

## A Pair of Pink Slippers

I hope you enjoy reading this quick story as much as I enjoyed writing it. This is just a lighthearted look at how Darcy and Elizabeth might have interacted during their first year of marriage. Please feel free to leave a comment!

### Part One

Darcy stretched lazily as he slowly awoke, absent-mindedly reaching out to his wife, Elizabeth, where she lay in bed next to him. It was early morning for him, around eight o'clock, his customary time for awakening, and the sun was shining brightly in through the open windows of his bedroom. His hand, however, discovered that his wife's place was empty, though a little residual warmth showed that she had not been gone long. Darcy was not disturbed. Elizabeth typically woke before he did each morning and, with her high level of energy, could not stand to wait for him before taking a long walk through the park, her first of several on a typical day.

He rolled over languidly instead and looked on the floor for the irrefutable proof that Elizabeth had come to his bed the night before- the pair of pink satin indoor slippers which she normally wore with her night ensemble. Darcy had come to love those slippers. On the nights when Darcy sought out Elizabeth's bed the slippers would be primly in their place in her own room, lined up next to her side of the bed, where she could put them on first thing in the morning. But on the nights when Elizabeth came to his bed, freely, unsummoned- ah, those were the sweetest moments of all in their young marriage. On the mornings after those encounters Darcy relished the sight of the pink slippers randomly arrayed in *his* room, a silent token of the bond they shared and the desire his wife felt for him. For some reason she never remembered to pick them back up before repairing to her room the next day. Darcy did not know that the location of Elizabeth's pink slippers each morning was the source of speculative mirth among his observant staff.

He shaved and dressed for the day quickly, with his valet's help, and in a trice he entered the sitting room where breakfast was laid out on the sideboard. His swift arrival meant that he had to eat by himself for several minutes before the sound of the front door opening announced Elizabeth's return. With a warm smile he welcomed her into the room and pulled out a chair for her before she sat down, noting how the glow in her fine eyes had been increased by the early exercise.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” he began, conversationally, as he sat down again. “I missed you when I woke up this morning.”

“You speak as though it is an unusual occurrence to awake alone,” she replied mildly as she looked back at him. “But I hardly ever sleep later than you.”

“It may not be unusual, but it is a sensation to which I have never grown accustomed. I always reach for you and find that you are not there.”

A playful smile appeared on her face. “We have only been married six months, and we did not marry until you were eight and twenty years old. How did you survive without me all that time?”

“I have no idea. My life was empty before you came into it. Waking up alone is a pointed reminder of the time before I knew you, and one that I would rather do without.”

“Are you saying that you would like it if I stayed with you until wake up each day?” Elizabeth asked, glancing aside to be sure the servants had left the room. They had.

“What would you say if I did make that request?” Darcy’s tone was serious, but his eyes had begun to twinkle.

“That would depend. Are you referring to *every* morning, or only the mornings after an evening spent in each other’s company?” She arched one eyebrow.

Darcy pretended to consider this for a moment. “At first I was referring, I believe, to the second circumstance you described; but the more I think about it, the more certain I am that I would enjoy your company *every* time I am in bed.” His smile broadened wickedly as he waited for her response.

“Then you are not as astute as I first thought you were, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy was enjoying the flirtatious banter more than he could express. “What have I said that lowers your opinion of my intelligence, Mrs. Darcy? Whatever it is, I must take care to reverse it immediately.”

“Why, it has apparently taken you six months to realize that you could have me in your bed as much as you want, simply by asking.” She smiled sweetly at him.

Darcy was glad that she had ensured their privacy before making such a provocative statement. “You have not answered the question, my dearest wife,” he reminded her. “What would you say if I were to ask you to remain in bed until I have risen each day?”

“I would answer that if my company is that important to you, instead of me staying in bed with you, you might try rising early with me!” She spread butter on the toast in her hand with an impudent smile, and Darcy knew he had been beaten. He could think of only one way to make his defeat a pleasant experience, and so he stood abruptly, preparing to move to his wife and show her exactly why he missed her every morning. But just then a light rap came on the door, and a moment later his steward ceremoniously bowed as he entered the room.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Darcy, but your tenants are here for their meeting with you.”

“Tenants?” Darcy echoed, as though he had never heard of such a thing before.

“The ones who asked to meet with you regarding improvements to their homes.”

“I do not recall agreeing to such a meeting.” Darcy frowned as he searched his memory.

“They sent you a message last week asking to meet with you at half nine this morning. They have already been waiting for some time.”

“Indeed, they did,” Elizabeth chimed in. “It was just after we returned from taking the phaeton up to Curbar Edge and back. You told them you would be happy to meet with them.”

“I do not need you to remind me,” Darcy said, irritated at the interruption. “I can keep track of my own calendar.” He had planned to meet with the local magistrate later this morning regarding some poaching occurring on the

estate, but now that meeting might have to be delayed. “Wheeler, show them into my office and tell them I will be with them momentarily.” If only Elizabeth had not taken so long to return from her walk! He could have eaten and been halfway through the meeting with his tenants by now.

“If I remember correctly, they were going to ask you about having their roofs repaired, or possibly even replaced. They seemed rather agitated. I hope you are able to reach a speedy resolution with them. Would it help if I had Mrs. Reynolds send in a tray of breakfast items?”

Darcy glowered. “It would only slow the process down. I can handle my own business affairs, Elizabeth.”

“Forgive me for trying to be of assistance, then,” Elizabeth replied coolly. “I will trouble you no more.” She swept out of the room before he could stop her, and Darcy silently cursed at himself. He would have to find her and apologize for his rudeness before he left for the magistrate. But first he had to deal with his tenants.

## Part Two

Darcy did not see Elizabeth again until late afternoon, when he returned from his meeting with the magistrate. His mood was no better than it had been in the morning. The meeting with his tenants had taken longer than anticipated, and then he had a lengthy discussion with the magistrate in Lambton. On the way home his horse had thrown a shoe. The resulting visit to the blacksmith had taken an hour and a half, which had given him plenty of time to reflect on his churlish behavior in the morning and wish he had behaved differently. Now he faced his wife with a mixture of embarrassment and trepidation.

He stopped to admire the pretty picture she made as she sat curled up in the window seat overlooking the lawn, reading a letter. Undoubtedly the letter was from her sister Jane, for she wore the look of amused affection he admired so much, the one he had only ever seen directed towards Jane and himself. Although Darcy had now referred to himself as a happily married man for six months, there was a part of him that could not quite believe in the reality of the situation. He had loved Elizabeth distantly and hopelessly for so many months that having her here with him, every day, felt at least half a dream. His soul tip-toed before her, dreading lest he do or say anything to break the magic spell which bound her to him.

Hearing his footsteps she looked up at him, and the smile disappeared.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy.”

Now he knew he was in trouble. His wife only called him Mr. Darcy when she was angry or teasing, and her severe look said she was definitely not teasing right now. “Elizabeth.” He nodded in greeting, then sat down awkwardly in a chair across from her. Elizabeth turned back to her letter and ignored him, while he tried to think what to say first. He gulped and spoke more abruptly than he intended.

“I looked for you before I left to see the magistrate, but you were not in the house.” To his dismay, he sounded almost accusatory. “Not that you were required to be in the house, of course,” he added hastily. Too late, he realized his error. Now he sounded condescending *and* accusatory. “I mean to say, I would have liked to see you before I left, so that I could apologize properly,” he finished in a rush. Blast it all, why did he always have to be so tongue tied in front of the one woman he truly wanted to impress?

“To apologize?” Elizabeth’s voice was still cool, and she did not look away from the letter she held in her hand.

“Yes, to apologize. I had no reason to speak to you the way I did this morning when the tenants were waiting for me. I was distracted and then cross at my forgetfulness, and I snapped at you. I am truly sorry.” Finally, he had managed to string words together coherently.

“Distracted,” Elizabeth repeated, one eyebrow rising skeptically.

“Yes, very distracted.”

“And what was the source of this distraction?” The corners of her mouth turned up slightly as she finally turned to face him, and her dark eyes sparkled. “What made you so absent-minded that you would forget a meeting with your tenants?”

At the sight of those eyes, Darcy melted, and he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind: “Your slippers.”

“My slippers?” Elizabeth swung her legs down gracefully from the window seat in order to face him fully. “Mr. Darcy, do you always speak so cryptically when you are apologizing?”

“With you, yes.” He shook his head in frustration. “That is to say, I know what I wish to say, but with you I always say it wrong. You undo me every time you look at me, and what I want to say goes away. All my prepared speeches just—disappear. But I know you meant well this morning, and I should not have spoken to you the way I did. I have regretted it all day, and all I wanted to do was come home to you, but then the meeting with the magistrate went longer than I planned, and the horse threw his shoe.”

“Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth was openly laughing at him now. “I pray you stop. You are babbling. All you had to say was that you were sorry.”

It was that easy? “Elizabeth, I am sorry.”

“And I am sorry too.”

“For what?”

The look in her eyes softened. “I should not have jumped into your conversation with Mr. Wheeler the way I did. You are correct, you do not need my help in managing your calendar or your business affairs. But you might have said so with a little more discretion,” she finished, with the arch look he loved.

Was this a test? “I may not *need* your help, but I *do* appreciate it. I appreciate anything you do for me, and I will not rebuke you for your assistance ever again.” He smiled broadly at her.

“Then let us forgive and forget.” Elizabeth smiled back, content. “I promise not to interfere in your business affairs ever again if you promise not to take offense if I do.”

“We have a deal, and we should shake hands on it.” Darcy took her hand in his as they both stood, standing close together, facing each other.

“I think we can find a better way than *that* to seal our bargain,” said Elizabeth, playfully, and Darcy moved his face towards hers. He had had the same thought and intended to follow through on it at once. But a footstep in the hallway outside made them abruptly move away from each other, and then Mrs. Reynolds stepped into the room. She looked at them apologetically.

“If you will, Mrs. Darcy, there is a large delivery come for you, from London. Where should I put it?”

Darcy was surprised to say the least. He knew of no items ordered from town recently, and ordinarily orders from town would be placed through his steward.

“You may put the items in the room next to mine, across from Georgiana’s,” Elizabeth answered with a deep blush, which Darcy observed curiously. She did not look at him.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The housekeeper turned to leave, but Darcy stopped her.

“A large delivery, you say, Mrs. Reynolds? What have we ordered from town recently?” Perhaps Elizabeth had ordered a surprise of some sort for him. He smiled in anticipation.

“I have the bill of lading here, sir.” She gave it to him and then left while Darcy looked incredulously at the paper in his hand. It was from a draper’s, and indicated that there were enough textiles being delivered to outfit a small regiment. He looked at Elizabeth in confusion, but she was looking steadily away.

“Elizabeth, why did you order all this cloth without speaking to me?”

“I was not aware that I needed to have you approve my orders from town, sir.”

“Ordinarily you would not, but this is not a customary order. There is both satin and silk here, in large amounts, besides sundry other items. What is it for?”

Elizabeth looked reluctant to answer. “I may not tell you yet.”

“What?” Darcy looked at his wife in amazement. “Why would you not tell me about something like this?”

Elizabeth made no answer. He was not angry, not yet, but his patience was beginning to fray. “If you will not tell me what this is for, then you should at least tell me how much it is going to cost.”

Elizabeth squared her shoulders and told him. He blanched. Trying to control his emotions, he ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Are you running out of new gowns already? That is more than two month’s worth of your pin money!”

“It is not for gowns! And I will pay it all back from my pin money, if it pleases you.”

He exhaled sharply, taking a moment to gentle his voice before he spoke. He took her hands in his. “The money does not concern me. I am a wealthy man, and if there is something you need you should order it as you wish. But this secrecy is not like you.”

“It is not a secret, simply something I did not wish to share yet.”

“That sounds like a secret to me,” he answered grimly. “Are you making gifts for one of your sisters?” He looked down at the list again. “For *all* of them?” It was the only solution which made sense in his mind.

Elizabeth looked him straight in the eye. “Do you not trust me, Fitzwilliam?”

“Implicitly; but a bill this large from the draper’s would not go unnoticed. Explanations must be made.” He waited, but Elizabeth pulled her hands from his and walked a little ways away, looking out the window at nothing in particular. “Elizabeth, if I were to suddenly spend a large amount of money on an unexpected item with no explanation, would you not want an answer from me?”

“That is not the same at all!” She whirled to face him. “You are the man, and as such you have complete control over every expenditure. You need answer to nobody. If you were to spend a large sum in a manner such as you describe, I

would not even know about it! But we women may not spend a guinea without our husband's approval. Society and the law are very hard on us."

He saw through her ruse immediately, and felt a deep level of hurt. "You are deflecting the question, madam, and for that purpose any subject will serve. I find it incredible that you refuse to share this with me." He waited, but Elizabeth merely clenched her fists and turned away again. "Very well, if you are determined on this course, I will just have to wait to discover on my own what is at the bottom of all this. You should probably go upstairs to receive your delivery. I am going to my study to work there until dinner."

He moved resolutely towards the doorway, but to reach it he had to walk past Elizabeth's back, stiff with indignation. He paused, waiting to see if she would turn to face him again, but she did not. If Darcy had reached out gently to her at that moment and brought her into his arms, soothing her with comforting words, she would have been his; but he did not. Instead he angrily walked away. He knew he would not go to her bed tonight, and he was fairly certain that in the morning there would be no pink slippers in his own room.

### Part Three

A state of armed neutrality now ruled Pemberley.

At dinner on the day of the argument, neither Darcy nor Elizabeth faltered in their frosty politeness to each other. They passed food items back and forth with an enforced formality, accompanied by distant half-smiles that started at the lips and went no further. Conversation was brief and concise. Was the room suddenly stone-cold, or was it only Darcy's imagination that made the temperature match what he saw in Elizabeth's eyes when she looked across the table at him? It was well that Georgiana was away visiting her cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and his mother, or she would surely have noticed and asked about the wary distance her brother and his wife were keeping between them.

Darcy retreated to his study again after dinner, hoping that Elizabeth might follow him; but by bedtime *he* was the one wavering, debating taking the steps across his room to Elizabeth's door and knocking. Pride froze him in lonely place. He had already apologized once that day and after all, he was not totally in the wrong; his question was not unreasonable, given the amount of money involved. Perhaps he could have waited a little longer before marching out of

the room, but didn't his wife have any responsibility here? Married couples did not keep secrets from each other, did they? At least not *happily* married couples. Elizabeth could have simply answered his question if she had wanted to heal the breach, or given him a good reason why she could not. Simply saying she wasn't ready to share it yet wasn't enough; *why* wasn't she ready? There was no solution which satisfied him on this point.

Besides, she had offended him with her little speech about men controlling women. It was a point of pride with him that he had diligently attended to the character flaws his wife had pointed out to him before they became engaged, and he resented having one of them thrown back in his face again. He had gone to great lengths to avoid being overbearing or presumptuous with his wife or anyone else.

After an uneasy, restless night Darcy decided pride made a most unwelcome bedmate. As he waited for Elizabeth to join him at the breakfast table he rehearsed the words he would say: *Elizabeth, I will forget your foolishness if you will forgive mine. Order more cloth if you want. Order all the silk in every warehouse in town!* Then he would sweep her into his arms and all would be forgiven. But Elizabeth did not even bother to come to breakfast. After waiting the better part of an hour he went out for the day without leaving word for her.

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Elizabeth's maid reported conspiratorially to the head cook.  
"The slippers were in the mistress' own room this morning, and her bed was only mussed on one side."

Cook nodded knowingly. "She stayed out walking yesterday till almost dark, and the master was in a temper last night for dinner, that's for sure. He sent the mutton back to re-do three times, when there weren't nothing wrong with it the first time! They must have had a row yesterday, and they haven't made up yet."

"The mistress didn't even come to breakfast! I say she's avoiding him."

"And I say there's more keeping her from breakfast than just the master," Cook responded shrewdly, but she did not elaborate. If madam's maid, young and unmarried, could not see what was as plain as day to those who were more

knowledgeable, she was not going to elaborate. She would find out in good time, just like everyone else in the house.

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By mid-afternoon Darcy knew he should have stayed home. He had ridden long and hard through the fields surrounding Pemberley on the flimsy excuse of checking crops while he tested a new saddle, but by half three all he could show for his efforts was a spasm in his back. The new saddle was undoubtedly the worst he had ever used. His back was in pain and his knees were sore from trying to balance himself on the animal, who resented the poorly-fitting saddle even more than he did. When he finally returned to the stable and dismounted, handing off the reins to the nearest groom, the mare turned her head and fixed him with a resentful glare. Darcy glared back. He turned on one heel and left the stable.

*Nobody has been more accommodating with his wife than I, he thought as he marched back towards the house. I have never asked for an accounting of my wife's pin money, as some men do, and I make no objection when Elizabeth sends gifts to her family, not even to that worthless sister and her rake of a husband! I have even learned to tolerate being called Wickham's brother-in-law! Although, for Elizabeth's sake I would have learned to tolerate much more!*

His steps faltered as his own thoughts struck him forcibly. *Yes, for her sake I would have tolerated a great deal more.* He stopped in his tracks as a feeling of shame overwhelmed him. Elizabeth had done nothing to deserve such resentment and anger in his mind. He was behaving like a spoiled child instead of the master of Pemberley, landlord to dozens of families, benevolent employer to dozens more servants under his own roof, and fortunate husband to the most lively, intelligent, and handsomest woman in England. He would go into the house, take a few minutes to change his clothes, and get himself into a proper frame of mind. After that he would find his wife wherever she was, apologize profusely, and beg her forgiveness. Hopefully she would forgive him at once and they could both forget that he had ever been so foolish about something as trivial as his wife's selection of textiles.

Resolved, Darcy had a new energy. He took two steps at a time up the back staircase and went straight into his room. He changed into a new jacket and

tidied his hair, then made for the front stairs, encountering Mrs. Reynolds as she came up them with a bundle of linens in her arms.

“Do you know where Mrs. Darcy is?” he asked her.

“In the garden, sir,” she answered, pulling up short as he swept by.

“I thank you.”

“But sir, you should know that—“ He passed her and was out of hearing before whatever she wanted him to know had reached his ears. A minute later he was in the garden.

The garden had large hedges interrupting the line of sight, making it impossible for one person to see another until, sometimes, they literally ran into each other. Darcy stopped and listened for a moment, trying to determine exactly where his wife was. A musical sound of feminine laughter came to him from somewhere on his right, and he moved that way with alacrity, grabbing a handful of yellow flowers as he went. Rue! The perfect flower for the message he wanted to convey. Hopefully Elizabeth would not throw them back in his face.



A moment later he nearly collided with Elizabeth, coming around a corner with her hands full of some bright blooms of her own.

“Elizabeth!”

“Fitzwilliam!”

They awkwardly stared at each other for a moment, her eyes wide and surprised as they looked at him, and then both tried to speak at once.

“I am sorry, Elizabeth—“

“I am sorry. But before I say anything else—“

“I am a blundering idiot—“

“You should know that—“

“It was all my fault. I had no right to be so harsh with you.”

“We have a visitor.”

“Order as much silk and satin as you want, it matters not to me.”

“I said we have a visitor!”

“Nothing is worth being separated from you like this!”

“For heaven’s sake, *please* keep your voice down!”

Her last words, uttered in a fierce near-whisper, finally penetrated his consciousness. “A visitor? Who is visiting?”

“Miss Bingley is here,” Elizabeth finished rather lamely, looking at him apologetically, as that lady rounded the corner behind Elizabeth, stopping just before she ran into the couple, who were still standing close together and staring at each other.

“Mr. Darcy!” she exclaimed in honeyed tones. “I am astonished to see you here! What a delightful and unexpected pleasure! Mrs. Darcy said that you were out all day.”

Darcy glanced at Miss Bingley blankly, then looked back at Elizabeth. “I was kept away for most of the morning and afternoon. Estate matters, you know. But I brought a gift.”

He thrust his small handful of yellow flowers towards his wife, whose face softened as she took in the sight. She looked up at him with a shy smile.

“I was just collecting my own arrangement of flowers to put on the table tonight. Perhaps we might trade.”

Darcy glanced at the flowers in her hands—Sweet Williams. Gravely he exchanged flowers with her, allowing his fingers to linger on hers longer than strictly necessary. “I hope you are partial to rue,” he said, knowing she would understand the hidden message—rue for regret. “It seems I have grown quite a collection of it lately.”

“Rue does indeed please me,” she responded solemnly, though her eyes were beginning to dance. “But you can see the flower I love most.”



Miss Bingley gave a dismissive sniff. “Such dirty, smelly little flowers, Sweet Williams! I wonder that you even bother to grow them. They are not fashionable at all.”

“But they are my favorite,” Elizabeth said demurely, “and they go well with rue.”

“If I could,” said Darcy, a small smile beginning to play on his own lips, “I would grow an entire garden of rue. I have a feeling I could use it in many settings.”

“And I would use Sweet Williams in all of mine.” She smiled beguilingly up at him.

“Oh! If you were to plant a garden with nothing but rue!” Miss Bingley exclaimed, still oblivious to the drama before her. “Nobody could doubt that rue belongs at Pemberley! It is as natural to the atmosphere here as the air itself. But nobody cares for Sweet Williams anymore.”

“Except for my wife,” Darcy answered with a pointed look, and Miss Bingley had the grace to flush. Darcy finally thought to ask the obvious question: “What brings you to Pemberley, Miss Bingley? Is your brother with you?”

“I was passing through Lambton with Mr. and Mrs. Hurst on our way to Scarborough, and I simply had to stop and call on dear Miss Georgiana. I’ve barely seen her since your wedding six months ago.”

“But Miss Georgiana is away,” Darcy pointed out.

“So your wife said. But it is always exceedingly difficult to leave Pemberley once I am here,” Miss Bingley responded, with a sickly smile just for him.

Elizabeth made a sound that might have been a strangled laugh.

“Unfortunately, Miss Bingley indicated she cannot stay long. In fact she was just about to leave.”

Darcy gave Miss Bingley his thinnest smile. “I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours. We will not detain you another minute.”

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In a very short time Miss Bingley was saying her goodbyes on the front steps of Pemberley. She and Elizabeth exchanged all the polite lies customarily uttered by two women who cordially detest each other, and then she climbed into her carriage and drove away. The Darcys turned and went back through the front door of Pemberley into the entryway. As soon as the door closed behind them, Darcy was surprised to receive a fervent embrace from his wife.

“I am so glad she is gone!” Elizabeth said, kissing him earnestly. “I didn’t see how I could stand one more minute away from you!”

“Elizabeth—“ Darcy stepped back, delighted, confused. He looked around the wide hall, but the servants had conveniently melted away. “Come.” He took her hand and led her into the library, shutting the door behind them before taking his wife in his arms.

“I am so sorry, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he murmured, returning her kisses eagerly. “Forgive me for being so obstinate. I had no right to question your purchases the way I did.”

“You had every right,” Elizabeth answered, when she could breathe again. “Of course you wanted to know what it was all for. It was a great deal of money.”

“When you accused me of being like those other men, the ones who try to dominate their wives by controlling their money, I became unreasonably angry.”

“But I did not say you were like them!”

“I know, but that was how it felt at the time. I never want to be accused of being such a man.”

“And you are *not*,” Elizabeth assured him emphatically. “You are the most generous man I know, but when you asked if it was all for my sisters, it sounded like you might resent what my family has cost you already. I detest being accused of mercenary motives. I never wanted to marry you—or any man—for any reason other than love.”

“You did marry for love,” Darcy comforted her, holding her close. “The deepest and most abiding love in the world.”

“I am afraid I was not quite rational either, at the time.”

“You never need be afraid that I will accuse you of marrying me for my wealth,” Darcy told her, “not after turning me down at Hunsford.” He chuckled at the sudden expression on her face.

“William! Do not ever mention Hunsford to me again!” she exclaimed, burying her head on his shoulder.

“Agreed, as long as you promise to forget what I did for your family. It was the least I could do, and it is never to be spoken of from this day forward.”

“Never!” Elizabeth agreed, and they went back to passionate kissing.

Darcy finally broke away. “Come.” He held out his hand to her. “Let us move this upstairs.”

“Not until I tell you something.”

Darcy paused, looking at her bemusedly.

“William, I am sorry I did not come to breakfast.”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. We were both angry, but it is over now.”

“I was not angry. I wanted to speak to you at breakfast but . . . “ she blushed deeply. “William, I am with child. That is why I did not eat with you this morning. I couldn’t abide even the thought of food.”

“Elizabeth!” Darcy pulled away and stared at her. “You are with child?”

“I conscientiously believe so. The cloth I ordered was for setting up the nursery.”

Darcy was stunned. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because I was being selfish. I wanted it to be a surprise—my own surprise, announced in my own way. I had it all planned out in my mind—how I would have all the blankets and curtains sewn and arranged in the bedroom just so, and then I would lead you into the room and tell you all about it.”

“But what made you change your mind?”

“Last night,” Elizabeth said, tears beginning to swim in her eyes. “I realized that it was more important to share the news with you, to let you be a part of all the excitement I am feeling, rather than to store it all up for some grand spectacle. It would not be right to deprive you of the joy we could share for the next few weeks, while the nursery is being assembled, merely for the sake of making a memorable announcement.”

“Elizabeth,” Darcy said, deeply moved. He pulled her back to him and held her more tenderly than ever. “However you choose to share this news with me is perfectly acceptable. You needn’t weep over it.”

“I know, but still.” She relaxed into his embrace, then giggled slightly. “Expectant women are said to be rather emotional at times.”

“Ah.” Darcy, who had never had much experience with expectant women, filed away that piece of information. “In that case, let us retire early tonight. Let us retire *right now*.”

“Gladly.” Elizabeth wiped away her tears and the happy couple moved out of the room together, back to his chambers, where they disappeared for quite some time.

Outside the open library window, money was changing hands.

“Dinner’ll be sent up to their room tonight,” the head gardener predicted sagely to the under groom, handing over several pieces of silver. “If they even remember to eat!”

“We won’t see hide nor hair of either of them until tomorrow,” the groom countered with a grin, adding his own piece to the pile.

“And those pink slippers won’t leave his room for a week!” cried Mary, the maid, gleefully.

And they were all absolutely correct.

