Like a Sister

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by tealitful

Summary

Because I can't get enough of the "Elizabeth meets Georgiana before Darcy" trope.

Just to be clear: written while tipsy and never edited. No plans to edit either! I'm afraid grammar mistakes, misused titles, and omitted words are here to stay.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Georgiana was nervous. Since the abrupt end to her stay at Ramsgate, she had only left her home to attend weekly services. She was so ashamed of her naivety, she was certain anyone who saw her would be able to tell how close to ruin she’d been.

Now she stood on the streets of London, her steady companion, Mrs. Annesley, by her side. Fitzwilliam had suggested she go shopping in an attempt to alleviate the gloom that had befallen her, and, eager to please, she complied. The rush of the people bustling around her made her head spin. She scurried to a nearby shop in which solicited little notice. In fact, she herself had not realised it was an establishment until she noticed, through a window, a few figures moving about. Mrs. Annesley, though dubious about the class of the establishment, suggested to her charge that she enter the establishment. "We are, after all, meant to take you shopping."

Georgiana smiled a timid smile and stepped inside. She was immediately in awe. While nowhere near as nice as the shoppes she was used to frequenting, it held its own unique charms. The shelves sagged under the weight of the items it was tasked with holding. Never had she seen so many books.

Mrs. Annesley stood next to the door, a place from which she could see nearly every crevice of the store. In taking root there, she hoped to provide Georgiana with a small bit of space while still keeping an eye on her. It was a sentiment her charge greatly appreciated.

Reading had never been a favourite past time of Georgiana, she much rather preferred her hand at the pianoforte, but her brother was an avid reader and she wished to be more like him. She let her fingers float along the spines of the books, reading the name of each as she touched it.

Her turn about the store ended when she gently collided with another patron of the store. Georgiana was wholeheartedly embarrassed, stammering an apology to the woman. In return, the woman let out a hearty laugh, much to the surprise of Georgiana. "Please do not be offended," the woman said, suppressing her glee as best she could. "I dearly love a good laugh, but I do not laugh at you! Please, you need not apologise. As you can see, I am quite unharmed. I am quite aquatinted with the distractions induced by novels."

Georgiana blushed. "I am afraid I am not well acquainted with such distractions. I do not read much, I am afraid."

The woman mockingly gasped. Her lightness of air put Georgiana more at ease. "Indeed, that is a tragedy! If you do not read much, may I inquire as to your reason for stopping here?"

Georgiana searched for the hidden malice in the statement that she was accustomed to hearing from the other ladies of society she had met, but found nothing but interest and amusement. "I have an older brother who has a great love of reading in what little free time he has. I suppose I thought I should like to share that trait with him."

"Well, what do you like to read?"

Georgiana furrowed her brows. "What ever do you mean? Books, I would suppose." She blushed and stammered out. "I am sorry, that sounded quite rude. I suppose I do not know what you mean." The woman laughed again, and Georgiana was in awe at how easy this woman flouted social graces. She became even more flustered than before and dipped into a curtsey. "I am Miss. Georgiana Darcy. My apologies for not introducing myself earlier."
The woman stopped her laughing, her face now sporting a good natured smile. She returned the greeting, dipping into a curtsey. "I am Miss. Elizabeth Bennet," she said, in a friendly sort of mockery, "It is a pleasure to meet you Miss. Darcy." Then her face contorted into one of mock seriousness. "Now, I'm afraid we must give you a quick lesson on literature, for I fear you do not know what you do not understand how many types of books there are!"

Georgiana stared up at her like a wide eyed child on her first day of school. This having been the longest conversation she'd had since Ramsgate, she was afraid to continue it but unwilling to let it end. Miss. Bennet was being so nice. "Oh, please do!"

Elizabeth noted the poor girl shaking like a leaf, and wished to set her at ease. "Well, I shall not keep you long, as I believe that is your companion by the door there keeping an eye on you, as she should, though bit of a heavy eye I might say." Georgiana paled slightly, and Elizabeth knew she had mentioned something she'd aught not to. "So, let us start our lesson before I am forsaken of your company and forced to wait what is likely to be another half hour for my uncle to finish his conversation with the owner, for you see they are quite the gossips."

They weren't at all like gossips, they just had a great deal to speak about and very little sense of time when doing so. Still, the joke had the intended affect, and Miss. Darcy covered her mouth to hide her giggle. "Please, Miss. Bennet, do teach me."

"Well," she began, unsure of where to start, "there are mysteries and histories and journals and poems and romances, for a start. Many more, but those are the most interesting. And once you have chosen one of those it becomes a matter of trial and error; of finding what you like to read and what you do not." Elizabeth laughed again. "Perhaps I have overestimated what there is to teach, for I have just said it is a process of learning about yourself and what you prefer."

Georgiana took a moment to soak up what Miss. Bennet had said. She first thought that she should not like romances as they would remind her too much of the hurt she had so recently suffered, but then she remembered that the bad men, the men who play girls' hearts for money do not get love in novels. That thought comforted her; the thought of a bad man being forced being revealed to everyone as such and he never being able to hurt an innocent girl, so in love with the idea of love that she would elope, again. Rather than voice all of that, she simply said, "I think I should like to read about love."

"Ahh," Elizabeth said, moving an inch closer to the girl. "Well, would you like to read about true love or fake true love?"

Georgiana gave her a funny look. "Whatever do you mean, fake true love?"

"Well, I have found that there are some very silly ideas of what love is and how it happens. Now, as I have never been in love, I cannot say for sure that love does not happen like some novels say, but I must tell you, I would never want a love as turbulent as that of a Radcliffe couple. And they barely even know each other in most cases!" Elizabeth huffed. While there were several girls who enjoyed the fantasy of it all, she was not one.

Neither, it seemed was Georgiana, as she quickly replied, "I only want to read the truest of love stories. People who know each other! A love that wont fade with time and has no ulterior motive."

Elizabeth smiled. "Those, are my favourites too, and difficult to find." She turned around, re-familiarizing herself with where books were situated in the store. She motioned for Georgiana to follow her and headed towards a particular shelf, knowing what she sought would be there. She pulled a thick tome from the shelves and handed it to the girl. "Shakespeare's sonnets. Since you said you were never quite the avid reader, I figured these would be good for you. This way, you can read
a couple sonnets, not as lengthy as a novel, and then you can force your brother to read them so you both can discuss it."

Georgiana smiled: first at Miss. Bennet, then the book, and then at Miss. Bennet again. "That is a very good idea. And I think I have heard Fitzwilliam talk about Shakespeare with our cousin."

Elizabeth smiled. "Now, you must be sure when you discuss to be nice about his opinions, but never ever concede if you do not agree."

Georgiana smiled. "I can not image disagreeing with my brother. He is never wrong."

"Oh, I am sure he is wrong far more often than you think," Elizabeth said, but did not press the subject. "Now, I believe you should be going. Your companion is waiting, and she looks quite certain I am holding you here against your will!"

Georgiana nodded, dipped into a curtsey, and turned to leave. She turned on her heal, however, and said, "Miss. Bennet?" Elizabeth smiled at the girl and quirked her head to the side, indicating Georgiana go on, which she did in a quiet stutter. "May I call on you? After I have read some of the sonnets, I mean."

"Oh, please do! I am residing with my aunt and uncle on Gracechurch street for two weeks more. After that I return to my father's estate in Hertfordshire."

The younger girl hesitated a moment longer, before paying for her book and returning to the busy streets of London with her companion by her side.
Later that evening, as the Darcys sat for dinner (Mrs. Annesley having chosen to take her meal in her room), Mr. Darcy inquired after his sister's venture into town. "What did you buy? I saw with only a single parcel when you and Mrs. Annesley returned."

"Well, I bought a book," she said, taking a sip of wine from her class.

"A book?" She nodded at his question, but said nothing. "Well will you tell me what book you've bought? And why?" Fitzwilliam thought it odd that Georgiana would choose a book as her single purchase in Town. She was never particularly vain, never had a love of shopping, but he thought she liked many women in the sense that she preferred new garments to reading.

Georgiana blushed. "Well, I thought I was ready to go to all the shops I was used to frequenting," tears welled up in her eyes.

"Gerogie, you need not tell me if it will make you cry."

"No, Fitz, it is not a sad story. I just wasn't ready to do what I thought I was. So I ran into a small book shoppe to hide, and I met a lady there." At the look of reservation and fear on Fitzwilliam's face, she comforted him, "Mrs. Annesley stood by the door where she could see me no mater where I went. And this woman I talked to, I don't remember quite how we came to the subject, but I mentioned that you liked to read, and she suggested, since I am not so fond of reading, she suggested I start with the sonnets. Shakespeare's sonnets, that is."

She was not being completely honest: she remembered every second of her encounter with Miss. Bennet. She did not know why meeting her had felt so important. Perhaps it was that she was how easily she was set at ease with her, or how absolutely without facade she was. Georgiana had seen her fair share of facades, after all, in many of society's "fine" ladies and more recently with him. Ultimately, she decided, it was a combination of both of those things, maybe even more. It felt good to have faith in something she thought, even if it was something as simple as a first impression, after having doubted her every movement such returning from Ramsgate.

"That is quite an interesting suggestion. It's been a few years since I read the sonnets," Fitzwilliam said. In truth, he thought it a very smart idea to suggest the sonnets: in this time, it was important for a lady to have at least read some shakespearean literature, and, as Georgiana had never been a fan of reading, to give her small amounts of reading was a smart way to keep her attention focused.

Georgiana took a deep breath, and gently cleared her throat, "Perhaps we, you and I that is, could talk about a sonnet or two over tea." Miss. Bennet had suggested she share opinions with her brother about the sonnets, and so she had suggested as such.

Fitzwilliam was surprised. His sister, who had been in such a state of despair and self loathing as of recent, was almost un-notably returning to the land of the living. "That, I think, would fit very nicely into our routine." He would have to dig up his sonnets from the confines of the library.

The two lapsed into silence as they returned to their meals. When they retired to the sitting room for tea and coffee, Georgiana spoke again. "I asked Miss. Bennet, the woman who helped me with the sonnets, I asked if I could call on her." Darcy's eyebrows shot up. Even before the incident, Georgiana had never been partial to social engagements. "She said she is staying with her aunt and uncle in Cheapside."
"I do not think I want you going to Cheapside."

His words were like a crushing weight on Georgiana. She had not realised how much she had already begun looking forward to seeing Miss Bennet again. "Mrs. Annesley will be with me!" He was clearly still not convinced. "I could send a missive inviting her here for tea or luncheon!"

Darcy was silent as he mulled over her request. Georgiana sipped her tea in anticipation. "You may invite her here for tea," Georgiana smiled and made to thank him, "but Mrs. Annesley will remain with you both the entire time and she will deliver to me her opinion of this Miss. Bennet."

It stung, as it often did when Fitzwilliam ordered Georgiana to always be accompanied, but she understood his reasons. It was fair to not trust her. "Thank you, Fitz. I will write this missive tonight before retiring and send it in the morning." And with that, the conversation was dropped.

Georgiana did indeed send the missive before breaking her fast the next morning. After receiving the letter, Elizabeth sent her own missive back, agreeing to the location and suggesting a day and time for later that week to which Georgiana immediately agreed to.

Darcy house was grand, especially when compared to the surroundings Elizabeth was accustomed to seeing in Cheapside. She was slowly becoming quite ill at ease with herself. Whatever qualms she had, however, were soothed by the glowing smile she received from her hostess upon her arrival. Elizabeth knew that Miss. Darcy would not be so cruel as too judge her on her simple dress or lack of accomplishments.

Georgiana was practically bouncing with nervous energy. She had never before entertained someone without societal obligation, and she so longed for it to go well. Mrs. Annesley had remained by her side the entire morning, helping her with arrangements for the luncheon. Now she stood by Georgiana's side, a reserved smile on her face.

"Miss. Bennet, I hope you are well," Georgiana said, rising from the curtsey she'd given in greeting and stepping towards her, "I have read the first and second sonnets. Should we discuss over tea as luncheon is prepared."

Elizabeth smiled, "That sounds lovely." Georgiana walked beside her and lead her into the drawing room where tea was waiting. Georgiana's copy of the sonnets sat on the davenport, pristine with a barely broken spine. Elizabeth fingered the tattered edges of her own print, thinking fondly of the numerous reads that had made it as it was now.

The two sat next to each other on the davenport and Mrs. Annesley sat in a chair near enough to the girls that she could hear all means of discussion but far enough that she hoped Georgiana would forget her presence enough to open up to her new friend.

"Miss. Darcy, you said you have read the first two sonnets but you've not yet told me your thoughts on them! I find I am quite interested to know what someone without such a love of reading as I thinks of them."

Georgiana was learning very quickly of Miss. Bennet's love of jokes, but she blushed none the less. "I… I am not sure if I have interpreted them right at all, but I do think they are quite pretty."

Elizabeth waved her hand gently in the air. "O, posh. Until someone discovers written explanations of each sonnet from Mr. Shakespeare himself, there is no wrong interpretation. So, tell me what it is you think, Miss. Darcy, for I should very much like to know."

And with those words, Georgiana became lighter. She told Miss. Bennet about what she thought of
this and that and listened to what Miss. Bennet thought, astonished any mind could conceive such a complex understanding of literature. Soon after their discussion of Shakespeare had ended, they moved to a grand dining room where they sat side by side and talked of themselves, quickly forging a strong friendship.

Mrs. Annesley was impressed by the quick change in her charge's behaviour, and, upon hearing of Miss. Bennet's approaching departure date, was sad to know her influence on Georgiana would not continue.

Georgiana, too, was anxious at the impending loss of her new friend, so she made a snap decision as she saw Miss. Bennet's carriage approaching to take her away. "Miss. Bennet," she said, a quiver in her voice. "Would you mind terribly if I- I mean, I hope you would not be opposed to writing to me."

Elizabeth smiled. She had every intention of writing to Miss. Darcy as soon as she had settled back into life at Longbourn, and hadn't even had the thought of inquiring as to whether or not it would be well received. She supposed it was just a matter of their different bringing ups. "Indeed, Miss. Darcy, I will write you as soon as I am home, but only if you agree to write me back posthaste!"

Another joke, Georgiana was sure, but she was too happy to think much of it. "Indeed, I will Miss. Bennet."

The carriage was now stopped in front of the house, waiting for its passenger. "And let me know how your first poet soiree with your brother goes. I should very much like to know if because you are siblings you think the same about literature."

Now, Georgiana just nodded her head, smiling sincerely her cheeks ached. And with the promise of a lasting friendship, Elizabeth returned to Gracechurch street to finish packing her things and happily spend her last few days in town with the Gardiners.
Fitzwilliam sat at his desk, his leg bouncing with nervous energy. He'd been trying for an hour and three quarters to focus on the estate business as he need do, but his mind was of Georgiana: how would she fare with a stranger as this Miss Bennet was? Sweet Georgiana could, at that very moment, be faced with a woman who did not meet what expectations she held. When Mrs Annesley knocked and entered upon command, he was relieved at the easiness of her person.

A beat of silence. "Well?" he asked, agitated that she was not immediate in her account of the afternoon.

"Miss Bennet seemed a bit uncomfortable when she first arrived, but it seemed it was just the estate that set her so ill at ease. Miss Darcy was nervous about entertaining, but Miss Bennet was able to reassure her without even making it obvious she could had noticed the discomfort. Miss Darcy was so pleased with the visit."

Darcy was relieved although he would much rather know the woman himself so to be sure of her intentions in befriending his sister. "It was good, then? Will she visit again?"

Mrs Annesley shook her head. "No, she has only a few days more in London before returning to Hertfordshire. Miss Darcy was disheartened at the quick departure, but Miss Bennet suggested a correspondence if you should allow it. Miss Darcy seemed quite taken with the idea."

Fitzwilliam nodded and dismissed the woman. Only a quarter hour later, Georgiana slipped into his office without a knock, a carelessness about her he'd not seen since before Ramsgate.

"How was your afternoon?" he asked, setting the work he'd only just begun aside.

That was all the invitation Georgiana needed, and she launched into a detailed description of the afternoon. She'd asked for his permission to write: he'd given it. When he had asked about their discussion of poetry, Georgiana had told him that he must sit with her to a meal or tea to discuss it before she should say what Miss Bennet thought.

"Oh, Miss Bennet is so insightful! I have not the slightest idea how she thinks of such interpretations, but when she explain why she thinks such a way it makes sense! You would find her agreeable, I think."

I like her now, Darcy thought, for what she has done for you, Georgie.

"Brother, you will not believe what Lizzy says!" Georgiana threw herself down next to him on the davenport. After several months and several letters, Georgiana begged Miss Bennet call her by her christian name, and Miss Bennet had, in return, insisted she be called Elizabeth or Lizzy.

"Well, if I will not believe it, I shan't even venture a guess," Darcy said before sipping his tea and feigning disinterest. In truth, he was always interested to hear Miss Bennet's opinions. When he and Georgiana would discuss the sonnets, Georgiana would tell him what Miss Bennet thought of each, and he could see his sister's comprehension. Quite a clever girl, this Miss Bennet seemed.

"O! Fitz, do you remember how you told me how Mr Bingley is to let a place in Hertfordshire?" Darcy nodded. Georgiana had seemed in quite a pit of despair when he'd told her that he would
accompany Charles to help him become established. He nodded to let her know he recalled telling her. "Well, I wrote to Lizzy than a friend of our family was to let a place called Netherfield, and I asked if she had ever heard of it. Guess what she said, Fitz!"

"Well, I would suppose she knows it if you are so excited. Did she say if it was well kept?"

"Oh, Fitzwilliam, she said it was a well kept estate just three miles from her father's estate. She says that, on particularly nice days, she sometimes walks to the fence that divides the properties. She likes to walk very much, have I told you?" Her eyes glittered with her unspoken question.

Darcy knew very well that she wanted to go. She had mentioned it shortly when he'd first brought up the subject, but he assured her that the size of Hertfordshire was so large the likeliness of being in her friend's company was slim. Now, however, it was highly probable that they should see one another.

"Yes, you have mentioned that she likes a walk." Georgiana stared, waiting for more. Several seconds of silence, and she began to lose heart. Darcy could tell. "Perhaps when Bingley stops by tomorrow I shall see if he would be willing to host you and Mrs Annesley as well."

The glitter reappeared, and Georgiana threw her arms around his neck. "I would be so grateful if you did so! You must tell me immediately what he says, so I might write to Lizzy and tell if I shall be riding with you to Netherfield."

Naturally, kindhearted Bingley agreed, surprised to hear that Miss Darcy had a friend in Hertfordshire; or any friends, for that matter, as she rarely ventured into society and was not comfortable with strangers. Darcy asked for a maid to call Georgiana to him.

When she arrived he simply said, "Georgiana, you must thank Mr Bingley."

She stood still as a statue for a moment before recognition flashed across her features and she turned to Mr Bingley, her cheeks red with delight, and did as she was told. "Oh, thank you Mr Bingley! I am so happy to go." She ran from the room, down the corridor, and to her room like a child. She sat at her desk, pulled a piece of parchment from a stack, and began to compose a missive:

Dear Lizzy,

I am in a state of unadulterated delight as I sit down to write this, but I am sure I should be calm by the time I am finished. I told my brother how close you were to Netherfield, and as he and Mr Bingley - he is the friend to let the estate - were discussing their trip, he mentioned the fact. Did I tell you that my brother was to go to help in settling the estate? Never mind that, it is not important. Mr Bingley has said that he would board Mrs Annesely and I happily!

What I am saying is that I shall be able to see you in a months time, if you are not adverse to the idea. O, please say you will see me Lizzy, for I have so much to say to you that cannot be conveyed through letters.

Your friend,

Georgiana Darcy

She did not bother reading over her letter as she usually did. Instead, she quickly sealed the letter. She stared at it for a moment. Was she silly to think that Lizzy would be as excited as her? Should she send the letter?

Yes. She would send it. Lizzy would not judge her childish glee. She called a servant and asked her to send it. For five minutes she sat there questioning if she was right to send a letter contains such
open emotion: it was not like her. But each time she questioned herself, she was comforted by the openness of Lizzy's letters.

She picked up her book of sonnets and began to reread some of the sonnets she now dubbed among her favourites.

Chapter End Notes

At least part of this chapter was written while I was tipsy so…
Chapter 4

After the agonisingly long ride to Hertfordshire, Georgiana had no qualms in saying she could go a whole life time and still not be ready to again be in the presence of Miss Bingley. Well, she had no qualms saying so in her head: she would not dare say so out loud. It had been they had arrived at Netherfield two days prior, ands sent a missive to Lizzy the day after. Tonight, she read the missive that had been sent in return:

Dearest Georgiana, it read,

I am all delight at hearing you have arrived safely and settled in. This Miss Bingley you speak of sounds absolutely retched. You much be sure to tell me all about it in as unladylike terms as your sweet mind can manage, for it is the only way to truly vent your feelings. I would immediately rush you if it were not for the assembly tonight.

As much as I dearly love all my sister, you know well that I am the only one that can even manage to vaguely keep them in line with something nearing propriety: I have vented several times to you about them, so you must know. There is an uproar among the neighbours at Netherfield's letting, and your brother's friend. My papa says that he will attend the assembly, so I beg you to warn him of the matchmaking mamas that will flock to him, my mother included (I fear she is the worst of them all, as I have mentioned to you before).

Should you send me a note back as to when you should like to make, I can arrange for tea at Longbourn, if you so wish to be out of certain company.

My best wishes to you, dear friend,

Miss Elizabeth Bennet

Georgiana smiled. She could not recall a time she had ever wished to be out in society as badly as she now did: in all truth, she was not sure she had ever truly wanted to be out at all. But now, as she listened to the Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst scuttling about in preparation of the night. Mr. Hurst was partaking in some brandy, and Fitzwilliam sat next to her, engrossed in some novel he'd picked up to read in what little downtown he was able to scrape together.

"Fitz," she whispered.

In a low voice he replied, "Why are we whispering, Georgie."

She blushed. She hadn't meant to seem so silly. "Lizzy has told me to make Mr. Bingley aware of the, as she puts it, 'matchmaking mamas' at the assembly hall, and I thought you also deserved warning."

"Not three days in Hertfordshire, our plans just set yesterday, and you have already sent a missive to Miss Bennet about our attendance to the hall?"

At this she laughed, a tinkling sound that lightened Darcy's heart. "She says that Mr. Bingley is the talk of the town, and everyone knows he is attending the dance tonight. I had told her it was he we were travelling. Lizzy has mentioned several times how even her mama is one of them. I cannot imagine!"

"Of course you cannot imagine, dear, for you would never have to coerce a man to marriage to ensure your safe future. You needn't ever marry if you do not wish to, for you are always welcome
to stay at Pemberley." He pet her hair, smiling at the girl he was sure must be the sweetest on Earth. Georgiana turned her head back to the missive, and she read it again. Darcy returned to his book.

And then a storm blew into the room: a storm adorned in a hideous orange dress and gaudy feathers.

"Oh, dearest Georgiana, what is it you are reading so earnestly?" Georgiana cringed at the use of her christian name without expressed permission. "If it is so interesting, I must read it. I am an avid reader you know!"

Darcy scoffed under his breath and Georgiana pressed the parchment to her chest. "It is a letter from my dearest friend, is all, Miss Bingley. I would rather not share it." Georgiana's voice remained quiet and timid, but there was a sternest that Miss Bingley was not used to.

Miss Bingley was angry to be hear someone that was not her referred to as Georgiana's 'dearest friend' as she had been going out of her way to befriend the girl. As uninteresting as she found the girl to be, a friendship would ensure she was among Mr. Darcy's good graces. Rather than harp on it any further, she turned her attentions to the man of her desires, praising his littlest movement.

As the party departed, Georgiana let out a sigh of relief to be left to herself for a little while. She had a dinner tray sent to her room and read while she awaited the return of the party. She hoped desperately that she could stay awake until their return, to hear from her brother if he'd seen Lizzy there.

The dancing was in full swing by the time the Netherfield party arrived. It all came to a sudden halt as they were recognised as strangers. They made their way to the opposite side of the hall, and the dancing started up again. Darcy could see the cogs turning in these 'matchmaking mamas' were already planning how to introduce their daughters. Feeling the need for a drink, Darcy made his way to the nearest refreshment table.

Choosing last minute to partake in the coffee that was set out next to the tea and punch, he waited for the young lady currently making herself a cup to move aside.

"Pardon me," she said, stepping to the side enough to allow him to fill a cup as she stirred in her cream and sugar. He said nothing. She stepped a little further away to allow him access to the additives, and turned to watch the couples dancing. "Are you with the Netherfield party, sir?" she asked suddenly, as Darcy took a sip of his coffee to make sure it was to his tastes: cheap, he was sure, but it would do.

"Yes," he said, not wishing to encourage conversation. She gave him a funny look but said nothing, instead opting to sip her drink in silence. Her easy acquisition to his refusal of conversing interested him. "What was that look?" he asked.

She quirked an eyebrow, and the corners of her lip tugged upwards. "I was just taken aback by what a skilled conversationalist you are." He scoffed, something she was clearly not fond of. "And that sir? What is that scoff meant to be, some sort of slight."

"I was simply surprised at the impropriety of a woman talking to a man whom she has not been properly introduced to."

At this she blushed. She hadn't thought of it that way. Still, she refused to back down. She assumed this must be the Mr. Hurst Georgiana had mentioned in her letter. "Indeed sir?" she said, not one to back down from a challenge, "Welcome to the country, sir."

And she turned and walked away, embarrassed beyond belief but not willing to let go of her pride
just yet. She saw her mother dragging both Jane and Mary somewhere, and as they came upon her, she was forced into the chain between the two. She was not at all surprised when her mother led them directly to Sir Lucas who was at the moment occupied with the Netherfield party. Her face burned as she saw the man with the quizzical brow, the one she spoken to just minutes earlier had rejoined his party.

Sir Lucas introduced each Bennet in turn. When her name was said, she dipped into a curtsey, keeping her chin raised, but her eyes down. However, as the Netherfield party was introduced, she raised her eyes so not to confuse their persons' later.

"Mr. Darcy of Pemberley," Lucas said, and the pompous man she spoken to bowed. Indeed she could not believe this was her sweet friend's brother. Bingley asked for the next dance with Jane, and if he may dance the one after with her. She nodded.

"Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy said, and she looked at him with a slight surprise shining in her eyes at his speaking to her. He seemed horribly uncomfortable, "If you are not already engaged, may I ask the next set?"

Elizabeth nodded: she would do this for Georgiana. "Indeed, sir."

He offered his arm and led her to the dance line, a few couples down from Mr. Bingley and Jane. Miss Bingley's face turned several different shades of red not at all cohesive with her burnt orange gown. The dance began, and they carried the first few steps in silence.

Elizabeth was beginning to suspect that was how the entirety of their dance would go, when Mr. Darcy spoke. "I must apologise for my earlier, ahem, behaviour," he said. "I have been told I am not the best socialite, and am not at all fond of gatherings like these."

The dance dictated they part, then, and they did. Elizabeth recalled Georgiana's mention of her brother's shyness, and she decided in that moment to forgive this one slight. Still, that did not mean she could not joke a bit first, for she dearly loved to laugh and this seemed a prime opportunity.

"Why, Mr. Darcy, I am all astonishment at your behaviour, for your sister speaks so highly of you!" She payed close attention to his face. He seemed so disappointed to not live up to his sister's description, and she immediately felt guilt over her tease. "I only joke, sir. While I do not think how you speak to women you are just meeting is exactly as it should be, you are are not wrong in pointing my impropriety, although I would thank you if you do so in a more subtle manner for I have a fragile ego."

At this he laughed a small laugh, and she felt a sense of accomplishment. Their dance separated them again. When they came back together, his stoic mask seemed back in place, but he had adopted a more pleasant person. "My sister looks forward to sitting to tea with you soon, Miss Elizabeth. She says you have invited her to your home for the occasion?"

She nodded, and he took her gloved hands and turned with her to the music. "If that is acceptable to you. She has mentioned some unpleasant company she has been in as of recent, so I figured she and I, and her companion of course, could have a small picnic and tea. Our garden is not nearly as grand as Georgiana has described yours - quite the descriptive writer she is - but it will allow us time to talk and she shan't be in the presence of my rambunctious younger sister, I will make sure of that."

Again they parted. She waited for the dance to bring them back together, for she wanted dearly for Mr. Darcy to approve of her plans. She knew how much his approval weighed on Georgiana's mind. They came together again. Her heartbeat picked up with eagerness and fear. "I believe Georgiana
would very much like that. Is there a specific date you have in mind that I may relay to her.

Relief washed through Elizabeth: her friendship was approved of. She felt a strange pleasure at
knowing she had deemed worthy of Georgiana's friend by him; after all, she reasoned to herself, I
cannot imagine Georgiana's disappointment if her brother and I were at each other's throats.

"I have told her she may pick a date. I haven't any plans for the week, and I would not wish to rush
her to a meeting when she has just arrived and is settling in."

Darcy nodded, an equal pleasantness spreading through him. He'd managed to right his wrong
against his sister first good friend before it'd been blown out of proportion (and he had a feeling it
could have been very much blown out of proportion). For the rest of their dance, they has pleasant
discussion of the country and weather and the varying shades Miss Bingley's face continued to
rotate.

As the dance ended, a pleasant laugh on Elizabeth's lips and her eyes brightened by the exercise of
the dance. Mr. Bingley was making his way to her for their dance. As he was just out of ear shot,
Mr. Darcy said, without intending to, "But thou contracted to thine own bright eyes/ Feed'st thy
light's flame with self-substantial fuel/ Making a famine where abundance lies."

He was embarrassed as the words slipped out, but she simply smiled and laughed. "Indeed, your
sister was truthful when she said you were both diligently discussing the sonnets! I never doubted
her, but I thank you for your assurance!" She curtsied to him in farewell, humour dancing in those
bright eyes.

All the rest of the night, as Miss Bingley unsubtly implied her want to dance, Darcy stood by the
wall and watched as his sister's friend danced jovially. He was no longer surprised at how his sister
had some so far in so few months of correspondence. Indeed, he was sure no one could be around
such a exuberant being as Miss Elizabeth without undergoing some change: he himself had almost
immediately been humbled in her presence.

"Thine own bright eyes feed'st they they light's flame," he murmured.
Chapter 5

The next morning, as they all sat to break their fast (save for Bingley's sisters), Georgiana lightly inquired after the night, having failed to stay awake until their return. As soon as she had mentioned the previous evening, Mr. Bingley's countenance shifted to that of a child whose mother had just allowed him a sweet before supper.

"Miss Darcy, I am sure I have never met so many pleasing people at one event!" he said. Georgiana made to respond, but Mr. Bingley continued on his account of the evening, embellishing details as was his style. Georgiana was all politeness, taking the time to partake in her plate. She nearly dropped her cup of tea when Mr. Bingley leaned back in his chair and ended his speech, "Indeed, Miss Bennet is all that is polite and good."

"Miss Bennet?" Georgiana asked. She knew that Mr. Bingley hadn't a malicious bone in his body, but she also knew - for her brother had told her - of the women he had been infatuated with before. She could not let Lizzy become victim of her brother's fickle friend.

"Indeed, Georgiana," Darcy said, noting the furrow in her brow. "Bingley past half the night with Miss Jane Bennet."

Georgiana relaxed. She knew it was bad of her to feel relief at someone else being the apple of Mr. Bingley's eye, but at least her friend was not in danger of heartbreak.

Bingley smiled again. "She has four younger sisters, Miss Darcy! Can you imagine so many women under one roof? I danced with the youngest two once each and with Miss Elizabeth twice; Miss Mary did not wish to dance - very studious, she seems. Miss Bennet, though, I danced with whenever she was free."

Georgiana placed set down her fork and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her handkerchief. She saw her opening to leave the topic of Miss Jane Bennet. "You danced with Lizzy, Mr. Bingley? I envy you having seen her before I!"

Bingley was all confusion, and his face, as it did with all his thoughts and feelings, betrayed it to all. "Are you acquainted with Miss Elizabeth? However can that be when you were not at the assembly?"

Georgiana looked to her brother and then back to Mr. Bingley. "Did my brother not tell you why he has brought me?"

"Only that you have a friend in Hertfordshire."

Georgiana smiled as she would when speaking to a small child: he was very nice but not so bright. "Yes. Elizabeth is that friend. We became acquainted over books when she was visiting family in Town."

"Indeed? Well that is marvellous! You must allow me to accompany you to Longbourn if you call."

Darcy looked at Georgiana. "I spoke with Miss Elizabeth, and she invites you to tea whenever you are comfortable to go."

Georgiana beamed. She dearly loved being in the company of her brother, and she did not mind Mr. Bingley or Mr Hurst terribly, but she could not manage to be happy or even content in the company of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley. "I should be off to write her now! Mr. Bingley, may I trouble you
for one of you need. your men to deliver it."

"Of course, Miss Darcy! Make use of whatever you wish."

With those words, Georgiana absconded to her borrowed bed chamber and set out to write, again, to Elizabeth. In the past months of correspondence, Georgiana had slowly begun to adopt Elizabeth's style of writing: while she was still not so outgoing in socialising, she was becoming quite well versed in the art of jests.

Dear Lizzy,

I here you have become acquainted with my brother - though I have not heard any particulars - and our host. You must tell me all about the evening because I am receiving little information from the men. Fitz says you sent him with an invitation for me, and I am eager to accept. If two days hence at midday is acceptable to you, I would be very pleased to act on your invitation.

Your friend,

Georgiana Darcy

Satisfied with her missive, she had it sent to Longbourn with one of Bingley's men. Not expecting a response until later that day or the next, Georgiana was pleasantly surprised to find Bingley's man returning with a note addressed to her in Elizabeth's curling hand just an hour and a half later.

Mr. Bingley's sisters had finally dragged themselves from bed and were eyeing Georgiana for an explanation. "Dearest Georgiana," Miss Bingley said, again taking it upon herself to use a Christian name she'd not been given leave to use. "We have not even been Hertfordshire a week, and you have received two letters!"

Georgiana nodded, but she did not respond. Instead, she broke the seal and began to read.

Dear Georgie, Georgiana blushed at the endearment that only Fitzwilliam and now Elizabeth used and read on,

Your letter caught me just as I was returning from a morning ramble. To my knowledge, I have no engagements on the suggested day lest my mama has seen to hold her tongue - an unlikely event, I assure you.

Indeed, I did meet both men you mention: I stood twice to dance with Mr. Bingley and once with your brother. I am sure they do not say much of the evening because there was little at all to say. I am almost certain, though, that if you were to ask Miss Bingley, she would find a great deal to say: she watched everyone with such a look of disgust, I was sure someone must have offended her greatly - perhaps the lack of gentlemen asking for her to stand up with them?

Still, if it is what you wish, I will happily tell you the most insignificant of details that were to be noted at the assembly in two days time. But I must end this letter now, for I have kept your servant long enough and have yet to break my own fast.

Your (hungry) friend,

Elizabeth Bennet

Georgiana let out a small laugh and reread the letter. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst continued to stare at her. "Miss Darcy, what is it that you find so funny within your letter?" Mrs. Hurst asked. Truly, she and Miss Bingley did not care so much what was funny, but who was funny.
Georgiana did not want to share her letter with the women: it felt an intimate thing for just she and Elizabeth to partake in. Instead, she responded. "Oh, it was nothing. Might I ask how you enjoyed the assembly?"

It seemed that was the right thing to redirect the conversation, for Miss Bingley immediately began tearing apart the small country gathering. Georgiana sipped her tea and nodded with an absent mind until Miss Bingley caught her attention with one of her comments directed at Fitzwilliam. "Oh, Mr. Darcy, it was so kind of you to dance with Miss Eliza Bennet, for I am sure it must have been excruciating!" She turned back to Georgiana, "The eldest Miss Bennets are said to be the beauties of the country, a laughable notion I assure you. Miss Jane Bennet is a fair bit handsome, although her fashion is lacking, but Miss Eliza is horribly tan uncouth," she turned again to Mr. Darcy, "Would you not agree, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy looked at Georgiana, her eyes wide with the shock of Miss. Bingley's rude words against her friend. He turned back to the book he was reading but responded to Miss Bingley, "I thought Miss Elizabeth had very fine eyes, and she is very clever, too."

It was an awkward compliment, but Georgiana knew of her brother's discomfort in dealing women compliments at all. She took heart in knowing her brother was there to defend Elizabeth with her and made to give her own response. "I cannot imagine my brother having struggled so much, for he and I often find we enjoy similar conversation, and I very much enjoy speaking with Elizabeth."

When Miss Bingley registered what Georgiana had said, disbelief overcame her and disgust displayed on her face. "Certainly you jest, Georgiana!"

"No, indeed, Miss Bingley, she does not. She and Miss Elizabeth are good friends and have been such for months," Darcy said, what little patience he held for Miss Bingley growing thinner.

"It is true, Miss Bingley," Georgiana said as sharply as such a sweet girl could before turning to her brother. "Fitz, would you walk with me in the garden?"

Darcy nodded and escorted his sister outdoors. They walked in silence for a long time, there strides slow. Finally Georgiana spoke, "Normally, I can find it within myself to ignore Miss Bingley's unkind words, but it is too painful to listen to her insult Elizabeth!"

Darcy took his free hand and placed it atop hers. "You are a sweet girl and loyal to your friend. It is natural to want to defend her, especially when she is not present to defend herself."

"I am sure, were she here, she would have no problem defending herself. She is of a quick wit, I am sure."

Darcy nodded his head. "Yes, that she is. A bit impertinent at times, but I cannot fault her for it was due impertinence she displayed." Georgiana was happy to hear that her brother was not opposed to Elizabeth's character.

The two let the topic drop, instead talking about small things that held little weight until they felt they could no longer justify staying out.
Chapter 6

Georgiana stepped down from the carriage and threw herself into the arms of Elizabeth. It was as if all feelings she’d wanted to share with Elizabeth were bubbling up in that moment and only clinging to her friend would keep them at bay. Eventually, the embrace ended but they held onto each other's arms as they exchanged pleasantries.

"My sisters have walked into Meryton for some bonnet trimmings and Mama is visiting my aunt for the afternoon, so I thought we may sit in the garden for tea and some biscuits," Elizabeth said, leading Georgiana into the house. "Where is Mrs. Annesley? I hope she is not unwell."

"I am afraid she is in bed with a migraine. I rode here with my maid," Georgiana responded, her mind now turned towards Mrs. Annesley's slowly declining health.

Elizabeth patted the younger girl's arm. "Well, you and I must have very good conversation today, so you may give her an interesting recount of your day."

Georgiana agreed with a timid smile and allowed Elizabeth to lead her to the small garden. They talked of many things; things they had discussed briefly in letters but now had leave to avidly discuss. Mrs. Hill set up a blanket spread of tea and snacks, and the girls partook happily. Soon discussion turned to the assembly that had taken place earlier that week.

"Oh, I wish you were there, Georgiana," Elizabeth said through her laughter, "to see Miss Bingley's discontent! Her face, I swear, was puce by the night's end."

Georgiana laughed too, well aware of Miss Bingley's tendency to freely display her anger. "Oh, but let's not talk about her! What of the assembly itself? Did you enjoy it? You said you danced with Mr. Bingley and my brother? My brother does not usually dance unless he can help it, you know."

Elizabeth took a sip of her tea before responding. "That does not surprise me, for he danced only one dance, with me to make sure you were not befriending a ruffian, though gentlemen were scarce; and, to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner. And he is a fair dancer, too! Not the best I stood with that night, but he was deft in his movements."

Georgiana laughed. "Well then, who was the best you stood with? Mr. Bingley?"

"No, Mr. Bingley is a good dancer, but his eyes were for my sister only which made his steps sometimes out of time. I think it was likely Mr. Thomas Lucas, the brother of my friend. His dancing is very lively," Elizabeth said.

Georgiana's face contorted into one of concern, and she set her cup on the matching saucer before broaching a topic she felt Elizabeth need be privy to. "I wanted to discuss that - Mr. Bingley and your sister that is."

Elizabeth could see the discomfort coming over the girl, and held her hand as a way of encouraging her. "If there is something I need to know about the attentions Mr. Bingley is paying to Jane, I beg you tell me."

There was a tenseness that overcame the girls. Georgiana began to speak, slowly and deliberately picking her words. "Mr. Bingley is very kind, and I am sure he means no harm to your sister. Still, I feel I must tell you what I know of his past infatuations." Elizabeth's eyes widened. She had not considered the amiable man having looked at anyone before in the way he'd looked at Jane. "I have overheard him speaking to my brother on a number of different occasions. It seems that he is quick to
infatuation but does not remain so for more than a few months. I do not mean to say he will do so to Miss Bennet, but I felt it only fair I share his lack of constancy with you."

Georgiana took a sharp breath and felt tears stinging her eyes for fear that Elizabeth would be upset with her. "Oh, do not let those tears leave your eyes, Georgiana! I am glad that you have told me, though I do not know that there is anything I can do to prevent he and Jane forming an attachment."

The tears slipped from Georgiana's eyes anyways, relieved that her friend was not upset with her. Elizabeth embraced the young girl and rocked her back and forth. When Georgiana's tears were dried and breathing calmed, she explained her outburst of emotion. "I do not want you to think that I am saying it is unlikely for Mr. Bingley to love your sister: in all your letters, she seems the picture of all that is good."

"Oh, Georgie, I do not think you are capable of speaking with ill will. It is not in your temperament," Elizabeth said. "Come, let us talk about something we are able to affect. Will you be attending the gathering at Lucas Lodge tomorrow night?"

Georgiana took the opportunity to talk of pleasanter things. "Indeed. Since I am not yet out, I may not dance, but Fitz thinks it should be alright for me to be present at the small gathering."

Elizabeth smiled, and the conversation of Bingley was forgotten. "Well, if you will not dance, you must play. I will turn the pages for you, if you like. I should very much like to introduce you to Mary, for she dearly loves to play."

"Yes, you mentioned once in your letters that she prefers the more solemn movements. Perhaps she and I could play a duet together?" It was a timid suggestion, as Georgiana had never shared a bench before but dearly wished to befriend the Bennets.

Elizabeth smiled. "I do not think Mary has ever shared the ivory before, but I bet she could be convinced to try. She does not get enough conversation about music as it is for I play very ill and our other sisters do not play at all."

"Oh," Georgiana started, just remembering something. "Lizzy, I have not told you! Brother has said he has ordered me a new pianoforte to be waiting for me we return."

"When are you set to return? I fear I will need to monopolise your what remaining time you have here, so we have plenty to reminisce on when we have nothing but letters to sustain us."

"We will leave as soon as Mr. Bingley is comfortably situated. My brother only came to help teach the running of an estate to him. Likely only a month, maybe two. Oh, I regret having even mentioned it now!" Georgiana said, knowing this parting would be much harder then the last.

"Oh, poppet, do not despair over what has yet to happen." Elizabeth gently pet Georgiana's blonde curls to comfort her. "Now come, hug me and say we shall see one another tomorrow evening. Your carriage is approaching now, I can hear it, and we must always have happiness between us when we part."

Georgiana did as she was bid, holding tightly to her friend. "Oh Lizzy, I cannot imagine going back to not being able to talk to you whenever I see fit!" What she said next was, at first, wholly in jest, "I shall force you to marry Fitz, and then you and I shall never be parted!"

Elizabeth blushed and laughed at the impertinent comment coming from such a sweet girl. "But then we would not be able to write about how you and your brother are fairing with the bard?"

Georgiana had stepped into the carriage as this was said. Now, she stuck her head out the window.
"Well you will be with us, so there will be no need to relay my brother's opinions."

"Ah, of course! Silly me for not thinking so," Elizabeth said with another laugh.

The horses kicked up their feet and the carriage jolted. The girls waved goodbye to one another, their giggles floating on the current of the wind. It was only Georgiana was no longer able to twist her head in a way that allowed her the sight of Elizabeth, that she settled into her seat and thought fondly on her first meeting in quite some time with her dear friend.

It was gradually that her mind turned to her silly comment. To have Fitz and Lizzy married. It could never happen, Georgiana was sure, because that would just be too much happiness under one roof. Still, she could not stop the beautiful thought of Lizzy as her sister rattling around in her head. She imagined what it would be like to have Lizzy always with her and how happy she was sure Lizzy could make Fitz.

The thoughts remained with her throughout the rest of the day, and when she dreamt that night it was of the perfect portrait of a family they would be. While she had always held Elizabeth to a higher standard than most women, she now compared every small thing Miss Bingley did to Lizzy in her mind. She spent so much time doing this that the idea of her brother marrying anyone else seemed out of the question: after all, Fitzwilliam Darcy was the best of men and best of brothers; and Elizabeth Bennet was best of women and best of sisters. Of course they should be fit to one another! To be with anyone else would be settling for less than either deserved. Still, Georgiana was aware that Elizabeth's family station was decidedly below the Darcys, and she did not see that being an easy thing to convince her brother to overlook.

Georgiana was near forcing herself to give up hope when the Netherfield party arrived at Lucas Lodge. Maybe it was because she'd been thinking so hard on the idea, but when her brother began to lead her in the direction of where Elizabeth stood talking to another woman, her hopes were renewed.

"Miss Lucas," Mr. Darcy bowed in a greeting before turning to Elizabeth. "Miss Elizabeth."

Georgiana was almost certain that he'd gone into a deeper bow in greeting Elizabeth then he did Miss Lucas. The addressed women dipped into their own curtsies and greeted him kindly. "Miss Lucas, I do not believe you have yet met my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy."

At the introduction, Georgiana took a step forward and dipped into a curtsey of her own. When she rose, Miss Lucas said, "No, indeed I haven't, but Lizzy has told me how dear a friend she has been to her, so I am sure is a paragon of virtue."

Georgiana blushed. "I thank you. I am sure she exaggerates."

The four chatted contentedly, and Georgiana was pleased to see her brother making a serious effort to stay engaged. It was something else entirely, though, that set Georgiana's determination in promoting the match between her brother and best friend. It was when one of the girls (that Georgiana would later learn was a sister of Lizzy's) requested dancing music. Couples flocked to the centre of the room, and an impromptu dance began.

Georgiana was in awe. She had been to plenty of small gatherings like this, but none had dancing. Not being out, she never had reason to see others dance. She was looking dreamily at the dancers, watching their deft movements.

Elizabeth smiled at the girl. "Should you like, Georgiana, I would be glad to stand with you for a set. It should not be seen as improper for to ladies to stand together."
"Oh, no! Lizzy, thank you, but I quite like to watch them. I am afraid if one should turn their head and catch me staring!" Georgiana replied, smiling at her friend's thoughtfulness. If they were not in public, she would happily stand with Elizabeth for she was sure they would have good fun. Alas, there were plenty of people she did not know and was not comfortable having look at her.

"Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy said. The three ladies of their small party turned their eyes to him. He was clearly out of his comfort zone. "Would you - that is, if you do not have some other engagement - would you dance the next with me? That way, Georgiana may watch the dance without fear of being caught staring."

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled with mirth, and Georgiana hoped she would not tease him too terribly. "Well, Mr. Darcy, I have spoken to none but our merry little party since you've arrived. Surely you would have noticed if someone had come to engage me, sir?"

Mr. Darcy noted the challenging raise of her brow. "Indeed, but I figured it better to ask than to assume."

Elizabeth's resulting laugh was enchanting to both Darcys. "Mr. Darcy, that is a very good answer. That answer combined with my want for your sister to comfortably enjoy watching the dancers, leaves me no choice. I suppose me must dance the next."

And she immediately returned to joking with group, utterly unaware of the heart she had set astir in a gentleman she'd just recently met, and the hope she had fanned in a young girl.
Chapter 7

The dance ended with a round of clapping and another young lady slid onto the bench. Darcy offered a stiff arm to Elizabeth and led her to the dance line. Elizabeth was thoroughly amused to see Darcy's face contort as he tried to conceal from her his awkwardness.

Georgiana's eyes followed the two. Fitzwilliam, you wipe that look off of your face! You look like you are being force even though you were the one who sought a dance.

Miss Charlotte Lucas was fully aware of Georgiana's intentions. The young girl's face practically radiated hope, and through her eyes one could see the cogs shifting in her brain. It was a fascinating expression to see affixed on a woman of her means, for women like that were usually well versed in hiding their emotions.

In short, Charlotte was thoroughly amused. The girl that Lizzy had befriended was now plotting Lizzy's romance. "Lizzy has talked about you a great deal since meeting you, Miss Darcy. She read your letters with quite full a heart," Charlotte said, keeping a keen eye on the girl beside her.

Georgiana shifted her gaze from the dancing pair to the woman who'd spoken to her. Knowing that her letters meant something to Lizzy warmed her heart. "I read hers just the same. Should you doubt me, my brother can attest to my excitement upon receiving her letters."

"I cannot imagine you every being dishonest, Miss Darcy," Charlotte said, truly meaning it. "You are so honest a person, your very intentions appear on your face."

Georgiana blushed and returned her gaze to Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam. Surely Miss Lucas could not object to what was clearly such a perfect match!

The dancing pair was quite content, as it was. The conversation had been stilted at the beginning, but their talk steadily grew comfortable and turned this way and that.

"Mr. Darcy, as glad as I am to see my dear Georgiana, I must inquire as to how your tenants are fairing. Are you sure they are well without you there?" Elizabeth said when the dance brought them together for a few steps.

Darcy was pleased to hear the woman talk of her care for Georgiana, for he had always sworn he could not marry anyone who did not love her just as much as he did (although, he assured himself, this surely was not an issue for he had little intention marrying anyone anytime soon). Her concern for his tenants was refreshing as well, so many society women being of little feelings towards those they were trusted to look after.

When the dance brought them together again, he spoke, "I have been keeping tabs on everything through correspondence with my steward. He assures me that all is well with our tenants, and he knows better than to lie to me."

It was a stiff answer, but Elizabeth was pleased enough to hear he was not the sort of man to disregard his duties. She told him as much, and the rigidity of his form immediately relaxed; that is to say, he was still fairly stiff but less so than was his normal countenance. He does not look so miserable when he is like this, Elizabeth thought before blushing at her impertinence. I should not think such things. I do not know him so well to suppose such things.

Fitzwilliam Darcy was grateful when the dance dictated a temporary switch in partners. He found that his mouth was suddenly dry and worried briefly over his health although he knew it was not the
cause. He watched the man now enjoying Miss Bennet's laughter with envy until she, by chance, turned her head in his direction and caught his eyes. The smile she gave him was not the same exuberant one he'd seen so many times in their short acquaintance, but deliberate, sincere, and sweet.

The dance brought them together again, but neither of them spoke: they didn't feel the need, each meticulously planning words they never said. It was a comfortable silence, each decided, and both chose to simply enjoy the small talk they usually found tedious.

When the dance ended, the couple was taken by surprise although they had performed each step as they was meant. Darcy cleared his throat and proffered his arm to Elizabeth. She took it. Still, neither spoke. Elizabeth was beginning to think speech had never even existed when Georgiana's quiet exuberance over took them.

"Oh, you both dance so well together!" Her young cheeks were rosy with happiness, and Elizabeth felt her suddenly unfamiliar laugh bubble in her chest. It was like the sweet wines her mother reserved for impressing guests.

"Did we indeed? I must say, I felt I was moving wholly by memory and none by intention! I was certain I must of mussed my footing and your brother was only being a gentleman and abstaining from comment." Elizabeth said, removing her hand from Mr. Darcy's elbow and grasped Georgiana's in a friendly hold.

Darcy clasped his hands behind his back. "Indeed, I noticed no such muss. You moved perfectly as far as I could tell."

That certainly was the highest of praise Fitzwilliam had ever given a woman, Georgiana was sure. "I thank you both for letting me indulge myself in watching you."

Again Elizabeth laughed, taking the young girl's face in her hands. "I am sure I could never refuse you anything, and I fear your brother could not either."

"You are quite right, Miss Bennet. It is my hope that Georgiana need never want for anything," Mr. Darcy said. "And so, may I ask to dance with you during the dinner set, for I am quite sure she is now wanting a dinner companion."

Elizabeth nodded her consent before being dragged away by Charlotte, a light blush sitting daintily on her cheeks. When they managed to find an unoccupied corner, Charlotte rounded on her friend.

"Indeed, Lizzy, I do not think I have ever seen you hold your tongue, and now you are hardly speaking at all!" Charlotte said.

Elizabeth pressed her abdomen, trying to calm the flippant butterflies floating about. "I… I do not know what to say." She let her arms float back to her side and straightened her posture. She refused to be embarrassed for having a momentary lapse of her quick tongue. It was then that a flock of red coats entered the room.

At the same moment, a shocked shriek sounded through the hall. Lizzy turned her head just fast enough to see Georgiana collapsing into her brother's arms. A soldier standing near the Darcys moved as if to help the poor girl, but Mr. Darcy roughly shoved him to the floor. There was recognition and rage in the Darcy's eyes.

Elizabeth ran to her friend's side in a burst of unaccountable speed. Charlotte escorted Elizabeth and the Darcys to a guest room where the poor girl was left to rest and recoup. On the floor below, the guests made their excuses and fled the house, rumours already rolling off tongues.
Lizzy held the girl's hand as she slept. Mr. Darcy took up station at a writing desk in the corner of the room, his hands to his forehead. Neither spoke, but Elizabeth's eyes demanded answers that Mr. Darcy knew would not go unheeded.
Chapter 8

It was truly a nightmare she'd had dozens of times; seeing George again, that is. She had collapsed after seeing him, she surmised, and now she lay in an unfamiliar bedroom with her friend lying next to her.

Her friend…

Elizabeth!

Georgiana felt a wave of grief overcome her. How could she explain her naivety to Elizabeth? In her despair, she'd not thought to check her sobs. Lizzy sat up slowly and took the poor girl to her arms, letting her cry all the tears her eyes could muster. When the tears were done and her cheeks were dry, Georgiana explained her near elopement to the red clad man.

Georgiana expected Elizabeth to leave: for her to be appalled at Georgiana's stupidity and to leave. She didn't. Instead, Lizzy comforted Georgiana and listened to her tale.

"He poisoned me against Fitzwilliam, Lizzy! How I could ever think that Fitz wouldn't want the best for me, I don't know. You must think me the stupidest girl of your acquaintance," Georgiana said, burying her hands in her face, "I am so ashamed!"

Lizzy's hand made small circles on Georgiana's back. "Georgiana Darcy, I shall not have you being ashamed of your good nature: you were simply too good to think anyone could have malicious intent. I am sad that this Mr. Whickham fellow stole that from you." Elizabeth was more than sad, if she were being completely honest: she was livid.

When Elizabeth had insisted — against her mother's wishes — that she would not leave until Miss Darcy was awake and well enough to bid her leave, a maid was sent to Lucas' Lodge with a night clothes and a day dress for the following morning. The maid, having heard from the youngest Bennet girls of the evening, asked after Miss Darcy's health. Among her many questions and well wishes was the news of the brave red coat, a Mr. Whickham, who'd rushed to her aid only to be shoved aside by the rude Mr. Darcy. Not knowing what she now knew, Elizabeth said nothing against Whickham but defending Mr. Darcy as the concerned brother he was.

Oh, that man! She wished she'd have slipped something to the servant so to have everyone warned. She kissed her friend's cheek and held her until a quick rap on the door was heard. Mr. Darcy entered at their response.

Darcy stood with his chin held high upon his entry, refusing to look Miss Bennet in the eyes. He knew she'd want to know what had caused Georgiana's illness, and he did not want his sister to lose the company of her good friend over a past trifle with a despicable man.

Noting his stiff posture, Georgiana laid his fears to rest. "I've told her about Mr. Whickham, Fitz; about what almost happened."

His breath caught in his throat as he finally allowed himself to face Elizabeth. Anxiety infected the air like a disease. No one spoke for some time. Darcy sat at the writing desk he'd occupied the night before.

Darcy broke the silence. "I will visit the shop keepers and warn them of his gambling and past debts. Hopefully we can keep what damage he does to a minimum."
Elizabeth nodded her agreement: the thought of that man ruining the shopkeepers' finances was beyond apprehensible. She turned to Georgiana and patted the girls back before standing. "I think it best that I leave you two for now. I fear my I am quite a picture at the moment, and not an all too pleasant one," she said, blushing when she realized how embarrassingly worse for ware she must look and cursing herself for drawing attention to it.

She found Charlotte in the tea parlor. She seemed so preoccupied with her stitches, Elizabeth thought she'd not been noticed. Charlotte said nothing as Elizabeth fell onto the davenport. A Radcliffe sat next to a freshly poured cup of tea. Elizabeth mouthed a sincere 'thank you' before letting herself sink into a moment of relief.

The weight of a quilt gently enfolding her was what woke her. The book she'd been reading was pulled from where it rested atop her chest and placed on the table in front of her, open so to save her place. How indecent, she thought upon seeing men's boots walking from her, of me to sleep in such a public space as a parlor. It wasn't so indecent, she decided, that she could not nap a little longer.

She let her muscles go heavy. She rested.

When next she woke, it was of her own doing at a little past midday. She found her way to the room Georgiana had been given, greeting the young girl.

"I had begun to think you'd decided you wanted nothing to do with me Lizzy," Georgiana said, "I wouldn't blame you."

Elizabeth sat on top of the duvet and gave the girl a stern look. "It shall take a great deal more than what you've told me to be rid of me. I shall not abandon a friend so easily."

Georgiana smiled. "Only joking," she said. Both of them knew she wasn't. "Fitz told me he had found you asleep on a couch! I'm sorry for it surely must be because of your tending to me that you were so exhausted!"

The thought of Mr. Darcy having seen her asleep as no one but family should sent a shiver down her spine. She raised her chin in exaggerated, faux haughtiness. "Why, Miss Darcy, you should not think so highly of yourself for certainly it was the dancing, not you, that tired me."

Georgiana stared for a moment before realizing Lizzy was simply being Lizzy and making a joke. A ghost of a smile found it's way to her lips, then a living smile, and the full blown grin. The girl broke into giggles at the mention of how similarly Lizzy's act resembled the behavior of their mutual acquaintance, Miss Bingley. The giggling grew to laughter. More jokes and smiles and laughs found them curled on the bed and holding their stomachs for fear of splitting a seam.

That was how Fitzwilliam Darcy found them when he entered the room. He cleared his throat. Georgiana's laughter faded to a lingering giggle, but Elizabeth's stop completely. She stood from the bed and straitened her dress. Twice in one day he has seen me as he shouldn't have; what must he think?

"I knocked," he said, pointing dumbly at the door.

"We did not hear it, sir," Elizabeth said, still batting nervously at her skirt.

A gentle smile crept onto Mr. Darcy's face, and it softened his features nicely. "I certainly would imagine not when such deafening mirth seemed to be taking place in here."

Georgiana giggled again. This made Elizabeth giggle. Both girls giggling led the laughter to bubble in their chests again. Mr. Darcy's smile widened at seeing his sister so happy. What would these
laughs sound like echoing through the halls of Pemberley? He could only imagine.
"I hope it was not too presumptuous of me to cover you with a quilt while you were sleeping. It is fairly cold outside, after all, and I could not stand to see you sick after all you have done for my sister," Mr. Darcy said as he escorted Elizabeth to the dining room. Georgiana had chosen to take her meal in her borrowed room, and Sir Lucas had insisted Elizabeth stay until the morning; it would be rude of Mr. Darcy not to accompany her to dinner (he reasoned to himself after already having done so).

"I thank you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, looking away from him, "But you needn't help me out of obligation: your sister is my friend, and I do not expect anything for treating her as such. She is quite like a sister to me, I should think, though she is much more well mannered than my younger sisters."

Elizabeth's stomach turned. Had he been kind to her thus far only because she was good to Georgiana? To presume her kindness to Georgiana was for some sort of repayment from him offended Elizabeth. She wanted to be angry with Mr. Darcy: she told herself she was angry with Mr. Darcy. In truth, though, she knew she was disappointed. With what, she could not quite place. Each time she'd thought she'd pinned down a reason, she managed to convince herself that it was without foundation.

Mr. Darcy was pleased to hear her affections for his sister were so deep. He could not understand, however, why she was so against his repaying her kindness. He had no intention of letting her freeze herself into a deadly cold! She was the only tolerable lady outside of his own family that he'd ever met. Her personality seemed so ingrained in her everything that Darcy was sure she would be of the very same spirit no matter the circumstances she was raised in.

By dessert, Elizabeth had nearly forgotten her strange upset, and she laughed gaily with the Lucas family. When the men and the women parted after the meal, however, the Charlotte reminded her.

"Mr. Darcy looks at you a great deal, Lizzy," she said softly, pulling Elizabeth away from her mother and sister. "Have you some news to share?"

Elizabeth was at a loss for a moment before realizing Charlotte's meaning. Her stomach twisted. "Indeed, I do not! What news could a friend's gaze possibly entail?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes as Elizabeth made an exaggerated tilt of her head. "Mr. Darcy is not your friend, Lizzy, his sister is."

Elizabeth's stomach was now so unsettled she would have been sure something of the meal must have turned had anyone else also been ill. "Pray tell why I cannot be friend's with both Darcys, Charlotte, for I would dearly love to know."

"I think, dear Lizzy," Charlotte said, trying to keep her amusement from showing, "that Mr. Darcy would not wish friendship of you."

"And what leads you to believe that?" Elizabeth asked, raising her voice above what was proper and drawing the attention of the other ladies in the room; they said nothing but were now straining to listen in on the conversation. Elizabeth and Charlotte turned their backs to them. Elizabeth raised her eyes and said again, quietly, "What leads you to believe that, Charlotte?"

"Mr. Darcy looks at you a great deal, Elizabeth." This was accompanied with a look that meant she was not joking.
It was then that, with the impeccable skill of interrupting important moments all men seemed to have had, the gentlemen rejoined the ladies. Elizabeth and Charlotte were forced to abandon their secluded corner and make polite talk.

"Mr. Darcy, will you be able to remain amongst the country very long with your sister's health in such a condition?" Mrs. Lucas asked. Elizabeth couldn't tell if her concern was more for Georgiana's health or the loss of Mr. Darcy's rich company.

"I think my sister's illness tonight was likely due to," Mr. Darcy turned his eyes to Elizabeth, "the excitement of seeing her good friend Miss Elizabet. She will no doubt recover."

Elizabeth raised her brows, mildly offended he could say such a thing while looking her in the eyes. "So it is my fault, Mr. Darcy? And is that your professional diagnosis as a doctor?"

A pleased smirk stretched his lips. "Indeed, you have caught me, Miss Elizabeth: I am not a doctor, but I know my sister well. I did not mean to imply it was your fault. I simply meant to say she is so much happier for seeing you, Miss Elizabeth, and she would not be so happy if we were to leave. What are a few tired days to happiness?" He held her gaze a second too long before turning back to Mrs. Lucas, "So in answer to your question: no, I do not intend to move us unless Georgiana's health is in actual danger."

Mrs. Lucas seemed please to know Mr. Darcy would remain in Hertfordshire a while longer and moved to different topics of conversation. The conversation was idle for the rest of the evening, aside from Mrs. Lucas' unfruitful attempts of recommending her daughters to Mr. Darcy in the same way Elizabeth imagined her mother would do if in the same position.

When it came time to retire, Elizabeth requested she stay with Georgiana. "Jane and I share a room at home," she explained to Mr. Darcy, embarrassed to be admitting such a thing to a man who surely had never had to share anything in his life, "And I have always found it a comfort to have someone to speak to at nights where I was unwell or upset."

Mr. Darcy nodded his assent. "I think you must know more of these things than I do, Miss Elizabeth. Thank you for taking such care of her."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Do not thank me sir. I have told you before: Georgiana is my friend and quite like a sister. I do not want thanks from anyone, I simply want my friend to be happy."

"Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. I know you do not want thanks, but I cannot help my gratitude. Georgiana had been missing something after her, shall we say, upset. I think you may be helping her find that again." Mr. Darcy said, clenching and unclenching his fists. He very rarely displayed his feelings with such openness. He didn't know what sort of response he expected but the smile she stopped to give him from the top of the staircase was just what he'd needed.

"Lizzy!" Georgiana said from where she was was curled up on the bed. "What in the world are you doing here in your nightdress and robe?"

Lizzy closed the door behind her. "I am accustomed to sharing a room with Jane, and I find I simply cannot settle into bed on my own." Georgiana stared at her, mouth slightly agape. "If you are uncomfortable, I will go! Please do not look so frightened!"

"No!" Georgiana said. "No. Please stay, Lizzy. I think I could do with your company: I think I can always do with your company."

Elizabeth let a smile take over her face as she discarded her robe atop a chair and scurried to the
warmth of the bed. Georgiana blushed: never knowing her mother and having no sisters, she hadn't before seen another woman in her night dress. It felt as if she and Elizabeth were more intimate than just friends; she had thought they Elizabeth was like a sister before, but now she felt what she thought was sisterly feelings before was nothing compared to her sisterly feelings now.

Each girl lay on a pillow, the fireplace bouncing light and shadows on their faces. "I do not think I ever want to leave Hertfordshire," Georgiana whispered.

Lizzy had a sleepy smile on her face, and her whispered reply was barely louder than a breath. "You would miss Derbyshire, I think, dear Georgie. You would miss Pemberley. You have told me several times how much your home means to you, and I have seen the beauty of it myself."

"But I will miss you so much."

Lizzy rested her hand on the young girl's face. "We have talked about this, Georgie. We will write just as we did before."

Georgiana held the hand on her face with her own. "But it will not be the same, Lizzy!"

"Do not worry your pretty little head just now, Goosey. We are together now. Sleep."

"But I cannot help thinking about it now."

Elizabeth pushed herself up onto her elbows and looked down at the girl. "Well then," she said, putting on a serious face, "we must run away together, you and I."

Georgiana burst into a fit of giggling and Elizabeth followed suit. Soon the two girls were muffling their laughter in their blankets and pillows.

And they fell asleep without the fear of parting looming over their heads.
Chapter 10

Within a matter of days, word had spread of Mr. Whickham's tendencies to accumulate debts. With Mr. Darcy to back the claims, there was little doubt of Whickham's poor character. Meryton gossips soon had begun circulating their own rumours about the man, one of which being extremely accurate: his defamation of young girl's.

There was nary a place he could go without the whispers following him, and today was no different. Still, the disapproval of which he was spoken of only served to make him more enticing to some of the sillier girls in town.

One such girl was a Miss Lydia Bennet. Whickham thought her particular type of stupid: the kind of stupid that stuck her hand directly into a fire, not because she thought it was something else, but because she thought there was a particular beauty in being burned.

"So what if you don't pay? It isn't fair that some people get the best things in life just because they have more ruddy money!" she would say. But she was just like other girls in fancying she could change him.

Whickham amused himself with those girls who thought their love would save him. He wanted to ruin the lives of as many girls as he could while in Meryton. He knew the Darcys were in town, and he wanted to send a message; to make it clear that they could not beat him.

Many weeks and several pleasant gatherings between the Netherfield party and the Bennets saw an invitation from Mr. Bingley to the Bennet girls; well, the missive was addressed specifically to Miss Bennet, but the invitation named all five of the sisters.

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Jane was glowing with innocent excitement. "O, a picnic! Mr. Bingley says that it will be an indoor picnic, isn't that queer! Because of the chilling weather, he says. Doesn't that sound awfully lovely."

"Awfully awful, more like," was Lydia's reply.

Kitty, ever loyal to Lydia, hummed her agreement and parroted the sentiments, "Perfectly dreadful."

Jane turned to Lizzy. "Will you go?" she asked, hopeful. "Mr. Bingley writes that the Darcys will be there. It was Miss Darcy's idea for a picnic out of the outdoors, he says. I swear, Lizzy, she you must have rubbed off on her."

Elizabeth smiled, remembering her own little picnic with Georgiana. "What could be better than food and friends to keep the spirit warm in such chilly weather?" She turned to the middle sister, "Shall you join us Mary?"

Mary weighed the pros and cons of going to the friendly gathering. While she wasn't one for socializing, she did not want to to remain at home and subject to the abuse of her younger sisters and nervous mother. "Do you suppose it would be rude if I brought something to read?"

Elizabeth smiled. "I don't think it will be minded to much if you bring something with you so long as you make some small talk first. Georgiana mentioned to me she wanted to talk to you about music for she knows how ill I play, though she would never say it."

Mrs. Bennet could hold her tongue no more, "Mary, you must be very good on the visit so that the
men may see fit to recommend you to other gentlemen of their acquaintance!"

Elizabeth was trying desperately to suppress her mirth at her mama's antics. "Mama, we are not so desperate that we should resort to begging for husbands, I should think!"

With a roll of her eyes, Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, "Indeed you are not so desperate with your attentions from Mr. Darcy — and good on you, my clever girl, for gaining them — but certainly you must think of your sisters, child!"

At this, Elizabeth was absolutely horrified. "I have not received any special attentions from Mr. Darcy, Mama, nor would I expect any. He has given me no indication of such, and I would thank you not to make such assumptions." She threw her sewing on the table beside her as she stood to leave. She stopped at the threshold, poked her chin above her shoulder and said, "Jane, I would love to see my friends on the date proposed. Would you mind sending my response along with yours?"

At Jane's nod that she would, Elizabeth scurried up the stairs two at a time and retreated to the safety of her room. How could her mother think she would purposely vie for a man's esteem? Lizzy was sure no esteem worth having won by calculated means, and Mr. Darcy was clearly no fool become attached to a facade of a woman or else someone of the Ton surely would have ensnared him already.

And what of her mother assuming Mr. Darcy's affections lay with her? Charlotte had said something of the same meaning some time back, and she had found it just as ridiculous then.

And it hurt that she found it ridiculous.

When the day of the picnic arrived, Elizabeth had convinced herself that she had put her confusing upset behind her. Georgiana, though, knew Elizabeth better than most (better, even, than her sisters or Miss Lucas, she thought with pride) and saw her friend's discomfort. Several times Mr. Darcy tried to speak to Elizabeth and each time she managed to redirect his conversation elsewhere. Georgiana was worried her brother had done some offence to her friend.

Mr. Darcy worried about much the same thing as his sister. He found Miss Elizabeth's conversation quite valuable, and his chest ached from the loss of it. Her eyes seemed dull and refused to settle for even the briefest moment on his figure. While Miss Mary was a pleasing enough conversationalist in his opinion (straight to the point and without nonsensical silliness), he would much have preferred to discuss the moral flaws and virtues to be found in Hamlet or the cadence of Othello with Miss Elizabeth.

He watched her as she ran about the area with his sister, collecting wildflower bouquets that they gifted to everyone in their merry party. After each had a bouquet, Georgiana sat back down next to Mr. Darcy.

"What did you do, Fitz, to unsettle Lizzy so?" She asked, holding his arm and settling her chin on his shoulder.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he said.

It was then that a giggling Elizabeth fell to Georgiana's other side, her hands fixed in her friend's golden hair. When she pulled away, her eyes shone again with the genuine happiness and affection Darcy admired. Purple flowers were knotted together to form a flower crown that contrasted Georgiana's yellow hair beautifully. Georgiana laughed when she realised what Elizabeth had given her, and Darcy melted in seeing his sister and Elizabeth in such a blissful state.
"I must make you one!" Georgiana said, pushing herself to her feat and heading towards the hills Lizzy had wandered with her a few minutes earlier.

Jane and Mr. Bingley were sat under a tree together, speaking to one another as sweethearts did. Mary sat near enough to them to serve as a chaperone; although, her book served to distract her from paying any mind to the young couple.

And so, Darcy and Elizabeth were left together on the picnic blanket with no chaperone and feeling of discomfort between them.

"Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said, "If I have done anything to offend you –"

"You have not, sir," Elizabeth insisted.

"Then may I inquire as to why my conversation seems so detestable to you, today?" Darcy asked, frustrated now.

Elizabeth looked about them to see if anyone was listening: no one was even remotely close enough to attempt eavesdropping. "I have been told recently by more than one person that I appear coquettish in your presence. I do not want people to think I am luring you like a siren lures a sailor to his doom."

Mr. Darcy's surprise showed on his face. "Indeed, I do not think you coquettish at all, and I cannot imagine how one could see our conversation in such a way."

"Well, Mr. Darcy, the women of Hertfordshire have little more to occupy their time than idle gossip," Elizabeth said, looking into his eyes. "I would never wish to subject you to such rumours."

It was the sincerity of Elizabeth's statement that struck some chord on the lyre of Darcy's heart: that she would be concerned for him rather than seek his entrapment amazed him. It was one of the many things about her that amazed him.

Georgiana put a crown marble white flowers on Elizabeth's dark head, and the girls began laughing and chatting together. Elizabeth seemed to forget she'd been speaking to Mr. Darcy at all. It was as if nothing was changed.

He did not forget.

He was alerted.
Chapter 11

The Darcys were leaving Hertfordshire.

Mrs. Reynolds' son was stationed elsewhere, and his wife was due for her confinement period. The Darcys had already been at Netherfield far longer than was originally intended. Mr. Bingley had not yet purchased Netherfield but was to leave for Town in a weeks time to look over his finances. He was an adequate estate owner thanks to Darcy's tutelage.

Mr. Darcy could think of no excuse to prolong their stay. In fact, he felt he had been horribly neglectful of Pemberley in his time here. He was sure his staff was attentive to everything, but there were some things they just could not do.

So on a gloomy Tuesday morning, having said their farewells the previous day, the Darcy chaise set out for home. It was not long before they came to a halting stop, much to the chagrin of the driver. His anger only became louder as someone knocked on the door of the compartment.

Mr. Darcy opened the door to find Miss Elizabeth Bennet standing in the light rain that was swiftly picking up in intensity. There was a small package in her hand.

"I just wanted to say a final farewell," she said.

Mr. Darcy stared at her for a moment before realizing her final farewell was for his sister. "Miss Elizabeth, please," he said as he stepped out of the chaise. He was not comfortable with her standing in the rain and offered her his place.

"No, Mr. Darcy! I promise you, I can convey all my love to Georgiana from right here," she said. 
"You must get in before you are soaked for you will have to ride all day as you are. I can go home and change."

He would have none of it. She someone found herself wetting the carriage with her damp skirts, against her stubborn protests. Georgiana hugged her achingly tight, but Elizabeth did not mind. Elizabeth said her second goodbye as quickly as she could to keep Mr. Darcy from suffering the rain for long, and thrust the parcel she brought into the blonde girl's hands.

"My stitching is not the finest, but I embroidered a strip of cloth for you to mark your books with. You shall have no excuse of losing your page! And there is a bottle of ink to keep your well full. You must write to me again, and I fear it has been so long, your old well may have dried up," Elizabeth said.

Georgiana was on the verge of crying, something she'd done plenty of at their first goodbye, and Elizabeth could not bear to see it again. She hopped out of the chaise with Mr. Darcy's assistance and lingered a moment longer.

"Goodbye, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy said. "I am sure we will meet again someday."

Elizabeth's light energy seemed to vanish and the weight of her feelings hung in the air about her. "I am sure you are right, sir. Travel safely."

He got back into the chaise, soaked to the bone. The horses kicked their feet up, and the carriage was
"Lizzy!" Mary was breathless, standing at the top of the stairs with a letter crushed in her hand. "A letter sent posthaste from Miss Darcy just arrived. The boy that delivered it said the letter was passed to him from another messenger who had ridden his horse to exhaustion."

Elizabeth dropped her sewing and grabbed the letter from Mary, quickly reading the shaky hand that had written her name. The inside penmanship only seemed to deteriorate.

Dearest Lizzy,

I do not know what to do. Brother is ill. It began as a cough, just a little after we left Hertfordshire, but he refused to have it checked. Now he is confined to bed and mumbling and wheezing!

The doctor can do nothing but recommend rest. He says how hard Fitzwilliam has been working since our return probably hasn't helped him at all. I swear, my brother is determined to work himself to death and leave me.

My cousin, Richard, is here looking after me and has suggested I invite a friend to stay and take my mind from worrying. I don't imagine anything can take my mind from worrying, though. Still, to see you would at least give me someone to talk to.

Please come.

Yours,

Georgiana Darcy

Elizabeth wasted no time in informing her parents that she would be traveling to Pemberley shortly.

"That poor man!" Mrs. Bennet said. "He was a bit stiff, but to become so sick… what his sister must be feeling."

It was the least self-serving thing Elizabeth had heard her mother say in a very long time, but she had not time to be impressed.

She returned to her room to find Mary was already packing a bag for her. Elizabeth kissed her sister's forehead in thanks, and finished the task herself. Her father contacted her uncle in Meryton who offered his driver and brougham.

Elizabeth sent a missive the same day as receiving Georgiana's:

Dear Georgie,

I am coming.

I do not know when you should expect me, but I will be there.

I am on my way as you are reading this.

Elizabeth Bennet

Within two days of receiving Georgiana's news, Elizabeth was on her way to Pemberley. The trip was anxiety laden and sleepless.

Elizabeth was worried.
Mr. Darcy had always seemed as fit as a fiddle in the time she had known him, and to imagine him in less than impeccable health frightening. What if he passed in the time it took her to get there? She found herself falling into fits of sobs.

By the time she could see Pemberley in the distance, she was all cried out. She could not seem upset in front of Georgiana. She was there to comfort her. She would be the strong one.

Or so she told herself. Upon stepping onto the gravel drive, however, and seeing Georgiana her resolve broke. Georgiana looked so much older than 16. Dark circles sat under her eyes indicating she had been the victim of many sleepless nights.

She fell into Elizabeth's arms, exhausted, and they clung to each other as they both cried.

After arriving, Elizabeth was shown to a room that would be hers while she was there.

"I had them put you by me," Georgiana explained. "I'm usually in the opposite wing of the house, but I wanted to be near Fitzwilliam..." She was silent for a moment as she gazed down the hall. Elizabeth assumed that was where Mr. Darcy must lay.

"I do not mind, Georgie," Elizabeth said, giving the young girl's hands a squeeze, "but I think I would like a quick rest, if you don't mind. I find travel does not agree with sleep."

"Of course, Lizzy. I think I may lay down as well. I haven't slept much at all either, but I feel better simply knowing you're here." Georgiana said, escaping to her own temporary room.

Elizabeth woke up to the pained screams of a man's voice. Disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings, it took her a moment to find her dressing gown. When she was covered, she entered the hallway rushed to the room from which the shouting came.

She stood in the threshold, shocked at the pale and sunken face of Mr. Darcy. Georgiana was kneeling on the ground next to her brother's bed, hands clasped in prayer and tears streaming down her face. The maid who was serving as a nurse tried to push Lizzy out of the room, claiming it was indecent for her to be there. Lizzy pushed past her and knelt beside Georgiana, adopting the same position.

The two spent the night praying until exhaustion finally took them.

Chapter End Notes

I am now realizing that my formatting on the previous chapters are missing a lot of the italics. I'm too lazy to go back and fix it, but I'll try to catch it from now on.
Chapter 12

Mr. Darcy was getting better, the doctor had told them, but slowly. He was conscious for a couple hours of the day, but he could not speak much without exhaustion. He usually saved his words for reassuring Georgiana. When it became clear he was struggling to speak, Georgiana would suggest they read.

When she would say that, Elizabeth would open the tome that had sat forgotten on her lap during the siblings conversation and begin to read. They had read several of Shakespeare's plays in the past month, Georgiana and Elizabeth sharing the character load. Occasionally, one of the Darcys would request a sonnet and Elizabeth would oblige.

And so the better part of two months was spent.

It was near the end of these two months that Mrs. Reynolds mistakenly let slip news of the tenants worry and account troubles. Mrs. Reynolds was frazzled by her slip of tongue, but Elizabeth would not simply forget her words. "Mrs. Reynolds," she said, "I am no scholar, and I fear I cannot be of help when it comes to the accounting. Although we hadn't so many tenants at Longbourne, we did have some, and I think I may be able to provide some peace of mine if I introduce myself as visiting on Miss Darcy's behalf while she tends to her brother."

Mrs. Reynolds was quick to refuse. "My dear, I know you have good intentions, but I should not want talk of you to spread."

"Well," Elizabeth said, "I might say I'm a distant relative! I do not want Georgiana to worry about the estate nor Mr. Darcy in his fragile state."

"Dear, you musn't worry yourself, either. You are a guest at Pemberley."

"I am at Pemberley to bring what peace I can to Georgiana."

Mrs. Reynolds opened her mouth to protest before closing it to think. In realizing that Miss Bennet would not let this go, Mrs. Reynolds relented. "If you are quite set on going, I suppose I should have some baskets made up for you to bring. You shan't lie about your relation to the family. Just say you are Miss Darcy's friend and that should satiate their curiosity of you. I'm not sure what will calm them in respects to the master's illness, though."

"I can be quite convincing when I want to be, Mrs. Reynolds. Leave it to me."

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I can be quite convincing.

Elizabeth had said that, but stepping out of the carriage bring her around the property to call on the first tenant, she was worried. What if she only served to stir up concerns that weren't already there? Still, she steeled herself and knocked on the first door.

The door opened and a voice called up to her. " 'Oo are you?" a chubby, blonde haired boy asked before sticking his thumb into his mouth.

Elizabeth bent at the knee to speak with him. "My name is Elizabeth Bennet. May I ask your name?"

The little boy pulled his thumb out of his mouth, said, "Henry Blechdan," and promptly shoved his
"Well, Mr. Blechdan," Elizabeth said with amusement in her voice. "Might I ask if your Mama or Papa are at home?"

Instead of answering, Henry turned on his heel and reentered the house in search of his mother. Elizabeth peered into the home through the open door but remained in her position at the threshold. When little Henry reappeared in the arms of a skinny woman with the same brown hair as him.

"Can I 'elp you?" she asked. The surprise on her face was clear but not unwelcoming.

"Hello. My name is Elizabeth Bennet; I'm a friend of Miss Darcy," she said, raising the prepared basket in front of her. "As I am sure you are aware, Mr. Darcy has not been well as of late, so I've come to be of some comfort to Miss Darcy." At Mrs. Blechdan's look of confusion, Elizabeth continued. "Miss Darcy is all nerves over her brother, and I did not want her to worry over the estate was well. I asked the housekeeper if I might visit you and the rest of the tenants in her place."

Mrs. Blechdan nodded at this and furrowed her brow in concern. "You say Mr. Darcy is still ill? Is he quite unwell?"

"He was for a small while, but he is recovering."

Mrs. Blechdan sighed in relief and took the offered basket. "That is good news! He's always been so constant in his visits that we was all in a tizzy when he'd been gone so long."

"I am glad to know his tenants care so for him," Elizabeth said. She truly was. He could be so stiff at times that she wasn't sure how his tenants and staff would receive him.

"I don't supposed you'd stay for tea, would'ya?"

Elizabeth smiled. "I'm sure I could stay should it not be any inconvenience."

Each home she paided visit to on the Darcy property was much the same in attitude, welcoming Elizabeth once they were aware of her relation to the Darcys. Most of the day passed much the same with Elizabeth introducing herself as Georgiana's friend and assuring them that Mr. Darcy was on the mend. She knew that some of the looks she received, although friendly, were not without some skepticism at her visiting the tenants. She could not blame them. Had it been someone else, surely Elizabeth would not have been without a few question.

Later in the week, Mrs. Reynolds pulled Elizabeth to the side after luncheon. Georgiana, as she always did after eating, went to check on her brother, so the two older ladies were left to themselves.

"It seems that having a visit from a main house guest did the trick," Mrs. Reynolds said with a nervous smile. "The tenants are glad to know they aren't being neglected, and because it was you and not Georgiana to make the trip, they know that the master really is unwell."

Elizabeth reached out and gave Mrs. Reynolds's hands a gentle squeeze. It was clear to Elizabeth that the woman had clearly been overwhelmed with handling the estate without direction from Mr. Darcy.

"He is sitting awake longer every day, and the doctor says he should be able to get up and walk soon. Only short distances at first, he says, but eventually Mr. Darcy will be just as he was a few months ago," Elizabeth said. "I should head up now. We are in the middle of King Lear, and Georgiana was practically bursting when we left off yesterday."
Mrs. Reynolds watched Miss Bennet as she gave one final smile of reassurance and left to be of some use to her friends. She not recall ever having met a lady quite like Miss Bennet.
Chapter 13

Darcy was relieved to be off bed rest, even if he only had the strength to walk from his bed to his desk. He refused the doctor's suggestion of a wheelchair; if he was not fit enough to stand on his own, he was not fit to be about the house. He did not want to worry the staff.

As his faculties returned to him, Darcy could no longer justify the impropriety of Miss Bennet's staying with he and Georgiana without some chaperone to oversee her stay. Elizabeth was embarrassed she had not once thought of a chaperone. She knew her own mind, and she knew she would never… but Mr. Darcy meant no insult in his suggestion.

In the moment immediately after his suggestion, however, Lizzy had not managed to quell her temper and think as he was thinking. "Sir, I am here to look after my friend – your sister – in her time of worry. You know this, I know this, and your staff knows this," she said in a huff, "but if nothing has happened thus far to warrant a chaperone, I cannot see the necessity in it now."

Darcy looked up at her from his place at his writing desk. Anger made the light of her eyes dance to and fro. "That was when I was constrained to my sickbed. No one should question your morals then, but I am now well."

Elizabeth scoffs. "Well, sir? You can barely stand a quarter hour without burdening your breath!"

"But that I may stand at all should make all think I am well and your services to my sister no longer required!"

"I am no servant," Elizabeth said. Her chest was tight with anger and hurt. "My services cannot be dismissed by anyone buy your sister. And I must ask, how can you be so sure that your loyal staff would spread such untrue gossip to Town when we are so far in the country? Do you not trust your staff? I have only been here some small time, and I know your staff admirers you greatly – though with your moods, I often wonder why!"

Her cheeks were growing red as the last of her rant settled in the air between them. Darcy was sure he should feel offended, but he could not. Instead he laughed. He so rarely laughed with anyone but Georgiana.

Elizabeth was sure she should be affronted by the laughter, much in the same vein that Darcy was sure he should feel offended, but he could not. Instead he laughed. He so rarely laughed with anyone but Georgiana.

The two quite easily forgot what they were fighting about, something neither stubborn soul was ever keen to do. When the laughter died, they loitered in a comfortable silence for a minute before Georgiana barged into the room, spouting some nonsense in French. After getting over her shock and controlling the blush that burdened her, Elizabeth replied.

It was Georgiana's way of feeling close to Elizabeth; speaking to her in a language her brother didn't have. "Elizabeth, une lettre pour toi! Je pense que c'est de te papa."*

Elizabeth smiled and took the letter with a merci. "I will go read this now, so we might do something interesting today for me to pen tonight and send in response tomorrow."

Georgiana perched herself next to her brother, who watched as Elizabeth left the room. Georgiana quirked her head to the right before smiling at her brother and glancing towards the door he still stared at.
My dearest girl, the letter started.

I am glad to hear of Mr. Darcy's continued recovery, as I find myself quite helpless in your absence. Jane has fallen into quite the case of the dismals for reasons she will not share with an old man like me, nor, I fear, will she share with anyone but you.

Lydia grows even more unruly; I fear she is enamored. With whom, I could not tell you, for she dances with every redcoat she can accost. Your mother encourages this, and I am afraid that I know not how to stop it.

Elizabeth sighed; she loved her papa dearly, but he was always a poor authoritative figure. He would take each mockery a step too far, and make each disciplinary act a week too late.

Mary seems the same to me. All that girl does, after all, is practice that deviled pianoforte and philosophize. I doubt she could get into trouble she try. Kitty does nothing but complain.

I hope, Lizzy, that you should take your leave from Pemberley within the month. If Mr. Darcy is, as you say, "recovering with the speed only a stubborn man could," I am sure Miss Darcy will be able to spare you. After all, we cannot have the Darcys grow as dependent on you as your own family clearly is.

God Bless You,

G —— Bennet

Elizabeth stood and paced across her room as she read the letter again. And then she plopped into her seat to read the letter a third time. Gingerly, she let her head fall to rest her cheek on the desk in front of her.

Parting is such sweet sorrow, Shakespeare had written. Poppycock! The ache in her chest was anything but sweet.

Elizabeth knew that the twisting sensation in her chest came as a warning, too late, that she was becoming too comfortable at Pemberley. She had become slack in her attentions to her family.

Elizabeth's head popped up in response to the knock at her door. "Come in!"

Mrs. Reynolds stepped into the room. "I've come to let you know Miss Darcy is in the music room practicing, and I've laid out some teas and nips for you."

"Thank you Mrs. Reynolds."

The housekeeper hovered in the threshold before stepping into the room and closing the door behind her. "I know, Miss, that it is not my place, but I hope you know that I am always happy to listen."

Elizabeths forced smile fell from her face. "Mrs. Reynolds, normally I would try not to impose my worries onto others, but I cannot talk to Georgiana about this, and you have been so good to me in my time at Pemberley!" Mrs. Reynolds smiled, took a seat on a small chaise that stood against a finely wallpapered wall. Elizabeth moved to sit next to her and continued. "I have become too fond of Pemberley, Mrs. Reynolds, and now it has come time for me to leave."

Mrs. Reynolds gently took the letter from Elizabeth and skimmed the contents. "We always knew this stay at Pemberley would have to be temporary, but that does not mean this is goodbye. You
know that Pemberley and everyone apart of it will always welcome you back." Elizabeth nodded, wiping a stray tear from the tip of her nose. "It seems that your family needs you right now."

Elizabeth huffed and, in a rare moment of selfishness, said "Will they ever stand on their own? I know that I do not do everything, but I do far too much. I am the discipline and compassion, and I know not who I am to receive those from!"

Mrs. Reynolds put her arm around Elizabeth's hunched shoulders. "I am sure that you have more sources of compassion than you realize; the best compassion, after all, is implemented without one's knowledge. That is the difference between pity and compassion."

Elizabeth sniffed, and grabbed an unfinished handkerchief from her embroidery vesicle to dry her eyes. "Mrs. Reynolds, I believe you are right."

"Old women usually are!" She said with a laugh. "Now, off to the music room you are. I find nothing soothes an aching soul so well as tea and biscuits. Off you go!"

And Elizabeth went.
Georgiana was in tears when Elizabeth what her father had written for. For a girl who seemed so composed all the time, it was a shock to see her so disheveled. When she finally dried her eyes with the handkerchief Elizabeth offered, she tried to lighten the mood.

"Perhaps we could push Fitz down the stairs," Georgiana said, "Not a full staircase, mind you, just the last few steps so he falls and hurts his arm or something. Then you will have to stay until that has healed as well."

Elizabeth gasped as if she were scandalized, but she knew Georgiana was simply trying to start a more lighthearted conversation. The girl couldn't hurt a fly. "No, I think we should let Mr. Darcy enjoy his wellbeing. Besides, they say distance makes the heart grow fonder, so I expect you shall run into my arms like a long separated lover the next time I see you."

Georgiana smiled, but her eyes were still misty with potential tears. She could not imagine how her brother would handle such news.

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Fitzwilliam Darcy was in as much of a state as he'd ever been, as every person of his employ could attest. While he had never favored tobacco, Darcy took a moment to consider the comfort his snuff box might yield.

Of course, he had known she would leave; she had, after all, only come to be of comfort to his sister in his illness. As he was no longer ill, his sister could no longer be in need of comfort.

She was need at home with her family. If only she hadn't become such a fixture in his.

Nonetheless, Darcy arranged his most comfortable carriage and saw to it one of his married serving girls was sent with her as a chaperone.

Georgiana clung even more so to Elizabeth than she had since first meeting her. Their usual picnics and talk of books dragged on longer than normal, and at night Georgiana would climb into Lizzy's bed and they would prompt one another with "what if" scenarios about their future.

For her part, Elizabeth seemed to be handling herself with a decorum befitting her station. Darcy rather resented her composure in the face of his households collective disappointment. He chastised himself for the ungentlemanly want for her to hurt as much as he – well, his sister – did at the loss Pemberley was facing.

It was the eve of her departure when he got his wish, although understand more distressing circumstance.

The air had a particular gloom in it, which Elizabeth had, in all her good-naturedness, tried to rectify by exuberant joy she did not feel. The day dragged on in this style for several hours.

It was after luncheon when a rider, covered in dirt and sweat appeared with a letter. The Darcys and Elizabeth sat on the steps of Pemberley, taking an informal tea and biscuits while Mr. Darcy, after much prodding from Elizabeth, read to them. Upon the rider's approach, Darcy set the book aside.
The rider dismounted, catching his breath as he slipped to the ground. He was young, fourteen maybe, but he spoke with purpose. "A letter for a Miss Elizabeth Bennet sent posthaste from," he squinted at the letter he'd pulled from his saddlebag, "Longbourn. Important I 'spose. My Pa told me not to let this here girl rest 'till this letter was delivered."

Elizabeth stepped forward to take the letter, concern crinkling her brow. Mr. Darcy directed the boy to his stables and told him the stable hand would happily water his horse and make her muscles were well rested for his journey back to who knows where.

The party of three then moved indoors, and the Darcys settled in the music room while Elizabeth moved to the library to read her missive. What could possibly be so pressing that her family should send her a letter that very well may have missed her? She stuck a finger under fold of the envelope and popped the wax seal off. She unfolded the letter with shaking hands, as if her body knew what she was going to read before her eyes could make out the words.

The script was hurried:

My Dear Lizzy,

I hope to catch you before you take leave of Derbyshire. You must be prepared for what you are going to face upon your return.

I shall be plain with you: Lydia has made a mess bigger than any she has ever made before. Mr. Wickham, Lydia told us, has fallen quite madly for Jane. How he could have is beyond me, as I have rarely seen the converse. Lydia, taken in by what she thought horribly romantic, has aided Mr. Wickham in spiriting Jane away! After much scream and fighting and pleading, Lydia has confessed that she did not think – she never does – to ask where Mr. Wickham planned to take your sister, and I now fear she is very much ruined.

Elizabeth threw the letter on the desk and forced herself to take deep breathes. When she'd calmed herself enough to keep the letters from blurring together through tears of furry, she continued to read.

Worse still, Jane seems to have gone willingly by all accounts, for Lydia manage to convince Jane she could do no better since Mr. Bingley's affections turned to Miss King a few months ago! I beg you, have out all your girlish tears before you get here, for your time shall be quite bespoke by your mother's nerves.

At this, Elizabeth threw her father's letter again, refusing to finish reading. Her father was more concerned about ending her mother's much justified panic, than he was with recovering his eldest daughter. Elizabeth had always thought her father a wise man, but now he seemed a degenerate. He had let his daughters do whatever they please. Lizzy had thought that very kind of him before, but now she resented him. If he had only exerted half of the control normal fathers exerted, this mightn't have happened.

And he suggested Jane had gone willingly! At this though, Elizabeth's anger turned to despair, and she fell to her knees, burying her face in her skirts. How long she stayed this way, she couldn't say, but it must have been a good while because when Mr. Darcy came to find her, the sky was dimming and her eyes dry though her face remained hidden in the fabric of her skirts.

She lifted her head when she realized Mr. Darcy, in his fine clothes, had sat beside her on the floor. He held the letter face down, and she knew he hadn't read it. She motioned for him to do so.

The minutes dragged. If they did not soon make an appearance downstairs, Georgiana would surely come to find them, and Elizabeth did not want the girl who had come to admire her to see her so
distraught.

Mr. Darcy folded the letter, and Elizabeth watched as muscles in his jaw jumped in anger. He stood and offered her his hand. When she was on her feet again, Darcy tucked her hand in his arm before she'd so much as straightened her skirt.

"I am afraid," he said as they walked to her room so she might change for dinner, "that you must write to your father and ask him if you might stay here longer. I have to go away on some business, and I would be comforted to know you are here. With Georgiana."

Elizabeth looked at him with wide eyes, surprised he was asking her to stay rather than hastening her leave. "What business has called you away so suddenly, sir? Are you sure you are recovered well enough to attend to it?"

"I refuse to let Wickham continue on this path of deceit and heartbreak. That alone will make me well enough to attend to this," Darcy said.

Elizabeth let her hand drop, and Mr. Darcy opened the door to her room for her. It was surely not appropriate, but her family was far beyond propriety at this point. "You do not have to do this, Mr. Darcy. My family's failings are not your responsibility."

Rather than continue to argue with her, Darcy grabbed her hand in his and kissed it before turning from her and setting off to inform his sister of his imminent departure and Elizabeth's extended stay.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone for correcting the French in the last chapter; I’ll let Georgiana know ;) And I am so so sorry to all of the people that are going to kill me for this chapter.
Georgiana's feelings were many, but she could not decide which was right. She had been elated when her brother had said he'd asked Elizabeth to stay a while longer. That was yesterday. Georgiana had assumed Elizabeth's unhappy countenance was, perhaps, due to Fitzwilliam's absence. It became clear rather quickly between Elizabeth's forced smiles and distant gaze that something worse was weighing on her mind. So Georgiana asked and Lizzy told her. "I am so sorry," Georgiana said, pulling Elizabeth's hands into her own, "If only I had done something to make his character better known, this would not have happened."

Elizabeth patted the girl's hand and sighed. "There is nothing more you could have done. I warned my father, but he puts little stock into what he should and too much stock into everything else." She took her hands away, then, and moved across the room so Georgiana would not see the tears clouding her eyes. "It's I who should have stopped it. I always knew Lydia was a fool, but I never thought she would purposely hurt Jane. I should have left as soon as your brother was well enough to stay awake through the day. My family needed me, and I was too selfish to leave you."

"You are not responsible for the failings of your family, Lizzy. Your father should have had your younger sisters disciplined better, I am sorry to say. Please don't be mad at me for saying so, but it is true. Mary is nice enough, although a bit severe, but the younger girls are wild in a way I have never met," Georgiana said, trying to comfort her friend.

Elizabeth was silent for a minute. She knew what Georgiana said was within reason, but the guilt remained. "Perhaps Jane would have talked to me, were I there. Father writes she went willingly and, although I can't believe it, if it's true, I know I could have stopped it were it so."

After minutes of silence in which Georgiana tried desperate to think of a way to bring back Lizzy's smile, she crossed the room to the pianoforte. Instead of sitting to play, though, she pulled the cushion on her piano bench. The cushion lifted on a hidden hinge, and a compartment holding mostly sheet music was revealed. Elizabeth had seen Georgiana pull out sheets on occasion, but she preferred to play from memory when she could.

Rather than pulling out music, Georgiana materialized a book. A simple piece of cotton had been sewn so that the front and back covers could be slipped into the fabric, successfully covering the any discerning title or authorship that might help Elizabeth identify the tome. When Georgiana strode back across the room and handed the book to her, however, embroidered in purple was the words Holy Bible. "I didn't know my mother," Georgiana said, letting a hand linger on the cotton cover, "but I have been told that she firmly believed the weight of the world was affixed to her shoulders. If my brother caught cold, she thought it her own fault. If our father made a foul investment, she should have talked him out of it. When I was old enough to understand, Fitzwilliam gave me Mama's bible and told me," she swallowed, "he told me that even though Mama went to church every week without fail, she acted as if she were God."

Elizabeth gasped. "Surely he didn't say that!"

Georgiana continued, "But she did, Lizzy, don't you see? To worry is natural, but for her to assume
responsibility and for you to assume responsibility; it isn't right! None of us are in control of everything: not my Mama and not you."

Georgiana moved her hand from the bible to Elizabeth's hand, gave a gentle squeeze, and then turned and left her alone.

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A fool! That is what Mr. Wickham was! Rather than disappearing to the country where no one would think twice of a young, presumably married couple, he had gone to London. London, where Darcy had many connections to call upon. No, finding the man was not difficult. But perhaps that was not a fool's move at all…

"You want me to pay you for kidnapping a girl?" Darcy asked through clenched teeth.

Wickham smiled. Jane was in her own room, which she had insisted upon until their wedding as was proper. Still, whether they'd shared a bed or not, she was ruined. Should her reputation maintain in tact, they would have to marry and Wickham would only agree upon his conditions being met.

"Five thousand a year. It is half of what you earn, so I should think it fairly split. Your father though me a son, practically," Wickham picked at his nails as he spoke. "Give me the money, and I'll marry the girl."

Col. Fitzwilliam, who had come to ensure Darcy was safe, took his cousin's cane and whacked Wickham upside the head with its metal grip. Wickham had not had the foresight to have another man present to keep him safe. Perhaps he thought they would not bring harm to him when only a hallway separated them from Jane. No matter now.

"Fitzwilliam!" Darcy exclaimed, motioning towards the limp body on the floor.

In response, Col. Fitzwilliam laughed and kicked the sole of Wickham's boot. "My footmen can help us carry him to my carriage, and you can surely convince Miss Bennet to come with you to see her sister, yes?"

"And what shall that accomplish?"

"Well," Fitzwilliam tossed the cane back to Darcy, "perhaps Miss Elizabeth might convince her sister of Wickham's character? We might convey her to Pemberley and leave Whickham at the nearest jail where he belongs."

"And let him ruin Miss Bennet's reputation?" Darcy asked, thinking of how devastated Elizabeth would be at her sister's fall.

Fitzwilliam stopped to meditate on the issue for a moment. "Should he say anything, we might say he was rejected in love and is spreading falsehoods in hopes she may receive no better offer?"

"As for her stay in town?" Darcy asked.

"Does she have any family in Town?"

"An Uncle."

The colonel grinned. "Who she was stopping to see before moving on to see her sister at Pemberley."
"But how can we justify her trip to Pemberley? Elizabeth was scheduled to leave when the letter with this scandal arrived."

Not overlooking the use of the woman’s Christian name but choosing not to mention it, Col. Fitzwilliam quickly solved this issue as well. "Perhaps Miss Elizabeth has had a fall, and her dear sister has come to tend to her."

Silence filled the room. Darcy was normally very plain in his words, and he could not remember when he last told a lie. They spent the next half hour ironing out the details of the plan, only having to hit Wickham back into unconsciousness once.

The Colonel would leave Wickham with the constables and the story they'd created, and Darcy would take Jane to Pemberley. Fitzwilliam would stay in Town just long enough to spread rumor of the beautiful girl his cousin was bringing to her sister, and how she had refused a man called Wickham and his likeliness to spread falsehoods. It would not stop all rumors against Miss Bennet, but it would stop many.

After his job was done and Wickham slandered, approximately a week from the date of the confrontation, Colonel Fitzwilliam was on his way to Pemberley.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we hear from Jane!

I'm not trying to be preachy with the God stuff, just so you know. I can't really get preachy when I know nothing of Anglicans (except that Jane Austen wrote 6 lovely prayers, and her father was a rector).

Thank you for reminding me to focus on the positive rather than the negative! Here's another chapter before the school gets into full swing, and I actually have to start reading what I write lol Henry/Fanny fic coming soon
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as the crunch of carriage wheels were heard on gravel path in front of Pemberley, Elizabeth was outside and waiting to take her sister into her open arms. When the doors to the carriage opened, however, Jane did not fly into them in the warm reception Elizabeth had imagined. Instead, Jane descended from the carriage slowly, refusing help from the footman.

Before Elizabeth could say a word, Jane turned an uncharacteristically cold gaze on her. "I will have you know, Lizzy, that I was quite on my way to contented marriage when the brute your friend calls brother appeared."

The carriage drove away and Misters Darcy and Fitzwilliam removed themselves to the library to give the two women as much privacy as the front of the estate would afford them.

Elizabeth reached for Jane but was again denied. "Since when have your affections turned to that evil man? How did this happen?"

"We are all only growing older, Lizzy. What reason have I to refuse the chance to be a wife and mother?"

"What of Mr. Bingley then? I thought you were well on your way to being in love with him?" Elizabeth asked. Her sister's character had never been inconstant.

At hearing Mr. Bingley's name, Jane cringed. "It seems he has become infatuated with Miss King."

Georgiana's warning of Bingley's flippant affections rung in Elizabeth's ears. She grew red in anger with the man who did not see her sister's worth as well as with Jane. "But that is no excuse for running off, Jane! You have enough good sense to know that! How could you have been so – so stupid?"

Elizabeth had not meant to say it. She knew Jane was not stupid, just stupidly heartbroken, but she could not put the words back in her mouth. Jane stormed past her and entered Pemberley, asking the first servant she could find to escort her to her "cell" so she might be alone.

When Georgiana saw Jane pass by with a cool air she did not remember her having upon their visit to Longbourne, she set out to find Elizabeth. She found her sat on the stairs. Georgiana sat beside her and Lizzy let her head fall onto her friend's shoulder.

"I do not know what has come over her," she said with measured breath, clearly avoiding tears.

Georgiana stroked her friend's hair. "Wickham is charming. I have always fancied myself sensible, and even I was taken with him."

"But she did not even claim to love him – only that she was on her way to a contented marriage. Content! The Jane I know would never be content with him!"

"What ever happened to her hopes of Bingley?"

Elizabeth sniffled then let out a bitter laugh. "It is as you said – inconstant. He is apparently paying his attentions to Miss King now. O, what I could warn her, I would!"
"But you cannot. Jane, however, is here. She cannot be warned now, but she can be helped."

"But how?" Elizabeth stood and walked away, picking up and twisting a handkerchief in her hand. "She is acting a fool! She will not be reasoned with."

Georgiana looked up from her place on the settee. "Even the most sensible person is liable to act a fool when heartbroken."

Elizabeth dissolved into tears again. Georgiana stood, then, and wrapped her arms around her friend. When her sobs again stopped, Elizabeth kissed Georgiana's cheek. "I am sorry you had to be witness to that. I am afraid I am becoming my mother in my old age."

Georgiana laughed. "Oh, I assure you, I can handle it. I was always taught to respect my elders."

They laughed again, putting aside for a moment the issue at hand and taking advantage of one another's support.

"Tell her," Georgiana said. "Tell her about Wickham and I."

That night, Elizabeth stealthily slipped into Jane's room and slipped into bed beside her. Jane said nothing – barely moved – but Elizabeth had shared a bed with Jane since they were small, and she knew her breathing patterns. Jane was awake.

"Jane," Elizabeth said, laying on her back but letting her head fall to the side to look at her sister. "I am sorry. You are not stupid, but you are hurt. I should have considered that."

Jane did not move or speak or give any sign that she was listening. Elizabeth continued, "That being said, I cannot apologize for what I do not understand, and what I do not understand is how you came to love Mr. Wickham."

"I do not love him," Jane said in haste.

"Then why, Jane? Why? What could persuade you to run away with him?"

Silence surrounded them for an eternity of seconds before Jane faced her sister. "I am afraid that I am running out of time, Lizzy."

"You are not on the shelf yet, Jane! You are so beautiful, I don't imagine you could ever be."

The despair in Jane's voice did not leave. "Perhaps, were my beauty enough, but it is not. We have no grand dowry. We cannot afford to be picky or act on eccentricities. I never understood Mama's obsession with marriage until – until Mr. Bingley's favor fell on Miss King. We are poor, Lizzy, and Papa is old. Mama's fear of the hedgerows is not unfounded. Papa does us no good by letting her tend to our futures rather than tending them himself."

"Papa loves us, Jane, and—"

"Yes, Papa loves us, but he is not thinking of what is best for us. The reality is, we could be on the streets at any moment. Were I to marry, I would at least have a home and a husband to provide you all protection."

"Wickham is poor as us and a gambler to boot, Jane. He would only serve to make us all miserable."

Jane grasped for Lizzy's hand in the darkness. "Don't say that, Lizzy. He could—"
Lizzy squeezed the hand that found hers. "He couldn't, Jane. Putting aside that his soldier's wage would never support so many people and putting aside the fact that he would sooner see you both thrown in a debtors' prison; Jane, Wickham has treated women ill before."

Jane snatched her hand away. "And how could you possibly know that?"

Elizabeth let the story come out then. She couldn't see Jane's face in the dark, but she knew the gamut of emotions that would be running across her face. She knew that Jane would first search for excuses for Wickham, desperate to look for the good in him. Then she would recognize how illogical it would be to lie about this, and she would feel pity for Georgiana's near ruin. Finally, she would recognize the reality of it all.

"Oh! Lizzy, I am ruined." The cold that had hardened her earlier in the day fell away and she cried. "I am ruined, and I have hurt you all by way of relation!"

Elizabeth kissed Jane's cheek and held her close. She could not say it would all work out or that it would be alright. Perhaps there was something to be said, but Lizzy could not think of it. Besides, no words could console Jane who had been betrayed by who was meant to heal her from her love's betrayal.

So Elizabeth held Jane.

And Jane cried.

And morning came.

Chapter End Notes

I know ya'll wanted her to have been kidnapped, but I'm sorry. I always wanted a Jane who wasn't perfect. Plus, as much as I love Jingly, I feel like more stories need to address the fact that Bingley is so easily manipulated.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day was better. It was not good, but it was better. Jane spent a good deal of her time staring out of windows as the love lorn were known to do. It was a requisite of healing, Elizabeth supposed.

The following week was better still. Georgiana and Jane had bonded through their mutual goodhearted but ill advised attempts at domesticating Wickham. With time it would become a joke, but that would be in years to come.

Two weeks past Jane’s rescue and arrival at Pemberly brought another guest: Mr. Bennet for his daughters. He did not write to inform the Darcys and his daughters as to his planned travel. When the foreboding music of the displaced and trodden on pebbles of the drive sounded out his arrival, the surprise was genuine in all of Pemberley’s residents.

As soon as Mr. Bennet alighted from the carriage, Jane threw herself into her arms and begged his forgiveness. Being second favorite of his children and seeing as the damage had been contained, Mr. Bennet was quick with his forgiveness: “I don’t suppose it matters much, my dear. You are not usually prone to such displays of silliness, and so when you finally succumbed all of your many silly fancies had united to form a single stupid action. Perhaps you should try being silly over a hat or some ribbons every so often, so we might avoid history’s repeating itself. Don’t let it happen again.”

Mr. Bennet was quite obviously uncomfortable with Jane’s need for physical reassurance, and as he told her she was forgiven, he gently but firmly removed her from his embrace. By this point, Elizabeth had processed the fact that her beloved and favored father did indeed stand before her after months of separation and – though she was not as exuberant in her greetings as she imagined she should be after a lengthy separation – she moved to occupy Jane’s previous post in their father’s arms.

“My dear Lizzy, do you see what befalls us without you to keep us in line?” he said, pulling back from the embrace and assessing his daughter.

Lizzy’s smile was tight. She was aware, of course, that her father was only joking, but it vexed her all the same. How could he, after the near ruin they faced not 2 weeks prior, be so amiable Even she – who had already forgiven Jane still – maintained a more serious disposition than usual. She had been embarrassed in front of her friends and utterly afraid for her sister – for her entire family!

– And Mr. Darcy! Elizabeth was struggling to even speak to him since his return. Every time she opened her mouth the immense feelings of gratitude for his rescue and mortification for how it reflected on her family blocked her throat. What could he possibly think of her? He had so kindly encouraged the affection between she and Georgiana, and it had brought him only difficulties. He would be justified in completely severing ties, Elizabeth thought, but she knew he would not take her friendship from his sister.

She wondered if he would revoke his own friendship from her and replace it with distant civility. He had made no attempt to do so, but she had not exactly been the best conversationalist with him in recent weeks. It would not be unwarranted, for though Jane’s elopement was hidden from most, the truth was known to him. Somehow, though, Elizabeth couldn’t imagine him shutting her out – not when Georgiana had nearly been where Jane was.
Elizabeth still felt her anxiety mounting, though, and with it was guilt. She was sure it was selfish of her to be thinking of her friendships at a time of near ruin and pain for Jane. Although she told herself every morning that she was the least affected by Jane’s actions, she would find herself unable to sleep each night as a small parcel of anger niggled in her thoughts and begged to be opened.

With Mr. Bennet’s unexpected arrival, Elizabeth could not help but feel her emotions doubled in intensity. While she could understand the need for her father to see for himself that disaster was well and truly diverted, he could have at least sent a rider ahead when he stopped to rest his horses. There was nothing she could do about it now, Elizabeth told herself, except make the best of what was happening at present.

“I’m sure I’ve never had any control on my sisters, no matter how I’d wished it when we were small,” Lizzy said as she looped her arm through her father’s. Mr. Darcy gestured them inside and they followed, Jane walking on their father’s other side. Mr. Bennet didn’t offer his arm, and Jane was not so brave as to take it.

Darcy accompanied them to a sitting room and made to leave. Mr. Bennet stopped him however, ensuring him that there were no secrets that were going to be shared at that moment: “I am sure discussion of any private matters can wait until we are home.”

Mr. Darcy sat on a chair across from the sofa that Mr. Bennet occupied. Elizabeth sat next to her father so that she might watch Mr. Darcy without having to turn her head. Jane sat in another chair opposite the sofa, eyes downcast to avoid her father’s sharp and judgmental gaze. Georgiana stood with her ear pressed against an adjoining room’s door, ignoring everything in her breeding that told her not to.

Mr. Bennet addressed Mr. Darcy first, “Sir, my daughter came to your home to do a kindness to your sister – her friend – but it is you who has done us a service.”

“No, sir, I did not do you a service,” Darcy said. It had been for Elizabeth. Even as he told himself it was just his Christian duty to help Jane, he knew it had been for Elizabeth.

He would do anything for –

“No Sir, I will not have you belittle what you have done for us. You have saved Jane and each of my daughters by proxy,” Mr. Bennet said. “I cannot allow my daughters to inconvenience you any longer.”

Mr. Darcy frowned. He could never classify Elizabeth as an inconvenience, and Jane reminded him of his own sister, no matter their age difference. He could not call her an inconvenience either. He wanted to say as much, but Mr. Bennet continued talking.

“As it is, Lizzy was meant to leave some time ago. While I am glad that her being here allowed you to put a stop to Jane’s foolishness, I am sure you have had quite enough of Bennet girls. I came to take them back myself to hopefully dissuade any further flights of fancy.” As he said this, Jane wilted and Elizabeth furrowed her brow though she tried not to frown.

There was nothing anyone could say. They were already bordering impropriety with Darcy well enough to be out of bed and Lizzy without anyone to truly serve as chaperone. Besides, Pemberley was not made for the likes of her – a gentleman’s daughter she was, but of breeding too low for the likes of high ceilings and the finer draperies. It was always meant to be temporary. There was no point in pretending otherwise. Still, the idea of leaving with the possibility of never returning left her feeling unsettled.
“Elizabeth has never been an inconvenience, Sir,” Mr. Darcy addressed Mr. Bennet, “and Jane made a poor choice, but she is not a bad girl either. I am glad I was able to help her.”

Mr. Bennet nodded as if he didn’t believe it but had to acknowledge it all the same. “Nonetheless, we will be going. My wife is eager to see the girls restored to Meryton society. If one good thing has come of all this, it is my wife’s lowering her standards for the girls. No more flights of romantic fancy or wealth for her, or so she claims, just a man who can support a daughter would suffice. I doubt it’s a sentiment that will last very long, but we may as well take advantage of her tempered nerves while we can, shan’t we? We’ll leave today, just as soon as everything is packed and ready.”

Had the idea of leaving Pemberly not upset her so, Elizabeth would have laughed at the notion of her mother’s supposed change in temperament. As it was, she found little mirth to muster, and the rest of the party seemed much the same.

After a period of silence only a few seconds long that somehow seemed to stretch into minutes, Mr. Darcy said, “Very well,” and left the room.

He took a few minutes to collect himself and his check his emotions before calling for the Bennet sisters’ things to be packed and brought down.

Chapter End Notes

I deleted the essay, so if the review section is acting up that’s why.
Hertfordshire was loud. So loud.

Lizzy loved loud. Or so she told herself. So she had. Hadn’t she?

She had, she was sure. So why now, returned to her rambunctious home, was she so desolate?

It was a stupid question to ask herself. She knew the answer. She had become too comfortable encompassed the quite companionship of the Darcys. She missed Georgiana’s recitations and her French. She missed the way they would both rearrange the floral arrangements when people left the room and laugh when no one noticed. Most of all she missed how Georgie’d play the piano to match the mood of the book Lizzy was reading. She’d mentioned it in passing one night at dinner and Mary, bless her soul, had approached her and told her she’d be happy to try.

“I know I don’t play as well as Miss Darcy, but I could try,” She’d said, fidgeting with a loose ribbon she’d found laying on a shelf. “Kitty and Lydia always insist I need to play less somber music, but I can’t seem to capture any other mood. Truly, you’d be helping me be more...” likable.

Lizzy kissed her cheek and then her forehead. Poor Mary was trying so hard, as she always did, and Elizabeth wanted to cry with gratitude. “I think I’d like that very much, Mary.”

And she did, no matter how awful Mary’s attempts at love lorn or excited or breezy pieces were. Laughing with Mary almost made her forget how much she missed Georgia and Mr. Darcy.

And Mr. Darcy.

She missed him very much.

She was ashamed of how much she missed him. Truly it was wrong. He had become a good friend, even with their occasional fights. She missed the way he would offer her his arm no matter how short the walk was and she missed the way he humored her when she just had to her opinion heard and how he understood her even when he didn’t necessarily agree.

Being without him only made her realize how dear he was. She had once thought that only the deepest of loves would move her to marriage, but now it seemed as if it was this deepest love that would keep her from marrying. She loved him, but how could she have him? She was a gentleman’s daughter in blood but less than wealthy. While he might not place as much value on such things, she knew what people would say about him if he’d ever decided to marry someone of her station – the insult it would bring to Georgie. He would never let that happen.

Granted those insults would depend wholly on his returning her affection, and she could not imagine how anything romantic could ever exist. It could have, she thought, even if neither ever acted on it. It could have existed quietly in the confines of their hearts to be dredged up on melancholy days when the mist was low and good friends scarce. It could have.

But it wouldn’t. In what world could someone who had brought so much trouble to a man’s doorstep then hope to garner his affection? Hers, Elizabeth supposed, as she could not stop hoping no matter how much she tried. She never understood what it meant for a heart to ache until now.
She was beginning to believe she’d lost Georgiana as well. She’d been home for what felt like a decade rather than weeks, and she had no word from the girl. She was well on her way to becoming the most wretched creature imaginable when the letter arrived. It read:

Dearest Lizzy,

How are you, my friend? I tried to wait for your letter saying you’ve settled back in at home, but I could not wait any longer. Lizzy, why have you yet to write me? Are things still not well at home? Please write to me, for I must know what you are about! I have gone from your constant companionship to being completely out you, and it is dysmal! I feel like a drunkard going off the drink, though I beg you never tell my brother I’ve used such a comparison – the fit he would have!

O Lizzy, you cannot know how agonizingly slow time passes without you at Pemberley. On the best days I am able to read in the garden and remember that horrible set down you gave my brother over Midsummer Night’s Dream. No matter how unceasingly he defended his point, I think he truly agreed with you by the end. He just did not want to admit that you’d swayed him.

My brother will be traveling to Hertfordshire soon, you know, so I am sure you will be seeing him very soon! I begged him to let me come along, but he says I must stay in Town with my cousin. I am afraid his visit may have something to do with Mr. Bingley who, as I understand, is intent on returning to Netherfield to see your sister. He does not know the particulars of Jane’s leaving Longbourn, but I would venture he suspects she left for her love of him, and he is determined to do right by her or some such nonsense. I believe my brother is intent on stopping him from seeing her and tending to some other business along the way.

I am sure he will call on you, but one can never speak when a room is full, so I thought it best to for warn you.

My cousin has come to bother me at my writing desk now, so I must make my goodbye. Write to me soon, sister of my heart!

Your devoted friend,

Georgiana Darcy

Elizabeth let a breath of relief escape her and sagged in her chair. The knot that had tied itself so intricately in her chest loosened a fraction. She’d not sent a letter because she wasn’t sure if it would be welcome, but Georgiana – in all her good breeding – had been waiting for Lizzy to indicate things had settled enough at home for their correspondence to continue. Of course Lizzy should have been the first to write. How stupid she felt!

And Mr. Darcy…

Mr. Darcy was going to be in Hertfordshire. He was still trying to protect her family – to help her protect Jane. Such a good, good man.

A good man she would see again soon.

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When he arrived at Longbourn two weeks after Lizzy had received the letter, Mr. Darcy appeared extremely stoic by the side of Mr. Bingley. He face softened only slightly when he gave Lizzy a smile before bowing to all the women in the room in proper greeting. Elizabeth found some sort of relief in that smile, but her chest felt tight heart was thrumming so unceasingly she was sure everyone must hear it.
Elizabeth turned her attention to Mr. Bingley who was staring at Jane like a child might stare at a long awaited toy. His affection was palpable and clearly superficial. He’d not seen her for months but now he looked at her as though he’d been courting her unceasingly. Jane’s eyes were downturned, and she had her hands clasped tightly in front of her, her knuckles going white.

Mrs. Bennet, however, was thrilled at the appearance of the gentlemen. She was sure this was the time for Jane’s triumph over a well-to-do man. She was desperate for it. She was afraid for Jane, truly. She was prettier than a pearl but not so young anymore. To engage a man’s affection was to engage a man’s security, and Jane was running out of time to do so.

As was the case, Mrs. Bennet made her daughters’ excuses: “Oh, Kitty! Lydia! The dresses we’ve purchased to be made up. Run into Meryton, won’t you, and see if they’re finished. It’d be so nice for you girls to have them for the next assembly, especially since we’ve gotten Mary to agree to wear a nice color for once. Drag her from the pianoforte before you go. I want you to make sure she tries the dress on before you leave with it. I wont have her saying it’s too ill fitting to wear, I just wont.”

Kitty and Lydia, understanding their mother’s intentions, scurried out of the room. Before Mrs. Bennet could think up more excuses for Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, and herself, Mr. Bingley spoke up, “Actually, Mrs. Bennet, I was hoping to speak with Miss Bennet private,” he turned his attention back to Jane, eyes shining, “If I may?”

“Oh yes!” Mrs. Bennet said, her voice breathy, from shock or elation Lizzy wasn’t sure. “Yes, of course!” She rushed out of the room, calling for Lizzy to do the same.

Lizzy looked at her sister and saw her desperation to not be left with Mr. Bingley. If she didn’t leave, though, no doubt her mother would be back to drag her away. Lizzy’s shoulders sagged as she realized there was no way to help her sister, and she looked at Jane with as much silent apology as she could convey.

In that moment, seeing her sister so defeated at not being able to help her, Jane decided it was time to rely on herself for once. She wasn’t Lizzy’s responsibility. Jane squared her shoulders and gave her sister a nod of reassurance. “Mr. Darcy, won’t you let Lizzy show you the garden? It is not so grand as yours, I’m sure, but we are proud of it.”

Mr. Darcy looked as if he were going to find a reason to object, and Lizzy remember that Georgiana had said he was attempting to stop his friend’s flimsy affection from hurting Jane again. Lizzy spoke quickly before Mr. Darcy could speak, “An excellent idea, Jane. Mr. Darcy?”

Mr. Darcy looked at Elizabeth as if she were mad, but when he nodded and followed her out of the room. She would not leave if she thought Jane were in any serious risk of more heartbreak. They walked in circles around the garden for a few minutes exchanging pleasantries before Elizabeth said, “She is not so weak as her past choices may make her seem, you know. I do not think she could be so easily swayed back in love.”

“I do not think she is weak,” Mr. Darcy said, lightly patting Lizzy’s hand where it rested in the crook of his arm. “I believe my friend has pretty words, however, that can turn a tender heart. He is very sincere, you know. He really does believe he is in love when he says all those pretty things.”

“Perhaps, but we know that believing something does not make it true, don’t we Mr. Darcy.”

“We do, yes.”

“Someone aught to explain to him a love so easily dissuaded isn’t love at all.”
Mr. Darcy, feeling he was being chastised, was quick to defend himself. “I have tried, you know. To tell him he’s too quick to believe his heart affected, I mean. It only serves to convince him he is a hero in some great romance and those who object are the villains attempting to dissuade true love.”

Elizabeth looked like she might argue. Instead, she looked away from him and said, “I suppose you’re right. I know I am often more tempted when I’m told no than when I’m left to my own.”

“I suppose everyone feels the need to be contradictory once in a while.”

“Yes,” Lizzy agreed, “But one does not like to think of herself as such, does she? To realize I am the same to some extent – that I’m not special.”

Mr. Darcy stopped walking for a moment and Elizabeth, arm hooked in his, stopped as well. His ears were slightly red, and she wondered if he perhaps wasn’t as well as she’d thought and the exertion of their leisurely walk was too much. Before she could suggest they take a seat on the garden bench, he started walking again, tugging her along.

“I think you’re very special,” he said just when Lizzy thought the silence might go on forever.

She felt her face flush. “Oh? A good special, I hope.”

“Yes,” he said, “Quite good, I should say.”

“Oh, quite good? I must thank you then, sir, for such a high compliment.” Her voice was light and joking, but her heart was accelerating again, and her stomach twisting in anticipation of something she couldn’t name.

Mr. Darcy stopped walking again and turned to face Elizabeth, moving to hold both of her hands in his. “Miss Elizabeth-” his voice seemed unsteady, and he paused to compose himself. He started again. “Elizabeth. I am not skilled with words. You know this. I have a head for numbers and matters of business. If I struggle to express my feelings...” He trailed off.

Elizabeth removed one of her hands from between his and laid it on his arm, steadying and comforting. “Take your time, sir. I will listen as long as you wish to speak.”

His eyes searched her face for something. “Will you?”

“Yes.”

“As long as I wish?”

She nodded and let out an amused huff, “Yes, as long as you wish.”

He squeezed the hand that remained between his. “And if I never wish to stop speaking?”

“I know you to revel in your peace and quiet, Mr. Darcy. However, if you have suddenly taken a liking to oration, I suppose I must listen you until you lose interest.”

“And if I wish to speak to you – to share my ideas with you, to tell you about my day, to discuss politics and literature and invention, to tell you all my thoughts and to listen to all of yours – would you still listen?” He was speaking with an urgency.

Each time Elizabeth thought her heart could not beat any faster without flying away, he proved her wrong. “It might take an awfully long time to convey so much, sir.”

“A lifetime, I should think.”
Elizabeth was sure she’d stopped breathing. “Might we have some time in silence too? Only, I worry you will lose your voice if you speak so much and then will have no need for me to listen.”

“You may have whatever you wish, Elizabeth – silence, speech, music – if only you will marry me. I shall always wish to speak to you, even when I have nothing to say. So will you listen as long as I wish?”

Elizabeth took a shuddering breath, “Even after every difficulty my family has caused you?”

“Will you be my wife?”

“I will sir,” she was sure there were tears collecting in her eyes. “For as long as you wish, I will be your wife. And when you are awfully vexed with me, or should you ever regret it, I will still be your wife because I – I love you. You shall never be rid of me now, fool man!”

Mr. Darcy looked almost faint with happiness. He kissed both her hands, then her wrists, then her hands once more before his ears began to turn red again. “I should talk to your father now.”

Elizabeth took his arm and stood a little bit closer to him than she had before, and they walked back to the house. While Mr. Darcy spoke to her father, Elizabeth waited on the porch with bated breath. Jane found her there and sat beside her in silence for several minutes.

“What of Mr. Bingley, then?” Elizabeth asked as gently as she could manage.

“He proposed, and I sent him away,” Jane said simply.

“Just like that?”

“As kindly as I could. I told him I had been terribly upset with how his affection simply changed. I told him I have forgiven him, but I cannot love a man I do not trust. He left as soon as he understood what I meant. You do not think I was too harsh, do you?”

“My sweetest sister, there is nothing harsh in protecting your heart.”

Jane laid her head on Lizzy’s shoulder. “And is that Mr. Darcy I heard Father speaking to in his study?”

“Listening at the door, Jane? My, you have changed,” Lizzy joked.

Jane sat up straight and grabbed her sister’s arm. “Do not tease me, Lizzy. Am I to wish you well?”

At this moment, the study door just inside opened, and the happy persons of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet stepped out, still shaking hands.

“Yes Jane, I believe you are.”

Epilogue –

The wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy was quickly organized: bans read, friends informed, and license secured. Three months after engagement, family and friends gathered in the small Meryton church, and the two were married. No expense was spared on the wedding breakfast, and the Darcys accepted all well wishes gracefully and gratefully. As they were bidding their farewells, Elizabeth pulled Georgiana to her in horribly tight hug, but neither girl seemed to mind.
“You know, Georgie, you are quite like a sister,” Lizzy said. “I think I shall keep you.”

Georgie kissed her sister’s cheek before turning to tell her brother goodbye. Then they were gone, riding toward Bath for a short, intimate wedding trip.

Georgiana and her cousin Fitzwilliam planned to stay at Netherfield until a week after Mr. and Mrs. Darcy’s planned return to Pemberley. While Georgiana did not understand why they did not retire to her cousin’s house in Town, it soon became apparent that Richard Fitzwilliam had plans of his own in Hertfordshire.

Apparently, Richard had become rather fond of Miss Bennet during her brief stint at Pemberley despite her often surly reception of everyone else, and he was determined to know her better. Jane was thoroughly embarrassed that someone who had seen her at her worst could seem so attentive to her. She quickly grew comfortable with him, and it wasn’t but two months time before the two found themselves engaged.

Col. Fitzwilliam, obviously aware of his host’s prior attachment, offered to remove himself and his cousin to an inn in Meryton when he had decided to court Miss Bennet. Bingley, however, insisted Fitzwilliam stay at Netherfield. Perhaps it was because Mr. Bingley had already gotten over his love for Jane, perhaps it was because he never loved her as he intensely as he seemed to think he did, perhaps it was because he was a genuinely genial fellow. No matter the case, he was quick in his felicitations to the couple.

That being said, Mr. Bingley was not wholly happy. That is not to say he was not happy for the couple, as he truly was. There was nothing he loved so much as love. He said as much to Miss Mary Bennet one night at an assembly when he found her sitting to the side as she often did, in a pretty blue dress he’d only ever seen her in at Darcy’s wedding.

“Perhaps,” she’d said seriously, “that is your problem. You are so in love with what you think love should be, that you do not know what love is.”

Mr. Bingley sat for a minute, shocked and still. “Well then, what is love meant to be?”

“Why on earth would I know?” She asked, her face harsh and confused. She’d certainly never been in love, and she tried not to think about it.

Feeling chastised, “Well I don’t know. You read a lot and seem to know a great deal. I just – I just though you would know.”

“Well, I certainly don’t read novels. Even if I did, I don’t imagine books about love would be any better instruction.”

“Why ever not? Surely that’s what they’re meant for.”

“I certainly hope not. From what I’ve heard, those books contain all sorts of murder and debauchery. Is that what you want out of your eventual romance?”

“No!” Bingley said with extreme conviction.

Then Miss Mary Bennet did something Mr. Bingley had never seen her do before: she laughed. It wasn’t a particularly graceful laugh, and he felt almost certain he was laughing at him rather than with him, but he smiled and laughed with her all the same. After all, Mr. Bingley was an amiable fellow, and he liked nothing more than to see people happy.

Mary, not used to having people laughing with her rather than at her, only laughed harder. When Mr.
Bingley asked her to dance, her protests were only half hearted, and she found herself enjoying herself at an assembly for the first time in a long time – possibly ever. Talk of love was put away for the night but not forever. A stout friendship was formed between the two, to the confusion of most everyone. After the Fitzwilliam wedding, Mary left for Pemberly with the Darcys to keep Georgiana company when the newlyweds were absorbed in one another, and to also benefit from the same tutors Georgiana learned from.

Mr. Bingley was very lonely. It wasn’t that there was no one he could speak to; he was still the charming man that everyone so loved to socialize with. He just missed his friend terribly. It was awful. He missed her blunt advise and how patiently she would listen as he described his day – how she would try to provide the words he was struggling to name. Worse still, he couldn’t even write to her like he would other friends because she was a lady. With only his letters from Darcy as a means of hearing about Mary, Mr. Bingley decided to quit Netherfield and take up a room at Pemberly while he sought out a new arrangement in Derbyshire.

It became quickly apparent to everyone who saw Mr. Bingley with Mary that he stupidly in love with her, and he didn’t even know it. There were no falsely sweet words and stolen moments; he was simply bursting with joy to be near her and horribly disappointed when he’d missed her. The Darcys were amused as they watched the odd romance play out. It wasn’t many more months before the two realized what was happening (a story much too long to be documented here), and the topic of what love was was again brought up. The two were married just as soon as their license was procured.

Having three daughters married off in less than two years, Mrs. Bennet was was well pleased. However, she became reluctant to let her youngest daughters go courting. They were much too young, really, and with three sisters well married, there was no need to worry about what would happen to them should Mr. Bennet die before they were married. The girls still danced and socialized at assemblies, but with much less pressure from their mother. It was three years before Kitty married, and another year from then before Lydia married – Mr. Bennet still alive and as close to proud as he figured he could be.

Chapter End Notes

I just really needed to end this story, so I’m sorry if it seems slapdash. Sorry if the Mary x Bingley bit in the epilogue was long. It was that or write a full one shot to get it out of my system, and I figured this was the more practical solution.

End Notes

Originally posted to my fanfiction.net account (tealitful)

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