriage but because anything that was important to Elizabeth mattered.

"Exactly," Elizabeth agreed. "Charlotte is actually rather happy. Her life is easier now. She said she still asks for Lady Catherine's advice but she is able to treat it as advice, not as an order. So far, both your aunt and Mr. Collins seem to accept that."

"And for when they don't, she had that letter."

On the other side of the parlor, a clock rang out the hour.

Miss Bingley stood. "Shall we all adjourn to the dining room?"

She turned and led the way. Everyone filed past Darcy and Elizabeth where they stood near the parlor door. With so few gentlemen, and those all essentially taken, and most of the guests being related, there would be little ceremony in entering the dining room. Darcy didn't mind.

Of all the others in the parlor, Bingley and Miss Bennet reached the doorway near Darcy and Elizabeth last. The two walked with heads together, speaking in low voices. Both appeared hardly aware of where they were or who was about them.

Once they passed, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. "So, your friend Mrs. Collins shall have a happier union because of our kidnapping."

"She believes so," Elizabeth said. "I hope she's right."

“And, because of our engagement, also a result of our kidnapping, Miss Bingley no longer protests her brother’s affection for your sister.”

“Nor do you,” Elizabeth added, smile touched with mischief again.

“Nor do I,” Darcy agreed. He captured her hands in his. “I believe that means there very well may be three happy marriages, all because we were abducted.” He didn’t include Wickham’s marriage, unsure if it was happy.

Elizabeth tipped her head to the side, looking up at him. “And if, after waiting, your sister and Mr. Everett wed, that will be four.”

“You believe they will wed, don’t you?” Darcy asked. He wasn’t opposed to the young man and, with Elizabeth’s reassurance, no longer worried that Georgiana couldn’t make a good choice.

“I do.”

Darcy studied the lovely face, upturned to him. “Well, then, four happy unions. A lot of good from one kidnapping. Perhaps we should track down the chamber maid and thank her.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I don’t think we need do that. I am thankful, though, because you are correct. Not marrying you would be the worst error of my life.” She shook her head, expression bemused. “Who would have thought it would take such an ordeal for me to realize that the one man in the world I disliked most was the only man I could ever truly love?”

“It certainly took me by surprise,” he said blandly.

Elizabeth laughed, making her all the lovelier.

Darcy wondered if he should pull her to him but, just as before, he didn’t need to. Elizabeth stepped forward into his embrace. There, secreted away in Netherfield’s parlor, he kissed her soundly and prayed it would always be thus. The two of them, together, joyously in each other’s arms.

~ The End... Again ~