

One

At that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!

—Pride and Prejudice

Less than a year into the marriage that made her mistress of one of England's finest houses, Elizabeth Darcy knew she still had much to learn about the place she now called home. Of one thing, however, she was certain.

A ghost haunted Pemberley.

She was not a ghost in the traditional sense. She did not moan, or shriek, or rattle chains. She did not cause rooms to grow cold, objects to fall, or fires to sputter. She did not manifest at midnight to pace on creaking floorboards, visiting in death the rooms she had occupied in life.

Yet the continued presence of Lady Anne Fitzwilliam Darcy was as real and pervasive as that of any spectre. And far more difficult to exorcise. Though her corporeal form had been laid to rest nearly twenty years earlier, she inhabited the estate as if it were still hers, casting a shadow so long that her daughter-in-law wondered whether she would ever escape it.

Elizabeth had known coming into her marriage that she entered a family and a house with a long, respected history. She had embraced that history, and her new place in it, as she had embraced her husband and the life he had offered her when they wed. She had thought she was prepared for her new role as mistress of Pemberley. She had not realized that the previous occupant had not yet vacated it.

“You are—you are *certain*, ma’am?”

Elizabeth left the corner of the small parlor and crossed to a spot nearer the center of the room. “Yes,” she assured the housekeeper. “Quite certain. I would like the desk moved over here, facing the window.”

“Of course. I will summon the footmen directly.” Despite her statement, Mrs. Reynolds made no move. The white-haired housekeeper lingered in the doorway of Elizabeth’s morning room, worrying her lower lip, apparently wishing to say more but holding back out of deference to her employer.

Circumstances had prevented Elizabeth from spending much time at Pemberley since marrying Fitzwilliam Darcy nine months ago, but in that period she had come to respect Mrs. Reynolds’s intelligence and opinions. One did not casually dismiss the concerns of a trusted servant with twenty-five years’ tenure, and the housekeeper’s advice had proven critical in easing Elizabeth’s adjustment to overseeing a house far grander than the ones she had known growing up. Mrs. Reynolds was both extremely capable and unquestionably loyal to the Darcy family.

Sometimes *too* loyal. Guessing the source of the housekeeper’s reservations, Elizabeth nevertheless asked, “Is there any reason not to move the desk, Mrs. Reynolds?” She resigned herself to the anticipated reply.

“Her ladyship preferred it in the corner. At certain times of year, this part of the room receives very strong sunlight. Lady Anne found the glare unpleasant.”

Lady Anne, Elizabeth had been given to understand by various members of the household, had also found the Wedgwood breakfast

set superior to any of Pemberley's many others, particularly the Royal Worcester china Elizabeth had thought to use last week. The fortnight previous, she had learned that the pattern of the music room's wallpaper was the only possible one that could adequately complement the view from that chamber's windows. The bird motif of the conservatory, another selection of her predecessor's, Elizabeth did not dare touch. Further, Lady Anne's taste in decorating had apparently been matched by equal excellence as an art collector, hostess, domestic manager, and philanthropist. As a result, Elizabeth had begun to find the glare of Lady Anne's perfection growing unpleasant.

"Thank you for the information, but I do not care to face a wall when I write," she said. "I would much rather look out. Pemberley has such beautiful grounds. I am exceptionally fond of the south garden."

Mrs. Reynolds smiled wistfully. "So was her ladyship. Lady Anne planted that garden herself—selected all the plants and put them in the ground with her own hands. But I am sure you already knew that."

"It might have been mentioned to me previously."

The housekeeper withdrew, and minutes later two footmen arrived to relocate the rosewood writing desk. As weary as she had become of most things related to Lady Anne, Elizabeth had to concede her own partiality for this particular furnishing. The graceful Chippendale piece practically beckoned one to take a seat and invent cause for correspondence.

The footmen lowered the desk to rest in its new position, then replaced the items they had removed from its top during the transfer. As soon as they left, Elizabeth rearranged the quill stand, wick trimmer, and wax jack, the latter of which she managed to drop in the process. She seemed to be dropping a lot of things lately. She bent to retrieve it—a motion more difficult now than it had been mere weeks ago—and positioned it to her satisfaction. The glass inkwell she then slid into place rather than trust herself to lift.

She sat at the desk, admiring the prospect from its chair. From her

new vantage point, she could see not only the river and valley, as she could previously, but also the south garden. Though Michaelmas approached, the roses yet held their own, the marigolds vigorously announced their intention to stay until kissed by frost, and the morning glories climbed heavenward. The blooms' gentle perfume wafted through the open windows, dominated by a particularly sweet fragrance. As she attempted to identify it, her husband entered.

She held her breath as he silently noted the desk's new location. Though Darcy had given her leave to make any changes in the house she wished, and had especially encouraged her to remake Lady Anne's former rooms into her own, she could not escape consciousness of the fact that any alteration of hers severed another small tie to the mother he had lost at far too young an age. Fitzwilliam Darcy had been but eleven when Lady Anne died giving birth to his sister, Georgiana. Their father, George Darcy, had left most of his beloved wife's effects untouched, and his son had made minimal changes in the six years since he inherited the estate. Out of sensitivity to her husband's feelings, and those of Georgiana, she hesitated to adapt much at Pemberley to her own taste. A lifetime stretched before them—time enough for a gradual transformation. She need not sweep in and obliterate all traces of the first woman he had loved. If not yet secure in her role as Pemberley's mistress, she was secure enough in Darcy's affections to share them with his mother's memory.

If only that memory were not so idealized. Lady Anne had been loved not only by her family, but also by friends, neighbors, tenants, and servants. She had been a paragon of grace and lived an idyllic life. How Elizabeth would ever find her own place here, she could scarcely imagine.

Darcy at last nodded at the desk in approval. "You shall enjoy a finer view."

She exhaled. "I am glad you agree. Mrs. Reynolds so disapproves that I thought I might have to move the desk myself."

"I hope you jest. No mistress of Pemberley should be pushing furniture across a room, but especially not one in your condition."

“Of course I jest. If the servants mutinied, I would have prevailed upon you.”

“And if I resisted?”

“I might have threatened to name this baby something ridiculous, such as Nancy.”

“Nancy Darcy? You would never saddle a daughter of yours with such a singsong name. Besides, you carry a boy. The Darcys for countless generations have fathered boys as their first offspring, so it only stands to reason that we would continue the family tradition.”

“Very well, then. Quincy Darcy.”

“You do not frighten me.”

“Chauncey? Percy?”

“Enough. We shall name him something that sounds well with Darcy. Richard, perhaps.”

“Nay, not Richard. That, *I* could not countenance.”

“It is a perfectly respectable name. In fact, it is the name of the physician I wish to engage for your lying-in. Dr. Richard Severn.”

“The London doctor? I thought we agreed our child would be born here?”

“I will arrange for him to stay at Pemberley during your confinement. He already divides his time between London and Bath, where he is at present, so I am certain he can be persuaded to come to Derbyshire this winter.”

“Should we not meet Dr. Severn first? What if we do not like him?”

“He has an excellent reputation.”

“So does the village midwife.”

His expression grew shuttered. “I do not want to entrust your safety to a country midwife.”

“I do not want to entrust it to a doctor I have never met.”

He regarded her quietly a moment, his air grown serious. “Very well,” he said finally. “When we have concluded our visit with the Bingleys, we will return home via Bath—provided you feel well enough to prolong our travel.”

“Our little Darcy has been behaving herself much more of late.”

"I am glad to hear it. You have looked rather green these many weeks."

"I feel quite better." The morning queasiness that had plagued the early weeks of her condition had nearly abated—a fact for which she was grateful. Her sister Jane, who had just delivered her first child, had suffered nausea right up until the day she was brought to bed. Though Elizabeth remained hypersensitive to scent, only a few smells yet set her insides quaking. "In fact, just now I am famished. If I ring for nuncheon, will you join me?"

"It is only half past ten."

"Your child cannot yet tell time." She headed toward the bellpull, discovering on her way a folded sheet of paper on the floor. Certain it had not been there during her conversation with Mrs. Reynolds, she took it up.

"What have you found?" Darcy asked.

"A letter."

"On the floor? The servants are seldom so careless."

The note was sealed with the cinquefoil symbol from the Darcy crest. She turned it over and discovered her name on the front: Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy. She smiled softly. Had her husband, intending some surprise, dropped it for her to find? "It is addressed to me," she said, studying his expression closely.

"Indeed?" His countenance remained open, revealing mild interest but betraying no prior knowledge of the note. "From whom?"

Perhaps he had not authored the letter, or its sudden appearance, after all. Now that she looked at it again, the handwriting resembled Georgiana's more than his, but was not quite his sister's hand, either.

Her curiosity piqued, she broke the seal and unfolded the paper. The lines began neatly but became progressively uneven and blotted. She quickly scanned to the end, then lifted her gaze to Darcy in astonishment.

"It is from your mother."