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Canon compliant main couples.

This is my first long Pride and Prejudice fic.

Upon arriving in Lambton Elizabeth was disappointed not to discover any letters from Jane. It was not until the third day of their stay that her expectation was alleviated, and with two letters. The first contained the expected news of home and the Gardiner children. Mr and Mrs Gardiner left Elizabeth alone to read the letters after hearing that their children were well. The second half of Jane’s first letter, however, contained less happy news.

“Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you -- be assured that we are all well. What I have to say relates to poor Lydia. An express came at twelve last night, just as we were all gone to bed, from Colonel Forster, to inform us that she had attempted to elope to Greta Green with Wickham. She had left a note for Harriet Forster explaining their intentions, not expecting to be missed until the next day. However, the elopement did not take place. When Lydia reached their carriage she found Wickham had been stabbed and was dying. She called for help and, thankfully, two good men from a different regiment came to her aid. They returned her to the Forster’s where she related the whole. Wickham died from his injuries and the matter is being investigated by the magistrate of the town.
Colonel Forster wrote to urge our father to collect his wayward and distraught daughter before her involvement is widely known. The Colonel of the other men’s regiment vouches for them and claims a connection to you, his name is Fitzwilliam, he is Mr Darcy’s cousin. Lydia is confined to the Forster’s, apparently ill, until father arrives. He left this morning and I anticipate they will be returning to us by the time you read this.

Be not concerned Lizzy that you are required at home. We will all be well, though Kitty is also in trouble with our father for concealing Lydia’s growing attachment to Wickham. I will write again soon once our father and sister are returned home. J B, etc. “

Elizabeth gasped in surprise as she read Jane’s letter and hastily moved on to the second, dated four days after the first.

“Father and Lydia arrived home safely this afternoon and now the children are settled this is my first chance to write to you. Lydia appears very shaken by the experience and has locked herself in her room with Kitty. Our father looks tired and as though the weight of the world is upon his shoulders. I am thankful that the elopement did not take place but grieved that Lydia witnessed Wickham in such a condition. Her honour and reputation are in tact thanks to all involved.

It is believed that W was attacked regarding gaming debts and his friends in the regiment have confirmed these were significant. We are grateful that Lydia was not injured.

Now that I have set your mind at ease please continue to enjoy your tour of Derbyshire and we look forward to seeing you at home once your trip is concluded. J B etc.”

Elizabeth experienced a range of emotions as she read her sister’s letters and was filled with a profound sense of relief that Lydia had not eloped despite the attempt. She was about to begin a second reading when the maid entered leading Mr Darcy.

She curtsied in response to his bow of greeting.

“Good morning Miss Bennet, are you well?”

“Yes thank you. Please have a seat. My aunt and uncle are walking to the church, I have been reading two letters from my sister Jane.”

“Are all of your family well? I understand from Mr Gardiner that Miss Bennet is caring for their children whilst you are travelling.”

“They are all well thank you though I have received some unexpected news which has left me discomforted.” Elizabeth paused for a moment and then relayed the substance of Jane’s letter regarding Lydia and Wickham. Mr Darcy was understandably shocked, and also gratified that she was confiding in him, as he had done to her. When he heard that Wickham was deceased and Lydia home safely he lent forward and impulsively grasped Elizabeth’s hands in his own.

“I am grieved to hear of your sister’s situation but relieved she is unscathed. You will forgive me, I am certain, for also being relieved that Wickham will no longer be a problem. I am interested to hear of my cousin Fitzwilliam’s involvement and hope to hear from him soon. Are you sure you are well?” He asked, again, concerned as he felt Elizabeth’s hands tremble inside his grip.

“Yes but shocked. I am sorry that Wickham’s behaviour has come to this and that he almost harmed my sister, just as he also almost harmed yours. I am not sorry that he is dead.” She seemed surprised by the bluntness of her own honest words.

“I thank you for your letter last April and the insights into Wickham’s terrible behaviour. I implored
my father not to let Lydia go to Brighton or continue to embarrass our family but he would not check
her impudent behaviour. Now she has come so close to ruining us all and only thanks to luck or
providence, nothing befell her.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, each lost in thought and forgetting the impropriety of their
clapped hands.

Once Elizabeth appeared calmer Mr Darcy smiled and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Miss Bennet, Elizabeth, if I may be so bold, I came here this morning with more than courtesy in
mind. You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell
me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on
this subject for ever. Or, if you would prefer I will court you with a view to securing your good
opinion.”

Elizabeth, for a moment was stunned into silence by his words and the tumult of emotions of the
morning.

“My feelings are the reverse of what they were in April and I wish never to refer to them again. But,
given how little time we have spent in company, I believe that a courtship would be wise.”

She was cautious in her response, concerned he would be upset by not receiving an immediate
acceptance but her feelings were too raw and mind too confused by the events of the morning. She
knew now, what she had not known at their previous meetings in Meryton and Hunsford, that he
was truly good man. It was herself she doubted.

He raised their hands to his lips and his her hand, “thank you Elizabeth,” he spoke the words
breathlessly and filled with relief.

“You had best speak with my uncle before our dinner at Pemberley this evening.”

Darcy agreed and they walked out to meet the Gardiner’s, talking awkwardly of his sister, guests and
then enthusiastically of Pemberley and its surrounds.

Once applied to, Mr Gardiner, as Elizabeth’s guardian away from her father, readily gave his consent
to the courtship and shared a knowing look with his wife.

The two couples walked around the town, enjoying the sights, the history of the church, and talking
to acquaintances. Mr Darcy was reserved but friendly, demonstrating his local knowledge and
understanding with pertinent enquiries and comments. They took tea at Miss Darcy’s preferred tea
room and were generally seen around town. Elizabeth’s hand on Darcy’s arm causing more than a
little speculation that the Master of Pemberley would soon be married.

Dinner at Pemberley that evening was enjoyed by all except Miss Bingley, for Darcy’s marked
 attentions towards Elizabeth were causing her to fear, realistically, that Darcy would never offer for
her, and Mrs Hurst who had to listen to her snoring from husband on one side and snide remarks
from her sister on the other. Georgiana was a little more confident than on their previous visits,
especially when she and Elizabeth played and sang together.

At one point during a walk the next day, Darcy explained to Elizabeth some of the events at
Pemberley after she and the Gardiner’s had returned to the Inn.

“Last night Bingley and I had a long overdue conversation. I confessed to him, and apologised for,
my role in keeping your sister’s presence in town concealed from him. I explained that I had believed
that it would cause him pain as your sister’s affections did not rival his own. He is still unhappy
about my interference. I also confessed that I had since received information which reassured me of her affections for him last year. To my objections to your family’s connections and the behaviour of some I am ashamed. I believe that I have shown you, your family and Bingley the error of my ways though I understand that it will take time for your parents to see me in a different light. Bingley was, understandably, very angry with myself and his sisters, but understood that I had done what I believed to be best for him at the time. I believe that he will return to Netherfield soon, and I plan for my sister and I to accompany him, so that I may continue to call on you and court you.”

Elizabeth expressed her delight at this and hastened to reassure him that his past censure of her family was not unwarranted but that he had redeemed himself since, especially with his attentions to her aunt and uncle.

The following days continued in a similar manner, time spent with the Darcy’s and Bingley’s touring the lake and park in a phaeton for the women, fishing for the men; a quiet, chaperoned, stroll for the courting couple; and dinner at Pemberley or with one of Mrs Gardiner’s childhood friends. Their five day visit was extended to seven but could be extended no further due to Mr Gardiner’s need to return to his business in London.

Bingley’s extended exposure to Elizabeth reminded him of the Bennet’s, one Bennet in particular, good qualities, and the apology from Darcy for separating Bingley from Miss Bennet caused Bingley to act as Darcy had expected. Bingley’s plans were changed and he arranged to return Netherfield not London at the end of his Pemberley stay. Miss Bingley was unhappy with this turn of events but would not relinquish her role as her brother’s hostess. Ultimately it was agreed that Bingley would reopen Netherfield with Miss Bingley, Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley; the Hurst’s and Darcy would return to London but that Darcy would soon follow Bingley to Netherfield.

The day the Gardiner’s and Elizabeth were welcomed back at Longbourn, the others left Pemberley. The Bennet’s all gathered in front of the house to meet the carriage and greeted the party warmly though Lydia was more subdued than previously. The misadventure of her attempted elopement with Wickham weighed on all of the adult’s minds, whereas the children were delighted to be reunited with their parents. They took tea, distributed presents and shared news. Mrs Bennet was delighted to hear that Mr Bingley would be imminently returning and was astounded that the Gardiner’s and Lizzy has spent time with him and the Darcy’s.

Later in the day, whilst the others were dressing for dinner, Lizzy slipped down to her father’s library. He smiled at her, genuinely pleased to have his daughter back. They chatted amiably about her travels, with details that he would appreciate but which would have been lost on his wife. Through the course of his conversation Elizabeth gave her father and understanding that Darcy was no longer the proud and haughty man who had awkwardly haunted the edges of parties and who had slighted her because he was a stranger, in a bad mood, in an uncomfortable environment.

“Be assured, my dear father, that he is the best of men. I must confess that my Uncle, in your absence, consented to us courting. Although Darcy has proposed marriage to me, we mutually agreed to a period to courtship to enable us to better understand one another. Our understanding has been greatly altered since I first knew him. I hope that you are not too displeased at the prospect of soon losing me, but I am sure what I am about and that he is deserving of my respect and regard.”

“My dear Lizzy, I could not part with you to anyone unworthy of your esteem. I will speak to your uncle and I will allow Darcy admittance to the house and to court you. But do not expect me to let him off so lightly, he too must earn my respect and prove that he is worthy of you. When he arrives, as I’m sure he will, send him to me. For your sake I look forward to meriting this changed Mr Darcy.”
She stood, kissed his cheek across the desk, and they parted until the call of the dinner bell.

Two days after the Gardiner’s return home to London, Mr Bingley returned to Netherfield, with a party of friends, was announced, a further day later the young man himself arrived at Longbourn. He spent an awkward few minutes alone with Mr Bennet apologising for the significant delay in his return and was granted permission to see the ladies.

Nervous smiles crossed both Jane’s and Bingley’s faces as Hill announced him to the room at large. Mr Bingley made his apologies again, hoped that Miss Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle had experienced a smooth journey home, expressed delight at his return into the country and invited them all to dine at Netherfield two days hence. Mrs Bennet was delighted to accept the invitation and returned one of her own for the whole party to dine at Longbourn the following Tuesday.

“Thank you Mrs Bennet, we would be delighted. The Hurst’s are in London but I accept for myself, Miss Bingley and Darcy will join you. Miss Darcy and her companion may not join as Miss Darcy is not yet out, but that is for Darcy to decide.”

Darcy would be joining him later this day or early the next and they both hoped to call again at Longbourn to introduce Miss Darcy to the other Miss Bennet’s. Once the initial nervousness had settled on all sides, tea was taken in a more comfortable manner, and Bingley left to continue his neighbourhood visits promising to return with the Darcy’s soon.

After Bingley left Jane and Elizabeth took a walk around the garden.

“Now,” said Jane, “that this first meeting is over, I feel perfectly easy. I know my own strength, and I shall never be embarrassed again by his coming. I am glad he dines here on Tuesday. It will then be publicly seen that, on both sides, we meet only as common and indifferent acquaintance.”

“Yes, very indifferent indeed,” said Elizabeth, laughingly. “Oh Jane, take care.”

“My dear Lizzy, you cannot think me so weak, as to be in danger now?”

“I think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever.”

Jane blushed then turned the table on Elizabeth. “I believe it is because of you that Miss Darcy is at Netherfield and that we are expecting the Darcy’s to call. It has not been long since you saw them last.”

“It has been ten days,” Elizabeth responded without thinking and Jane cast her a significant look.

Ten days since Darcy had kissed her hand then handed her into the carriage and watched them drive away from Pemberley. Since then she has spent a great deal of time thinking about Darcy, their days spent courting in Derbyshire, and the improvements in their respective behaviour. She knew now that she had judged him unfairly and harshly upon their first meeting, and that she had allowed his slight against her to colour all of their subsequent interactions. His proposal, insults and explanation in Hunsford were remembered with pain. He had greatly improved himself since and she hoped that she had done enough to be seen likewise. Elizabeth could not control the behaviour of her family and their lack of propriety but she did hope that Lydia’s stupidity and near disastrous elopement would effect the changes her words had failed to achieve.

Since her return home Elizabeth had observed that her father was now stricter with the younger girls and that they were actually listening to him. Lydia’s mood was still subdued and Elizabeth was not yet sure if it was due to her disappointment or to the shock of witnessing Wickham’s demise. She could only hope that the events in Brighton would shock some sense into her youngest sister.
Mr Darcy’s impending arrival, as forecast by Bingley, prompted Elizabeth to have an overdue conversation with Lydia. She invited her youngest sister into her room on the pretence of choosing some new ribbon to trim a bonnet. Once Lydia had made a suggestion from the options proffered by Elizabeth, the elder began uncomfortably;

“I am sure that by now at least half of our family has lectured you on the inappropriateness of your behaviour with Wickham and the attempted elopement and I know that you will not stand to listen to the same from me. Lydia, we have not been close, too many years between us and the favourites of our father and mother respectively, but if you wish to discuss the events of Brighton, rest assured that I will listen to you. I am severely disappointed by your behaviour but I expect that witnessing Wickham’s death is punishment enough.”

Lydia stood still, thoughtfully considering her sister.

“You can have no understanding of what I suffered that night. I had been deliriously happy, about to leave for my new life and become Mrs Lydia Wickham, but instead I found death and despair. I was going to be the first married, and I the youngest! You can lecture me, or pity me, or do what you wish, but you cannot know what I have suffered.”

Lydia spun on her heel and rushed out of the room, leaving Elizabeth speechless in her wake with no idea of how to cope with her sister’s attitude. Later, after discussing the incident with Jane, neither had any appropriate courses of action. Jane confirmed that in the days between Lydia and Elizabeth’s respective returns, the youngest had been angry, sullen, coddled by their mother at having her dreams destroyed, lectured by Jane, their father, and Mary about her behaviour, and treated with confusion by Kitty. Mr Bennet had been stricter any time the younger girls stepped out of line, and demonstrated their containing want of proper behaviour, but did no more than scold them. Elizabeth was left to sleep with a tumult of thoughts and emotions about her family, conflicting with a longing to see Darcy.

The next day, as Bingley had predicted, he and the Darcy’s came to call. He apologised for Miss Bingley’s absence citing a headache and her absence troubled no one. It was difficult for Elizabeth to tell which Darcy was most pleased to see her again. Miss Darcy smiled shyly but genuinely and was happy, if nervous, to be introduced to the Bennet’s en mass. Once the introductions had been made Elizabeth began a conversation about music which animated Mary and Miss Darcy enough to be left off to one side.

Darcy smiled at Elizabeth’s attentions and stole a quiet few minutes of conversation about their time apart. Both were genuinely happy to see one another again but their relative privacy did not last long. Mr Bennet, firmly, invited Mr Darcy into his library. Jane and Elizabeth both knew that Darcy would be applying to their father for consent to court and, in the future propose to, Elizabeth. Darcy returned before long, relief evident on his face, and sent Elizabeth an expressive look of happiness. She suggested a walk which all the young people but Mary agreed to.

Lizzy instructed Kitty to be kind to Miss Darcy. The group began to walk towards Lucas Lodge, Jane and Bingley quickly fell behind, Elizabeth and Darcy led the party and their sisters walked in the middle. Elizabeth and Darcy continued the habit they had begun in Derbyshire of discussing how they had spent their time whilst apart and learning about common interests, one another’s pasts and families.

“Were you able to see Colonel Fitzwilliam and his family whilst you were in town?”

“Yes I was. The Colonel sends his regards and was able to provide me with a full account of the events in Brighton.”
Elizabeth checked that Lydia, Kitty and Georgiana were out of earshot the nodded for Darcy to continue.

“Two of Fitzwilliam’s Lieutenants were returning to camp after an evening in town when they heard a young woman crying and screaming for help. They found Lydia cradling Wickham, who was bleeding profusely. Their carriage was abandoned, the square they were in empty but for themselves and some luggage. The lieutenants recognised that Wickham’s wound was fatal but rendered basic assistance in order to ease Lydia’s tears. He died quickly. Lieutenant Baker managed to find out from Lydia where she was staying and took her back to the Forster’s lodgings. After waking the household Lydia was handed over to the servants and Mrs Forster whilst Colonel Forster accompanied Baker back to Wickham and Lieutenant Samson. The magistrate and Colonel Fitzwilliam were summoned, Wickham’s and Lydia’s identities established. Once Wickham was taken away Fitzwilliam accompanied Forster to his lodgings. Forster sent an express to your father. Fitzwilliam explained that he knew you, the Collinses and myself, as well as relating some of his past with Wickham.

Between them Fitzwilliam and Forster established the quantity of Wickham’s debts in Brighton which I have since discharged for the sake of the tradesmen. Lydia’s involvement has been kept quiet to protect her and the magistrate has established that the attack was due to Wickham’s debts. He has been buried in Brighton. Fitzwilliam and I think it unlikely that Lydia was anything more than a convenient companion. She has no money to interest him and it is likely that, had their departure succeeded, they would have been lost to the depths of London not the legitimacy of a Scottish marriage.

Fitzwilliam wrote to me in London, not knowing I was at Pemberley, which my London butler sent on but I missed in my journey down. I saw Fitzwilliam in London and he related the whole to me. He would like to be reassured that Miss Lydia is well. He and I both feel that this could have been prevented had we made Wickham’s true character known publicly and neither of us are sorry that he is dead. He will never be a threat to anyone again.”

“I, and my whole family, are very relieved about that and the Colonel Fitzwilliam’s men were able to assist. I must talk to Lydia to see how she is fairing but that will come later. Tell me, sir, are you pleased to return to Hertfordshire?” Elizabeth cast him a teasing smile.

“Very pleased. I appreciate the opportunity to become better acquainted with many here and, more importantly, to see you again. I confess that I have been anxious to return to Hertfordshire and reassure myself of the continuation of your good opinion. I fear that my past actions, the pride and conceit, with which I presented myself will take more time to overcome. Also my sister was desirous of seeing you again.”

“You have proven yourself to me and I am confident that this change in your behaviour will be welcomed by many, and commented upon, but rest assured that I have retained my good opinion of you and have been eagerly awaiting your return. I am anticipating seeing you frequently and I apologise in advance for my mother’s attentions once she learns we are courting.”

They smiled at each other, both relieved of their continuing mutual regard.

They continued to talk and walk, catching up on the events of their time apart, reflecting on Bingley and Jane’s renewed proximity and their respective younger sisters. When the party turned to make the return Elizabeth chose to walk with the younger girls and Darcy with Bingley and Jane though he was far more silent than she.

The younger girls had found mutual areas of interest in new dresses and bonnets, though Miss Darcy’s other areas of interest tended towards accomplishments and the Bennet’s towards finding
husbands and the militia. Lydia remained more subdued than previously and turned the talk away from the militia with a shudder. Elizabeth saw and squeezed her sister’s hand in comfort which Lydia pulled away from. She left Kitty and Georgiana talk about sketching and water colours and gradually begin to walk ahead.

“Lydia, Mr Darcy has told me the details of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s men finding you.” Lydia looked confused.

“I would think that you are angry that your plans were ruined, that your family continues to castigate you for your behaviour and that you cannot understand what you did wrong. You feel shunned by us, by the militia and your friends. However, we believe that Mr Wickham had no plans to marry you, he simply wanted company on his escape from Brighton. However, he did not leave soon enough and his bad behaviour caught up with him. He was not a good man, he was dishonourable. You were almost ruined Lydia. You need to understand this and you desist with this angry behaviour. It has been a godsend to your family, even if you do not see it yet, that your plans were thwarted and Wickham killed. I cannot speak plainer than that.”

They continued the walk home in silence and when the party returned to the house Mr Bennet invited the gentlemen into his library. Now with the ladies alone Mrs Bennet’s attention was focused on Miss Darcy for the first time. Politely, if enthusiastically, trying to ascertain more about the young woman, her interests and accomplishments, and whether or not she was a threat to the hoped marriage of Jane and Bingley. With assistance from Jane and Elizabeth Georgiana gave Mrs Bennet to understand that she had no interest in Bingley beyond his friendship with her brother, and that she was delighted to become friends with all of the Miss Bennet’s.

When, after a quarter of an hour’s tête-à-tête has elapsed and the gentlemen not returned Elizabeth look Miss Darcy away to find Mary and the pianoforte. To ease Miss Darcy’s anxiety Elizabeth played a moderately difficult piece which she knew the younger was familiar with and asked for guidance on the tricker passages. Miss Darcy was reluctant at first her eventually was prevailed upon to share some of the benefits of her musical education. Elizabeth learnt information to her advantage and saw Mary and Georgina becoming easier in each other’s company. Their encounter was interrupted by Mr Darcy.

“Ladies, I apologise but it is time for us to return to Netherfield.” Miss Darcy stood and Elizabeth walked them to their carriage. Darcy managed to speak quietly to Elizabeth that her father had consented to their courtship and that he looked forward to seeing her at dinner the following evening.

To Netherfield, the following evening, went all of the Bennet’s though Lydia and Kitty had almost been prevented from attending due to a squabble earlier in the day. The dinner passed off pleasantly, though Elizabeth did not enjoy the company and conversation quite as much as their dinners at Pemberley. Darcy was attempting to gain the good opinion of her parents, and behaving in a more genial manner as he had with the Gardiner’s, but it was not an easy process. Through the course of the dinner Mrs Bennet began to notice Darcy’s attentions to Elizabeth. Thankfully, for Elizabeth’s sake, her awe over Darcy’s fortune and position in society, prevented her from enquiring directly in the presence of the gentlemen. However, this did not extend to their carriage ride home. After expressing her fervent hopes that Bingley would soon propose to Jane, Mrs Bennet directed herself to her least favourite daughter and Elizabeth was forced to confess to her whole family of their courtship. The truth of the matter caused Mrs Bennet to flutter.

"Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it! And is it really true? Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane’s is nothing to it—nothing at all. I am so pleased—so happy. Such a charming man!—so handsome! so tall!—Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray apologise for my
having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Every thing that is charming! Two daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted.”

“Mama, we are not engaged; it is not settled yet, for myself and Darcy or Jane and Bingley. Do not be presumptuous.”

“Pish, a man of Mr Darcy’s situation would not court you without wishing to marry you. It is only a matter of time and I have seen the way Mr Bingley regards Jane, if he does not ask for her hand in the coming days then I do not know…two daughters so well settled. Such charming men!”

Elizabeth gave up trying to quiet her mother and left her to prattle and rejoice until the carriage reached Longbourn. After that night Jane said no more of her indifference regarding Bingley. The days fell into a similar pattern to Elizabeth’s in Derbyshire, visits and walks with the Bingley’s and Darcy’s, social events with friends and family in the evenings.

Mrs Bennet’s long awaited dinner at Longbourn for Bingley occurred successfully. The Bennet’s, Bingley’s and Darcy’s were joined by the Lucas’s and Phillips’s. Darcy forbore the Elizabeth’s relations and related more than he had in company with them previously. Elizabeth and Jane were not free from embarrassment regarding their family’s behaviour but recent events had tempered the behaviour of the youngest somewhat. Mr and Mrs Phillips’s eldest son’s return from University also enlivened the party. The Phillips’s were, understandably, proud that that they had been able to afford him a University education and his study of the law had taken followed in his father’s footsteps. Matthew Phillips was due to inherit the business upon his father’s retirement and both Bingley and Darcy were pleased to make the acquaintance of a sensible young man previously unknown to them, and a relation of which the elder Miss Bennet’s had no need to be embarrassed by.

Elizabeth and Jane had ceased trying to talk sense into Lydia or make themselves available should she wish to confide in them. Instead she remained sulky, coddled by her mother who still wished to see her favourite daughter married, and reprimanded by her father. Kitty was benefiting more with time spent with Georgiana Darcy and Maria Lucas away from Lydia. Georgiana and Maria shared fears of Lady Catherine’s displeasure had forged a bond and Elizabeth could see that although Maria would never been as sensible as Charlotte, she would still be a good friend to Kitty and Georgiana as Charlotte was to her. Instead, the elder Miss Bennet’s focused their attentions on Bingley and Darcy respectively.

On a walk, two weeks after the gentlemen’s return, on a walk to Oakham Mount, Darcy again posed Elizabeth an important question.

“Now that we have been courting and much in company together, a continue to be sure of my love for you, and wish that you would consent to be my wife. Will you make me the happiest of men, Elizabeth?”

She immediately, and joyfully, assented, she was confident in their mutual regard and in the improvements of their respective behaviour. Their understanding of one another had deepened significantly in recent weeks and Elizabeth was sure that their marriage would begin on a basis of mutual respect and love.

At the top of the Mount they stood, arm in arm, admiring the view and simply enjoying the peace they found together when they were joined by Bingley and Jane. Their slower pace having meant they had quickly fallen behind but the smiles and happiness suffusing both of their countenances told Elizabeth of the happy news they had to share. Each couple congratulated the other and bantered over who was happiest.

As they walked back to Longbourn Darcy and Elizabeth discussed details of their wedding, planning
it before Mrs Bennet could become involved. As the month of August was drawing to a close, Darcy expressed a desire to return to Pemberly for the harvest. He wanted to take his new bride away to the north to begin their marriage at home away from his London house and the attendant societal obligations. Elizabeth was delighted with this idea, knowing that a season in London would be more enjoyable as she was comfortable in her role as Mrs Darcy. In order to be married more speedily than the calling of the banns would allow and, Elizabeth anticipated, add gravitas to the event, Darcy would procure for them a special licence. Elizabeth knew that her mother would not be contented with only three weeks to plan a wedding but hoped that her new status as Mrs Darcy would modify her somewhat.

However, Elizabeth was not at peace with the prospect of missing Jane and Bingley’s wedding and, consequently, suggested to Darcy that they share the event with the other couple. He assented and they slowed their pace until the others caught up to them, and then shared their plan. Once Elizabeth had explained their thoughts and reasoning Bingley and Jane were delighted to accept, their own plans having progressed no further than a desire to marry soon. The four agreed that after Mr Bennet’s consent had been sought, and presumably given, that evening, the gentlemen would journey to London for several days to prepare settlement papers and procure the necessary licences, whilst the ladies would arrange their mother and local plans. At the door to Mr Bennet’s study the couples parted, Darcy leaving a lingering kiss on Elizabeth’s hand.

The ladies drank tea, listening to their mother’s discussion of their morning visits, until the gentlemen appeared, Mr Bennet leading the way.

“Mrs Bennet, congratulations are in order, I have consent to the engagements of Jane and Bingley and Elizabeth and Darcy. Tomorrow the gentlemen will journey to London to procure special licences and draft the settlements. You have a wedding to plan, as our daughters have expressed a desire to marry together.”

All of this was too much for Mrs Bennet, who sat in silence for a moment absorbing all of the information, before she began to flutter, “two daughters married, special licences, a double wedding”. Mr Bennet withdrew as his wife began to speak.

Bingley and Darcy sat through it all with good grace at the sides of their betrothed. They enjoyed a cheerful family dinner at Longbourn before the gentlemen retired to Netherfield. When Bingley broke the news to his sister Miss Bingley’s disappointment was significant but she did not say anything unforgivable, and thus retained visiting rights to Pemberly. Miss Darcy’s delight was as fulsome and genuine as Darcy had predicted to himself.

In the days whilst Darcy and Bingley were away, in the midst of wedding planning and trousseau preparations, an unexpected visitor came to call.

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Hill announced, before speedily departing the morning room.

They were of course all intending to be surprised; but their astonishment was beyond their expectation; and on the part of Mrs. Bennet and Kitty, though she was perfectly unknown to them, even inferior to what Elizabeth felt.

She entered the room with an air more than usually ungracious, made no other reply to Elizabeth’s salutation than a slight inclination of the head, and sat down without saying a word. Elizabeth had mentioned her name to her mother on her ladyship’s entrance, though no request of introduction had been made.

Mrs. Bennet, all amazement, though flattered by having a guest of such high importance, received her with the utmost politeness. After sitting for a moment in silence, she said very stiffly to Elizabeth,
"I hope you are well, Miss Bennet. That lady, I suppose, is your mother." Elizabeth replied very concisely that she was. After several moments of either uneasy conversation or dead silence, Lady Catherine stated:

"Miss Bennet, there seemed to be a prettishly kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company."

It was not a request that would be negated.

Elizabeth obeyed, and running into her own room for her parasol, attended her noble guest downstairs. As they passed through the hall, Lady Catherine opened the doors into the dining-parlour and drawing-room, and pronouncing them, after a short survey, to be decent looking rooms, walked on.

"How could I ever think her like her nephew?" said she, as she looked in her face.

As soon as they entered the copse, Lady Catherine began in the following manner:
"You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come."

Elizabeth looked with unaffected astonishment."Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam. I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here."

"Miss Bennet," replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, "you ought to know, that I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere you may choose to be, you shall not find me so. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it. A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. I was told that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you."

"If you believed it impossible to be true," said Elizabeth, colouring with astonishment and disdain, "I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?"

"At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted."

"Your coming to Longbourn, to see me and my family," said Elizabeth coolly, "will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence."

Her ladyship continued in the same vein, berating Elizabeth for the rumour, expounding on her belief of her daughter Anne and Darcy’s engagement, until Elizabeth could stand it no longer.

"In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal."

"True. You are a gentleman's daughter. But who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition."

"Whatever my connections may be," said Elizabeth, "if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you."

"Tell me once for all, are you engaged to him?"

"Yes, I am. We are engaged to each other freely, without impediment, and with the consent of my
father. Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude," replied Elizabeth, "have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former were excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment’s concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn. You can have nothing further to say on this subject which will not be an insult to either myself or your nephew."

Elizabeth walked quietly and hurriedly back into the house. Mrs Bennet was surprised and disappointed that Lady Catherine did not stay for refreshments given that they were soon to be family, but Elizabeth gave her to understand that she had simply been passing through and only stopped to briefly talk to Elizabeth.

In the solitude of her bedroom Elizabeth relayed the whole to Darcy in letter, but was concerned that Lady Catherine would descend on him in London before receiving Elizabeth’s warning. Elizabeth was on the point of asking her father to send the letter express, an extravagance she was not entirely sure the situation warranted but she did not wish Darcy to suffer his Aunt’s wrath unprepared. However, the application proved unnecessary as Elizabeth was crossing the hallway to her father’s study, Darcy and Bingley were being shown into the house.

Elizabeth greeted them with delight and Bingley left them in privacy for a moment. Elizabeth hurriedly explained Lady Catherine’s visit and handed Darcy the letter she had written to him.

“My Aunt will be vexed when she arrives in London and finds me not at home. I knew that she would not approve of our marriage but I am grieved that she came to you first, to talk you out of it.”

“If you can withstand my relations, then I can withstand yours,” Elizabeth said, knowing that she already had the favour of Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who were the most important to Darcy.

“I suspect that Aunt Catherine will apply to my Uncle in an attempt to use his influence to end our engagement, but she will not be successful. Indeed I can withstand your family and let me reassure you that we have the support of the rest of my family. Aunt and Uncle Fitzwilliam, my cousin Viscount Milton and Lady Mary on my mother’s side; Sir John and Lady Louise, Mr and Mrs Hampton on my father’s side.”

“I am relieved, thank you, and I would like to learn more about your family,” Elizabeth smiled and gave Darcy’s hand a quick, impulsive squeeze.

“I have aunts, uncles, and cousins aplenty, we have time.”

They joined the others in the parlour and the party agreed to dine at Netherfield the next day, giving Mr Bennet time to review the settlement papers for his daughters.

The next morning, after breakfast, Mr Bennet called Lizzy into his study.

“Your young man has behaved admirably of late and impressed me much Lizzy. His love of you and your mutual respect is clear. I could not part with you to any less a man, my girl.”

“Thank you, Papa, it is very reassuring to hear it but what has prompted this declaration?”

“The ample care and protection which he has laid out for you and any future children in your settlement. The details are his to discuss with you, as I am sure he will, but suffice to say you will be well cared for.”

“I will ask him, thank you.”
At dinner that evening Miss Bingley enjoyed holding court, knowing that her time as her brother’s hostess was drawing to a close, and kept her barbed comments to a minimum as there was no one to appreciate them. Both she and Bingley looked forward to her return to London and the Hursts’ after Bingley and Jane’s wedding. Caroline especially anticipated returning to London to be away from the obvious failure in her attempts to marry Darcy and prevent her brother’s marriage to Jane. Relations between Caroline and Charles were polite but strained, lest she lose all access to him and his relationship with the Darcy’s. In London she could start afresh in her search for a worthy husband.

The party was merry and ran late into the night, and although Mrs Bennet and her commentary on her daughters successes and anticipation of their season in London made Elizabeth and Jane blush they bore it well.

As both couples counted the days to their weddings and consequent changes that would be brought unto their lives, Elizabeth and Jane’s thoughts and conversations often turned to their younger sisters. Mrs Bennet’s repeated comments about putting their sisters into the path of other rich men did nothing to allay the elder’s fears around the younger’s behaviour. Whilst their minds were on their sisters Lydia’s near ruin had also given her parents a great deal to think about. Mrs Bennet was torn between dismay that her favourite daughter was not the first married and embarrassment at the manner in which she had tried to go about it but the former feeling dominated the latter. Mr Bennet realised now the wisdom of Elizabeth’s warning to him and his own laziness and folly in not heeding her. However his desire to punish Lydia for her behaviour was already wearing down against his wish for peace and quiet. After several conversations on the subject between the elder Miss Bennet’s, their parents, and their gentlemen a conclusion was reached: send Lydia and Kitty to finishing school. It would provide Mr Bennet with the peace he longed for and, if well chosen, curb the girls problematic behaviour. Jane was of the opinion that Kitty would need far less work than Lydia, if removed from her influence, and Elizabeth was inclined to agree.

Mrs Bennet’s delight over her daughter’s engagements was compounded by several days spent in London with the Gardiner’s shopping for their trousseau. The visit allowed Elizabeth time to be shown the Darcy’s house in London and request a few small decoration changes to be completed before their return after the wedding. They were also invited to take tea with Darcy’s Fitzwilliam relatives in order for all the women to meet. Elizabeth was thankful that her mother held Darcy and his title family too much in awe to behave embarrassingly. She and Darcy also confirmed their plans to travel almost immediately to Pemberley but to return to London in October once the seasons was underway. Georgina was to stay in London with Mrs Annesley but would travel into Hertfordshire with Colonel Fitzwilliam for the wedding. Elizabeth liked Darcy’s Aunt Fitzwilliam, the Countess of Matlock, though any family who was easier to get along with than Lady Catherine would only be seen in a positive light.

The day of their wedding arrived quickly though not quickly enough for all, except Mrs Bennet. She succeeded in providing a wedding and wedding breakfast which would be well remembered and talked of for years to come by people other than herself. The Darcy’s spent a day in London before travelling to Pemberley. The Bingley’s closed up Netherfield, temporarily, to tour the North in order for Jane to meet the rest of Bingley’s family. Lydia and Kitty were sent away to school, it was not one of the finest seminaries, but it was one suited to their needs and Mr Bennet’s budget which was only slightly supplemented by his new sons and their mutual desire to prevent such inauspicious behaviour as near elopement again.

Christmas saw the whole family gather at Pemberley, Gardiner’s, Bennet’s, Bingley’s, Fitzwilliam’s and Darcy’s. The mixture of families was greeted with trepidation by many but Elizabeth’s growing skills as a hostess and the diplomacy of her Aunt Gardiner, meant for a successful holiday season for all. The Christmas joy was enhanced by the news of an impending Darcy heir. The joy with which
Mrs Bennet talked of Mrs Darcy and Mrs Bingley to all and sundry needs no description and before the twelvemonth was complete the Bingley’s had purchased and removed to an estate thirty miles from Pemberley.

Lydia and Kitty were successfully calmed buy their further education though neither girl would ever be called retiring, their exuberance was regulated. Kitty and Mary both developed a close friendship with Georgiana Darcy and the women regularly corresponded even as their lives changed, Kitty married a young clergyman near Pemberley, Mary one of her Uncle Philips’s clerks who appreciated her mind more than anyone else in her life, and Georgiana the younger son of the Earl of Derby and was very happy. Lydia achieved her aim of marrying an officer thanks to an introduction by Colonel Fitzwilliam.

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