

# Chapter One

*Perfect happiness, even in memory, is not common...* —Jane Austen



ONE SUMMER'S JUNE I came to know well my cousin-in-law, Elizabeth Darcy—despite the vague misgivings of my father.

In my girlhood I had often stayed at Pemberley, where she and Cousin Darcy live in the country. Affectionate and kind, she favored me as a child. I was a foreigner then from Portugal, a poor convent orphan at the war's end, until my father found me, gave me his surname, and brought me up English. But army life hadn't prepared a colonel like him to be a parent. And though Mrs. Darcy offered to help, by teaching a four-year-old proper behavior, she never could

claim any success. For I was mischievous, headstrong, and, to the misery of all, a zealous drummer-girl who roused the sleepers each morning with rat-a-tat tat-tats! on my little drum.

Living abroad in Spain from the ages of nine to fifteen didn't help matters; I returned to England last year very independent, fearless, and much too outspoken. This worried my father that I, with my foreign habits, would not be fit for society beyond our family circle. But now, having reached the great age of sixteen in the year of our Lord 1826, I must find my heart of wisdom, says my father in a hopeful manner.

So why does he, almost in the same breath, treat me like a child when it suits him, telling me not to concern myself with life's complications?

"My father insists that, regardless of your request, I should not call you Lizzy given the disparity in our ages, among other things," I told Mrs. Darcy, who was four and thirty. It was exceptionally warm that day at Pemberley, and we sat together under the shelter of a large, pale-green parasol.

She responded playfully, "My family and closest friends call me Lizzy, and, with them, I answer to nothing else."

I glowed inside at being considered an intimate friend of hers just a week after renewing our acquaintance. There is something prepossessing about Lizzy—she with her expressive dark eyes. They say that the radiance of someone in fine looks can be taken as earnest for an honest heart. It certainly held true for her.

Why, then, was my father troubled by my friendship

with the properest lady in the world, one with good sense and judgment, one of fortune and consequence?

“My father simply cannot accept that I am grown up—I am convinced of it.”

“Poor Colonel Fitzwilliam,” said she, fondly.

“It must upset him that I, Sofia-Elisabete, am known now as Mrs. Munro and no longer Miss Fitzwilliam.”

“My dear Sofia, you are indeed young to be married,” remarked Lizzy.

I spoke up, and said, “I know of many girls from good families who were married at fifteen or sixteen here in England, and on the Continent.”

Lizzy paused, then spoke frankly, “A younger sister of mine was, and still is, a determined flirt, self-willed, and reckless. My father never exerted himself to restrain her wild flightiness; nor did my mother, who indulged her favorite. At sixteen, Lydia married a man of very bad character. The only thing constant about those two is their debts. Theirs is a far from perfect marriage.”

In my worshipping eyes, the Darcys had a perfect marriage, a perfect understanding of one another, and the question of age, in my opinion, had little to do with it. A person couldn't help but notice, from sunrise to sunset, their long-lasting marital bliss, or come upon them unexpectedly in the garden maze, on a drowsy afternoon, snug in each other's arms and sighing with happiness. Oh, that my own marriage will remain so lovely, so strong as the Darcys' when I become as old as they are!

Unless you knew their history, you would never suspect that two years prior, the Darcys had suffered the most acute

pain there is in this world. Each day they bravely soldiered on, always loyal to one another. But my father had warned me not to speak about the past. Perhaps that was why he didn't want me to become close with Lizzy? He worried that I couldn't keep quiet. Yes, that must be it.

Lizzy observed, "You are the third female relation of mine who has happily married a *braw* Scotsman. I have long surmised that the kilts make females giddy with excitement."

She smiled encouragingly, and I sensed that she wanted to know why I had eloped with and married Kitt Munro, the young Scots Catholic with whom I had fallen in love, a year since, in Spain. Dared I open my heart to her and reveal how it had begun with the betrayal by my natural mother, Doña Marisa? She had sent me to Madrid at the age of fifteen to see Lord Scapeton, my father's elder brother, to obtain another loan for her. Before I knew it, my uncle had coerced me into an engagement with an ancient Spanish nobleman, one with creaky knees and a flair for violence.

Here, in Lizzy's peaceful kingdom of high woody hills, the sweep of the park beyond, stretching over a considerable extent, with, above it all, the finest pastel sky—how could the sorrow, the betrayal, and the horrors from my past find me out? It made me feel safe to confide in her.

For the next half hour, I shocked Lizzy with some of the disturbing, incredible happenings of my sojourn in Madrid and eventual escape. My sympathizer listened attentively, raised her eyebrow at anything magical in my tale, and, when I was done, asked me many questions about Lord Scapeton, her intense curiosity about him puzzling me at

first. When she learned that my uncle had urged me to marry for money, then to take a *lover*, she blushed upon hearing the word, and set to fidgeting with her necklace of twisted pearls. I gazed at her questioningly.

“That unscrupulous man!” was her exclamation.

“I hope I have not offended your sensibilities with my story—” I hesitated out of fear that I had divulged too much.

“On the contrary,” said she, composing herself. “I wanted to hear about your life in Spain, its culture, and in what ways the women are different there.”

Of course, I believed her, for not only was she liberal-minded and intelligent, but I also knew that after the war was over, she and Darcy, along with their infant son and heir, had conducted a long tour of France, Italy, and Switzerland, the last being the birthplace of her second son. She had, over the years, become a cultivated, fashionable lady who wore a flowing lace veil over her hair instead of one of those puffy white mob-caps. She had also benefitted from her introduction into a circle of like-minded, well-informed ladies with whom she maintained a lively correspondence. They privately referred to themselves as the Rational Creatures Society—something I had heard her mention before.

So I spoke plainly: “There are those who, not knowing my history, would unjustly censure me and spout nonsense about my character.”

Lizzy became thoughtful. “England is a country of proprieties. One could say that decorum is our national peculiarity. It affects everything we do, entering into our religion and morals, our politics and opinions as a nation.”

Then, solemnly, “Having traveled to the Continent, I have come to realize there is a great degree of pertinacity and narrow-mindedness here, as there is in every country.”

I nodded. “Until now, I have trusted but one person—Aggie, my dear step-mamma—with the knowledge of all that befell me in Madrid.”

“Yours was”—Lizzy searched for suitable words—“quite a fantastical, frightful journey, but you survived, thankfully, because of Mr. Munro, who courageously protected you.”

I continued on. “Aggie and I agreed that for the sake of my father’s health, he must never learn of his elder brother’s past mistreatment of me. Who knows what grievous ill-will the colonel might conceive against Lord Scapeton otherwise? Ever since my father suffered that injury to his head, although it was years ago, it has made his behavior unpredictable, alarming even.”

Lizzy, too, was concerned. “We certainly do not want your father to quarrel with his brother. Rest assured that I will not utter a syllable of this to anyone.” It relieved me to know that she wouldn’t tell a soul.

But a moment later, she muttered almost to herself.

“Oh—and Lord Scapeton will not speak of it either. He has a singular talent for guarding deep secrets.”

Guarding deep secrets! This brought to mind that a week prior, I had received a mysterious package on my birthday. Inside had been a book of manners, *The Lady’s Preceptor*. My well-wisher, using dark gold ink, had underscored a passage, which read: “There is no greater mark, both of politeness and good sense, than the talent of preserving both our own secrets and those of others.” Given

my father's concern that I maintain perfect politeness and sound judgment in all aspects of my friendship with Lizzy, I had immediately understood it was he who had favored me with this advice. My forgetful father, however, had neither signed the book, nor included a note of any kind.

Though he and the worldly and wise among us say it is so, why should it be taken as an axiom of human nature that girls love to tell secrets? "Secrets with girls, like loaded guns with boys, are never valued till they make a noise," said the poet George Crabbe. Even as I had the thought, Lizzy's five-year-old daughter, Emilla Jane—who seemed to know her share of secrets and certainly liked making noise—came to the south terrace where we sat, accompanied by her nursery governess. Who could not be pleased for an interruption by a cherub with plump, cream and roses cheeks? Emilla Jane was well-spoken for her age, curious, and bright. Whenever she shook her head adamantly, her shiny brown hair tumbled upon her brow. In looks overall, she resembled her father; in temperament, she reminded me of her mother and sometimes her father.

"Cousin Sofia, is that a toy?" the little girl asked eagerly, standing before me, her eyes glued to the pocket spyglass that I held in my lap.

"It's a spyglass to help me see things that are far away," I explained, and showed her how long it could extend. One of my greatest treasures, it had been given to me by my father many years ago.

Emilla Jane gasped. "Can you see tiny fairies who live inside the holes of the hills?" She bounced on her toes, excited at the very idea of them.

I smiled. “No, but you can see other wonders. If you are careful, you may look through it.”

With begging eyes, she sought her mother’s approval.

“You must stand still and hold it firmly,” Lizzy instructed her.

Emilla Jane did as she was told. “Oh! I see a butterfly! Two butterflies!” she cried out loudly, peering through the spyglass.

“A lady must never shout,” her mother reminded her gently.

Her governess agreed. “A lady never loses self-control.”

An impish grin appeared on the girl’s face. “Mamma, I have a big secret to tell you. I lost control today and shouted, ‘EEEHH!’—and no one heard me. Does that still make me naughty?”

Keen to be as good a parent as Lizzy, I learned what I could from these mother-child interactions, choosing to write my thoughts in a small note-book. I believed myself discreet about it, balancing the note-book on my lap, scribbling with my pencil, tucking away my note-book into my wide sash, all while mother and daughter were yet conferring.

“Sofia, here is an important item to add to your note-book.” Lizzy stole a sly look at me, and I could feel my cheeks burn on being found out. “I have five children. They each have their own tempers and inclinations, some requiring more attention than others, for example.”

I placed a hand atop my recently expanding waist, for I was near four months in the family way. “Oh, Lizzy, I shall be pleased to see my child turn out as perfectly well bred as your children.”



This amused her for some reason.

I said, "It is unfortunate that I can't see Will on this visit."

She smiled and said, "The two of you were once play-fellows. Do you remember?"

"Oh, yes. What is he like now?"

Her proud response was, "My eldest is all that is good and clever, similar to his father. A sensible, serious boy, he has always acted older than his years."

Emilla Jane, who had been scanning the garden with the spyglass, cried out, "Oh, Mamma, look! She *can* see him. Our Will is come home."

"It is impossible, child; the school term at Eton has not ended." Lizzy had no sooner pronounced this than she, taking the spyglass from Emilla Jane, saw him too. There, on the lawn, beside the blooming peonies, Will awaited her acknowledgment. Though only twelve, he stood tall for his age, school-boy handsome in a black short jacket, broad white collar, and black waistcoat and trousers.

"Did he run off from school again?" asked Emilla Jane, innocently, her dark eyes as round as berries.

I gasped inwardly. Had I heard correctly? Lizzy paled, which made me think that her girl had spoken the truth. Silently, she returned the spyglass to me. Meanwhile, the governess, on seeing her mistress's altered expression, hushed the child, and hurried her away towards the house.

Staring after her daughter, Lizzy spoke, her voice low and miserable, "Oh, Milly, my fairy-child, how do you know these secrets?"

It surprised me to hear her say that because Lizzy, who

didn't believe in fairy tales, banned them from her children's education. She had told me that a child should not be exposed to the irrational. It was one of her first remarks that I had written in my note-book, even though I disagreed with the notion, being a great believer in the mysterious ways of the universe.

I once read that the pleasures of a lively imagination, when guided by reason, are among our best enjoyments. But Lizzy would not care for a book of fairy tales that provided instruction to children, when she had been profoundly influenced by certain men and women of letters, in particular, Mary Wollstonecraft. The latter had warned against filling children's heads with improbable tales and superstitious accounts of invisible beings, because, in her opinion, they bred strange prejudices and vain fears in young minds.

Given that, what did Lizzy really think of me, when I made no secret of my alliance with the supernatural world? Had she, who had used the word "fantastical" to describe my experiences in Spain, believed my adventures at all?

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HIS YOUTHFUL ABOUNDING ENERGY on display, Will strode up the wide stone steps, his hat in hand. He bent down to kiss his mother on the cheek, then greeted me with a bow. Lizzy slowly rose and, with maternal tenderness, embraced him in a cloud of worry. Whereupon, she excused herself to speak to old Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper. The boy needed to bathe, his room must be aired, beef tea must be

prepared, and so on and so forth; and, later, the two would have a talk.

As soon as his mother was gone, Will's mild countenance turned gloomy. He sat with me for a while. Some time passed before we began to reminisce, which made him smile a little. He had a precise manner of speech for such a young school-boy.

"Cousin Sofia, you did not wait for me," he said.

"Will, what do you mean?"

"Ah! You have forgotten your promise."

And suddenly, I remembered. It staggered me that he could recall having asked for my hand when he was five and I was nine, and how I had teased him that I was too old, too much the tomboy for the heir of Pemberley. Besides, hadn't he already proposed to his nurse? Nevertheless, in good humor, I had promised him then to think on it. We grinned together at the memory.

"You will like my husband," said I.

"Where is Mr. Munro?"

"He, along with your father and the tutor, took the boys to fish for trout."

At the mention of this, Will seemed to withdraw. He turned away and didn't speak for a long minute. Clearly, something was wrong, but I was filled with curiosity and wished to know why he had come home. Did he really leave school without telling anyone?

I said sympathetically, "I am no stranger to running away. When I was a very young girl, I went on a big adventure to find the perfect world in the moon."

He flinched. "There is no perfect world where I have

come from—a place of horrors for over three hundred years.”

“Oh, Will, do tell me what happened.”

But he refused, shaking his head miserably.

“You will feel better,” I said, and that was how I persuaded him to share his troubles with me.

It appeared that school-mates of Will Darcy from the Lower School at Eton called him Darter, for not only was he extremely fast on his feet, but the month prior, he had run off from school in a thrilling escape. Pursued he had been by Crusher, the fearful name given to a weighty sixth-form boy whom Will served as a drudge—making his tea, brushing his clothes, fetching and carrying for him. Even now, Will groaned at his bad luck for having forgotten to toast the tyrant’s sausages for breakfast on that unfortunate morning. He had run for his life, his heart beating with terror.

“I’ll break your head, Lower Boy!” had bellowed his hungry tormenter, shaking his thick round fist in a threatening way.

On that occasion, a hue-and-cry had been raised for Will’s capture, and some other sixth-form boys had come thundering after him. “Boo, boo!” the lower boys shouted a chorus of protest, while sending off a hail of soft-boiled eggs at these big seniors. Will hadn’t stopped running until, the story went, he had reached London, twenty-two miles distant.

Of course, these school-fellows of his had exaggerated, because he hadn’t gone up to the metropolis, but instead, had wandered about on the river bank, lonely and in the

dumps. A few hours later, he had reluctantly returned to school to be flogged for being absent.

“You wanted a holiday. Don’t deny it, sir. I see guilt in your eyes,” the Head Master Keate had upbraided him. “Kneel on the block!”

Later that evening at his boarding house, the madman Crusher, their house captain, had smashed him in ways unimaginable. Will had been laid up for a week, sore in body and spirit. When he felt better, he wrote to his mother about his ordeal, yet begging her not to tell his father that he had run off from school and been punished by the Head Master.

Not long after, however, he was brutalized again. Crusher and his toadies gave him a tossing—a cruel trick whereby a boy is tossed up and down from a blanket. It had made him wretchedly dizzy.

Will made his mind up to go home for good. He devised a plan. After prayers, while he was serving Crusher a monstrous breakfast, the senior boy grumbled that his tea was cold.

“Pooh, pooh! When I dipped my greasy fingers in the tea to make sure, it was most definitely hot,” Will said impudently, amazing even himself with his own audacity.

“Lower Boy!”—Crusher’s ugly phiz turned purple—“I’ll pulverize you to atoms.”

Oh, danger! Will dashed off again, running doubly fast this time, praying to Almighty God for his deliverance. “Go it, Darter!” the lower boys cheered him on. Half way across the bridge to Windsor, his demonic pursuer suddenly sank to his knees, holding his belly, and fell on his side, dead beat.

When I heard of how Will's desperate flight from school had begun so, I couldn't help but interject, "What a near thing it had been!" that Crusher hadn't caught him.

Will nodded. "I had ensured that Crusher had eaten too many sausages for breakfast—likely he suffered a stomach cramp."

In Windsor, Will had quickly attended to urgent business. First, at the pastry-cook's shop, he had purchased for his travels the sugary treats that every boy craves: apple tarts, cakes, and buns. Second, he had bought a ticket for an inside seat on the Emerald, the fastest coach to London, the better to preserve his school clothes from the dust. Last, he had sent a message to his tutor, a rather decent fellow, to tell him not to worry. He felt sorry for Crusher's two other drudges who would be bullied instead of him—in particular, one named Westley, a small, delicate boy.

"It was dangerous for you to have traveled alone," I gently scolded him. "You could have been robbed of your money and your clothes, or, worse yet, snatched off by some evil character."

He hadn't thought so. "Eton boys are well known at the Swan with Two Necks in London, one of the stops for the Emerald, because many of us take that coach to get to Eton when the school term begins."

In the capital, at the aforementioned inn, he had transferred to another coach that would go through Derby. What was one hundred and twenty-six miles of good road? A long but manageable distance, he believed, having traveled it several times in the comfort of the Darcy coach, accompanied by his tutor. By the next morning, though,

after fifteen tiresome hours of sitting squashed next to a tradesman who habitually jingled the coins on his fob, he had decided otherwise.

“Still, no one from school had captured me,” he pointed out. “I made it to my home country on my own, just as I had planned.”

“Fortune smiled upon you,” said I.

Not wanting any gossipers in the market-town of Derby to see him, he had set off immediately on foot, cross-country, impeded at times by herds of cows roaming the sweet-smelling clover-fields. Two miles later, he had hitched a ride on a tenant farmer’s cart and, after a few more miles, had at last alighted at the park that he proudly called home, with its mythic oaks of such beauty and magnitude, as old as his ancient family.

I stared at him in wonder. “You must have been sorely fatigued by then.”

Will replied, “It crossed my mind to rest, sitting against a tree, but I would have slept well into the night.”

Inside the park, he had espied a swift kingfisher, a beacon of courage, and pushed on, suddenly no longer weary. Up the carriage road he had climbed. When, finally, having gained the summit of the hill, he beheld Pemberley House, a golden-hued stone building on the opposite side of the valley, his heart became full. He told himself to stay away from the stables, the better to avoid the brooding master of the house.

“My father isn’t the same,” he lamented.

“You are referring to what happened two years ago?” I asked cautiously.

“Oh, yes,” he said forthrightly. “I remember that I was sent home from preparatory school, where I was a boarder. My mother cried often and took walks with her dog. She and my father did not get on well together. By chance, once, I even heard him say to her, ‘You have done me wrong,’ and he accused her of disloyalty. They didn’t speak to one another after that.” He cast his eyes down.

I urged him to continue, scarcely able to believe my ears. In my heart I still wanted to believe that Darcy and Lizzy were a perfect married couple, but a troubled doubt had crept into my mind.

“One morning soon after their argument”—Will wiped away a tear with the back of his hand—“my father spoke sharply at us for making too much noise. We children hid in the summer-house, very afraid, and did not come when called and sought. But we were found out and punished. The boys weren’t allowed any sweets for a week. Emilla Jane had to surrender her doll. I was forced to ‘muck out’ the stables, working alongside the stable-boys. Eventually I returned to school, and I was glad of it, to be away from home.”

“Your father must have been frightened when his children disappeared.”

Will didn’t answer.

“Well, his mood seems to have improved since then,” I suggested.

He shrugged. “At Easter, a few months ago, my mother claimed that a great change had come over him for having recently spent time with you and your family.”

Regardless, Will didn’t believe in it—this “great



change”—having seen otherwise in his father for one week during the Easter holidays. They had ridden together in silence, talked only briefly a few times after that, and merely shaken hands when Will departed for school with his tutor. Granted, his father had sent him away with a generous amount of pocket-money for school things, even though Will already received an ample allowance.

“My father never thought I would use it for another purpose—leaving school,” Will said, with a guilty look.

“I am glad, in the end, that you have done it,” I told him nevertheless.

So that explained how he had come to be here today. And, as he was crossing the old stone bridge that spanned the stream at the front of their house, he had hoped to find his mother alone. He had recalled from her letters that they had guests, the Fitzwilliams and Munros, that the colonel and Mrs. Fitzwilliam had gone to visit the Bingleys, their relations, that he hadn’t seen me, his second cousin Sofia-Elisabete, since he was a child in the days when we had run foot races until our sides nearly split.

“I had felt confident about my decision to come home,” he said, dispirited.

“You don’t seem so now,” I remarked.

He explained, “I had not reckoned that my little sister would discover me first, alarming my poor mother. When she looked upset, it shamed me of a sudden. My chance seemed gone to convince her I was right, to make her see my side of the matter, that I won’t and can’t put up with the oppression in school.”

I understood him. “Will, I think your mother might lis-

ten to you.” But I didn’t tell him that I suspected otherwise with respect to his father.

He sighed. “Regardless, the deed is done. I have run off from the place and refuse to go back.”

Anxiously I asked, “What would happen if you did return there?”

“I would get five cuts with a birch rod, or possibly ten with two birch rods, administered by Head Master Keate, a strict disciplinarian and a busy flogger,” answered he, doubly flinching. “We call him The Executioner.”

“What a cruel punishment system!” I exclaimed, angry about it.

“Cruel, yet necessary to maintain order,” interrupted a deep voice behind us.

I started round. “Cousin Darcy! You have—oh!—you have come home early.”

“I have already gathered from the startled faces of the servants inside that no one wished I had,” Darcy replied sourly.

“Good day, Father.” Will solemnly stood.

Darcy, so tall, glanced down at him. “My study, now, if you please,” was his clipped response.

“Yes, sir,” answered his son, respectfully.

Chin up, chest out, back straight, Will accompanied his father to the house. A Darcy man never showed fear. But I swear that I saw the poor boy gulp. Father and son, so strikingly similar in attitude, had the same quick gait, the same general comportment, and it led me to wonder how it would feel to reprimand a younger version of myself.

NOT TEN MINUTES had gone by when Lizzy rejoined me at the terrace. She seemed dismayed to find me sitting alone. When I explained how and why Will had left school, her motherly indignation rose at that “tribe of savage boys” who had bullied her son. And when I informed her next that Darcy, having returned early from fishing, had found Will here, conversing with me, she looked away, frustrated, at something far off in the natural landscape.

“Why is everyone *not* where they are supposed to be?” she muttered.

To this—I hoped—rhetorical question, I said nothing.

She went on. “I could have—should have—prepared him.”

Did she mean Will or Darcy, or perhaps both of them?

“Well, Sofia”—she gave me a concerned side-glance—“there is nothing for it but to await the outcome.” Lizzy seemed resigned to it.

Soon I found myself fidgeting. “I cannot help but worry for Will.”

“Yes,” was her firm reply. “When father and son are at odds, and feelings are wrought up to an angry pitch, the love between them, which is not often expressed, may cease to exist altogether in the son’s eyes.”

A disturbance could be heard at Pemberley House. A door banged. Then, louder, the door banged a second time. Lizzy winced. Behind us father and son were working up into a great row.

“Obey me at once!” demanded Darcy.

But Will was obdurate. “I shan’t go back, sir. And there’s an end on it.”

Darcy spluttered out, "I do not like your tone, young sir."

Will did not answer.

"This matter is far from over," his father informed him severely.

When I had heard from Darcy last month, he had written cheerfully, giving me the impression that all was well with his family. How could things suddenly have changed for the Darcys, the happiest of families? One minute there was harmony, everyone was in health, the days were easy. In the next minute came this ugly quarrel, a most unwelcome disruption. Up at the house, behind the sashed windows, where the children stood, their little frightened eyes observed a father and brother arguing.

Finding myself in the way of a family affair, I thought it best to return to the house. I had no sooner walked wide round the domestic dispute on the terrace, when I felt a need to glance back at Lizzy, perhaps to offer my support somehow. She wore an expression that struck me as utterly undefinable.

I thought about that look many times afterwards. While no single word exists in our language to signify a kind of dread mixed with anticipated disappointment, it had been written on her countenance.

And so I began to know that something was not quite right at Pemberley House.