



*Two More Days
at Netherfield*

AN EPILOGUE

HEATHER MOLL

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To all of my encouraging readers

“Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul.” – Henry Ward Beecher

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Epilogue

FEBRUARY 2, 1814: LONDON

I may feel it to be my duty, but it is certainly not my wish to be walking along the Thames on this frigid day.

However, no man who valued his honour could allow a task to go unfinished, and Darcy was resolved to see to this matter himself. He stifled a sigh, bending and flexing his fingers in gloves that were not up to their task, and pressed on down the pier.

He made his way, his head bent against the cold wind, toward the small outbuilding that served as the pier office for the London firm F & C.F. Mangles. He looked only once towards the water where an aging prison hulk was moored along the river bank, a massive decommissioned navy vessel used to house prisoners awaiting transportation.

Private merchant ships were used to convey these convicts across the world, but there were more prisoners to be transported than berths available. Between the limited space and the possibility of sailing only at certain times of the year, it was not uncommon for a prisoner to serve their entire sentence on one of these floating prisons. Above the blustery wind, Darcy could just hear the convicts at hard labour on the deck.

Had this part of the Thames not been frozen, many other prisoners would have been at work dredging it. Although not as bad as they once were, conditions aboard the prison hulk were still miserable and, even at this distance, Darcy could tell that the standards of hygiene were poor.

He gratefully entered the office of the firm that owned the *Surrey*, a square-rigged transport ship. Darcy shivered; he did so hate the cold, and it was scarcely any warmer within than it was on the pier. The secretary behind a small desk rose to greet him.

“You are Mr Darcy, I presume? The master is not here, but he asked me to be of use to you.”

“I simply wish to know for absolutely certain if a certain convict will be taken aboard the *Surrey* today, and if Captain Patterson will be so good as to write to me to inform me if that man survives the voyage.”

“I cannot recommend that you go down to the ship, sir. However, if you would recognise the prisoner in question, I think you will be able to watch from the docks as they embark.”

Darcy allowed the man to lead him back into the cold where they took a short carriage ride farther down the river—where it was not frozen—to another pier where he could look down the shipyard and see a mass of humanity trudging towards the *Surrey*.

“May I ask how many convicts will board?” Darcy had to raise his voice to be heard over the piercing wind.

“This voyage will carry a full load, sir: 200.” The secretary consulted a list in his hand. “One-hundred and seventeen life sentences, but an average sentence of ten years. Of course, two out of every ten convicts die on a voyage. It might be more this time.”

“Why do you assume that?”

“The ship’s surgeon often does his job well, but we do not have one for this voyage.”

Darcy crushed the pleasure that crept into his heart when he heard this. *Elizabeth would not think well of me if she knew how gratifying I found that news.* The man who had wronged his sister was guilty of desertion and could be punished for *that*; it was all the satisfaction he had the right to lay claim to.

He observed the line of prisoners that paraded past two men standing and an assistant seated at a desk who shuffled papers back and forth. This continued until each prisoner was accounted for, and finally marched up the gangplank to board the *Surrey*. All of the convicts were in shackles and chains.

Despite the bitter temperature, he remained an hour, until very nearly the last the man was aboard. Darcy then said, “I have now seen all that I need. I would be obliged if you would remind your master to write to me of the matter we discussed once his ship arrives in Sydney.”

He turned from the massive vessel and did not once look back.



Darcy finally arrived in his warm house in Berkeley Square, handed his walking stick and layers of outer clothes to the butler, and was about to climb the stairs to seek out his wife when he heard her lilting voice from the library.

“Yes, this is Papa’s desk. And that is Mamma’s chair. And we shall need a place for you, will not we? You shall want to read all the books, too. Did you hear Papa’s voice? Is Papa home?”

He entered to see his beloved wife on the floor and his son performing his latest accomplishment: sitting upright, alone, for a long moment before tipping over to the side. He landed on one of the many pillows Elizabeth had crowded around him. The little boy’s giggles filled the room and filled Darcy’s heart.

“Is this child to take over every room of my house?” he asked, smiling.

His wife raised an eyebrow, which was enough to inform Darcy that no one believed him when he pretended to complain about his son’s presence outside of his nursery. Elizabeth swept the boy into her arms and kissed his head. “We needed something new to read. Master Fitzwilliam has excellent taste in literature.”

Darcy had no doubt as to his son’s intelligence, but the young master was currently looking at him over Elizabeth’s shoulder whilst he gathered the fabric of her day dress into his mouth. “So long as he does not gnaw on the books, you may read to him whatever you like.” He held out his hands, “Come to Papa!”

Elizabeth handed him over, and his son began to babble. Over the cheerful sound, she asked him gently, “Was your business successful?”

Darcy tossed his laughing son into the air and caught him three or four times before answering. He kept his attention on the boy and a smile on his face, but his voice was low. “He is on board.”

“Did it bring you any satisfaction? I still do not comprehend why you needed to go to the docks yourself. You hate the cold, and the weather is severe today. It could have all been managed by letter.”

Darcy sighed, and brought his son back into his arms, holding him close. The sight of Wickham—manacled—despairingly tramping up the gangplank had been a gratifying one. He was not proud of his uncharitable thoughts, but he could not deny what he had felt.

“I do not desire him to come to harm, you know that I do not, but I cannot pretend that I am not relieved to know that Mr Wickham will be sentenced to hard labour on the other side of the world for seven years.”

“I comprehend your feelings, yet I could never again tolerate the sight of that man even if I was watching him board a ship in chains. Aside from what he did to drive us apart, he preyed on Georgiana’s loneliness.”

Darcy could still recall the fury he felt when he learned Wickham had crudely kissed Elizabeth when she was still Miss Bennet. That was an ember compared to the scorching rage he experienced when Georgiana ultimately confessed to him the extent of the Ramsgate affair after they learnt of Wickham’s sentence for deserting the militia. He often could not think on it without a shudder of revulsion.

Maintaining the appearance of composure in front of Georgiana would have been too difficult had I not known that Wickham would be transported. Rather than answer, Darcy gazed fondly at his son.

“Fitzwilliam...why did you go there today?”

His son reached for his watch chain, and when Darcy handed it to him, he grabbed Elizabeth’s eye miniature and began to shake it and the chain energetically. “After what he did to you to try to keep us apart, for what he coerced Georgiana into thinking she must do...” Darcy exhaled and shook his head. “My dear, I simply had to see for myself that he was truly gone.”

Elizabeth ran her hand through the curls on their son’s head before replying. “Georgiana’s self-blame was the worst result of it all, I feel. She thought no one could ever love or respect her again. The tragedy is that she believed the acts Wickham manipulated her into performing was what love is.”

“Where is Georgiana?” Darcy had to raise his voice over his son’s gleeful shrieks and the rattling chain.

She smiled, clearly welcoming the change of subject. “She has gone to Jane’s. Kitty arrived in town this week to prepare for her wedding, and she wanted to call on her. Bingley is to take them all to the Frost Fair. Georgiana wanted to go and I think she knew her brother was not about to spend the afternoon in the cold.”

“Did you not offer to—”

“Before you ask, I will say that she simply told me that she was going out. I took it as a sign of her confidence that she felt that she could call on ‘my sisters’ without me. Her words, not mine,” she added, with a smile, when Darcy looked at her. “She likes Kitty and Jane very much.”

“She has not sought you out to comfort her for any painful memories in some time.”

Elizabeth plucked her son from Darcy’s arms when the boy attempted to chew on her eye miniature. “No, she has not. Since we have been speaking about Kitty’s pending nuptials, I know that Georgiana is no longer horrified by the idea of marrying someday. I venture to hope that she feels that she is worthy of an admirable gentleman’s love and respect.”

“She would not have recovered from what happened at Ramsgate if not for you, dearest Elizabeth.”

“I was simply always ready to listen, and then forget selectively. My excellent ability of forgetfulness, and to see her as Georgiana Darcy rather than only a victim, was what she needed.”

Elizabeth shifted the baby to her other shoulder and Darcy kissed her affectionately. It was a short-lived gesture that was interrupted by the plaintive complaints of a little boy who felt neglected.



JULY 14, 1814 PEMBERLEY

Colonel Fitzwilliam, as consequence of his connections and his rank, had obtained a month’s leave of absence, and chose to give his time to his family at Pemberley. Although he insisted on spoiling his son with too much attention and sweet things, Darcy was delighted that his cousin at last had the opportunity to cultivate an acquaintance with his wife, and Elizabeth

was scarcely less eager to befriend him. Elizabeth was charming, and his cousin was an agreeable man, and hence the two conversed with much spirit and flow.

Darcy was surprised, therefore, a week into Fitzwilliam's furlough, to notice his cousin withdraw from his wife. The cousins were enjoying their port after dinner before they rejoined Elizabeth and Georgiana when Darcy spoke his mind.

"You have not seemed yourself these last days. I can scarcely believe it possible, but has my wife done something to offend you?"

Fitzwilliam looked up from his glass in genuine shock. "No!"

"I had thought you and Elizabeth had become friends. She said to me the day after you arrived, 'Colonel Fitzwilliam's manners are much to be admired. In person and address, he is most truly the gentleman.' She then drew a comparison between you and your brother Milton. Suffice to say, she likes you more."

"Mrs Darcy is an intelligent woman."

"Yet you no longer talk with her if you can help it."

Fitzwilliam lifted his glass to his lips, hesitated, then set it back on the table. "Has Mrs Darcy remarked upon my behaviour?"

"No, but she invited you to call her Lizzy, and you choose not to. This alone tells me you wish to maintain a distance from her."

He sighed softly. "I am flattered your wife thinks highly of me."

Darcy was angry when his cousin did explain himself. "You previously sought her company, but it is clear that your opinion of her has changed. Again and again, it is the same: you rebuff her attempts to know you better. I have seen you be pleasant to the most ridiculous simpletons, but now you cannot be courteous to my wife!"

"I feel guilty!"

Darcy stared in silence at this outburst.

His cousin shifted in his seat. "I feel guilty, Darcy. Mrs Darcy has an enchanting liveliness. She has a notable power of observation as well as kindness. And it is obvious she returns your and Georgiana's affections." He took a long swallow. "What I have learned over the past days is that Mrs Darcy is, without a doubt, perfect for you."

“Then I fail to comprehend why—”

“*I am the one who encouraged you to forget her. I am the one who encouraged you to compromise your principles when you thought you had lost her. As I have come to know Mrs Darcy, I realise what I nearly cost you by urging you to lay with some courtesan. You might never have married Mrs Darcy had you listened to my awful advice.*”

“I do not hold you accountable for my actions.”

“I still feel guilty for my part in persuading you to stay away from a woman who I now realise held greater value than an infatuation.”

“Elizabeth and I blame no one but ourselves for our misunderstandings—no one aside from Caroline Bingley and George Wickham.”

“I gave you terrible advice. I was ignorant of Mrs Darcy’s character, of your attachment to her, of her attachment to you. My best intentions aside, I do not know of another time when I have been so wrong in my counsel to anyone. I was no better than Lady Catherine!”

“I would not go so far as that.”

“I would.” Fitzwilliam slumped in his chair. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“There is nothing for me to forgive.”

“If only I had seen you and Mrs Darcy together before I suggested you find yourself a mistress.” He paused to fiddle with his empty glass. “Will Mrs Darcy pardon me if I behave more cordially towards her?”

“It is not in her nature to be spiteful. If you call her Lizzy and are as engaging as you were before, I see no reason for you not to be friends.”

“So long as she does not exclude me from Pemberley. There is nearly no other place I would rather be.”

“Elizabeth and I will always welcome you here.”

“I shall likely not see your family before the new year. Shall you be in town if I am granted leave again?”

“Briefly. My better half is not passionately fond of town. Instead of spending only half my time in the country as I did when I was a bachelor, I pass more of the year at Pemberley.”

“Better half?” Fitzwilliam barked a laugh. “Before I arrived, I was afraid you would oppress me by your felicity and love for your wife. You mostly call her Elizabeth without any angelic embellishments, for which I respect and wish you happy.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “Your teasing tone reminds me of my wife’s.”

“I admire her sense of humour.”

“She laughs at me very much.”

“You thrive on it.”



JANUARY 5, 1815: PEMBERLEY

“Why was your cousin laughing earlier when I addressed you as ‘Fitzwilliam?’” Elizabeth looked up from writing her letter while they shared a quiet moment alone. “He has heard me address you that way a hundred times before.”

Darcy shrugged his shoulders and set down his teacup. “He had been mocking me before you entered the billiards room. He was attempting to insult me for calling you my dearest and loveliest even after three years of marriage. When you came in and addressed me without any endearments, he felt you proved his point: he thinks me uxorious.”

“Would you say that you are not?” Elizabeth said archly. She stood and came nearer, resting her hands on his shoulders.

“Certainly not.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her into his lap. She gave a cry of surprise, but was grinning widely. “There is nothing at all excessive about my affection for you.”

Elizabeth’s lively, dark eyes were smouldering when he kissed her. She ran her tongue slowly between his lips, coaxing them apart. When they did, his tongue plunged into her mouth, settling into a long, passionate kiss. Elizabeth moaned into his lips, raking her nails through his hair. He was joyful at still being able to thrill her after three years of marriage. It was some time before he tore his mouth from hers, and the sound of their ragged breathing filled the silence of the room.

Darcy brushed his lips against the tender skin just below her ear before she moved from his lap, needlessly touching her hair and still smiling as she resumed her seat.

“What were we speaking of? Your cousin. Your cousin is desirous of your happiness, I think.” His wife hesitated, and then said, “He does not appear to be as attracted by his sister-in-law Mary as he once was. I wonder if he might marry someday?”

Darcy could make no answer, as a small mass of energy threw open the door, hurtled across his wife’s dressing room, leapt into his lap, and scrambled into his arms.

“Is this where you are supposed to be, my boy?” he asked smilingly.

“No, Papa!” Presumably, the young master found this diverting, given the shriek of laughter that followed this declaration.

“He must get this behaviour from you, Elizabeth. I am certain that I never escaped my nursery as a child.”

“Mrs Reynolds tells me otherwise.” She laughed, and then her expression sobered. “Fitzwilliam, our son is a year and one-half old now. Jane and Charles will have a third child this spring and we have been married nearly exactly as long. Lydia just had a second, and Kitty will have her first child any day and she has not been wed a year. My mother had five children in seven years.”

Darcy had been holding his son in his lap, pointing to various objects and smiling appropriately as the boy proudly identified them. “And?”

“And...you would not be disappointed if...what if he is our only child?”

He looked at her fondly. “There are twelve years between the future Lady Tate and myself. It is certainly not a hopeless case.” The nurse then entered, with breathless apologies, and scooped up her charge, who went willingly only after Elizabeth promised to read to him if he was back in his nursery.

When they were gone, Darcy stood and said, as he planted a kiss on the crown of her head, “But no, I would not be disappointed were he our only child.” He then bent to speak in a low voice into her ear. “Although, it will not be from want of trying.”

A servant then entered to present Darcy with a letter, and interrupted any possibility of resuming their romantic interlude. Darcy opened it, immediately noting that it had been written the previous summer. He read the short missive silently while his wife continued.

“Speaking of the future Lady Tate, Georgiana tells me that her betrothed, for all his rank and fortune, is still rather terrified of you, so you must try to—what is it?”

“I have had a letter from the master of the *Surrey*.” He handed the letter to Elizabeth, who glanced at its pithy contents and then carelessly set it aside without a second look.

“As I was saying, Sir Hector Tate and his mother and sister will be dining with us tomorrow, and Georgiana has made it known to me that she would appreciate it if you did not torture her young man like you did the last time he dined at Pemberley.”

Darcy paced his wife’s dressing room. “I did not torture him. To use the word torture implies that I deliberately intended to cause Sir Hector anguish or injury. He will soon marry my sister and remove her to the other side of the country. I shall only see her in town during the season or for brief visits in the summer, if I am so fortunate. She is not even nineteen. It is only natural that, as her guardian, I question Sir Hector further about his finances, his ambitions, his estate, his beliefs, his friends, his education, his reputation, and his values.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and stared at him; Darcy sighed and accepted her silent rebuke. “I will show Sir Hector more consideration than when we last met. It is not as though I do not approve of him.”

“Georgiana knows that, my dear.” She stood and kissed him softly. “It is Sir Hector who does not.”

“He is an amiable, respectable young man.” Darcy looked into her eyes. “You are certain that she will be happy with him?”

“We already discussed this, at length, Fitzwilliam. Sir Hector has eyes only for her and, although he is a little young, he is of a good family and Georgiana will want for nothing. She loves him and admires him. Her confidence, both in herself and in him, is enough to satisfy me. Does this have to do with...?” Elizabeth trailed off, her hand gesturing lightly toward the table where she placed the letter.

Darcy rarely thought of what happened at Ramsgate, but when he did, it galled him still. He pulled his wife into his arms to steady his emotions. The blazes of hell were not hot enough for Wickham, as far as he was concerned.

“The letter only reminded me of what she suffered. When she confessed the truth to you, you were right to think only of Georgiana’s happiness above all else. I would have been consumed by rage if I knew then what had happened at Ramsgate. But you were also showing me a kindness, I think. You took the worst of the burden entirely onto your own shoulders to spare paining me.”

Elizabeth laid her head against him and held him tighter. He knew no greater comfort than being in his wife's embrace. After a long moment she asked, “Shall we tell Georgiana?”

“No,” he answered firmly. “I do not want her wedding day troubled by any memories of that man.”

“I think you are right. She is a compassionate soul, and would feel guilty for finding any peace in this. I have no such compunction.”

“I am as satisfied as you are. Now, there is a little boy down the corridor who is expecting his Mamma to read to him. If you do not soon make your appearance, he will escape his nurse and come rushing in here with a vengeance. His energy is boundless; he exhausts me.”

“Shall you join us?”

“Absolutely I will.” Darcy smiled.

When the door shut behind them, the letter on the table fluttered to the floor.

July 28, 1814

Sydney Cove

Most honoured sir,

I seize this opportunity of letting you know that the Surrey arrived here safe after a very boisterous voyage of 156 days. We landed here 164 men and women; only 36 convicts died during the passage. George Wickham was

*among them, and his body was sunk with ballast near the
Cape of Good Hope.*

I am, &c,

Capt. Jas. Patterson

About the Author

Heather Moll is an avid reader of mysteries and biographies with a masters in information science. She found Jane Austen later than she should have and made up for lost time by devouring her letters and unpublished works, joining JASNA, and spending too much time researching the Regency era. She lives with her husband and son, and struggles to balance all of the important things, like whether or not to buy groceries or stay home and write. Connect with her on social media or subscribe to her newsletter.

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His Choice of a Wife

Two More Days at Netherfield