Talk Any Louder

by PutItBriefly

Summary

Transparency proves dangerous when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy face life-changing consequences as a result of his defense of Lydia.
Chapter 1

He was a slow writer. He made frequent pauses, every one long and thoughtful. His writing was studied and deliberate. Every sentence was fully formed and edited in his mind before he set the first letter to paper. He would not begin without being certain of the end.

She thought it would have been better to remain ignorant of his habits. She had received one of his studied letters. She had heard his friends banter about how he did not write with ease. This was not the first time that she had learned something about him and immediately realized that she had already known it. Throughout their acquaintance, she had created two sets of catalogues for the study of his character. One set -- little truths and details and anecdotes that were collected only to be immediately discarded. The other -- misrepresentations and lies, created for the purpose of flattering herself.

It would have been better to neither notice his habits nor realize the injustice of her own. The guilt of her mistreatment of him was compounded by knowing that he should not be occupying her thoughts. There were more pressing matters at hand than how deliberately Mr. Darcy chose every word he wrote.

He relieved her stress with the obvious resolution of writing a letter -- he finished. In his haste to dry the ink, he blew on it, sanded it, and finally shook the paper before he was satisfied that it could be safely sealed. Done, he handed her the letter. On the outside sheet, he had addressed it "Mr. Bennet," with no further direction.

He handed it to her without preamble. "This letter includes an introduction, reasons for my involvement, and explains the actions I intend to take."

She said, "Thank you," without being sure of anything else to add.

"The post would be faster than asking your uncle to hand deliver it, of course, but I fear with ours being so trifling an acquaintance, your father would sooner forget it than read it without his being prompted by Mr. Gardiner."

She could not disagree.

"I should like to wait with you until Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner return," he announced suddenly. "Though I have no doubt of your being more suited to the office, I prefer to explain my involvement to Mr. Gardiner myself."
Having no objection to such a scheme, she nodded. It had been twenty minutes since he arrived. They had spent all of that time alone, behind a closed door. Her aunt’s servants already knew Mr. Darcy came to visit Miss Elizabeth Bennet while she was reading in the parlor. He did not shut the door with the intention of risking her reputation, she was sure. No, she was under the impression he had come with the intention of renewing his addresses.

When they were first reunited at his estate, Elizabeth feared he might have thought she was trying to trap him. She had spurned the offer of his hand the first time he made it -- an event that was clearly a shock to him. Her refusal had been made with particularly abusive language. It would not have been unreasonable for him to suppose she had reevaluated his proposal and had decided to see if she could tempt him again.

She had been eager to make him aware of the truth of the situation. She was simply traveling with an aunt and uncle. The former, having grown up in Lambton and still having some friends there, had induced the party to enter the neighborhood. She further wanted to see Pemberley, the greatest estate the area, renowned for its beautiful grounds. Though Elizabeth was reluctant to visit the home of a man whose love she had spurned, she found herself unable to deny her aunt's request. By all accounts, he was not at home and she was easily persuaded by the promise of interesting walks and picturesque prospects.

Elizabeth had been eager to explain herself. He was eager to introduce her to the party of friends he traveled with. She was delighted by his sister. He, using the sister as a proxy, issued an invitation for her party to dine with his.

With every encounter, Elizabeth became more and more assured of Mr. Darcy's continuing regard. Where she had once felt only indignation at the idea of his admiration, she had begun to feel grateful. It was not only that he loved her that inspired these feelings, but that he continued to love her despite the way she had treated him and the dreadful accusations she had hurled at him.

Elizabeth had last seen him only the day before. She felt on that occasion, that if she wished, she could induce him to renew his address with only a small bit of encouragement. They had made no plans to see one another today, though the earlier dinner invitation had still gone unfulfilled.

Mr. Darcy appeared at her lodgings regardless. Elizabeth was quite alone, curled up in the parlor with two letters from Jane. Her aunt and uncle, knowing how much she had coveted these letters set out on a walk so that she might have time to read in peace.

He appeared, lead into the parlor by a maid who disappeared after receiving his hat and gloves. With his customary deliberation, he shut the door behind himself. Desiring privacy over propriety, Mr.
Darcy could have only one goal in mind when he entered. His reasons for visiting unannounced were soon forgotten when he saw her.

Doubled over in her chair, Elizabeth was weeping over the news Jane related. Upon seeing her in tears, Mr. Darcy had been by her side immediately. He offered everything for her relief that he could think of -- wine, the servants to help her, to fetch her aunt and uncle who had abandoned her in her time of need.

The entire account soon tumbled from her lips: her youngest sister left the household of her friends in the middle of the night to elope with a man who could have no serious designs on her.

Jane’s hurried letters gave the particulars of what had been attempted by her father to recover the fugitives. Mr. Bennet had met with no success beyond a reason to believe the couple had not journeyed farther than London. This itself was cause for alarm, for while it was easy enough to be quietly married in town, it was easier still to hide away and never be found. From Mr. Darcy’s account of Mr. Wickham’s history, Elizabeth had no reason to suppose that her sister would soon be married. Mr. Wickham would not be tempted without a fortune that Lydia did not possess. She was ruined and all her relations were tainted by the connection. Elizabeth had not the faintest hope that she would ever see her sister again.

“I am grieved,” he had said. “Shocked. Is it certain, absolutely certain?”

She replied that it was.

“What has been done to recover her?”

“My father has gone to London. Jane writes to beg my uncle’s assistance.”

“He shall have it. Mine as well, if he will allow it. Your writing desk,” he prompted, “where is it?”

The portable cabinet of Elizabeth’s writing things sat upon a table in the corner of the parlor. She gestured to it. Immediately, Mr. Darcy sat himself before it, appropriating Elizabeth’s paper, pen, ink, knife and sander.

It was surreal to watch him bent at a woman’s writing desk. He neither knew nor respected the girl in question, yet he sat penning a missive seeking her father’s permission to assist in her recovery. On
her first day at Pemberley, Elizabeth had begun to understand that was his way. Hundreds of people relied on him for their livelihoods, from the servants and tenants to the villagers who did business with the Pemberley household. Responsible and good-natured, he provided for them all. It mattered not to Mr. Darcy that Lydia’s own thoughtlessness played a role in her disgrace. He had the resources to assist her. Therefore, he would do so.

“It is not my intention to give you false hope,” he added, after receiving permission to wait with Elizabeth for her uncle’s return. “I believe myself to be tolerably acquainted with Mr. Wickham’s habits and friends. I have a greater chance of locating your sister than your father does.”

“It is more than we deserve,” Elizabeth said stiffly. “You need not take on my family’s mortification as your own.”

“Miss Bennet,” he protested, kneeling before her chair, “You know as well as I that this could have been avoided. His history reflects poorly on my family. I was too proud to reveal what he was, though I knew quality people might suffer for the ignorance.”

She smiled, ruefully. “I could say the same for myself.”

Gently, he disagreed. “I demanded secrecy from you. That you were generous enough to grant it speaks only well of you.”

“You were seeking to protect Miss Darcy. Such a dear girl! Who could help but protect her!” Though her acquaintance with Mr. Darcy’s sister was so brief it barely deserved the name, Elizabeth could easily imagine the feelings of such a girl’s brother. “Her reputation should not be tarnished for the sakes of people she had never met, in a place no one had ever heard of. A lady’s reputation is delicate. It is not pride to guard it zealously.”

Persisting in the argument, Mr. Darcy replied, “An illustration of his character need not require naming the young ladies he has shamed.”

“Then take what solace you can in that no one would have believed you had you said a word,” Elizabeth said frankly. “The only difference would be that we would feel foolish now, for having not believed you when we had the chance.”

Mr. Darcy smiled and said warmly, “You believed me, my harshest critic. Why should all of Meryton not follow suit?”
“I am a vain creature. You were clever enough to flatter me before telling me that which I did not want to hear.”

“I think,” he said cautiously, “that which I intended to flatter you and that which you did not want to hear were, at one time, one in the same.”

“That,” Elizabeth replied, too honest to say anything else, “I cannot deny.” He looked away. “But I saw the compliment soon enough.”

Mr. Darcy seized her hand. “Miss Bennet –”

Behind him, the parlor door swung open, announcing the return of the Gardiners and the servant sent to fetch them. Elizabeth rose to her feet. In quick succession, Mr. Darcy dropped her hand as though touching her skin had burned him, rose to his full height, spun to face the couple and bowed his greeting. “Mrs. Gardiner. Mr. Gardiner.”

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner’s curiosity could not be sated soon enough. The servant Mr. Darcy had sent caught them and bid them to return to the inn immediately, which had given them both alarm. This transformed into a sort of satisfaction once they learned from the innkeeper who was upstairs with their niece. They had both supposed there to be more to Elizabeth’s friendship with Mr. Darcy than she had acknowledged. A tete-a-tete between an engaged couple was acceptable, provided it was brief. Elizabeth’s tear-streaked face and Mr. Darcy’s grave manner upon their entrance gave both aunt and uncle a new sense of anxiety.

They both thought too well of Mr. Darcy to suspect him of any wrong-doing, but Elizabeth was under their protection and the sight of her in tears while alone with this man was enough for Mr. Gardiner to demand, “What is the meaning of this, sir?”

“Please,” Elizabeth answered, stepping around Mr. Darcy, “I’ve had dreadful news from Longbourn.” Frantically, she collected the pages of Jane’s letters and tried to put them into some sort of order before giving them to her uncle. Mr. Darcy took this opportunity to put more space between himself and Elizabeth. Mrs. Gardiner took up his office of comforting Elizabeth while her uncle familiarized himself with all that Jane had relayed.

“Mrs. Gardiner,” her husband said in clipped tones, “have the servants pack our things. We must return to London immediately. I’ll pen an express, letting my brother know I am on my way.”
“Mr. Gardiner,” his lady protested. “What in Heaven’s name is going on?”

“Lydia has eloped,” Elizabeth said, her voice straining. “My father has cause to believe she is in London. Jane begs for Uncle’s assistance.”

“I shall arrange to have our things packed and loaded onto the carriage,” Mrs. Gardiner affirmed. “We must leave within the hour.”

“You should go first to Longbourn,” Mr. Darcy advised. “Mr. Gardiner’s presence is London, however welcome, is likely to be less needed than Miss Elizabeth’s by her mother and sisters.”

“How fortunate we are that it is on the way,” Elizabeth said wryly.

“I shall go immediately to town,” Mr. Darcy told the collected party. “With any luck, I will have located Mr. Wickham and Miss Lydia before you arrive, Mr. Gardiner.”

“You, sir?” he sputtered in surprise.

“I was fortunate enough to pass most of my youth with Mr. Wickham,” he answered. “I am well acquainted with his friends and habits. I believe this task is best left to me.”

Mrs. Gardiner had by now left to fulfill the tasks that she had been assigned, leaving Elizabeth the only witness to the discourse of the two men. Every glance at her pale, anxious face steadied Mr. Darcy’s resolve. She could not suffer without him taking every action in his power to relieve her. Every glance made by the young gentleman towards his niece softened Mr. Gardiner’s resolve. The recovery of Lydia was her family’s responsibility; her disgrace was their disgrace. Mr. Darcy’s interest was not that of a lord or a patron, but a lover and a brother. Elizabeth would be his wife; Lydia, his own sister. If her recovery was the responsibility of her family, then surely that included Mr. Darcy.

Once he had Mr. Gardiner’s acquiescence, Mr. Darcy nodded to Elizabeth. “I have given Miss Elizabeth a letter for her father. It explains my relationship with Mr. Wickham and what I intend to do for Miss Lydia. I shall ride for London this morning. Send word once you have been reunited with Mr. Bennet, and he has read the letter. Miss Elizabeth,” he requested, “allow me use of your writing desk once more that I may write the direction for Mr. Gardiner.”
“Of course.”

It took Mr. Darcy only a moment to complete that task. Then, as though realizing that he, too, must have his journey prepared if he hoped to leave when promised, he made his good-byes. To Mr. Gardiner, he asked that his compliments to Mrs. Gardiner be delivered, and looked forward to having better news to share in London. Elizabeth offered her hand and, taking it, Mr. Darcy bowed. Rather than release her, he studied her hand for a long moment before drawing it up to his mouth. He kissed her knuckles with something like reverence.
Chapter 2

Longbourn was in an uproar. Mrs. Bennet had retired entirely to her apartments in a pique of self-pity and imaginary illness. Without the direction of their mistress, most of the servants were aimless. Jane, in whose care the Gardiner children had been left, tried to direct both the children and the maids, but neither group found her leadership inspiring. Even her natural optimism wavered in the face of so many setbacks. Mary moralized and lectured at all the people who needed it least. Kitty, the consummate follower, floundered about, trying to make a stand of her own while unsure of what that stance should be. She was at once put out that her father was angry with her, desirous of making sure everyone knew she would never behave the way Lydia had, yet also not convinced Lydia had done much of anything wrong.

Elizabeth arrived home fatigued and ill. She had, until now, regarded the Gardiners’ carriage to be a superior vehicle. Three nauseating days spent pushing horses to their limit to return home as quickly as possible left her sore and queasy. Her nights on the road had been anything but restful. She had spent them lying awake. Whatever time she could spare from despairing over Lydia, she spent longing for Mr. Darcy. There would be no news of either until Mr. Gardiner reached London. Mr. Bennet would not find Lydia without Mr. Darcy's help and Mr. Darcy could not contact the family at Longbourn but through Mr. Gardiner.

Jane and the children had been keeping watch for the arrival of Elizabeth's party. No sooner had the carriage arrived at the door, than the five of them spilled out of the house. Mr. Gardiner handed first his wife from the carriage, who was immediately beset upon by her children, then his niece. Elizabeth took Jane's hands. "Oh, Jane," she said breathlessly, "has there been any news?" Elizabeth asked, though she knew there would be nothing.

"Oh, Lizzy, my mother will be so pleased you are come home," was Jane's reply. She was not equal to giving a negative reply, Elizabeth thought. The idea of her mother anxious to see her let Elizabeth know how adverse the situation had affected Mrs. Bennet.

"I shall see Mama right away," Elizabeth told Jane as they walked into the house. "How are Mary and Kitty?"

"Mary is holding up admirably," Jane answered. "She takes great comfort from Scripture." Privately, Elizabeth supposed Mary did not know what to think, but took great comfort in reciting words that sounded wise. "Kitty is in a dreadful state. She and Lydia were so close, and I think she feels the judgment of society the worst of us all."

"The news is generally known, then?" Elizabeth asked. She was too practical to think it could be hidden for long, but she hoped the family would receive a reprieve during the worst of it. Her bonnet, gloves and pelisse were left with Hill in the foyer. Jane followed her up the stairs.

"Almost from the start," Jane admitted. "We've also heard many accounts of Mr. Wickham's behavior in Meryton. He's left many debts, Lizzy."

"We knew what he was, Jane," Elizabeth said mournfully. "I should have made at least some of Mr. Darcy's account public."

"We had good reasons for not doing so," Jane added.

"Indeed, we did not," her sister countered. "We imagined that a man, who had shown no intention of reforming in the whole course of his life, may suddenly change for being in our neighborhood! We
imagined that because he was leaving us soon, his character did not matter! It does not matter where he is, if he's to do harm to respectable people. And we are the ones who must suffer for that choice. I could bear it if it was only myself who had lost because of my choices, but Lydia is gone -- perhaps forever! None of the rest of us will ever make a suitable match. Mama will never know any peace. She will worry about what will become of us until Papa dies, and then suffer the reality of every prophesy she's ever made."

"I cannot..." Jane began, "I cannot think it will turn out all that bad."

"Forgive me," Elizabeth sighed. "My imaginings are all dreary and hopeless. But, if we prepare ourselves for the worst, than we may be pleasantly surprised when it all turns out much better."

Before she was fit to appear before her mother, Elizabeth needed to refresh herself and change her dress. Clean skin, a fresh gown and the remembrance of Mr. Darcy's intent to forge onto London raised her spirits considerably.

When Elizabeth and Jane stepped into her mother's room, she was sitting in bed, conversing with Mrs. Gardiner.

"Lizzy, Lizzy, my dear Lizzy," her mother gushed out when she saw her second daughter, "You good girl, clever girl, we are saved!"

Elizabeth and Jane exchanged confused glances. "Has there been news?" Elizabeth asked. If any word had reached Longbourn, her assumption was that it would have reached Jane, acting as the head of the family in their father's absence and their mother's convalesce, before it reached the sickroom.

"There has, there has, you know very well there has!" her mother cried.

"I am sorry," Elizabeth stammered, "but I did not know. Pray, what is the news? Has my father found Lydia?"

"Your father," Mrs. Bennet harrumphed. "Your father is responsible for all of this, you know. Had he only taken us all to Brighton, like I wanted, Lydia never would have run off."

Elizabeth again requested that her mother share her news.

"My sister," Mrs. Bennet said, with a pointed look to Mrs. Gardiner, "told me straight away that Mr. Darcy has gone to London to search for dear Lydia."

"Mr. Darcy?" Jane repeated.

"Oh," Elizabeth said, feeling herself grow red and turning away, "yes, yes, that was his intention."

"What a clever girl you are, Lizzy," her mother cooed. "Now, I have always thought you too clever for your own good, but this was a good scheme and I dare say no one could have thought of it but our own sweet Lizzy."

At this, Elizabeth was confused, and told her mother so.

"Mr. Darcy is an unpleasant man and I despise the sight of him, you know, but he is so very rich. Such a proud fellow! Thinks himself quite above us all! But quality people, you know, they think it their duty to provide for the less fortunate. A very commendable trait, I have always thought. I dare say anyone but my Lizzy would want to hide our disgrace from a man like him, but she told him, made it his responsibility and now he shall take on all trouble of saving my poor Lydia."
Elizabeth did not think this a very flattering portrait of herself or of Mr. Darcy. "Lydia is a gentleman's daughter, Mama. I do not think Mr. Darcy thinks her so low as all of that."

"There can hardly be any other explanation," her mother insisted. "And right he is to think so, if it should take his interference to make the match."

Here, Mrs. Gardiner looked very pointedly at Elizabeth, but she could not fathom what her aunt wished her to say. Her mother's conjecture was absurd, but Elizabeth and Jane had had very little success in the past of bringing their mother to any rational understanding of the world.

"I do not think that alone can account for his involvement," Mrs. Gardiner suggested, when Elizabeth failed to provide the desired intelligence.

"He does have a long-standing relationship with Mr. Wickham," the niece suggested, having no success divining exactly what her aunt hoped for her to add. "If Mr. Darcy has any feelings of responsibility towards the match, I am sure they come from that quarter."

"Elizabeth does not do Mr. Darcy's feelings enough credit," was Mrs. Gardiner's reply.

Mary chose this time to enter, baring a tray of tea things. Elizabeth was offered a reprieve from answering her aunt's uncomfortable suggestion. She was of the opinion that Mr. Darcy's actions were rooted at least partially in a preference for herself, but to share such a theory with her family was more mortification than she could bear. In light of Lydia's actions, there would be no proposal coming. Elizabeth did not think her mother could ever forgive her should she learn that she had already refused the man.

Indeed, Elizabeth felt her mother would be quite justified in her anger. Though she had been able to enter Derbyshire perfectly content with her refusal, if not the manner in which she refused, Elizabeth had not been able to leave without regret. Returned to Longbourn, her past self appeared to Elizabeth as a frightfully stupid girl.

The mother, aunt and three sisters partook of tea and cakes. Conversation was directed by Mary, who related the contents of a recent conversation between Mrs. Phillips and the curate at Meryton. In her retelling, Mary appeared largely unaware of how condemning the clergyman's words had been. Had she given much thought to the matter at all, it was unlikely she would have repeated it to the mother of the girl in question with so little emotion.

Being that the curate was married, Mrs. Bennet had very little interest in his opinions of her daughters and instead chose to spend this time digesting what her sister Gardiner had said regarding the feelings of the very single Mr. Darcy. A single man in possession of good fortune must be in want of a wife; if such a man was to spend his fortune on a ruined girl, his inducement could only be interest in one of her sisters.

"Jane," Mrs. Bennet interrupted suddenly. Mary was put out, but used to her contributions being pushed aside in favor of Jane. Owing to Mary's subject matter, Elizabeth found she had less sympathy for Mary's plight than she might normally have had. "Jane, dear, leave the running of the house to Lizzy."

Equally trained in the art of running a household, Elizabeth was surprised at this sudden need for her skills. Deference to seniority demanded that while her mother was indisposed, her responsibilities as mistress fell to the eldest daughter.

"Have I displeased you, Mama?" Jane wondered, having never in the whole course of her life done anything that earned her mother's disapprobation.
"No, no, dear, of course not," Mrs. Bennet said tenderly, patting Jane on the cheek. "But we cannot have you do anything to loose your bloom."

"Whereas the bloom my youth is an acceptable casualty," Elizabeth interjected. "Though I am younger, so it may require more than merely the running of a household to defeat."

"That's enough out of you, Miss Lizzy," her mother pronounced. Internally, Elizabeth could only shrug. She was a necessity to her mother for nearly an hour -- the longest stretch of her life so far. "Jane," Mrs. Bennet continued, addressing her eldest daughter again, "when Mr. Darcy comes, you must be agreeable."

This declaration was a shock to all present.

"We thought him such a great friend to Mr. Bingley and I am more disappointed than any of you to know his loyalties are so easily overpowered, but Jane, if he will save our family's reputation for you, then, however distasteful you may find it, you must accept him."

Jane, unable to process such a vulgar idea, was speechless. Elizabeth, all indignation cried out, "Mama!" Mary looked at Jane with some sympathy. Mrs. Gardiner smiled to herself in some private amusement and shook her head.

"Sister, you misunderstand."

"Oh, how I wish that were so," Mrs. Bennet said mournfully. "I would not like to see my Jane with such an unpleasant man. But to take on the office he has chosen to take on -- well, there is only one reason for it. Jane is a good, dutiful girl; if he wants her, he shall have her. She has such a sweet temperament. I dare say she can make the best of it, if any woman could."

Kitty entered, wondering about some bit of ribbon she had misplaced, just in time to ensure that every woman in the household was present when Mrs. Gardiner corrected her sister: "It is Lizzy that is engaged to Mr. Darcy."

For the first time in her life, Elizabeth truly understood what her mother complained of when she spoke of her nerves, for this simple sentence, from the mouth of a respected aunt, made her feel very ill. She had a great disappointment in hearing such an announcement and knowing that it was false. She had wished for such a thing, but knew it to be impossible. To have it claimed by another person made all the impossibility of it worse. Additionally, the announcement was a great shock to her family. Elizabeth dreaded both the effusive reactions and the inevitable disappointment when she revealed the truth.

Kitty laughed. Mary recited verse. Jane hugged her. Mrs. Bennet found her second daughter once again in favor.

And Elizabeth, Elizabeth said, "Aunt, I am not."

Mrs. Gardiner's countenance faltered for a moment. Attempting to mollify feelings that she misinterpreted in her niece, she said, "I am sorry to say it so plainly when he has not spoken to your father, but in the circumstances, I thought it best not to be obtuse."

"There is nothing to say to Papa," Elizabeth said honestly. "I will admit Mr. Darcy shows some partiality, but we are not engaged."

"Then, Lizzy," said Mrs. Bennet, undaunted by the awkwardness shared by aunt and niece, "you will make yourself agreeable to Mr. Darcy when he returns for you. I will have none of the foolishness you showed Mr. Collins."
"A simple task to fulfill," Elizabeth observed, "for Mr. Darcy is no fool."

Kitty laughed again. "He's not fool enough to marry Lizzy! You've got no dowry!"

Pained as Elizabeth already was by Mrs. Gardiner's misconceptions, Kitty's remark had little additional effect. "That's no obstacle. He has money enough."

Forced to concede to the truth of that, Kitty had nothing more to say. "I hope you do marry him, Lizzy," she said anyway.

Elizabeth was unsure if she should thank her sister for this sentiment. Her mother was quick to answer, declaring that Elizabeth certainly would marry him, should he condescend to ask. There was to be an assembly in a month. If Elizabeth did not dance the first set with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, her mother declared, will have used them all very ill. Elizabeth refrained from arguing with her mother's assumptions about Mr. Darcy's attendance at a public ball in Meryton. Jane pressed her sister's hand in sympathy. After Mary said something indistinct about a female's reputation, Elizabeth claimed fatigue and excused herself that she might rest before dinner. Mrs. Gardiner rose immediately afterwards and followed her out of Mrs. Bennet's apartment.

"Elizabeth," her aunt implored, taking Elizabeth's arm and drawing her aside, "your uncle and I accepted Mr. Darcy's help because we thought you engaged. We allowed the two of you so much privacy as a favor." Mrs. Gardiner dropped her voice. "The parlor at the inn -- how long were you alone together?"

Knowing as well as her aunt did the dangers of letting that conversation be heard, Elizabeth was just as quiet when she answered, "Not above an half-hour."

Even this period of time was too long to safeguard the reputation of a most beloved niece. "He should not have stayed, once he saw that you were alone."

"Perhaps not," Elizabeth admitted cautiously. Inwardly, she reflected that a young man did have his reasons for desiring the exclusive company of a young lady. He could hardly wish to make a proposal in company. "He saw I was in distress. What else could he do but try to comfort me?"

"It is not his place to comfort you if he is not your intended," Mrs. Gardiner chided. "He knows this. He is too intelligent, too proper a man to have not considered this."

"In truth," Elizabeth protested, "I do not believe he did. If helping the helpless is not just cause to remain in someone's company, what is?"

"Elizabeth," her aunt sighed. Mrs. Gardiner was normally of too sanguine a temper to grow frustrated with her niece, but on this occasion, Elizabeth's evasiveness was drawing her close to it. "What is your relationship with Mr. Darcy? None of us has correctly divined it."

She pressed her lips together. "I first heard of Mr. Darcy at an assembly. Mr. Bingley wanted to introduce us. Mr. Darcy refused to make my acquaintance and said some very rude things about me, besides. I made a joke of it, but in truth, I was very cross."

"We continued to meet. We could not help it. He rarely participated in conversation, but when he did, we quarreled. I thought myself very clever, arguing with a man so few would."

"This account of Mr. Darcy is so unlike the young man we had the pleasure of meeting at Pemberley." The same was true of every account Mrs. Gardiner had heard.

"He was very different at Pemberley than when I saw him last autumn or even in the spring,"
Elizabeth reminded her.

The aunt remained skeptic. "But such a change?"

"People are often changing," Elizabeth replied. "It is what makes the study of character so fascinating. Oh, I think in essentials people do not change. But the faces they show in different situations, those can show a great deal of variation."

"The difference in being at his own home versus the guest of another, you mean."

"Yes," Elizabeth drawled, "but also, I think he was also trying harder to make a good impression. He knows he often gives offense without meaning to when he makes new acquaintances and he wanted you and my uncle to like him."

"We did like him," her aunt answered. "We liked him very much."

Elizabeth smiled. "I'm very gratified to hear it. I like him, too."

"But you are not engaged to him."

"No."

"Are you anticipating his address?"

Elizabeth hesitated, before answering, "I was." She feared saying more, unwilling to publicize his humiliation at Kent. However, she could not allow her aunt to labor under the impression a proposal was imminent, when the truth was it was impossible to conceive. "What Lydia has done," Elizabeth hasted to add, "has ended any hopes I may have had in that quarter. He would never willingly be connected to Mr. Wickham."

"Oh, Lizzy. You do him too little credit."

"I am in that habit. So, I shall hope for a better outcome."
Chapter 3

London being only half a day's journey from Meryton served the family well. Though Mr. Bennet was a neglectful correspondent and wrote only a line or two during the whole of his trip, Mr. Gardiner was loquacious.

The first piece of news was unremarkable. Mr. Gardiner wrote to say he had arrived in London and been reunited with his brother the very day he left Longbourn. Mr. Bennet had read the letter prepared by Mr. Darcy, and his daughters were very tactfully given to understand that the offered help had been grudgingly accepted. The men had not met with Mr. Darcy yet, but Mr. Gardiner assured them that he would write as soon as they had and relate the course of the conversation.

The second letter arrived before Mrs. Gardiner had posted her reply to the first. Mr. Gardiner wrote that he and Mr. Bennet had been received at Mr. Darcy's London home the morning of his second day in town. The letter was eagerly passed among all the ladies presently home, including Mrs. Bennet, though she declined to read past the first paragraph.

Mr. Gardiner assured them that Mr. Darcy had found Mr. Wickham and Lydia living together in a boarding house. They were, as feared, not wed. He intended to visit the couple himself the next day, but Mr. Darcy had related that Lydia was in good health and high spirits. His first object had been to separate the couple, but at this, he failed.

Though Elizabeth quickly realized that Mr. Darcy's plan to separate Lydia and Mr. Wickham was likely canvassed in the letter she watched him write, but had not read herself, she was shocked by the suggestion.

"What can he mean by it?" she had wondered idly to Jane.

"Lydia is very young," her sister replied. "Too young, I should think, to marry, even if she is out. Miss Darcy is Lydia's age, is she not?"

At this, Elizabeth could not help but interject that Miss Darcy was a year or so older.

"The very best outcome would be for Lydia to return home," Jane continued. "She can marry when she is wise enough to make a prudent choice."

"What man, of adequate means to support her, would take her knowing that she lived out of wedlock with Mr. Wickham?" Elizabeth wondered. "There are no men that good."

"Perhaps it is not too late to say it was a misunderstanding."

"Perhaps not," Elizabeth reluctantly agreed. "If Lydia is not with child, we can say it was all a misunderstanding and people can chose to believe us or not at their leisure. However, any man she would marry would deserve to know that she is not chaste."

"Perhaps Mr. Darcy intended to send her away," Jane suggested, unwilling to discuss her sister's lost virtue in anything but the vaguest terms.

"Papa cannot support a second household," Elizabeth said firmly. "We barely live within our means now."

"Then we are fortunate Lydia is choosing to marry him," Jane surmised.
"She is choosing to stay with him," Elizabeth corrected. "That is not a marriage."

Mrs. Gardiner wrote a reply to her husband's second letter. Elizabeth refrained from penning her own to demand a clearer explanation of Mr. Darcy's intentions. That Lydia was choosing to compound her disgrace by continuing with Mr. Wickham after she had been offered whatever salvation his money could buy made those intentions irrelevant.

The third letter received at Longbourn brought them all greater cheer. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner had gone to see Lydia. While she had preferred Mr. Wickham to the dreary stranger Mr. Darcy, to her father and uncle, she was not so stubborn. She removed from Mr. Wickham's lodgings and settled at her uncle's home quickly enough. She maintained that she would marry Mr. Wickham and negotiations had begun for the marriage settlement.

Mr. Gardiner implied that Mr. Wickham, though having no intentions of marrying Lydia when they left, had been persuaded to change his opinion by threat of legal action. The friendship he had cultivated between himself and Lydia was apparently of a sort that the family could sue him for breach of contract.

("Lydia is not clever enough to keep proof of Mr. Wickham's false promises," Elizabeth remarked. "She is a romantic," was Jane's reply. "She would keep love letters. If he wrote his intention of marrying her, Papa would be right to pursue it through the law."

Elizabeth, remembering a cherished letter of her own that carefully sidestepped direct mention of a proposal, flushed.)

The oppressive spirit at Longbourn lifted with this reprieve. Married, Lydia would be absolved of her sins. When the wedding date was announced, Mrs. Bennet emerged from her apartments for the first time since Lydia's disappearance. Mrs. Phillips and Kitty immediately set out to ensure that all of Meryton congratulated them on the first marriage of a Bennet sister.

Because all the news had been delivered by the pen of Mr. Gardiner, once Elizabeth was allowed to feel relief, she longed to know her father's position on all that had happened. She had not heard from him in his own words since she left for Derbyshire. Mr. Gardiner's understanding and tact she appreciated perhaps more than her father's, but her papa was the first man in her heart. He was a man who liked peace and he had been robbed of it for a very long time. He would stay in London until the wedding three weeks hence. Elizabeth had no doubts that the wait would be a trying time for her father. Mr. Bennet hated London and hated being another man's guest in the best of times. He was robbed of the possibility of making the best of the visit by the very real consideration that Lydia could be with child by the time she reached the alter.

Elizabeth was in her apartment writing a cheerless letter for her father, that he might enjoy commiserating with, when she was called into the sitting room to visit with Lady Lucas and Maria. The Lucases had not found the Bennets worthy companions during their trials, but now that everything was being resolved with an event they could pretend was a joyous one, their fair-weather friends had come to sit and gossip.

Kitty and Maria giggled in the corner while Mrs. Bennet tried to pretend that Mr. Wickham was a larger prize than Mr. Collins. Elizabeth sat at her needlework, considering her presence quite superfluous, until Maria addressed her, laughing: "Eliza, tell Kitty that you would never marry Mr. Darcy. He's too frightening!"

Elizabeth's teasing reply that Mr. Darcy wanted to be thought of as very frightening and would be pleased to know he had been so successful with regards to Miss Lucas was not heard over the reply.
of her mother.

"Miss Lizzy has made a great match, Maria! Ten thousand pounds a year! A great estate in Derbyshire and a house in town! My sister tells me the park is ten miles around. That will do quite well for Lizzy. Very fond of walking, you know."

Kitty boggled at the idea of ten miles of property in London. ("Where do they find the room?") Elizabeth protested that she had made no match of the kind. Mrs. Lucas nodded sagely and said, "He was always partial to our Eliza. Why, my Charlotte has said many times that he favored Eliza."

"Who wouldn't favor my Lizzy?" Mrs. Bennet cooed. "So quick, so clever, so well read. Lady Lucas, did you know Elizabeth reads both Latin and Greek? I dare say he's never met a lady so accomplished!"

Having grown up without a governess or the money to attend a seminary, the Bennet girls pursued what education they could with the resources they had. Most young ladies learned the modern languages; her greatest resource being a university educated father, Elizabeth had learned the classic languages because they were what he could teach. She was proud of her ability to read the great poetry of antiquity in their original languages but she had never considered it an accomplishment to entice a gentleman. Her cheeks burned with the shame of her mother's claims.

"And she plays and sings," Lady Lucas added, rather anticlimactically. "The education of my girls was rather more traditional," she added. "Charlotte and Maria speak French and Italian."

"Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet said, hearing the subtle dig of Lady Lucas's words, "why did you never learn French?"

"I had no one to teach me, ma'am," she answered.

"Your father speaks French," her mother tutted.

"I am very sorry, but he does not. If anyone tried to teach him in his youth, I am afraid he was a poor student of the language."

"Does your Mr. Darcy speak French?"

Deciding it was best not to engage in an argument, Elizabeth said, "He has never made mention of it, if he does."

Satisfied that her husband need not know French if a man worth ten thousand a year did not speak it, Mrs. Bennet turned her attention back to Lady Lucas. "Mr. Darcy has two or three French cooks at least," she said. "Lizzy, when you were last at Pemberley, how many French dishes were served?"

"I have never dined there, ma'am," Elizabeth said, feeling her resolve to meet this humiliation with dignity slipping.

"Never dined there," her mother said mournfully. "How are you to know how he likes his table set when you are mistress if you do not dine with him?"

"Asking him would be out of the question, I gather."

Lady Lucas and Maria, feeling unwelcome in the face of the mounting tension between mother and daughter choose soon after to take their leave.

"Elizabeth," her mother said sternly after their guests were gone, "I know you enjoy amusing your
father by vexing me as he does, but I simply cannot have you embarrassing me like that in front of Lady Lucas."

Elizabeth, unable to sympathize with anyone who felt their embarrassment during the visit was greater than her own, announced she was going for a walk. Solitude and reflection refreshed her spirits and when she re-entered the house, Elizabeth was able to think of her imaginary engagement with the humor a situation so absurd deserved. It was true, she owned, that she thought very highly of Mr. Darcy. She hoped fervently and self-consciously that she might see him again someday, though as Lydia and Mr. Wickham's wedding drew nearer, she felt it unlikely. She longed to thank him for his services to her family, for being so kind to her beloved aunt and uncle and for loving her once though she hardly deserved it. She had so many apologies to make. If she could see him once more, speak with him once more, let him bow over her hand just one more time, receive one more kiss and part on good terms... Then...then, she could think of him and regret him and continue on with her life, a better person for having known him, and having been loved by him.

But, to have her family cling so desperately to this idea of an engagement regardless of how often she corrected them was a delicious piece of human folly and Elizabeth was determined to enjoy it. If her mother thought she could manifest a gentlemen to marry her daughter simply by speaking of it often, then she would not allow it to pain her. She would laugh at it, as it deserved.

Jane greeted her at the door when Elizabeth was disposing of her bonnet and spencer. "The post arrived while you were out," she said. "We've had another letter from my uncle."

"Pray tell me he has good news," Elizabeth said. "We have nothing but misery and resignation for too long! I should like to be honestly happy again."

Jane smiled tentatively. "I hope this news will make you happy. Our mother shall be very happy."

"What is it?"

"Papa and Uncle Gardiner will come home after Lydia's wedding," Jane said brightly, "and when they do, Mr. Darcy shall accompany them."

Feeling all the anxiety of having, what was a moment ago, her deepest wish come true, Elizabeth had the most sensible reaction she could. She wept.

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Any effusiveness upon being reunited with her father was tempered by the presence of his silent companion. Elizabeth watched her cousins with some jealousy as they clamored for Mr. Gardiner’s attention. Too young to recognize they should comport themselves with more dignity in front of a guest, they hugged him and tugged on his hands. It had been an unexpectedly long separation from their father and the Gardiner children felt every moment of it. As much as Elizabeth would miss the counsel of her aunt, the Gardiner family deserved to be whole again and return home.

They would not be returning to London until the next day, a fact for which Elizabeth was grateful. Partially because Mrs. Gardiner was a trusted confident whose presence she required when faced with Mr. Darcy for the first time since he kissed her hand in Lambton, but largely because Aunt, Uncle and their four children filled all of Longbourn’s guest quarters. Prior occupation of those apartments was the only thing saving Elizabeth from Mr. Darcy being invited to stay in her home. Even with her aunt’s fortifying presence, Elizabeth barely felt equal to this meeting. She would never be able to leave her own bedroom for the mortification if he was staying at Longbourn.
Longbourn’s sitting room was not so large as to comfortably accommodate its master, mistress, their four daughters and three guests. Mrs. Bennet, alert for any opportunity to promote a match between her second daughter and the austere gentlemen who supposedly favored her, made an awkward suggestion that Elizabeth should show Mr. Darcy the park.

With no small amount of embarrassment on both sides, coats and hats were fetched and donned. Kitty was sent along with them, for in such a situation, the ideal chaperone was the person most likely to be irresponsible and distracted.

Their conversation being dull and commonplace, Kitty soon wandered away from Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in search of something to amuse herself. Talk of the weather and condition of the roads was duller than normal when Mr. Darcy was the one speaking. Elizabeth was pretty and clever; that she attracted so many terrible men and no pleasant ones surprised Kitty, but she supposed some people were just unlucky.

Once Kitty had ventured far enough away that they could converse in relative privacy, Mr. Darcy ended the customary discourse and said, “I was surprised to find the neighborhood anticipating my arrival. Last we met, I believe you implied I was not well liked in Meryton.”

Elizabeth flushed. “Gossip is a favored past time,” she said lightly. “I am afraid you have made yourself a subject of intrigue.”

“And apparently so.”

“Please don’t concern yourself about it too much,” Elizabeth said, hearing too much feeling in her own voice. “All will be forgotten in time. Talk is spread quickly, but is forgotten even faster.”

Mr. Darcy pressed his lips together. “I am curious as to how this came about.”

“My aunt and uncle Gardiner,” Elizabeth began -- then feeling suddenly a great need to defend the much beloved friends who had first misunderstood her -- declared, “are intelligent, amiable, well-bred people. I cannot think of a couple, in the whole of my acquaintance, whom I respect more.”

Mr. Darcy clasped his hands behind his back. “I do not know your aunt as well as I should like, but having spent much of this past month with your uncle, I believe I am as fit as any to judge you correct for such feelings.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath before forcing her to say that which she knew must lower her uncle in Mr. Darcy’s estimation. "But even they are not immune to errors in judgment, for I was to learn -- together with my mother and remaining sisters -- that my aunt and uncle believed you and I to be engaged.”

Elizabeth’s gaze darted to Mr. Darcy’s face. Too embarrassed to look at him steadily as she sated his curiosity, she could only take periodic peeks. His lips were compressed so tightly they had lost all color. His eyes were closed.

“Your admirable defense of Lydia was attributed to a brother’s feelings,” she continued. “To have Lydia as your sister, you would intend to take one or another of us as your wife. My mother suspected you favored Jane at first, which was when I learned my Aunt Gardiner’s feelings.

“I immediately corrected my aunt,” Elizabeth added hastily. “She graciously accepted that she had misunderstood the situation. My mother, however…” Elizabeth knew not how to condemn or defend her mother. “My mother shared her hopes in that quarter will all of her friends.”

They walked some minutes in silence. “My mother,” he said suddenly, “died when I was young. She
was...she was a woman of understanding, sense and education. Not,” he said slowly, “unlike your aunt, I think.” Mr. Darcy paused, and Elizabeth waited silently for him to continue. “Since her death, Lady Catherine has sought to provide for me any mothering a boy, and later young man, might need. She has some hopes of becoming my mother.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, cold dread sliding into her gut. “I’ve heard of her hopes for a match between yourself and Miss De Bourgh.”

“So you see,” he said, “I am not as unfamiliar as you might think with a parent who ignores your protests and circulates what rumor she likes best.”

Cool, blessed relief flowed over Elizabeth like water, and she laughed for the joy of it. He smiled. “What sort of girl is Miss De Bourgh?” she wondered. “I’ve been in company with her, but I’ve never heard her speak.”

Mr. Darcy shrugged. Elizabeth laughed again. “In the past ten years, I do not believe I have heard her speak above half that many words. I understand your friend Mrs. Collins has much more success.”

“Mrs. Collins became my cousin when she married,” Elizabeth said, for the first time sincerely pleased with Charlotte’s choice. She was proud to call such an astute woman her cousin, and prouder still to have her name bring such relief.
Chapter 4

Unexpectedly, Elizabeth soon found her friendship with Mr. Darcy held hostage by her parents’ unhappy union. Mr. Darcy’s initial visit at Longbourn lasted a quarter hour. At the close, he did not kiss her hand again, as Elizabeth had hoped, but he did shake it. A handshake was satisfying in a different sort of way and as he left, she felt very warm feelings towards him.

Before the gentleman could pay another call at Longbourn, the family needed to return his visit. He was staying at the inn at Meryton. Being that his household included no genteel women at present, the ladies were unable to pay their respects. Elizabeth and her eager mother were forced to rely on Mr. Bennet to return the visit. Mrs. Bennet intended to have Mr. Darcy as her guest for dinner as soon as possible, provided it was not on a Monday, so that he might propose to her daughter at his convenience. Mr. Bennet, disinclined to go along with any scheme of his wife, purposefully delayed in doing his part. Had he known the unhappiness he was bringing to his favorite daughter, it must be supposed that Mr. Bennet would have done the required and returned the visit.

Elizabeth, for her part, could not comprehend Mr. Darcy’s actions. She did not attempt to divine his motives. Experience had taught her that she did not understand his mind. He had spent roughly a month in town with Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner. After all the unpleasantness of Lydia’s situation had been resolved, he accompanied them to Hertfordshire. He spoke highly of the Gardiners. From what little of them she had seen, Mr. Darcy appeared to treat her father with respect.

However, he had achieved all that could be hoped for in his business with her family. There was no reason for Mr. Darcy to remain in Hertfordshire. Without Mr. Bingley, he had no friends besides herself in the neighborhood. He did not have liberty of a manor, so the upcoming shooting season could not be keeping him in the country.

At night, when she lied in bed with nothing to distract her from dwelling on him, the only reason Elizabeth could fathom was that he was in Meryton for her sake. She refused to trust that treacherous, hopeful voice. She had misjudged him so severely in the past. No matter how much she wanted to believe that it was all for her -- that he had done it all out of a continuing love and admiration -- Elizabeth had to accept that she did not know his character well enough to properly discern his feelings.

He had loved her once, and she had thought his admiring gazes to be disapproving. He had had serious misgivings about her connections once, and she had been offended when he told her how his feelings for her overpowered any other consideration. Now she was connected to the man who used and betrayed Miss Darcy. Her mother’s vulgarity, her father’s apathy, her sisters’ silliness, these things were small hurdles when compared to the crimes of her new brother. To connect himself to Mr. Wickham was to do harm to Miss Darcy. That Mr. Darcy would do so was unfathomable.
She should like to ask what kept him in Hertfordshire, but it seemed Elizabeth was destined not to see him. She could bear the separation better if not for the continued expectation of her neighbors. From what little conversation they had on the subject, Elizabeth knew Mr. Darcy was aware of the anticipation of a match, and that he did not seem concerned. She was relieved he was not affronted, but could not afford him much greater accolades than that. Mr. Darcy was a man of the world, used to moving in the top circles of London society. What expectations a small village in Hertfordshire held for him was as unlikely to affect him as the expectations of a widow in Kent. Elizabeth had lived at Longbourn for the whole of her life. If the entirety of her social sphere believed her jilted by Mr. Darcy, she was unlikely to become another man’s choice in the coming years.

She could no more part with him than she could marry him.

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On the day of the public assembly, Mrs. Bennet’s predictions of a month past came to fruition. Mr. Darcy did, indeed, attend. He was much better behaved at this assembly than at the one where she had first seen him. Everyone, Elizabeth was to learn, had always liked him better than Mr. Bingley. As Elizabeth walked among the crowd, greeting her friends and learning their news since her travels, she learned again and again that none of her neighbors had ever considered Mr. Darcy proud. Though she had never heard a word spoken in his defense but from Miss Bingley, many people told her how they had always corrected anyone who claimed Mr. Darcy thought himself above his company.

Elizabeth, though tempted, dared not ask if these new opinions stemmed from his service to Lydia and her family or if her neighbors were showing themselves as sycophants toward his prospective bride. Such a pronounced change in public opinion highlighted the inconsistency of her neighbors’ understanding. Normally, Elizabeth would be silently laughing. In this situation, she was hard-pressed to find the humor. Rather than carefully not letting her amusement show, Elizabeth was sparing the feelings of her neighbors by not allowing her pain to show.

When the music began, and swayed by general anticipation that they would lead the dance, Elizabeth allowed Mr. Darcy to take her hand and lead her to the top of the set. Eyeing the couples that lined up after them, Elizabeth remarked, "My father must be the only soul in the neighborhood who does not think us engaged."

As Mr. Darcy stepped with the first movement, he replied. "I spoke to him in London."

Elizabeth could barely keep her face from registering the extent of her surprise. "He thinks we are engaged?"
"No, no," Mr. Darcy quickly corrected. "I told him only of my hopes. Forgive me, I was feeling too much to not speak of it to anyone. He was at hand; you were not."

The dance separated them. His words created a riot within her. When they were again facing one another, Elizabeth wondered, "What did he say?"

"He told me that you are a rational creature who knows her own mind." Elizabeth smiled proudly at this description. Mr. Darcy continued, "I was to respect your choice and not press you on the matter if I found your answer to be a disappointment." That such an event had already occurred left Elizabeth feeling decidedly less pleased with her father -- he knew her too well, perhaps -- and herself.

"Of course," Mr. Darcy continued, "that was before the match had been made between your sister and Mr. Wickham."

The riot within her returned, this time a sullen, angry thing. By nature, Elizabeth had easy spirits. In the days she had not seen Mr. Darcy, she had reflected on the Wickhams and come to the very same conclusion. Though she had anticipated his dismissal, she was unprepared for the devastation it wrought. Worse, she was deeply ashamed of momentary flash of dark thoughts regarding a most foolish sister.

"Afterward," Mr. Darcy added, "he told me I could beg and plead as much as I wished."

Elizabeth colored at the unexpected reversal. She accepted with no small amount of joy that she had once again misunderstood him. Her eyes glittered. He inhaled sharply, struck by she didn't know what. Elizabeth asked, "And how much did you wish?"

"At the time?" Mr. Darcy prefaced. "Just once more. I thought you a rational creature. If you chose to silence me, I would be silent."

"And now?" she wondered merrily. "Have I lost all hope of rationality and become as silly as Kitty?"

"Now I hardly think begging necessary," he replied. "General knowledge of my involvement in your sister's affair has engaged the honor of us both."
The dance gave Elizabeth eight steps in which to compose herself before faced with him again. "Surely you knew that would be the case. One marriage always leads to rumors of another."

There passed eight more steps before Mr. Darcy was given adequate opportunity to form a defense. "When I was thinking clearly -- yes. You must understand, it was never my intention to force you to accept my hand." They joined hands as the dance required. Elizabeth raised her eyebrow and wondered at how well he had used the time he had been allotted. "I could not...When I saw you...when you had first heard the news...I could not leave you without hope. I did not want to give, perhaps, more hope than what was reasonable in such a situation, but I could not let you think it definite that your sister was lost forever, or that you were without friends."

Again, they were separated by the steps. When she found herself opposite him, Elizabeth answered. "I know. I attributed such motives to you at the time."

Happily, they had danced down the set at this point and were now able to look forward to ample time for conversing in near privacy. Taking advantage of such a situation, Mr. Darcy said with no small degree of feeling, "Then you know, then you know it was done for your happiness. All things, I will do for your happiness."

Feeling this conversation was growing too heated for a public dance, Elizabeth said lightly, "You shall make me very vain with such devotion."

"Please," he said, having no similar misgivings, "Miss Elizabeth, be serious."

"I cannot be serious in a ballroom," she answered. "Let us speak of something else."

She noted his face lost some of its color and she felt all the guilt she should. Elizabeth was not equal to speaking frankly of his feelings while they waited for their next movement in the dance. If his position was that his honor was engaged and he was required to make an offer, Elizabeth would prefer not to hear of it in such terms. If he felt her honor was engaged likewise -- by the actions of another, and not in reference to any of her own choices -- she was in the unhappy state of being unable to disagree. And as much as she cared for him, Elizabeth still did not find his arrogance an attractive trait. She was in no mood to listen to yet another proposal where her acceptance was considered automatic by the man making it. Though a dance provided relative privacy, she absolutely would not listen to a proposal made in a public setting.

However, there was real warmth in his voice when he spoke and his desire for her happiness above all recommended him. His feelings for her, Elizabeth thought, were as strong as ever. She was glad for it, though she did not want to trap him in a marriage that would give pain to his sister.
They spoke of banal pleasantries for the remainder of their dances. Mr. Darcy failed to regain any of his prior animation, except for when he made mention of his sister, at Elizabeth's prompting. Miss Darcy had quit Pemberley soon after he did. She and her companion accompanied Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley and the Hursts further north, to visit with some of their relations.

When their second dance ended, Mr. Darcy returned Elizabeth to her father with some reluctance. He made brief conversation with Mr. Bennet, then lost himself in the crowd. Elizabeth had the pleasure of dancing two sets with men from the neighborhood. Neither of them had anything important to discuss, which greatly increased her pleasure in dancing with them. Want of a partner forced her to sit for the fourth set. Elizabeth had never missed Charlotte's company as well as she did during that half-hour. Jane was dancing. Having no one to distract her mind from thoughts of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth searched the room for him with her eyes.

He was standing at a good distance from her, nearly on the other side of the assembly hall. She hoped to catch his eye, but he appeared very intent on whatever he was looking at. Elizabeth followed his line of sight as best she could from her vantage point. He was watching Jane and her partner. Jane smiled and spoke with the young man. Nothing about her manner showed any preference for him. Elizabeth could see the warmth of a lifelong friendship in Jane’s countenance, but to a near stranger like Mr. Darcy, she would not be so transparent.

Jane’s partner, a Mr. Henry Palmer, was a second son on leave from the navy. He was in no way a threat to Mr. Bingley’s interests. His elder brother was to inherit a fairly modest estate in the parish, but he was already married with a son of his own. Mr. Henry Palmer was an amiable young man, but in no way a prudent match for Jane. He was two years younger, besides. He was too young and too poor to be considering making a connection. Though Elizabeth reflected such, she knew none of this information could be transmitted to Mr. Darcy by the power of her thoughts.

At the close of the dance, when Mr. Henry Palmer returned Jane to her father, Elizabeth, sitting conveniently close to Mr. Bennet, did catch Mr. Darcy’s eye. She smiled. He returned the smile and crossed the room to join the party from Longbourn.

Understanding too well the consequences that would arise from paying Elizabeth the notice of two dances, and no dances with any other lady, he requested Jane for the fifth set. She was happy to give him her acceptance. Kitty, as usual, was never without a partner and paused only briefly to exchange young men. Her previous partner took the opportunity to escort Elizabeth to the set. And so, for the next half-hour, three sisters were occupied.

The elder two sisters ensured they were beside one another in the line. Before the dance began, Elizabeth whispered an aside to Jane that she should ask Mr. Darcy about his sister when the movements allowed them the chance to converse. As the dance progressed, she attended more to her
sister’s partner than her own, trying to discern what topics they were speaking of.

When the dance was over and the party again reconvened at Mr. Bennet’s place, Elizabeth slipped her hand in the crook of Mr. Darcy’s arm and declared, “We must find you a partner.” She cast her eyes about the room, in search of a suitable girl.

Seeing her intention of keeping him occupied with other partners so that he could not ask her a second time, Mr. Darcy replied, “I have danced enough.”

“Nonsense!” Elizabeth cried. “You have danced only four dances! That is not enough by half!”

“Not enough, perhaps,” Mr. Darcy suggested, “for someone who enjoys the activity, but for myself, two sets is more than enough.”

Elizabeth stopped her search to survey him. “What is it, sir, about dancing that bothers you so?”

“I find making conversation difficult,” he admitted easily enough. Elizabeth nodded; he had mentioned that much before. “Also,” Mr. Darcy added after some consideration, “I am not overly found of touching people I do not know.”

“Everyone wears gloves at a ball,” she said, laughing.

He shrugged. “Even so.”

She turned away from him then, to resume her search for a partner. Elizabeth both hoped and dreaded that Mr. Darcy would ask herself to dance again. She would have to refuse if he did; to stand up with him twice, when he stood up too little, would be far too much distinction. If she refused one man, she could not dance again for the rest of the night. Elizabeth would be very put out if she had to forgo dancing for the rest of the ball. But foolishly, she longed for his attention while simultaneously fearing what would occur once she had it.

“Miss Lucas,” she declared, eyes settling on Maria. “You’ve dined in her company. I think you adequately acquainted that holding her hand should not be so very painful.” Elizabeth smiled playfully. “Also, she is frightened of you, so she won’t make you talk.” She withdrew her hand from his arm to indicate that he should go.
“You are serious,” he said, not moving.

Elizabeth nodded. “I am personally offended at the idea that sheltered young ladies should sit out a dance because a worldly gentlemen is too shy to ask one to stand up with him.”

“Worldly gentlemen,” Mr. Darcy posited, “are generally accustomed to selecting their own partners.”

“And a worldly gentlemen that selects a partner is of course free to do!” Elizabeth cried. “But as you have not selected one, it falls upon your friends to choose one for you.”

Music swelled, indicating the next set was to start soon. Couples lined up along the dance floor, chatting in happy anticipation. Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy with expectation in her eyes.

“Miss Lucas?” he said, almost asking Elizabeth to release him.

“I could introduce you to another lady in the neighborhood, if you would prefer,” Elizabeth offered mildly.

“Miss Lucas,” he affirmed, resigned.

Elizabeth watched him cross the room to request that Maria stand up with him. The girl appeared terrified and confused. Maria was younger than Miss Darcy, Elizabeth realized as she watched them take their place in the set. Mr. Darcy saw his sister as a child still. As Elizabeth pondered the feelings of men and girls who suddenly seemed very young, her mother approached. That Mr. Darcy had danced the first two with Elizabeth was long forgot by Mrs. Bennet, who railed that he should dance with one of those artful Lucases while dear Lizzy was without a partner.

“I am well, Mama,” Elizabeth remarked when her mother paused long enough to admit another’s contribution to the conversation. “I have danced enough.”
Chapter 5

The ball lasted late into the night. Afterwards, the sisters sat up later still to discuss all that had happened and their impressions. Jane and Kitty had never been without partners, a circumstance that satisfied neither of them as well as it should. Jane, because no young man in the neighborhood had Mr. Bingley's combination of breeding, manners and amiability. Kitty, because the local gentlemen were not as charming or handsome as the still missed militia officers. The absence of Lydia was also keenly felt by the sister who favored her most. Mary had danced not at all. She had not had the opportunity to play or sing, either, which bothered her considerably more. Elizabeth had danced sparingly. She had never been in as high demand as Jane or Kitty. Elizabeth had sat out while they stood up before. However, she had a great fondness for dancing and while it was not so unusual for Elizabeth to be without a partner for one or two sets, she always danced the majority.

"Mr. Darcy did not let you dance," Kitty supposed, "did he?"

"Mr. Darcy had nothing to do with it," Elizabeth declared, rather untruthfully. "I was simply fatigued."

Kitty was skeptical. "You do not become fatigued from four sets."

"Oh, not by the dancing itself," Elizabeth replied. "It was the weight of expectation I found rather heavy and somewhat tiring to bear."

"If everyone knew I was going to have a rich husband," Kitty said, "I should be much happier about it than you are."

"The institution of marriage," Mary offered, "was ordained by the Lord for three purposes. To feel superior to ones neighbors is not among them."

"Thank you, Mary."

Unconcerned by Mary's censure, Kitty shrugged. "When Lizzy is married to Mr. Darcy, she shall find rich husbands for the rest of us, won't you, Lizzy? And then we shall see." She yawned, feeling herself succumbing to the lateness of the hour. "Lydia was stupid. I liked Wickham best, too, but he's poor. If she had waited for you to marry Mr. Darcy, you would have found her a much better husband."
Since any conceivable man would have made a better husband than Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth could not disagree, however little interest she had in making matches for her sisters. "But she did want to be the first of us to marry," Elizabeth reminded Kitty. "Her success must override any dissatisfaction she has with her husband, should any exist."

Kitty shrugged again and went off to bed, soon followed by Mary. Jane gathered her shawl around her shoulders, as if making preparations to follow, but instead turned to Elizabeth.

"Lizzy," she asked tentatively, "Why did you stop dancing?"

"Because," Elizabeth began with some hesitation. To Jane, she could bare her soul and she found the courage to continue, "Because dancing is for people who are looking for their partners in life. Whether he marries me or not, I have found mine. I do not want to pretend that I have not."

"You think Mr. Darcy will not have you, after all he's done?" Jane asked, surprised.

"I should like to say," Elizabeth declared, "'If he will have me, let it be for love alone.' I do not want to think that he would have me to preserve his honor, or mine."

"I think he still loves you," Jane offered.

"I think so, too, and I thank you for sparing me the embarrassment of saying it first," Elizabeth said. "But his feelings must revolt at the idea of being connected with Mr. Wickham. Even I cannot condone connecting poor Miss Darcy to him. If he chooses to marry me in spite of it, can I respect Mr. Darcy if the feelings of his only sister warrant so little consideration?"

"Why must it follow that in marrying you, he is not considering Miss Darcy?" Jane asked patiently. "She would not need to be in the company of Mr. Wickham."

Lydia and her new husband had removed to Newcastle after their wedding, where Mr. Wickham met with his new regiment in the regulars. It was true that they would be an easy couple to avoid. They did not have the liberty of traveling as freely as the Darcys. Elizabeth accepted the truth of Jane's reasoning.

"Mr. Darcy shares guardianship of Miss Darcy with his cousin, does he not?" Jane continued. Elizabeth replied that it was true. "He is responsible for her now," Jane said, "and it would do him
credit to think of her needs first, but you must remember that she is a sister, Lizzy. She will leave
him for her husband’s home and be under a husband’s guidance. If she marries in, oh, three or four
years, what happiness will Mr. Darcy find in giving you up for her sake, only to lose her as well?"

Miss Darcy would not be at Pemberley for all of her life. It did seem silly, when put in those terms,
to banish any Bennets from such a place, for such a reason.

"You are very wise, Jane," Elizabeth said, kissing her sister on the temple.

"And so is Mr. Darcy," Jane added, "because he has chosen Lizzy."

Elizabeth laughed. "Let us hope he chooses her again."

Jane frowned. "You do think him inconsistent."

"No," Elizabeth replied. "I think him a man of sense and education, who has been rejected and
discouraged. His pride and his family may not stop him from attempting to court me, but he has a
quick mind. Mr. Darcy is fully capable of seeing a pattern. There are no guarantees that he will
continue to try in the face of my caprice."

"Oh, I think there is," Jane said, smiling.

"You do?"

"He loves you very much," Jane replied. "I spent an half-hour with him this evening and no matter
how many topics I attempted to discuss with him, the only thing he could express was how very dear
you are."

"And to think! I tried and tried to hear what you were speaking of!"

"It was not in his words, so much," Jane countered thoughtfully. "It was his gentleness and the way
he kept looking towards you. He only attended to me when I praised you."
"Ignoring a partner, you make him sound uncivil," Elizabeth said fondly. "I wonder if he was so to poor Miss Lucas. I made him dance with her, you know."

"I had wondered why you did that," Jane acknowledged.

"Had anyone else asked me," Elizabeth said, "I would have said because I hoped it would be amusing to watch them together -- it was not -- but because you are my dear Jane, I shall tell you: it was because I was growing afraid."

"Of what?"

"I hardly know. Too much and not enough of him all at once, I suppose."

When the sisters parted for the night, Jane felt all the happiness of knowing Elizabeth to be in love with the man all were sure she would marry. Elizabeth felt all the anxiety of knowing herself to be in love.

***

The following day, Elizabeth rose late. She was in the habit of walking before breakfast and set out to get her exercise before she would be expected at the house. She set out in the direction of Meryton, knowing she would have to turn back long before she reached the town. She walked in the early hours by herself every morning and often later in the day with her sisters. Her solitary rambles were rarely interrupted by meeting with a fellow walker during the course of them. Most people she encountered were laborers at their tasks, a butcher delivering meat or footmen on errands.

She spied a gentleman walking. From his height and the cut of his figure, she supposed from the first that he was Mr. Darcy and as they came closer to one another, Elizabeth was pleased to see that she was correct.

“Miss Bennet,” he said in greeting. “I hope you are well this morning.”

“Very well,” she answered, curtsying in response to his bow. “I trust you are in good health?”
“Indeed,” he murmured. Then, louder, “May I ask your destination?”

“No place in particular,” Elizabeth answered. “I am merely taking some exercise before breakfast.” She turned her face toward the sun so that her bonnet did not block its brilliancy. “I fear I shall need to turn back soon.”

“May I accompany you?”

She smiled brightly. “Yes, of course.”

Mr. Darcy offered his arm and Elizabeth slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow. They turned towards Longbourn and walked in silence for a few moments before he said rather anxiously, “I have been walking every morning in hopes of meeting you. I have not had the good fortune of discerning your habits here as in Kent.”

When visiting with Charlotte Collins in the spring, Elizabeth had told Mr. Darcy of her favored walk on his aunt’s estate as a warning. It was not until several meetings that she was unable to imagine were accidental, and an unexpected proposal, that she understood he had taken her words as an invitation to walk with her.

“The landscape here is nothing to the beauty of Rosings Park,” Elizabeth said earnestly. “I am afraid I do not have a favored walk. I choose my direction rather haphazardly.” She had discouraged him the previous night. Not even the bravest of men could soldier on in love without any encouragement and she had given him peculiar frustrations. “However, we could arrange a meeting place,” Elizabeth offered. The suggestion sounded scandalous in her ears, but he had accepted such a thing before.

“If you would find that agreeable,” Mr. Darcy answered.

“Let me think of a suitable place,” Elizabeth requested. If they were seen making an assignation, it would add fuel to the rumors already on everyone’s lips. Their meeting place needed to be secluded and well sheltered. She was to travel on foot, so it needed to be reasonably close to Longbourn, but for his sake, at least moving towards, rather than away from, Meryton.

“Are you familiar with Mr. Hitchin’s estate?” Elizabeth asked.
“Hadley Park, yes,” Mr. Darcy answered.

Silently, Elizabeth thanked Mr. Bingley for forcing his friend into some semblance of sociability during their stay at Netherfield last year. She thought it likely he had been shooting at Hadley at least once and was pleased by the confirmation.

“About a quarter mile east of his hermitage, leaving his property, there is a chestnut grove. Have you seen it?”

“From a distance.”

“In the grove, there is a especially large Spanish chestnut tree. It is hollow,” she confessed. “As a child, I would hide secret treasures inside of it. Will that do?”

“Admirably,” he replied with warmth in his eyes.

“Then I shall see you there tomorrow,” Elizabeth said.

“You shall,” Mr. Darcy affirmed, smiling. “I will look for you in the place Gilpin would have favored, had he ever seen it. Your choice suits your taste.”

At that, Elizabeth blushed prettily. In an attempt to regain control of her fluttering, she wondered how many discreet meetings they might have in such a place by asking, “How long do you intend to stay in this part of the country, sir?”

He frowned, thoughtfully. “I have no fixed plans yet. My business is the sort that is difficult to judge how much time will be needed. My sister, I know, is hoping I will join her in Lyme come October. Perhaps until then.”

Surprised, Elizabeth said, “That is a long time to be staying at the inn, sir.”

Evidently, this turned his thoughts away from the woman at his side and toward where he had lodged previously. “If my friend were to return to Netherfield,” he said cautiously, “what do you anticipate the reaction of the neighborhood to be?”
Elizabeth considered the spoken and unspoken implications of such a question. He did not speak of Jane, but judging by his careful watch over her last night, hers was the reaction he wished to know. "I believe the neighborhood would be very pleased," she answered.

Mr. Darcy ruminated over this silently. "Upon reflection, it may be preferred that Netherfield be inhabited by a man of more conviction. My friend has shown himself to be inconsistent and easily swayed."

"An unfair account!" Elizabeth cried. "Why, you fail to take all the particulars under due consideration. The relative heights alone of the participants must acquit him of any wrong-doing."

Her companion smiled and his exhale was sharp, half a laugh. "An unflattering account, perhaps," he owned, "but upon further acquaintance, you will find it fair."

"I believe in any neighborhood," she offered, "a variety of temperaments is preferable. Some may choose the company of a man of unrelenting conviction, while others prefer someone more easy."

"You once told me he faced the derision of the neighborhood," Mr. Darcy said soberly. "I have seen first hand it continues to be the case."

Neighborhood had by now ceased to be a metaphor to refer to Jane by; he had seen nothing in Jane that implied anything but the highest respect for Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth was caught between wanting to assure him that all would be forgiven the moment Mr. Bingley rode into town and begging him not to use any of the words she had last April.

"The neighborhood men still speak of it?" Elizabeth asked, settling on requesting an account of his information.

"Miss Bennet is highly prized. The general opinion is that there is not a man alive that is good enough for her."

Elizabeth nodded with mock gravity. "By which is meant, there is not a man in Meryton or any of the nearby parishes that is single, genteel and established. In a country neighborhood like this, the options are few and in some cases, there are none at all."
Underneath her hand, his arm became tense and she could sense the rest of his body following suit. Eager to give him some comfort, but unsure of what caused him grief, Elizabeth continued. "My father should have been a more diligent parent and paraded us about Town every winter. Five daughters out at once wreaks of desperation, and is not much of a scheme when there are no eligible gentlemen about. One or two at a time, in Town, would have been more efficient, though more expensive." Her speech, though ludicrous, gave him no relief.

It was not the place of a lady to be direct with a gentleman, but given that she had already been rather forthright this morning, Elizabeth did not fear to ask, “What have I done to upset you?”

He seemed surprised. “Nothing. You have done nothing at all. Forgive me, my mind wanders.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips, wondering to what dark place his mind had wandered off. “I should prefer that your mind stay with the rest of you,” she said playfully. Her free hand joined the one resting on his arm. Her words and her touch did not inspire so much as a smile. Elizabeth bit her lip and bravely forged on.

“I do have something to apologize for,” she said. “You know it as well as I do. At the assembly --”

“No,” he interjected forcefully. Elizabeth dropped his arm in surprise. “I was...inappropriate, uncalled for and you were entirely right to stop me. I thank you for preventing me from making fools of us both.”

“Well, I am sorry regardless,” she said. Elizabeth wound her arms around his again and squeezed briefly. For a moment, it was less a woman supporting herself on a man’s arm and more a hug. The awkwardness had not lifted and she could see Longbourn growing closer and closer. Their tête-à-tête was nearing an end and she did not know what sort of mood she would find him in at the chestnut tree tomorrow.

Deciding to try to part with levity, she let go of his arm and danced away from him. “However,” Elizabeth declared, slipping in front of him. She had to recline her head to meet his eyes this way. He really was too tall, she thought. “I was actually speaking of making you dance with Miss Lucas. You did not make a handsome couple, and I shall not attempt such a scheme again.”

She took two large strides backwards and held out her hand. “Now, shake hands with me and let us be friends.”
Mr. Darcy’s smile was small and not sufficiently happy as he accept the offered hand and dutifully shook it.

“And I shall see you tomorrow at Mr. Gilpin’s favored tree,” she said, desiring the confirmation that his mind had not wandered too far away from her.

“You shall,” he answered.

She smiled and searched for something encouraging to say. ‘What do lovers do at a secret meeting?’ entered her mind, but she thought that question too bold even for herself. In Kent, they had walked together, talking of inconsequential things like poets they favored and the landscape, travel and how much she liked the great house. In retrospect, Elizabeth realized none of it had been inconsequential at all. Last November, he had struggled with his feelings for her and conquered them well enough that he could walk away. Last April, he had been a fool for love. The difference had been those conversations. The difference was knowing her to be well-read, that she shared his love for nature, that she expressed an interest in seeing more of the kingdom, that she did not favor the style of Rosings. She had unknowingly shown him, in that grove, why he should want her for his wife.

Her own musings made Elizabeth blush. Feeling she had gone too long without saying anything and that it would only be awkward if she was to say something now, she picked up her skirts and ran towards Longbourn. Halfway there, she stopped and turned.

Mr. Darcy was standing perfectly still, his formidable stare trained on her.

She ran home, laughing.
Nearly all of the hours between Elizabeth parting with Mr. Darcy and their reunion the following day were spent on thoughts of him. Keeping herself focused on her usual tasks was arduous. She found attending to her needlework even more tedious than usual. Her father’s library, a sanctuary that she alone could invade at will, provided few delights. To her chagrin, Elizabeth could find no poetry extolling the rugged landscape of Derbyshire. Her father seemed to know what she was about. He gave her a volume of Bancroft.

Any trepidation Elizabeth felt on the subject of meeting with Mr. Darcy at the chestnut tree was done away with upon her arrival. They met at the tree as planned and soon fell into the habit of talking while they strolled. Elizabeth, still having Bancroft on her mind, spoke of Hertfordshire poets and how she had a certain local pride in the works of Cowper. Mr. Darcy, unaccustomed to being without a library, was feeling all the pain of being denied a favored hobby. Tales of Elizabeth pursuing bookshelves in search of something new to discover left him decidedly jealous.

Elizabeth reminded him that Mertyon had circulating library, though she did warn him that it was apt to be more a place for socialization than for acquiring reading material.

“Your father’s library is regarded as the finest in the neighborhood,” Mr. Darcy said, somewhat surprised that she should have cause to be familiar with the public institution.

“Oh, no!” Elizabeth laughed. “Not the finest by all means! Netherfield, for example, is much better stocked. However, my father’s book room is the most beloved book room in all of Hertfordshire, so that may account for whatever you have heard.”

Mr. Darcy assured her that it must, but added that he had observed Elizabeth’s taste to be very broad. “Certainly,” he continued, “you can find no lack of volumes of interest.”

“True, sir,” she answered. “I wish to read far more of my father’s books than I ever shall. However, you must admit that mood affects what one wishes to read at any moment. I enjoy many of the books in my family’s collection, but it was not built with the taste of a young lady in mind.”

“From that,” he said, “I presume you refer to a lack of novels in your father’s collection.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, indeed. How well you know a lady’s concerns!”
“I admit,” Mr. Darcy said, “I have done very little reading of novels myself.”

“I am shocked, sir!” she cried. “I have all this time thought you a literate man! No one can be called well-read, or dare I say, even intelligent, if they do not appreciate at least a few of the better novels.”

“This appears a serious gap in my education,” he said in so solemn a tone it bordered on parody. Privately, Elizabeth did not think he realized that she was perfectly serious in her earlier statement. “What would you recommend I do to amend this?”

“If you wish to be considered an accomplished man,” Elizabeth said, “you must at least read the works of Mrs. Radcliffe. One or two will do!”

Mr. Darcy smiled. “My sister has often expressed the very same opinion.”

While Elizabeth doubted that Miss Darcy felt her brother’s education was lacking, she could readily accept that Miss Darcy shared her belief that ‘The Mysteries of Udolpho’ was required reading for any gentlemen or lady.

“I think the fanciful nature of novels must appeal more to ladies than to gentlemen,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully. “Females are bound to their homes, without the freedom of travel and education afforded to men. By reading books that take place in far off lands and experiencing the strange adventures of the characters, we have more opportunities to see the world beyond our homes than we otherwise might.”

Mr. Darcy reminded Elizabeth that she had done some traveling.

“Yes,” she answered, thinking of their meetings in Kent and Derbyshire, “but always at the invitation of someone more established than myself. Without the invitations of my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, or Mrs. Collins, I should never see anything beyond my own neighborhood.”

“You do not have other relations that wish for your company?”

“I am afraid you have met all the principle members of my family,” Elizabeth replied. “We have for the most part stayed very close to home.”
“I was given to understand you had met Mr. Collins only very recently,” Mr. Darcy said.

Elizabeth colored. “My mother’s connections, I should say,” she corrected, “have stayed close to their father’s establishment. Mr. Gardiner alone sought his fortune in London.”

“And your father’s?” he asked.

“I do not want to tell this story,” Elizabeth declared, “for you and my father have learned to respect one another, and this will make him look very poorly.”

“My opinions are not so easily swayed that one story will blind me to a man’s virtues.”

Elizabeth gave her companion a sidelong glance. She trusted him well enough, but the story was an embarrassment. She did not relish the idea of her family’s follies being presented to him for his amusement. Elizabeth reminded herself that he had seen such a lack of propriety from her closest connections in the past that one embarrassment, largely involving people she had never met, could hardly affect his opinion. In any case, she did have hopes of making her family and connections his own. If she attempted to hide her family from him, he would only learn later that she had felt a need to conceal it.

“It is very dreadful,” Elizabeth warned.

“I know what things you apply that word to,” he said, smiling.

“Some of it is not fit for the ears of a lady,” she added.

“I shall cover yours when you tell it,” he promised.

“And yet you would make me say it!” she cried. “Perhaps you are the dreadful one.”

“I can make no judgement on that score without knowing the particulars.”

“Very well,” Elizabeth said, “If you are offended, it shall be your own doing.” Their exchange had,
overall, made her quite merry. From the way he watched her, Elizabeth supposed he must feel the
same. But, since the story was just as dreadful as she had promised, she soon sobered upon the
telling:

“My father had three brothers,” Elizabeth began, “though he was the only one to survive to
adulthood.” At this, Mr. Darcy offered all proper condolences. “Until such a time that he had a son,
my father’s heir was to be his cousin, who was at this time also called Bennet.

“My father’s cousin Bennet was the eldest son of my father’s uncle. My family has been at
Longbourn for many generations, but it is not so profitable that the younger branches are provided
for. While my father is a man of leisure, it appeared for some time that his cousin would need to
work to support his lifestyle, though he was the heir.

“Cousin Bennet had, on his mother’s side, excellent connections. One such connection was an aunt
and uncle with no children of their own, but a large estate. Cousin Bennet was adopted, and his
name changed to Collins.”

“A common tale, thus far,” Mr. Darcy interjected.

“Old Mr. Collins became a man of leisure, fortune and great expectations and so he remained until
his aunt passed. After her death, the uncle revealed a hitherto unknown number of natural children.
His estate and fortune not being entailed, he was free to divide up all his properties among his
children. He provided for them very well, I am told, at the expense of Old Mr. Collins’ inheritance.”

Mr. Darcy, with a grace that Elizabeth previously would not have attributed to him, deflected the
attention away from the fortunes of the veritable army of illegitimate children by saying, “I fail to see
how this reflects poorly on your father.”

“My father was very amused by the change in his cousin’s fortunes. Old Mr. Collins had stopped all
discourse with the Bennets after he had found better prospects. My father was not graceful in
welcoming him back. They never spoke again. It was not until after his death that my family had
the honor of meeting Mr. William Collins.”

“A dreadful tale, indeed,” Mr. Darcy mused. “We should always wish for a happier outcome than
breeches made within families.” This reaction surprised Elizabeth, for the part she had been reluctant
to tell involved the numerous children born out of wedlock that had destroyed the prospects of a
respectable man. “You were brave to tell it, as well.”
“I built up a lot of suspense,” Elizabeth owned. “I could scarcely not tell it, after that.”

Being that Elizabeth was expected in Longbourn’s breakfast parlor, their walk could not continue for much longer. They parted on much better terms than they had the previous day. Mr. Darcy honored Elizabeth’s courage in telling a difficult tale with a kiss to her hand.

It could be supposed, however, that he was not rewarding her courage so much as finding his own.

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On a typical day, Elizabeth was the only resident of Longbourn to leave the house before breakfast. She was not the only early riser in the family: her father would be in his library before Elizabeth left for her walk; Jane employed the time writing letters; Mary read. Mrs. Bennet and Kitty would not emerge from their apartments until they needed to make an appearance at the breakfast table. All the sisters shared a maid, but their activities allowed Elizabeth to dress and have her hair styled first.

She was at her toilette, thoughts of meeting Mr. Darcy first in her mind, when the abigail was startled by a sudden pounding on the dressing room door. Mrs. Bennet, followed soon by Jane and Kitty, burst into Elizabeth’s room.

“A caller!” Mrs. Bennet trilled, “Heaven and earth, my nerves, Lizzy, you are needed downstairs at once!”

“A caller?” Elizabeth repeated, motioning to Sally to continue work on her hair. “At this hour?”

“Her card, her card,” Mrs. Bennet cried, pacing with furious excitement about the room. “What became of her card? It should be displayed, yes, everyone must see it from the very moment they walk in.”

“Lizzy,” Jane said, with intelligence more useful than her mother’s, “Lady Catherine De Bourgh has visited. You are needed downstairs at once!”

“Lady Catherine!” their mother cooed. “To think! Such a woman! So noble, so finely dressed! She’s in the north sitting room, Lizzy, she wants to see you! Her future niece! She has come to congratulate you, no doubt!”
Elizabeth did doubt that very much. “I shall go down as soon as I am presentable, ma’am,” she assured her mother. Mrs. Bennet left the room in as much of a flutter as she had entered, calling for the housekeeper, Mary, Mr. Bennet and her nerves.

“What can she mean by it?” Jane, who had remained with her sisters, asked Lizzy.

“I am sure she is traveling on her way to somewhere,” Elizabeth replied, “and has stopped to give us news of the Collinses.”

“Who would come all this way for a purpose like that?” Kitty scoffed.

“Why, Kitty,” Elizabeth asked wryly, “have you not heard of Lady Catherine’s gracious condescension?” This made Kitty snort, and Jane bear the harshest expression in her repertoire, a sort of exasperation-tinged affection. Though Elizabeth tried to dissuade them, both girls were certain that Lady Catherine’s visit was to promote the match with Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth regretted that none but herself were dressed to receive visitors, for one had to meet Lady Catherine to adequately appreciate the woman’s foolishness.

When Elizabeth appeared in the sitting room, Lady Catherine was seated upright on the settee as though it was a throne. “Miss Bennet,” her ladyship said upon Elizabeth’s entrance, “you can have no doubt as to why I have come hither.”

A sudden fear seized her. To be at Longbourn at this time of day, Lady Catherine must have traveled half the night. Elizabeth could think of only one reason why such a flight would be deemed necessary. Mr. Darcy had mentioned Lady Catherine’s maternal feelings towards him. He had shared with her the previous day an intention of going cub hunting with some of the local gentlemen. At this time of year, training the dogs was more the intention of the hunt than capturing foxes, but she knew the reckless riding involved in fox hunting always presented a risk. “Your nephew,” Elizabeth said with some anxiety, “was in good health last I was in company with him.” She prayed that her ladyship would not contradict this.

Lady Catherine’s eyes narrowed. “I did not do myself the disservice of calling upon him.”

Elizabeth breathed easy with relief. “And your ladyship,” she added with a hurried curtsy, “I trust you are in good health as well?”
“Miss Bennet,” her ladyship began again, “a most disturbing report reached me not two days ago, regarding yourself and my own nephew, Mr. Darcy.”

With an immediate understanding of what such a report must be, Elizabeth colored and said, “My youngest sister was recently married, ma’am. In a neighborhood such as this, one marriage always gives rise to expectation of another. It is a wonder such idle speculation traveled so far.”

“Selfish girl,” Lady Catherine spat, “idle speculation, indeed. You dishonor the name of my nephew, make him forget what he owes himself and all his family, and dismiss the claims of decency and gratitude as idle speculation. I am ashamed of you, Miss Bennet.”

“I do not have the pleasure of understanding you,” Elizabeth said with honest confusion.

“I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement,” she hissed. “I know it all; that the young man's marrying her was a patched-up business, at the expense of my nephew. You have used him abominably. From his earliest hours, my nephew was destined for his cousin. You have heard me say so. You knew of his engagement to Miss De Bourgh. Yet you have taken him, drawn him in, and embroiled him in the disgraceful affair of your sister.”

“I have heard you speak of an engagement,” Elizabeth admitted, “but the work in completing the plan falls to others. If Mr. Darcy is bound neither by honor nor inclination to his cousin, I can hardly be supposed responsible for it.”

“This is the thanks I receive for my attentions last spring?” Lady Catherine’s voice resonated with offense. “This scandal of your making has destroyed the hopes of my daughter, has made forever impossible the fondest wish of his mother and hers! I should never permit my daughter to be connected to such a man. Offering carte blanche to an actress would have been preferable to this disgrace. He could still make a respectable connection once he was bored with her favors. But to see him raise expectations over a gentlemen’s daughter, however low her connections, whatever they lack in education or propriety, engages his honor. His duty must be done! Marriage to you will see him censured, slighted and hated by all the world! You have no connections, no link to the family, yet you presumed to ensnare Mr. Darcy! What were you thinking?”

“I think the world too sensible to censure a gentleman for a rumored engagement to a girl from a good family,” Elizabeth offered.

“Good family!” her ladyship crowed. “The girls in this family were purchased, and for a paltry sum at that.”
“I wonder what you meant by coming all this way. If Mr. Darcy’s actions have caused you to give over your hopes of making an alliance between himself and your daughter, and if Mr. Darcy instead turns his attentions instead to me,” Elizabeth said, “you can have nothing more to say.”

“I am nearly the closest relation he has,” Lady Catherine countered. “I am entitled to know his dearest concerns. He has raised expectations of marriage to a girl so beneath him it is a wonder he ever spoke to her. He has put forth more money to this match that you have ever seen. But there is no gratitude, no deference, no respect! Not even interest from you! Selfish girl, you will see him ruined.”

“If I intended to ruin him,” Elizabeth said coolly, “I should be the last person to admit it.”

“I expect to be hearing of a divorce no sooner than I hear the marriage has taken place,” Lady Catherine said upon her exit. “From a family such as this, one could hardly expect any better.”

Mrs. Bennet was disappointed that her ladyship had not stayed longer, but Elizabeth reminded her mother, in a tone much calmer than she really felt, that their visitor had traveled for most of the night and must have been eager to get some rest. Once Mrs. Bennet was sufficiently distracted, Elizabeth removed to her father’s book room.

“Papa,” she called softly as she entered. Mr. Bennet closed the volume he was reading over one finger, obviously intending only a brief pause from his escape of choice. “Lady Catherine has gone.”

At this, Mr. Bennet smiled. “She is everything Mr. Collins promised she would be, is she not?”

Under normal circumstances, Elizabeth would have enjoyed her father’s sport, but today she could not. “I am disturbed by some of the things she said,” Elizabeth admitted. “I believe she knows more about Lydia’s marriage than I. Lady Catherine is so wholly unconnected to us that I wonder how this could be.”

Her father shrugged. “Mr. Collins, I am sure, has created some nonsense to satisfy her notions of her own importance that involved Lydia in some way.”

“I am sure that is it,” Elizabeth replied. Her father turned back to his book. The volume of Bancroft’s poetry he had lent her lay in his desk. She picked it up. Fingering the leather spine, she
added, “I understand you and my uncle Gardiner spent time with Mr. Darcy in London.”

“Such an upright fellow,” Mr. Bennet opined. “I do dislike agreeing with your mother on any score, but she has the right of him. I despise the sight of him.”

“I believe he is a good man,” she said.

“My very complaint, my dear. There is no amusement to be had of him at all.”

“There is,” Elizabeth disagreed gently. “He keeps it hidden.” After a moment’s pause, she added, “He speaks highly of you.”

“Does he?” Mr. Bennet. “He does so to please you, I should think.”

“Please, sir, I did not come to satisfy my vanity, but my curiosity.”

He father chuckled. “You cannot suppose I would answer a question before you ask it, Lizzy. You are too clever for that.”

“Mr. Darcy said a curious thing at the assembly,” Elizabeth began. “He said before Lydia’s marriage, you called me a rational creature who knew her own mind, but afterwards, it sounded as though you had changed your opinion. Lydia leaving your home for her husband’s does not mean it falls to me to add extra silliness to the house.”

“I should be very sorry if it did,” Mr. Bennet replied with a smile. “I have been enjoying the relative quiet.”

“I can not think of any reason why Lydia’s marriage should change your opinion of me,” Elizabeth added.

“Lizzy, I appreciate your wit but this talking in riddles is tiresome. If you have a question, it would be much better to ask it straight away.”
With some force, Elizabeth asked, “Did Mr. Darcy pay Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia?”

Her father closed his book again. “Did Lady Catherine say something to that effect? You are too wise to listen to such a woman.”

“I am,” she agreed. “That wisdom is the very reason I am petitioning my father for the information.”

Her father was silent for a long moment before succinctly answering, “He did.”

Elizabeth stiffened. “You know we cannot pay him back.”

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Bennet said, “you have been, nearly from the moment of your birth, the child of my heart. I should not wish to see you unhappy, or reduced to a marriage that is not equal to your mind or talents. It pains me more than you know.

“Lydia,” he said with emotion that Elizabeth had never heard in his voice before, “is my child as well. I never checked her, never felt it worth the effort to curb her behavior.” His eyes held a slight twinkle as he beheld Elizabeth, “Though you had asked for it so many times. Her death would have been easier to bare than her disgrace. Mr. Darcy,” the name was heavy in his mouth, like a large burden, “presented himself as capable and willing to bring her back to life. I cannot pay him any sum for the life of my daughter. He was clear enough on the score of his reimbursement. All he wants for is you.”

Coldly, Elizabeth said, “You have said quite enough. I require no further particulars of this transaction.”

Lady Catherine’s unwanted appearance and her interview with her father delayed Elizabeth’s usual schedule. Furious as she was, she considered remaining indoors. Let Mr. Darcy wonder why she had not appeared when and where he wanted her. No matter what anyone said, he had no real claim on her time or her company.

The thought of staying home, under her father’s roof, was equally vile. Exercise had always been a cure for her spirit and so, without any real intention, she fled the house and began walking. Angry energy propelled her to a run and before Elizabeth really knew what she was about, she had dashed all the way to the Spanish chestnut.
When she arrived, she was out of breath. Beneath her bonnet, ringlets stuck to her cheeks with sweat. Mr. Darcy had been waiting for her. His eyes swept over her body when she approached. Elizabeth felt revolted.

Forgetting herself too much to even make a greeting, she demanded, “How much did you pay for me?”

Somewhere between offended and bewildered, he declared, “I beg your pardon, madam.”

“Lady Catherine arrived at Longbourn this morning,” Elizabeth said, incensed and struggling to catch her breath. “Almost at first light. She said the most offensive things I have ever been forced to listen to. I shall not pain you by repeating them.”

Mr. Darcy was silent, his teeth clenched in anger. Elizabeth could see a vein in his jaw jumping wildly.

“She told me,” Elizabeth continued, “that you had been the principle means of connecting my sister to Mr. Wickham.”

“I never hid from you that I took part in that affair,” he replied, affronted. “From the very first moment, you knew.”

“We were told that Mr. Wickham married Lydia because legal action would be taken against him if he did not!” she cried.

“Yes,” Mr. Darcy answered simply. “I bought up all his debts, and I look forward to throwing him in prison as soon as he gives me just cause.”

“There’s more,” Elizabeth said, “I know there is.”

“I bought his commission,” Mr. Darcy admitted. “If they are prudent, it will be enough to keep your sister out of poverty.”

“You know they will not be,” Elizabeth argued. “You know too much of Mr. Wickham’s habits.
You know my sister will never be able to check him, even if she wished to. How do you really expect them to live?"

“I gave Mrs. Wickham an additional five thousand pounds to serve as a dowry,” Mr. Darcy said, having by now regained some of his composure. “If Mr. Wickham gambles it away, or uses it selfishly, I will have him thrown in debtors’ prison.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. His version of events did not sound very like her father’s or his aunt’s. He had been responsible for the citizens of Pemberley all his life. Though their history was difficult, Elizabeth could not fault him for taking these actions on behalf of Mr. Wickham. “Is...is that all?”

He compressed his lips, and she knew that it was not.

“Sir?” She questioned, hopes of a better resolution plummeting, “I ask again: is that all?”

“Sisters...” Mr. Darcy said vaguely, turning to face away from her, “sisters should have equal portions.”

Elizabeth almost feared to ask if he had given her an equal portion, or if he refrained from the belief that he would never need to part with that money. Her voice was shaking, and she was mortified for it, as she asked, “How much? In total?”

Understanding the question, he answered coolly, “Twenty-five thousand.”

Elizabeth was not the sort of woman inclined to swoons, but by this time, she felt remarkably unsteady on her feet. There was not so much as a stile or a tree stump to sit upon. “And with the debts, and the commission?”

“Thirty-five.”

She almost did fall, then, but he steadied her, one strong hand on her arm, the other bracing her back. It took her a long time to find her voice afterwards. “After you did that,” she said, “my father said...”
“Your father gave me his blessing to ask,” Mr. Darcy clarified. “Nothing more.”

“He behaved as though your wanting and a marriage were one in the same.”

She could hear the long-waited for resentment in his voice when he said, “A common mistake, I assure you.”

Finding the only thing she could make a seat from was a particularly large tree root, Mr. Darcy guided Elizabeth to it. He helped her sit, and then stood by her, an imposing sentry. “I am sorry,” he said, looking off to the distance, “very sorry, that this has given you such unease. It has been my doing, and I see now that it was done selfishly. It was my wish to give you relief -- it pained me to see you in pain -- and I failed to properly anticipate the repercussions of my actions. None of this wretched business has been a mistake on your part, Miss Bennet, and you should not have to bear the consequences.”

She deliberated on these words and tried to make some sense of all that she was feeling. When she came upon him in the clearing, there had been nothing but betrayal in her heart. Any notion that she had his respect had been shattered by his aunt’s visit, but the revelation that he had given her a substantial dowry changed her perception yet again. Should she accept the hand of another man, Mr. Darcy had obliged himself to pay that man five thousand pounds to steal her away. “I do not believe you know anything of selfishness, sir.”

Startled, he looked down at her.

“You have done more for my family than we could ever deserve. Let me thank you, again and again, and for all my sisters, for they must be as ignorant as I of how their fortunes have changed.”

“If you must thank me,” he said with some discomfort, “let it be for yourself alone.”

In reply to this, she said, “I am very thankful, and I apologize for the anger I displayed when I met you this morning. You did not deserve it.”

He crouched on his haunches before her, and appeared as though he had more to say for a moment. Then, taking her hand and helping her to her feet, he said, “I fear it is already too late to enjoy a walk. Allow me to escort you home.”
Feeling real gratitude for his support, Elizabeth thanked him again, and let Mr. Darcy to lead her to Longbourn.
Chapter 7

Two days after Lady Catherine’s unexpected call at Longbourn, she was followed by the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Collins. The Lucases were very pleased to have their daughter and her husband as guests. The news quickly traveled through the neighborhood that Mrs. Collins was expecting her first child. It would be sometime before Charlotte would be able to visit again, and so she and husband made the trip.

Privately, Elizabeth supposed the reason for their flight from Hunsford was Lady Catherine’s displeasure. The Collinses were most unfortunately connected to the woman who had destroyed all the supposed hopes of Miss De Bourgh. The living which Lady Catherine had provided for Mr. Collins was not in her power to revoke. Elizabeth felt no guilt on that score. She did, however, expect that the parsonage was no longer a comfortable home for Charlotte. Elizabeth had long felt that her friend had traded too much for an establishment of her own. If Charlotte now saw the folly of her choices, and if that new found vision was at all related to Elizabeth’s situation, she was very sorry for it.

Their second day in the neighborhood, Mr. Collins and his wife called on Longbourn to issue an invitation to dine that evening at Lucas Lodge. As always, such an invitation was happily accepted. To add to the joy of the Bennets, Charlotte added that Mr. Darcy would be among the party. He had not spoken of it earlier that morning, so Elizabeth assumed Mr. Collins and Charlotte had gone to pay their respects to Mr. Darcy before coming to Longbourn.

Errands for her mother caused Charlotte to take her leave after much too short of a call, but Mr. Collins stayed behind to speak with Mr. Bennet. Elizabeth was very surprised when, after a brief visit with her father, Mr. Collins joined Mrs. Bennet and herself in the sitting room.

“Cousin Elizabeth,” Mr. Collins began, “as a clergyman I consider it my duty to give you guidance at a time such as this.” His air was studied. Elizabeth felt it likely that speaking to Mr. Bennet had been an excuse to stay longer so that he might deliver a premeditated speech to her.

She paused at her work to raise her eyebrows at her presumptuous cousin. “I thank you, sir,” Elizabeth said, feeling no gratitude at all, “but I am not in need of spiritual guidance. If I were, I should seek the reverend at Meryton, besides, who has known and guided me since my baptism. Any concern of mine, I am sure he would have much greater knowledge of than yourself.”

Mr. Collins was undeterred. “As your cousin -- though I am am shamed to call you such -- and the future head of this family, the responsibility falls to me.”
Elizabeth shrugged and returned to her embroidery. “I believe stewardship of my soul belongs to me alone,” she replied. “Many persons may educate young ladies, but in the end, to listen to or disregard such wisdom falls to each of us.”

He sighed. “It is a wonder to me that your father never checked your behavior. You shall not be suffered to behave so when I have the charge of you.”

“You cannot think I shall ever be under your protection,” she said, really appalled. “You are not father, brother or husband to me.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, Mr. Collins said gravely, “Allow me to speak plainly, cousin.”

She did not have a choice in that matter, Elizabeth reflected. She had yet to gain the happy ability of preventing Mr. Collins from speaking.

“I am ashamed of your behavior,” he declared. “You have ruined the happiness of a girl worth ten of you. You cannot think Mr. Darcy will ever marry you, and yet you have torn him from Miss De Bourgh with no consideration for the feelings of either.”

“I believe it is the mother’s feelings you reference, sir,” Elizabeth replied. Now that she knew the source of his diatribe, her offense was considerably lessened. Mr. Collins’s opinion of the rumors regarding herself and Mr. Darcy could not trouble her. “Of the daughter and nephew’s feelings, you can know nothing.”

Mrs. Bennet interjected something indistinct.

“Lady Catherine De Bourgh told me of their engagement herself!” he cried. “Because of you and your disgusting behavior, she has been forced, on the behalf of her daughter, to break their engagement!”

“Sir, an engagement is formed or broken by the principles,” Elizabeth said. “Should Miss De Bourgh choose to break an engagement at the behest of her mother, it does her credit, but only if such an engagement existed in the first place.”

Passionately, Mr. Collins heaved, “My relationship with the noble house of De Bourgh has allowed me to see the truth of that most just connection with my own eyes!”
To this, Elizabeth replied, “Mr. Darcy has told me himself that he was never engaged to his cousin.”

“Of course he would tell you that!” Mr. Collins snapped with frustration. “You have seduced him so thoroughly that he can think of nothing but the fruit of your vine.”

Elizabeth colored at such language. “Mr. Collins!” Her mother screeched with outrage, “I had thought you a gentleman!” Her mother coming her defense was a rare thing, and Elizabeth, though embarrassed, was also pleased.

Mrs. Bennet’s chastisement had the effect of alerting Mr. Collins to just how inappropriate his words were. In a considerably calmer tone, he said, “It is not out of the question,” he said lowly, “for a young man intent on enjoying the favors of one lady, to deny an engagement to another, if he feels acknowledging the prior arrangement will harm his chances of success.”

“If you think Mr. Darcy to be such a rake,” Elizabeth answered, sufficiently recovered, “it is a wonder that you think he should make Miss De Bourgh happy. Surely she is better off without such a man.”

“Lady Catherine,” he intoned solemnly, “took an exceptional interest in Mr. Darcy’s raising and education. He has been, up until your unfortunate meeting, an upstanding gentlemen who knew his duty to his family. He was very pleased with the splendid connection he was to make with Miss De Bourgh. He will regain himself. He will remember his station. He will never marry you. You have ruined all of Miss De Bourgh’s hopes for nothing, cousin!”

Mr. Collins spoke with emotion, but his misunderstanding of the feelings of Mr. Darcy was enough that Elizabeth could not credit it. Calmly she said, “If that is so well decided, your words can have no impact on the event.”

“It should be so, it should be so,” he muttered, pacing across the sitting room. “I shall, of course, help Mr. Darcy on his own quest for spiritual peace.”

“Mr. Darcy can have no need for whatever help you offer,” Elizabeth said. She busied her hands by organizing her threads and needles. “He will not thank you to presume he has some need of you. You are too far beneath him.” Her words were cruel, she knew, and invoked an image of the Mr. Darcy she had invented, but she wanted to spare the real man any similar encounter with her cousin.
“My dear, misguided cousin,” Mr. Collins said, “all men, from the lowliest of peasants to the greatest kings have need of a clergyman to usher their spiritual fulfillment and promote their fellowship with the Lord.”

“Do your fellow men the honor,” Elizabeth suggested, setting her packed workbag aside, “of choosing their own time of need. Mama, I am going to dress for dinner.”

“I hope your sprigged muslin is pressed,” Mrs. Bennet fretted. “Mr. Darcy likes that best, you know.”

Elizabeth smirked as she passed Mr. Collins on her way out of the room. Her mother’s claim was a complete fabrication, but she was finding her mother to be an excellent accomplice now that their goals were aligned.

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The gown in question was not pressed and the procession into the dining room was ordered in such a way that it prevented Elizabeth from sitting near Mr. Darcy at the table. Seated between Lady Lucas and Charlotte, he seemed to struggle to converse with them, and Elizabeth had to satisfy herself with the knowledge that he was trying.

When the news that Mr. Darcy had laid claim to Miss Eliza Bennet had first begun to circulate through the neighborhood, the Lucases had been foremost in industriously spreading the rumor. Lady Lucas’s love of gossip was second only to Mrs. Bennet’s and Sir William favored any topic that lent himself the appearance of importance. In the wake of their son’s disapproval -- and more importantly, the disapproval of his patroness -- the usual scheming to keep the supposed lovers together had become scheming to keep them apart.

The effectiveness of such plotting was arrested by Sir William’s ease and sociability. Neither the Bennets nor Mr. Darcy could be excluded from a proper party, and so the efforts to keep Elizabeth away from him were for naught. When the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room after the meal, Mr. Darcy immediately took his first opportunity of the evening to place himself by Miss Elizabeth’s side. From across the room, they were watched carefully by Mr. Collins. His countenance betrayed a disapproval that he dared not voice to Mr. Darcy himself. However, his watchful eye could hardly be ignored by the subjects.

“Your cousin has been uncharacteristically quiet this evening,” Mr. Darcy observed.
“I warned him off you,” Elizabeth admitted impishly. “I told him you think him beneath you.”

Mr. Darcy frowned. “I do not think him beneath me. He has received a good living from a respectable family and is the heir to a profitable estate.” Elizabeth, who was far from blind to her cousin’s faults or unaware of the varied levels that existed within the range of genteel society, looked at him skeptically. Forced to say something more, Mr. Darcy added in a low voice, “I think him an idiot. In the future, when you relate my opinions, I ask that you do so accurately.”

She laughed merrily. “My mistake, sir.” Elizabeth checked her joy soon enough. Her cousin was foolish and ignorant. He was the heir to Longbourn, it was true, but Elizabeth could hardly give credit to the idea that he would manage the estate well. Certainly, his servants and tenants would never praise him with the honestly and intelligence that Mr. Darcy’s servants did. She did not want to be disloyal to her family, but the truth was the truth. Not even in her most unflattering imaginings of Mr. Darcy had she thought Mr. Collins had any right to approach him. “He is beneath you,” she whispered.

Mr. Darcy looked at her askance, trying to devise some response to this confession. With some anxiety, and staring at a fixed point past her shoulder, he said, “I was under the impression you felt it uncivil of me to say so.”

Having brought up this uncomfortable subject herself, Elizabeth felt it incumbent on her to relieve him of his distress. “In certain circumstances, it must be so,” she answered with mock solemnity. With a wide grin, Elizabeth added, “In others, a statement of fact.”

“That is a vague edict,” Mr. Darcy said. “One hardly knows what is acceptable under such a ruling.”

“Indeed,” she replied with a nod. “I recommend you give over trying to discern it.”

Rising to the challenge her playfulness presented, Mr. Darcy asked, “How is one to proceed properly without the aid of established guidelines?”

“An excellent question,” Elizabeth owned. “You are too clever for your own good, but you are in luck, for I believe you will like the answer.”

He smiled. “Please, do not keep me in suspense.”
“You proceed by doing what will, in your own opinion, afford you the greatest possible happiness,” Elizabeth explained. “You, I have long observed, take particular pleasure in getting your own way.” She shrugged. “So I suspect such a ruling can give you only relief.”

After taking some time to digest this theory, Mr. Darcy asked, “Will you indulge me in allowing me to pose a paradox?”

“More cleverness!” Elizabeth cried. “I cannot abide by it!”

Mr. Darcy began his paradox thusly: “Let us suppose a man has identified the action that will grant him the greatest possible happiness.”

Before she accepted this as the basis of Mr. Darcy’s paradox, Elizabeth asked, “Is this man a rational creature that knows his own mind?”

Somewhat taken aback by the question, Mr. Darcy said, “Let us flatter ourselves that he is.”

“I have pictured him,” she declared. “We may proceed.”

“Let us further suppose,” Mr. Darcy continued, adding a second circumstance to his paradox, “that the event that will give him this happiness may produce misery in another.”

Elizabeth accepted that easily enough, noting, “I would imagine for every outcome that pleases one person, another is disappointed.”

“Excellent. Now, suppose, by inflicting this misery upon the second person, the first has made himself miserable.”

“This second person,” Elizabeth wondered, “is he also a rational creature?”

“I have long thought so, yes,” Mr. Darcy affirmed.

Elizabeth, who often saw more folly and silliness in people than logical or controlled behavior,
revised her stance. “In such a case, I find it hard to credit that two rational men could have such differing feelings on the same event. If the event is just, they should both be pleased.”

To this, he replied, “Following the dictates of one’s duty, while just, is not always pleasing.”

“Do the persons in question normally enjoying fulfilling their duties?”

“I cannot speak for all persons,” Mr. Darcy answered. “For myself, I tend to find more a feeling of satisfaction than of pleasure.”

“That,” Elizabeth pronounced, “I think, is the source of your confusion. With such a guideline as I have given, one is not to seek the greatest possible satisfaction, but the greatest possible happiness.”

Acceding to Elizabeth’s point, Mr. Darcy said, “I grant you they are not the same feeling, but one can hardly be happy without being satisfied that he has made the best possible choice in his circumstances.”

The wisdom of that was irrefutable. Elizabeth reflected on the character of the man presented by Mr. Darcy’s paradox. Finally, she said, “He sounds very kind.”

“A rudimentary sketch of his character does not resolve the paradox, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I beg your pardon, sir, for it does,” Elizabeth countered. “By allowing the other person’s misery to overcome his own joy, he has shown himself to have a compassionate disposition. With such solicitude on behalf of their comfort, the second person cannot be miserable for long. The first then achieves his greatest possible happiness. You see, it was not such a paradox after all.”

Elizabeth’s pleasure at her own cleverness was interrupted by Sir William’s sudden need for Mr. Darcy’s attention. His reasons sounded flimsy to Elizabeth’s ears -- he had been a witness to some event or another Sir William was recounting, and the older man wanted him to add his recollection to the tale -- but Mr. Darcy, recognizing his duty to his host, went as beckoned.

Lady Lucas accosted Elizabeth soon afterwards. Her conversation centered largely around the praise of Elizabeth’s cousin. The Lucases had every right to their gratitude on behalf of the man who had given their daughter independence and a fine establishment. She was happy to know the family to be pleased with the connection. However, Elizabeth still did not care for excessive praise towards a
man she could not respect. Especially unpleasant was the none too subtle implication that Lady Lucas thought Mr. Collins a superior prospect to Mr. Darcy.

As an attempt to discourage Elizabeth from accepting Mr. Darcy’s attentions, it was laughable. Lady Lucas praised the steadiness of Mr. Collins’ character. Knowing as she did that Mr. Collins had pursued Elizabeth not three days before becoming engaged to her own daughter, Elizabeth wondered why constancy, of all things, was a virtue ascribed to Mr. Collins by Lady Lucas. Mr. Darcy did not come off the poorer because he did not offer for young ladies twice weekly.

Mr. Darcy proved his constancy soon enough by escaping from Sir William and offering to refresh Elizabeth’s tea. She accepted the offer and trailed after him to best separate herself from Lady Lucas.

“That appeared a trying conversation,” he said by way of explaining himself.

“Indeed it was,” Elizabeth answered. “It makes one wonder about Lady Lucas’ maternal feelings.”

“If she was expressing some displeasure with your friend,” he said, conscious of having no intimate relationship with the family, “it is better it not be spread.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth protested, quick to correct him, “No, not at all. Lady Lucas is a very devoted mother to Charlotte. It is just, I think Mr. Collins has made her perfectly terrified of your aunt, and I suspect she would prefer he were my husband, rather than her daughter’s. Mr. Collins is a fine match for Charlotte, and I wonder that her mother would wish him upon someone else.”

Stiffly, Mr. Darcy said, “I believe Mr. and Mrs. Collins are quite happy together. Were you to be Mrs. Collins, that could not be the case.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, and I told him so quite vehemently at the time.” When Mr. Darcy looked at her with confusion written plainly on his face, Elizabeth’s laughter died. “You had left the country,” she remembered. “You do not know. Very well. Last November, Mr. Collins made me an offer of marriage. You will not be surprised to know I refused him. He would not accept it and made a fool of himself over it. Within three days, Mr. Collins was engaged to Charlotte. I do believe he still hopes I will repent my choice at any moment, but of course that will not happen.”

Her tale complete, Elizabeth looked up at Mr. Darcy expectantly. She wished for him to ask, ‘Do you regret me?’ She would then answer that she did. She woke up each morning eager to see him,
spent her day swimming in thoughts of him and went to bed at night wishing he was on the other side of a door, so that she might have him nearby always.

He did not ask anything of the kind, but instead looked grave and thoughtful. Too late, Elizabeth realized that she had not expressed a preference for Mr. Darcy as much as a dislike of men who would not accept refusal.

Finally, he said, “It would be uncivil of us to spend the entire party speaking to no one but each other,” and walked away.
Chapter 8

The morning after the party at Lucas Lodge, Charlotte called at Longbourn. Her appearance after breakfast cheered her particular friend considerably. Walking with Mr. Darcy earlier that morning had left Elizabeth in low spirits. Charlotte’s practical perspective was very welcome in the face of the unrelenting romantic optimism of Elizabeth’s sisters or the financial hopes of her parents. When Mr. Darcy had walked away from her at the party, Elizabeth had been frustrated with herself for her poor choice of words. These feelings were transferred to Mr. Darcy upon seeing him at Mr. Gilpin’s tree. He was awkward, silent and absolutely refused to be teased out of his ill humor.

“Mr. Darcy’s manners appear much improved,” Charlotte said, once the opening pleasantries had been dispensed with. She had somehow managed to come to Longbourn without her husband. At Lucas Lodge, Charlotte was without her usual means of distracting Mr. Collins from spending his time with her, but her skill at deflecting him remained unabated. To Elizabeth’s thinking, this was another thing to be thankful for.

She answered, “You never saw much the matter with his manners, as I recall.” Though she was not feeling terribly charitable towards him, Charlotte’s praise of Mr. Darcy left her satisfied.

“I find myself willing to forgive,” Charlotte teased, “if a man shows good taste.”

Elizabeth smiled tightly. “And he showed the good taste of courting my good opinion.”

Charlotte had always been a shrewd woman. She had not been born to a genteel station in life; she lacked the celebrated beauty of the Bennet sisters -- she was, in short, less in love with herself than Elizabeth, and as a result, had none of the willful blindness that Elizabeth suffered. “Pray Eliza, I have heard every possible account of your engagement but your own. I should like to hear the story from one of the principles.”

Elizabeth’s tale was, “I am not engaged.”

“Eliza,” Charlotte chastised, seizing her hand, “you must marry him. Surely you know you must let go of this romanticism.”

“A lady has only the right of refusal,” Elizabeth replied, squeezing her friend’s hand in return. “Until the gentleman asks, I am afraid it is quite out of my hands.”
Charlotte was puzzled. “How can that be?” she wondered. “The news is all over Meryton. It has reached as far as Lady Catherine. If it is not being spoken of in London, I should be surprised.”

“I do not see why anyone in town would concern themselves with it,” Elizabeth said dismissively. “I understand this is not the first rumor of its type that has circulated about Mr. Darcy,” she added, thinking of his supposed understanding with Miss De Bourgh.

“You are more clever than that, Elizabeth,” Charlotte chided. “You know very well the marriage prospects of a man worth ten thousand a year is news at home and abroad. It may do very well for him to be connected to rumors of this sort over and over, but it won’t do so nicely for you.”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth answered, growing annoyed, “if a man courts me, then abandons me, it reflects poorly on me. In this instance, an exchange of money was involved, which makes it all the worse. If he paid for me and abandons me, then I am the lowest sort of woman. No other man will have me.”

“Mr. Darcy has admired you for so long,” Charlotte said. “I cannot account for his building such expectation and not offering for you.”

“I can,” Elizabeth replied. “He had nothing at all to do with the building of anything. My aunt Gardiner told my mother of her speculation. My mother, aided by my sister, spread it about, all on the heels of Lydia’s marriage. One marriage gives rise to expectation of another. Why not connect Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy?”

Charlotte had never claimed to be a romantic, and demonstrated once again her practical views of marriage when she stated, “Regardless of who built the expectation, it is still there. Mr. Darcy must know that you cannot escape this with your reputation intact. It is his duty to offer for you.”

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth admitted, to Charlotte’s relief. “Not at all. Really, I am convinced I shall be very happy with him. It is my own doing that he has not made an offer and I confess, I am at a loss
of how to fix it.”

Elizabeth’s confession hardly made more sense to her friend than the idea that she would not desire a man of Mr. Darcy’s station. “What do you mean?”

“Charlotte,” Elizabeth said in a low voice, “I do not wish to lie to you. But the things I would tell you, you must not tell another soul.”

“Eliza, I am a married woman,” Charlotte reminded her. “You know where my first loyalty must be.”

Elizabeth knew she could accept the loss of Charlotte’s loyalty. If she were to confess the mistakes she had made since Mr. Darcy’s return to Meryton, Charlotte would see the complications in the match without learning anything best left concealed. However, in light of their history, Elizabeth did not truly think the discouraging comments she had made in the past se’nnight were enough to dissuade Mr. Darcy. He had the confidence to be in love with a woman who hated him; he should be able to bear an affectionate woman who lead herself astray every now and then. His silence was rooted in something deeper than the most recent branch of their acquaintance. Elizabeth weighed the worth of a full confession and decided to place her faith in her lifelong friend. “Can you at least promise me you will not share this information with my cousin unless he were to ask you directly?”

For Charlotte, this was a small concession. “Very well.”

“Mr. Darcy made me an offer,” Elizabeth admitted. “Last April, when I was visiting with you.”

“Elizabeth!” Charlotte cried with surprise.

“I refused him.” Elizabeth said, which hardly needed to be added, given all that had transpired since then. “The things I thought of him at the time! Of course I refused him.” Elizabeth smiled and pressed her friend’s hand again, this time with affection. “You, dear Charlotte, had been right about him all along. He told me he had admired me almost from the first.”

“To refuse such a man!” Charlotte said, unable to comprehend what she was hearing. “Eliza, even if you thought him unpleasant –”

“-- I did not think him unpleasant!” Elizabeth burst in. “I thought him hateful, cruel and
unforgiving!” Reigning in her passion, Elizabeth continued in a somber tone, “Of course, he is none of those things and truly, I wonder that I ever thought so. He’s a bit selfish, and he is rude when he doesn’t care for your conversation, but are those things so terrible? He is generous, gentle, intelligent, educated, responsible, active, well-read... I never hear a word of complaint from him about my cleverness, or running wild.” Ruefully, Elizabeth smiled. “He likes to get his own way. I think that forgivable, in light of everything else.”

Still stuck on the principle point, Charlotte said, unable to shake her disbelief, “Yet you refused him.”

“Indeed. I did not know any of this at the time. Through...various means, I have learned to know him a bit better since.” Mr. Darcy’s letter was too personal a thing to share, and in light of their lack of an understanding, too incriminating. Though she did not want to mislead Charlotte in her account of her relationship with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth was not prepared to tell everything. “We came to meet one another again accidentally this summer. I felt...I felt he was still in my power, when I saw him again, and Charlotte, my information was so much better. I began to think I might like to keep him that way.”

“Mrs. Gardiner, she saw the two of you behaving so?” Through her correspondence with Elizabeth, Charlotte had known that her friend was meant to spend the summer traveling with her aunt and uncle. If it was Mrs. Gardiner’s misunderstanding that began the current well of misinformation, her mistake was understandable in such a light.

“I am embarrassed to say she and my uncle did,” Elizabeth confessed. “I did not speak of any of it and her imagination got the better of her.”

“If she did not know it to be true,” Charlotte said, frowning at the absent woman’s uncharacteristic lack of sense, “why did she tell your mother?”

“A heavy crime, indeed,” Elizabeth said, agreeing with the unspoken accusation. “My mother took Lydia’s elopement very poorly. I think my aunt merely wanted to give her sister some relief. Mr. Darcy had told my uncle that he hoped to aid us in recovering her. What motive could he have but a wish to marry one of us? It is a sensible enough conjecture, even it if it turned out false.”

“That he goes to so much trouble and expense to bring the match about in July,” Charlotte began to say, only to be interrupted by her friend adding --

“And stays with my father and uncle throughout most of August!”
“But is silent come September. Eliza, what can he mean by it?”

“It is my doing,” Elizabeth said again. “He came to Meryton entirely unperturbed by the rumors and, I think, quite ready to make an offer. The last time I saw him in Lambton, I thought the same thing.”

“What has changed?”

The first change that came to mind was large enough, and one that Elizabeth had originally felt must end all discourse between herself and Mr. Darcy. “Lydia married Mr. Wickham. At first, I credited Mr. Darcy’s silence to that. I own, I would have preferred silent when he first returned to Hertfordshire. I felt I could not connect him with Mr. Wickham. You do not know their history, but I should not like to make them brothers.”

“That match was Mr. Darcy’s doing!” Charlotte forcefully reminded her, as though his part in it forbade Mr. Darcy from having any objection to marrying into the family himself.

“And then he returned to the country,” Elizabeth mused, tracing their history, “only to learn that all the neighborhood thought us engaged.”

“Which you admit does not disturb him,” Charlotte added. “A man of his station should be able to quiet the rumors in a town such as this if he chose. I think it more likely he allows the rumor to persist.”

“To what end?”

“To get what he desires, Eliza.”

“I could better credit that theory if he offered for me,” Elizabeth replied, “or if he was not so upstanding. I call him selfish, but he is not so very bad that he would perpetuate these rumors to force me into marriage. He would be miserable if he forced me; he has all but told me that himself.”

“I would choose his misery over your loss of virtue.”

“And I would choose to make him happy,” Elizabeth declared, “if he would give me the choice!”
The greater part of Charlotte’s concern was fixed upon Elizabeth’s respectability. She could not maintain a good reputation for herself or her remaining unmarried sisters if she played at refusing Mr. Darcy again. “He cannot give what does not exist.”

“I cannot refuse him,” Elizabeth realized, “so he will not ask. That is what has changed, Charlotte! In Lambton, he came to me knowing I could refuse him again. Now I am obliged to him. I cannot refuse. He will not pose a question that I cannot answer freely.”

To this, Charlotte had an answer. The cynical answer of an unromantic woman, perhaps, but an answer nonetheless. “Proper encouragement will change his mind soon enough.”

“I have been trying to encourage him!” Elizabeth replied. “I have not met with success. When I was trying to give him pain, I made him enamored of me. When I have tried to show him affection, I have turned him away. How do you show a man affection when you love him? I cannot speak of it.”

“What is it about you that draws him to you so?”

“I hardly know,” she answered. “He knew almost nothing of me when he first told me he loved me. He understood me no better than I understood him. I was impertinent. I spoke to him to give him pain more often than anything else. Perhaps if I did something very rude, he would like it.”

A bit alarmed, Charlotte reminded her, “Affectionate, Eliza.”

“Perhaps I should kiss him,” Elizabeth considered. “To think, a lady kissing a gentlemen without the benefit of an engagement! An excellent blend of the impertinent and the affectionate.”

“That would be difficult to misinterpret,” Charlotte acceded.

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After she retired that night, Elizabeth made the grave error of contemplating the logistics of kissing Mr. Darcy. Immediately, two obstacles came to mind, one more easily conquered than the other. The first was her bonnet. They always met outside, where she wore a wide brimmed bonnet to
protect herself from the sun. The brim would certainly be in the way if she tried to kiss him. To take the hat off in preparation would appear suspicious, but it was a thing that could be done. Since her reasons for doing so would be made very soon apparent, she could not tax herself terribly with concerns that he would be suspicious.

The larger problem was how very tall Mr. Darcy was. Even standing on her toes, Elizabeth did not think she could reach his lips with her own. It would be necessary to pull him down, somehow, and that she was not sure how to go about that. If she seized him about the neck and tugged, and he refused to acquiesce to such undignified handling, she would come off very foolish for naught. She would probably need to explain herself after a failed attempt, which would be mortifying.

No, now that she had really thought it through, kissing him was not liable to be an effective plan. Still, without any activity to distract her, Elizabeth allowed herself the freedom to imagine what it might be like for Mr. Darcy to kiss her. If they married, Elizabeth fancied that she would be the frequent recipient of his kisses. The touch of his lips was not all she could anticipate receiving as his wife. When he wished, he would enter her bedroom to deposit his seed within her. She had a rudimentary understanding of the martial act. There was a place in her body created to receive her husband. He would come to her, mount her and find pleasure in doing so.

Elizabeth could hardly sleep once she had conjured a phantom of Mr. Darcy lying atop her.

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By the time she needed to leave Longbourn to rendezvous with her illusory lover, Elizabeth had come up with a more reasonable plan to show him her affection. Her father’s library, while not built to suit a lady’s tastes, was at least stocked with the necessary volumes to make it a book room worth its name. Before alighting from the house, she selected a much worn and beloved book, and spirited it away in her reticule.

“Good morning, sir!” she cried when she saw him, leaning against the tree. Mr. Darcy pushed off and bowed. She answered with a curtsy and said, “I trust you are well?”

“Very well, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy answered. “And yourself?”

“It is a beautiful morning,” she replied. “Who could have cause for complaint?”

“No one, I am sure,” he answered. Mr. Darcy offered his arm, but Elizabeth did not take it.
“Sit,” she instructed. He raised his eyebrows and she laughed. “We are not going for a walk today,” Elizabeth explained.

“What do you propose instead?” he wondered.

“Several days ago,” Elizabeth intoned, with much gravity, “we identified a very grievous lapse in your education. You asked me how best to address it, and though I advised you most excellently, I fear you have taken no steps to expand your mind.”

Though caught, he smiled. “That is so,” Mr. Darcy admitted.

Elizabeth presented to him the book she had packed in her reticule. “‘The Mysteries of Udolpho,’” she said. “Your sister will not thank me if, when you next see her, you still know nothing of Emily and Valancourt.”

He accepted it, and said, “Lending me a book does not preclude walking together.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You misunderstand! I shall read it to you!”

“I am perfectly able of reading it myself.”

“I would not dare suggest otherwise,” Elizabeth replied, humored at his offense. “But I only have the one copy and the circulating library never has it in stock. If you wish to discuss a peculiar point, and I do not recall it, for I have not read it myself in years, then what shall we do? It is really much better to read it together.” She motioned again that he should sit.

Mr. Darcy took Elizabeth’s hand and helped her to find a seat on the tree root he had settled her on in the past before sitting beside her. Once comfortable, she retrieved the book and opened it to the title page.

“‘The Mysteries of Udolpho, a romance; interspersed with some pieces of poetry.’” Elizabeth paused in her reading. She looked at him askance and said, “We should be alright, I think.” She then continued reading, “‘By Ann Radcliffe, author of The Romance of the Forest, etc. In four volumes.’” Another aside, Elizabeth added, “This should keep us occupied for some time.”
Elizabeth read steadily for half of an hour, acquainting Mr. Darcy with the family history of Emily St. Aubert. He learned of the decline of their fortunes, the tragic deaths of Emily’s brothers and mother and the close bond she shared with her father. The two surviving St. Auberts, their mule driver and new friend Valancourt were journeying through Pyrenees when she found her voice growing too hoarse to continue. “You will have to finish this chapter,” she said, handing the book to Mr. Darcy. In the act of passing the book between them, and Elizabeth’s pointing to where she had stopped, they were uncommonly close.

Mr. Darcy resumed the reading. He had a very pleasant voice. He did not give Emily’s raptures over nature the same energy that Elizabeth would have, but there was something warm and calming in his tone. She watched his mouth as he formed the words, remembering Aunt Gardiner’s observation that there was something pleasing about Mr. Darcy’s mouth when he spoke. Really taking the time to study his profile, Elizabeth had to agree.

It occurred to her then, seated shoulder to shoulder as they were, that Mr. Darcy was not so terribly tall in this position. It would be an easy task to kiss him. She would not even need to turn his head to kiss the corner of his mouth. One of her hands idly toyed with the knot of her bonnet ribbon.

He deserved to be kissed, really. There was no reason for a man to have such a pleasing voice and well-formed lips but to tempt a girl to kiss him. Yes, Elizabeth was absolutely decided she would kiss him. Any thoughts or fears for his reaction had quite left her mind. She desired to kiss him, and Mr. Darcy had never protested anything she had done to give herself pleasure. It was an excellent plan. All that stood between herself and completion of the scheme was the ridiculous brim of her bonnet.

“Shall I continue?”

Elizabeth was startled out of her reverie by the question. The smooth, even way he read had given way to an honest inquiry. Having no idea where he left off, Elizabeth could hardly form a response. He shifted to face her. Elizabeth wondered what he saw in her eyes, because upon meeting them, his expression changed.

His eyes flickered to her lips. Something in her countenance had given away the direction of her thoughts. It did not matter to Elizabeth if Mr. Darcy chose to kiss her before she could act. Her mouth suddenly felt very dry. She swallowed hard and licked her lips. Elizabeth revised her stance. It would be much better if he kissed her.

His gaze was by now very much settled upon her mouth. It was, she thought, the best possible place for him to look. He was unmistakably leaning towards her. Elizabeth’s eyes fluttered closed.
The planes of his shoulders were hard beneath her palms. Entirely without meaning to, she had grabbed onto him for support. Elizabeth had never touched any part of Mr. Darcy but his hands and arms before. This new touch made him recover himself. When Elizabeth opened her eyes the intent she had seen in his was gone, replaced with shame and self-recrimination.

Disappointment settled in her belly. The moment was gone. Elizabeth’s hands released his shoulders, retreating down his chest. Suddenly, his left hand seized her right, trapping it against his breast. He squeezed her hand before releasing it.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth began, but he did not allow her to finish.

“Forgive me, Miss Bennet.”

There was nothing to forgive. He had done nothing to offend her. Elizabeth started to say as much, when he continued: “We should not continue to meet without the aid of a chaperone. A lady’s reputation is a fragile thing; yours, I fear, has not been guarded as it should.”

“If you think that best,” Elizabeth replied with some difficulty. All the power over her reputation lay in his hands.

He said, “Thank you,” with real relief. It was hard to hold onto the bitter sting of rejection when agreeing to his suggestion gave him such peace of mind.
Though solitary rambles had been her habit since she was sixteen, Elizabeth found walking alone to
be unsatisfying after several days of spending that time with Mr. Darcy. Air and exercise was
Elizabeth’s answer to all that ailed her. Solitude was preferable to the silliness and noise of her
younger sisters, to the nervous distress of her mother and the shortcomings of her father. When
compared to the companionship of a young man with a well-formed mind, a walk by herself was
lonely. To return to the house in lower spirits than she had left with was unthinkable. And yet,
entering Longbourn without having shared Mr. Darcy’s company resulted in just that.

Divested of her bonnet, muff and pelisse, Elizabeth tried to cheer herself through other means. At
breakfast, she would have the pleasure of Jane’s company. Charlotte was still at Lucas Lodge and
would welcome her friend paying a call. Mr. Collins being in the neighborhood meant her father
was likely to have a new absurdity to share with her. And since she could not be truly happy
banishing him from her thoughts, Elizabeth reminded herself that Mr. Darcy wished to see her still,
he simply wanted their meetings chaperoned. He would come to call at Longbourn soon enough,
and though she would have to share his attention with her mother or sisters, Elizabeth would still
have the pleasure of his company and bear witness to his improved manners.

Moved to excellent spirits, and determined to be compelled into greater ones, Elizabeth sat down to
breakfast with her family. Conversation at the table was exactly what she should expect: Mr. Bennet
related bits of nonsense for the amusement of his daughters. Kitty bemoaned the loss of Lydia and
the militia officers, but both were out of her mind easily enough when other topics of interest were
introduced. Mary shared what quotations she felt were applicable to the conversation. Jane was
serene and engaging to all. Elizabeth smothered giggles into her napkin.

Without warning and entirely unrelated to any of the conversation flowing around the table, Mrs.
Bennet declared, “That Mr. Darcy! I begin to suspect he has no intention of offering for you at all,
Lizzy.”

Elizabeth’s merriment was checked immediately by her mother’s sudden outburst. She hardly knew
how to respond to it. Ever since her mother had been informed of Mrs. Gardiner’s ill-formed beliefs,
Elizabeth had been trying to convince Mrs. Bennet otherwise. Her mother’s behavior with the
neighbors was an embarrassment. Elizabeth had carefully concealed her meetings with Mr. Darcy
from the family. Mr. Darcy lingering in the neighborhood without being induced to hie to
Longbourn had apparently succeeded where Elizabeth’s persuasive skills had failed. Mrs. Bennet
had ceased to consider the fortunes of her daughters saved and resumed prophesizing the worst
scenario. Given the mortification her mother’s behavior inspired, Elizabeth knew she should be
satisfied with this change of heart. However, she had also enjoyed when Mrs. Bennet defended her
to Mr. Collins. Hoping as she was for Mr. Darcy’s addresses, Elizabeth did not feel equal to
agreeing with her mother that he might never make an offer.
Dearest Jane said, “Mama, Mr. Darcy is a proper gentlemen. He wishes to court Lizzy before proposing.”

“Quality people,” Mrs. Bennet clucked, “if one can call them that, are not to be trusted. Why, Jane, just remember how ill Mr. Bingley used you.”

This attack was effective at silencing Jane.

“He built up so much expectation and left without a word!” Mrs. Bennet continued regardless. “Mr. Collins wanted you first, Jane, remember, but I said, ’Mr. Collins, Jane is very likely to soon be engaged.’ How much better off we all would be if Mr. Bingley had never entered the neighborhood! Jane would be Mrs. Collins and none of us would have met that Mr. Darcy. He’ll do the same as his friend, I wager. Build up all of poor Lizzy’s hopes and then wander away.”

Elizabeth was, at this point, not sure whose conduct merited the most censure: Her mother’s, for paining Jane; Mr. Bingley’s, for doing exactly what he was accused of; or Mr. Darcy’s for being responsible for Mr. Bingley’s deflection. To Mr. Darcy, at least, she could attribute a noble motive, if not noble actions. Mr. Bingley had failed to follow the edict of his own heart, which in Elizabeth’s opinion should have greater weight than the faulty judgment of his friend. Her mother’s greatest mistake in this sorry business was being perfectly oblivious to the feelings of those around her.

As her mother was the only one of the three present, Elizabeth said, “Mama, please.”

“I told you, Lizzy,” her mother declared, shaking a finger in her direction. Elizabeth was at least relieved that Jane was spared any further pain by herself being Mrs. Bennet’s primary target. “I told you never to dance with him. Did you listen to the wisdom of your mother? You did not! I am ill-used indeed. You did just what you please, like you always do, running wild and dancing with men worth ten thousand a year! It’s a wonder to me he ever looked at you.”

“Do you condemn Mr. Darcy because he looked at me,” Elizabeth wondered, “or because he was not tempted by what he saw?”

“Men like Mr. Darcy do not want wives like you, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Bennet said.

“Men like Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth countered, “will choose their own partners with no thought given to the preconceptions of persons unconnected to themselves.”
“Exactly so,” Mrs. Bennet replied, leaving her daughter to suppose she did not understand what was said. “His only concern is in pleasing Lady Catherine! It will be like Mr. Collins said! He will marry Miss De Bourgh! You will be a spinster!”

“Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth reminded her, “informed us that any expectation of a marriage between Mr. Darcy and Miss De Bourgh was at an end.”

“If only Mr. Darcy had wanted Jane!” Mrs. Bennet bemoaned.

“Then he should be a terrible friend!” Elizabeth declared, offended on Mr. Bingley’s behalf.

“So graceful, so beautiful, so deferential! Those,” her mother said pointedly, “are the qualities a man of Mr. Darcy’s station looks for in a wife.”

Mr. Bennet, having finished his meal and grown weary of the argument, stood to depart from the table. “You’ve got the wrong of Mr. Darcy,” he said to his wife as he passed her. “He could not have less interest in a deferential wife.” His eyes twinkled as he looked at Elizabeth. “Of grace and beauty, we will have to agree such things are in the eye of the beholder.”

Satisfied that she had grace and beauty enough for both her beloved father and Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth said, “Mr. Darcy can be surprising, Mama. Please do not trouble yourself by trying to predict his actions.”

“Mark my words, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Bennet continued, as though no attempt had been made to reign her in, “He’ll see you ruined!”

Their father’s departure being enough to signal the end of the meal, Elizabeth’s younger sisters took their leave. She could hardly blame either of them for it. Arguing with Mrs. Bennet was largely useless and neither Kitty nor Mary had the wit to make the best of it. Jane took Elizabeth’s hand under the table.

“A rumored engagement leading up to nothing is hardly enough to ruin me, Mama,” Elizabeth replied. Her prospects in the neighborhood had always been slim. No one who knew of this affair was likely to attempt to court her later. It was clear enough that she would marry Mr. Darcy or she would not marry at all, but to be a spinster and to be ruined were not analogous.
“Your honor!” Mrs. Bennet cried, “Your virtue!”

“Lizzy has done nothing to damage either!” Jane protested. “Her conduct has been nothing short of exemplary!”

Elizabeth blushed at this praise. Secret meetings with the gentleman were not exemplary conduct at all. She could rest assured that even if Jane had known of Elizabeth’s assignations with Mr. Darcy, her older sister would still consider her without fault, but her own assessment was a bit more realistic. She squeezed Jane’s hand.

“He’s so rich, Lizzy!” Mrs. Bennet continued. Normally, such a phrase out of the mouth of Mrs. Bennet was praise, but in this instance, it sounded like a plea. “We will never succeed if we take him to court for a breach of promise.”

“We were never promised,” Elizabeth replied, “so I should think that would be the case.” It was on the tip of her tongue to inquire if Mrs. Bennet knew the truth behind Mr. Wickham’s marrying Lydia. She and her sisters had long believed Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner pressured Mr. Wickham to the altar with a threat of legal action. In actuality, Mr. Darcy had bribed him into the match. She checked herself, however, aware that directing such a question to her father would be the better way to learn the information.

“Mr. Darcy is going to offer for Lizzy,” Jane added. “He has not yet spent two weeks in her company. He is being sensible of her maidenly feelings.”

“That is what the engagement period is for,” Mrs. Bennet scoffed. “She will have weeks to get over her fears of what he shall do to her once the marriage is sanctioned by God.”

“Mama!” Jane cried. Elizabeth, highly colored throughout the exchange, could only blush deeper. She had no fears of what Mr. Darcy would do, once the right to do as he willed was bestowed upon him. Every time she allowed herself to consider the duty of Mrs. Darcy, Elizabeth anticipated it more. She did not aspire to be only the object of his carnal desires; Elizabeth hoped to run his household, guard his happiness and mother his children.

“Jane dear,” Mrs. Bennet replied, “a man needs his sons. Lizzy is clever enough to know how he intends to get them.”

“Mama, Jane is not offended on behalf of my cleverness,” Elizabeth argued, “but because this is not
appropiate talk for the breakfast room.”

“The talk is all for naught if Mr. Darcy does not offer for you!” her mother cried.

“And so he shall, Mama,” Jane said at the same time that Elizabeth replied, “Then we’ll all be better served to save our breath.” Jane frowned at her sister. “You may talk all you like after an engagement occurs, should one occur,” Elizabeth added. With a side long glance at her mother, she continued, “Though perhaps not in the breakfast room.”

Mr. Darcy himself had drawn a comparison between Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine when he entered the neighborhood. Elizabeth was finding the two women had more in common than just their love for professing their own opinions. Neither of them required a response. Indeed, Mrs. Bennet wailed on about how Mr. Darcy would never offer for Elizabeth, as though neither she nor her sister had ever entered the conversation.

Through the employment of a lengthy tirade over which neither Elizabeth nor Jane could be heard, Mrs. Bennet convinced herself that not only would Mr. Darcy never pay his addresses to Elizabeth, but that he never intended to make them in the first place. Mrs. Bennet was now subscribing to the same interpretation of Mr. Darcy’s character that she had found so offensive when espoused by Mr. Collins. Mr. Darcy, she claimed, was cut from the same cloth as his countryman, Mr. Wickham. He hoped only to find that Elizabeth was as ruled by her passions as Lydia. He would take what he wanted and leave her. His wealth made him untouchable. He would see the entire family ruined.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said coldly once her mother was finished, “is a gentleman. I shall thank you to speak of him in such a way no longer.”

“You call what he’s done the actions of a gentleman?” Mrs. Bennet asked skeptically. By this time, she may have forgotten that her theories were only her own conjecture and not events that had actually taken place.

“I do,” Elizabeth replied. “He is the best man I have ever known and has done nothing to warrant such abuse.”

“A man of with any sense of decency or honor would have offered for you by now,” her mother replied, firm in her convictions.

Unable to bear a repetition of Mrs. Bennet’s dreadful claims, Elizabeth disclosed the piece of
information she had always promised herself her mother would never know: “He did offer for me,” Elizabeth said. “In April. I refused him, most violently. Even a man of decency and honor has the right to some hesitation, in light of that.”

Mrs. Bennet’s reaction to the news was everything Elizabeth had ever feared. She was equal parts fury and nerves, calling Elizabeth out for harming the prospects of all her sisters and decrying the physical pains the daughter’s behavior wrought. She spoke of Elizabeth in terms most abusive. She insisted she would never speak to her again. When Elizabeth attempted to save herself the pain of listening to such language, her mother immediately broke her vow to demand that Elizabeth stay exactly where she was.

Eventually worn out by the force of her own anger and hopelessness, Mrs. Bennet retreated upstairs to her room.

“You know she did not mean it,” Jane said, attempting to relieve Elizabeth’s wounded feelings.

“I know she will forget,” Elizabeth replied, feeling mostly shock. “I believe she meant exactly what she said.”

“Her only wish is to know that you will be cared for once Papa is gone,” her sister argued. “It must be very frightening, to be mother to daughters with uncertain prospects.”

Although Elizabeth was hurt and dismayed by her mother’s conduct, she understood that Jane, though witnessing it all, could not condemn her parent. Mrs. Bennet’s fears, however foolishly or cruelly expressed, were rooted in a very real concern for the girls’ futures. In her assessment of her mother’s feelings, Jane could not dismiss that. Any attempt she made to comfort Elizabeth must exonerate the one who gave her such pain.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was much too pained to be feeling charitable towards someone who spoke so meanly of her. Mrs. Bennet’s fits were selfish. Even Elizabeth herself did not approve of her past conduct, but she accepted how her actions were colored by her feelings at the time. Though her mother vocally disliked Mr. Darcy, she had made no attempt to consider how unappealing a match would be to someone who felt likewise. Comfort and consequence were as attractive to Elizabeth as they were to any other gentleman’s daughter, but spending life attached to a man she could not respect or love was too high a cost. The knowledge of how worthy Mr. Darcy was of her respect came too late. Much trouble would have been avoided had he grown so dear to her months ago.

It was useless to speak of regrets to anyone but the man himself. Mrs. Bennet and her daughters
would not be sheltered by regret. Sisterly confidences could change nothing. It was up to Mr. Darcy
to find the courage to breech the subject. Elizabeth had given him enough difficulties that he was
reluctant to do so, if he even still wished it. She had hoped he could read her intent in sharing a
novel about a pair of lovers, or the commitment she made in those 800 pages. To tease him about
poetry was indirect, but as a lady, it was the best she could do.

Because exercise was the cure for all that ailed her, Elizabeth announced, “I am going for a walk.”

Disinclined to leave Elizabeth to solitary reflections after a heated conversation with Mrs. Bennet,
Jane asked, “May I accompany you?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth answered, “though I fear I will not be the best of company.”

Elizabeth trampled an angry circuit around the park. Displeased with every part of the situation she
found herself in, no amount of reflection could ease her mind. Her own conduct had been poor
throughout. Many of her family members had played a part in furthering the rumors which she could
not escape. She was the darling of Meryton as long as an imminent engagement could be believed,
but should it fail to manifest, she would have the scorn of the same people. Jane searched for every
silver lining or bit of encouragement to share with her sister.

The girls were nearly returned to the front gate when they spied a man on horseback approaching
Longbourn. They stopped and watched so as to make out his identity. It was Mr. Darcy. “All will
be well,” Jane whispered.

Rather than return to the house, the sisters waited for their visitor’s arrival. He came to a stop before
them and dismounted.

“Miss Bennet. Miss Elizabeth.” Mr. Darcy bowed. The sisters curtsied and chimed, “Mr. Darcy,”
in unison. A groomsman relieved Mr. Darcy of his horse. Though he tried to direct some of his
attention to Jane has he made the usual inquiries into the well-being of their family, his consideration
was monopolized by Elizabeth.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said, hesitant. “Are you well?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered. “I thank you for your concern.” He did not appear convinced, and
Elizabeth felt clarification necessary. “I have merely had a disagreement with my mother. I fear
such things are typical. It shall not distress me for long.”
“I had hoped to call at Longbourn,” Mr. Darcy said, as though his presence there was not enough to indicate such an intention. “If you do not wish to return to the house, do not let me importune you.”

“Should I choose not to return to the house,” Elizabeth queried, “what would become of your intentions?”

He smiled slightly. “They would require some revision. Should the object I seek not be at Longbourn, I must seek her elsewhere.”

Elizabeth glanced at Jane. The presence of her sister should be adequate chaperonage. “My sister and I were walking,” she said, “Would you care to join us?”

Mr. Darcy indicated that he would like to join them and the party rearranged themselves so that each of the girls held one of his arms. The group took a turn through the wilderness. The time passed pleasantly enough. Jane’s company was sufficient to prevent Elizabeth’s mind from contemplating the timber of Mr. Darcy’s voice or the handsome shape of his lips overmuch. Supporting a second lady on his arm checked the intensity of his gaze.

When their path took them again to the gate, Mr. Darcy said, “I should like to pay my respects to your parents.”

Elizabeth frowned. “My mother is likely to be indisposed,” she replied, “but I am sure my father could be persuaded to be home to visitors.”

“If he does not typically see callers,” Mr. Darcy answered, “he need not change his habits on my account.”

“He will be pleased to see you,” Elizabeth insisted. “It has been many weeks since you last called, and he would appreciate your sensible conversation.”

“Have I been remiss?” he wondered.

“Oh, no!” Elizabeth was eager to acquit him on the subject of his manners. “Papa did not return your call, and so there was nothing to be done.”
“Until one becomes impatient,” Mr. Darcy corrected, “and decides he shall have his own way regardless.”

At this, Elizabeth laughed and she was happy to do so. “I have noticed that about you often! You are perfectly proper until it suits you to be otherwise.” With Jane on his other arm, she dared not list examples.

“I am glad you are in better spirits,” he said, his eyes showing his satisfaction. Sobering himself, Mr. Darcy added, “I hope your mother shares your constitution.”

Trifling pleasantries about how her mother would get over their argument soon enough could not seem to escape Elizabeth’s mouth. Through the course of it, she had revealed personal information about him without his consent. “Sir,” she said cautiously, “I fear I must give you some intelligence about my mother’s current indisposition.”

“You need not air any private concerns to me,” he said kindly.

“I am afraid it involves you,” Elizabeth confessed. “I cannot be easy without your being aware.” Silently, he waited for her to continue. Elizabeth took a fortifying breath. “Though I had promised myself I would never do so,” she prefaced, “not two hours ago, I told my mother of the events of last April.”

He lost some of his color and said faintly, “I see.”

“I am very sorry to give you pain,” Elizabeth hurried to add, “or remind you of the dreadful things I said on that unfortunate day. I am sorry to say, I felt it necessary for her to have more information about our relationship, in light of some of her own beliefs.”

“Her beliefs on what score?”

“On the score of your character, sir,” she answered. “I shall not repeat what was said, but she accused you of conduct unbefitting a gentleman, and I felt corrections were in order.” Here, she paused, aware that on the dreaded day in April, his character had come under undeserved censure from none other than herself. “I have, of course, not shared any of the information you related to me in confidence.”
“Mrs. Bennet was angry at you,” Mr. Darcy surmised, “for doing what your own feelings had made necessary.” He was studiously not looking in her direction. His eyes fixed on the house.

“Yes, sir.” Her feelings had undergone a material change. Had he not withdrawn from her, had Jane not been on his other arm, Elizabeth would have added something about how differently she felt towards him now.

“I should like to speak to her,” he declared, steering the group towards Longbourn.
Chapter 10

When the servants informed Mr. Darcy that Mrs. Bennet was in no condition to receive visitors, he asked that his card be submitted to her regardless. This soon had the intended effect of an assurance that Mrs. Bennet was delighted by his idea of waiting upon her. Whatever unflattering imaginings she had of his character, they were not able to withstand the man’s request for an audience. Mrs. Bennet welcomed his visit with all appearances of gratitude.

Elizabeth was surprised to find herself quickly dismissed. Mr. Darcy wished to speak to her mother without her presence. Mrs. Bennet was now of such a mind to never disagree with anything Mr. Darcy said. Immediately, she insisted on Elizabeth’s departure. Not wishing to appear insensible of filial duty, Elizabeth obeyed, but not without a great deal of hesitancy.

Feeling that her father deserved to know what was occurring in his house and regarding his wife, she went straight to his library to make it known.

“Your beau prefers your mother, does he?” was Mr. Bennet’s reply. “She always was a beauty.”

“Papa,” Elizabeth pleaded, “I am afraid Mr. Darcy was offended by my mother’s conduct.” She regretted relating the tale of their argument. At the time, she had felt it Mr. Darcy’s due. His character was at stake and she had shared personal information about him without his consent. After seeing the result of such an action, Elizabeth had no choice but to revise that opinion. When Mr. Darcy questioned her ill-humor, she should have laughed it off.

“I should not expect otherwise,” Mr. Bennet answered.

Frustrated by her father’s typical disinterest in taking charge of his family, Elizabeth said, “It is not the role of a man unconnected to our family to censure your wife.”

This, Mr. Bennet conceded was true, but he added, “She no longer hears you or I. It can only do her good to have someone else say it. I do not anticipate your mother paying him the deference he might expect from a more sensible woman, but all of his consequence and importance must be good for something.”

Elizabeth, in an attempt to master her anger, reminded herself that Mr. Darcy’s ‘consequence and importance’ lay in the power he had over the fortunes of the people of Pemberley. By all accounts, he was a liberal and just landlord and master to those whose livelihoods depended on him. If he was
a little too accustomed to taking matters in hand himself, it was understandable.

Having talked herself out of offense, Elizabeth had only embarrassment remaining. Mr. Darcy had never been of a mind to forgive Mrs. Bennet her improper behavior or her background. He had told her once that he considered connecting himself to the Bennet family to be a degradation. Her mother and youngest sister seemed determined to prove him right. Elizabeth had never been insensible to the ill breeding of her mother or younger sisters. She had never been unaware that her father had married beneath himself and suffered for it.

Elizabeth eyed her father. Now that she had drawn a parallel to her father’s match with an attorney’s daughter and Mr. Darcy’s interest in a genteel woman several degrees beneath himself, she could not help but draw others. Both men were unsociable, bookish types with a ready wit and satirical sense of humor. Both were charmed by a pretty face and poor manners. Her father had grown to regret his choice. Would Mr. Darcy, should he choose her?

Did her mother regret accepting a man that had raised her social standing but did not respect her? Elizabeth regretted refusing Mr. Darcy; if, in the future, she had occasion to accept him, would she find herself regretting that as well?

In a few short months, Elizabeth would reach her majority. The five thousand pounds Mr. Darcy had settled upon herself would come under her control, should she be brave enough to ask for it. She could support herself with such a sum for the rest of her life. She realized with a start that all of her sisters could support themselves in a comfortable lifestyle with such money. The burden of a prudent marriage or inevitable poverty had been lifted from them all.

It was true that her options had not changed: she would marry Mr. Darcy or she would become a spinster. An old maid would never be as respectable as a wife, but he had ensured she could endure a future without him. It was humbling to be reminded again of how good he was. In her anger and embarrassment, she had forgotten.

Elizabeth could not really imagine ever ceasing to love him, but she suspected no one who entered the marriage state in love believed it would fade. Did she really love him, she wondered, or was she confusing justified respect for a most excellent man with love? Had she, Elizabeth wondered, told herself she loved him because she felt obliged to care for him, once she understood him better?

“Papa,” Elizabeth asked, “did you ever think yourself really in love with Mama?” Her parents had married for affection. That affection had faded quickly, leaving very little in its wake.

His reading entirely disturbed, Mr. Bennet wondered, “To what can such a question pertain?”
It was a personal question and Elizabeth was unsurprised that his reply failed to answer it. “To Mr. Darcy and myself,” she answered. “Until today, I had never doubted that I loved him, once I started on that path. But I do not know how his expectations in life may differ from my own. I believe love endures all things, but how does one know love from respect or a need to fulfill one’s duty?”

“Mary,” Mr. Bennet said drily, “would have some very pretty extracts to explain it.”

Elizabeth chose to ignore the barb directed at her least romantic sister. “Mary and I do not have a similar mind,” she said instead. “You and I do. If you deceived yourself, perhaps I will as well.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “I do not like to dwell upon my mistakes,” he said. “If I was of a disposition to think on and regret my misdeeds at length, we may have had fewer vexations.”

Elizabeth was not prepared to argue against that point.

He was forced to continue, “You are right in supposing I deceived myself. In our early acquaintance, I got the wrong of Mrs. Bennet’s character. We married in haste, thinking each other possessed of a great number of qualities neither of us, in truth, had.”

Elizabeth heard the similarities between her parents’ relationship and her own friendship with Mr. Darcy. In the early months of their acquaintance, she had had the wrong of him. He, in turn, had believed her possessing sentiments and understandings which she had not. But there were stark differences, as well. Elizabeth had hated the person she thought Mr. Darcy to be. It was not until she recognized her own wretched blindness and learned his true disposition that she began to think warmly of him. His attachment to her had weathered all of this. It endured, as love should.

“As for your other point,” Mr. Bennet said, “I would think you sharp enough to already know this, but love, respect, indeed, even obligation, are tied up in one another. You will never love a man you cannot respect, Elizabeth. Others may, but you will not. There will be things you must do, once you a wife. Compromises you may not wish to make, invitations you do not want to issue, deference paid to new relations who do not deserve it. If you do not wish to give your husband his due, I will recommend against marrying.”

With a wry smile, Elizabeth replied, “Despite Lady Catherine’s best efforts, my affection has survived conversing with his relations.”
“You are determined, then,” Mr. Bennet asked, “to have him?”

Elizabeth no longer needed to consider this question. It was simple enough to answer. “Yes, Papa.”

Before Mr. Bennet resumed his reading, he said, “Then let us consider the matter settled.”

Elizabeth was about to select a book so that she might distract herself for the remainder of Mr. Darcy’s visit with her mother. This plan was superseded by a knock on the library door. Mr. Bennet sighed and bid the interloper to enter. Jane peered inside.

“There you are, Lizzy,” Jane said. “Mama needs you in the sitting room.”

“Was it very bad?” Elizabeth asked her sister as she left the library.

Jane replied cautiously, “Mama and Mr. Darcy understand one another now, I think. However difficult it was to reach an accord, one was made and they are better for it.”

“My mother no longer thinks him a rake intent on ruining me?” Elizabeth asked.

“Lizzy!” Jane cried. “You know very well she never thought that. She does not wish to see you heartbroken. That is all she meant by it.”

“Forgive me, Jane,” Elizabeth replied with some humor. “I must have misheard.” Smirking, she suggested, “Mr. Darcy once accused me of willfully misunderstanding others. It is a fault I am afraid I have yet to repair.”

Jane refused to engage with Elizabeth’s less sympathetic version of events. “Do be serious, Lizzy,” was all that she said.

Elizabeth was in no hurry to check her good humor. Very little about the morning had pleased her. She had canvassed and conquered every doubt she might ever entertain about Mr. Darcy. Coming to the resolution that she would have him, somehow, left her feeling light and liberated. Not even the most insulting behavior of her mother would pain her.
Mrs. Bennet greeted Elizabeth at the door when she passed into the sitting room. She had barely crossed the threshold before her mother was before her. All at once, she was winding strands of Elizabeth’s hair around her fingers to better arrange the curls that fell around her face. She pinched her daughter’s cheeks to give them color. She murmured things like “Bless me, child,” and “I shall go distracted,” several times before walking out of the parlor and shutting the door behind herself.

Elizabeth could only turn and watch the door close, highly confused about what had just occurred.

Turning back around, she saw Mr. Darcy, clearly agitated, pacing in front of the fire place. Soon, Elizabeth understood that her mother had left the pair of them alone. Just yesterday, Mr. Darcy had requested that their meetings be chaperoned. Already, they were left to themselves.

Her heart hammered in her chest.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said, making her arrival known, “would you care to sit?”

He started, and declined the invitation.

Elizabeth bit her lip, and said, “I hope you found some resolution with my mother.”

He stopped his pacing, and suddenly realizing he had been remiss when she entered, bowed. Elizabeth curtsied in return. She took a seat, and having no needlework to occupy her hands, self-consciously folded them in her lap. Mr. Darcy resumed his pacing. She watched him, his obvious anxiety causing the same emotion to spread in her own breast.

“Forgive me,” he said abruptly, “for not treating your mother with the respect that she deserves. It was unconscionable of me.”

“Having not been witness to your conduct myself,” Elizabeth replied, “I must rely on Jane’s account of events. She related nothing objectionable.” It was not in Jane’s nature to find fault in anyone’s conduct, a characteristic Elizabeth chose to use to her own ends.

Mr. Darcy stood, his height impressively out of place in a room normally occupied by the ladies of the family. His hands clasped behind his back, he said forcefully, “I will not tolerate any disrespect.”
Though it was not her own conduct he was censuring, Elizabeth still felt the force of his disapprobation as though it was. When she hated him, his imaginary disapproval had been comical. To have all the harshness of his tone really turned on herself was painful. “Yes, sir.”

At these words, Mr. Darcy’s haughty bearing collapsed. “Miss Elizabeth!” he cried with dismay. “You misunderstand. I will not tolerate disrespect towards you.”

His reply was really shocking to Elizabeth and her face showed it plainly.

“I know I have no right to be dissatisfied with how your family treats you,” he said. “I have, in the course of our acquaintance, shown you very little consideration myself. Perhaps it is because I find my own conduct to be so repugnant that I have difficulty forgiving similar offenses in others.”

Elizabeth hardly knew how to reply. If he had been referring to his conduct last fall and in the spring, she would have to agree with him. However, since the summer, he had been nothing but charming. His manners had given offense every now and again, but feeling as warmly as she did, those instances were easily forgot. A complete defense would be dishonest, but she had no wish to condemn behavior that he had already amended.

“As your mother,” he went on, undeterred by her silence, “she is, of course, owed the greater portion of respect. I would not suggest otherwise. It does not follow, however, that you are due nothing. I believe she and I now understand one another.”

“I am relieved to know my mother will be spared your implacable resentment,” Elizabeth said. She meant it as a joke, but her own anxiety was such that she was unsure if it sounded like one.

To her very great relief, Mr. Darcy smiled slightly in response. “I thought you could not laugh at such a failing.”

“I am not laughing,” Elizabeth protested, but she could not fight the smile that appeared on her own face.

Mr. Darcy allowed himself a moment to enjoy her countenance before resuming his pacing. “This episode has forced me to reevaluate the disservice I have done to you,” he said, his tone somber.
She could not identify any disservice. He had made her sister respectable; he had saved her family from ruin; he had given the girls’ independence where their own father had failed. “You have done nothing to me,” Elizabeth protested. “You have shown me nothing but compassion and generosity. You have certainly been kinder than I deserve.”

“I have done nothing,” he replied. “Every day that I do not act, your neighbors and even your parents value you less.” Mr. Darcy sighed. “I have listened to what is said about you in Meryton. Selfishly, I chose not to act.”

Elizabeth shrugged, uncomfortable. “It is only gossip. Started by my own family, let us not forget.”

Yet again, Mr. Darcy stopped his pacing. This time, he chose to stand with his back to her, at the fireplace. “I had hoped,” he said, “that I might find a way to free you from the consequences of my mistakes. I did not warn anyone about Mr. Wickham. I bribed him to marry your sister. I involved myself in events your family would have chosen to hide from persons unconnected to them. Word of my involvement, and the belief that I did so to obtain favors, travels further every day.”

Elizabeth blushed. “You did do it for me,” she reminded him softly.

He spun to face her. “For your happiness,” Mr. Darcy said desperately. “For your peace of mind. Miss Elizabeth, please, I did not act with the thought using your sister’s foolishness to advance my own cause.”

“You cannot think I would accuse you of such!” she cried. Elizabeth was concerned to think he might think that very thing. She had accused him of several deeds unbefitting a gentleman in the past.

“My apologies,” he said, relief evident in his eyes. “It was insupportable to suggest that you would think such a thing.” Those same eyes flickered to the door, but it remained closed.

Boldly, Elizabeth requested, “Perhaps you should tell me your cause, sir, so that I may better judge your efforts in that quarter.”

“My purpose in coming to Meryton,” he said, “was to judge, if I could, whether I might ever hope to make you love me.”
Elizabeth immediately rose to her feet. If he would not sit by her, then she would stand by him. “Mr. Darcy,” she began, ready to confess all that she felt.

“Such a scheme should have been abandoned immediately,” he continued, “Your spirits, while charming and above reproach, often leave me confused as to your sentiments. Careful observation brought me no closer to ascertaining the viability of my goal.”

A great many thoughts and feelings swirled about Elizabeth. She regretted not kissing him. It would have left him in no doubt that his goal had been accomplished. The knowledge that he held her heart would relieve all of the anxiety he presently felt. Mr. Darcy had done much to secure her peace of mind, but his own was just as dear to Elizabeth.

“As soon as I realized,” Mr. Darcy continued, “how detrimental to you the talk was, I should have declared myself. That would have been the action of a gentleman. I have not forgotten your reproof of last April, ‘If you had behaved in a more gentleman-like manner,’” he quoted.

“Please do not repeat what I said then,” Elizabeth said, seizing his hand.

“What did you say of me that I did not deserve?” he asked.

“A great deal!” was her reply. “I have heartily regretted all of it!”

“I would argue,” Mr. Darcy protested, “that you did not say enough. Though my first object, upon seeing you at Pemberley, was to show you that I was not so mean as to resent the past and that I had attended to your reproofs, I soon fell victim to the selfish desire to claim your love.”

“You did,” Elizabeth interjected. “You did, you did.”

Mr. Darcy looked down at where her hands clasped one of his. Seeming to comprehend her words, he brought her hands to his lips. He availed himself of her knuckles, not satisfied until he had kissed each one. From there, his lips traveled to her fingers, her palms, her wrists. "Miss Elizabeth,” he said, “allow me to assure you of my love and admiration, which once bestowed has never wavered. I have thought in all these months only of you. I beg you to consider becoming my wife.”

She laughed. "I have considered very little else since your arrival!” Her hands took advantage of their position by his head to stroke his much beloved jaw and test the softness of his hair.
"And what have you decided?" he asked, pressing a kiss to the pad of her thumb as the opportunity arose.

"That I shall know no peace until we are wed," Elizabeth answered, "for though all my thoughts will be of you regardless, as your wife, I shall not feel so silly for it."

"This is your reply?" he asked, as though he could not trust in his own good fortune.

"Indeed, sir," Elizabeth replied, delighting in how his hands cupped her face.

"Then you shall be in good company for the rest of your days," he murmured, leaning close and pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth, "as all my thoughts will be of you."

"See that they are!" she cried, voice filled with laughter. "I am a very vain creature!"
Desirable as privacy was to a newly engaged couple, Elizabeth soon relented to the dictates of her own good breeding and eased the door to the sitting room open. Her mother, anxiously awaiting just such a cue from the hallway, soon entered. Elizabeth stepped away from Mr. Darcy to immediately share her news with Mrs. Bennet and Jane. Though Mr. Darcy had shared his intentions with them when he requested the audience with Elizabeth, their delight was in no way checked by the knowledge of what must come to pass. Mrs. Bennet’s raptures were for the economic windfall her second daughter should expect; Jane’s, for the real and unaffected happiness of her sister’s heart. Mary and Kitty were soon called into the sitting room as well, so that they might join in congratulating Elizabeth’s good fortune.

Elizabeth was not offended when Mr. Darcy excused himself from the collection of his future wife, mother and sisters so that he might speak with Mr. Bennet. Such excess of feeling from people he hardly knew could not be pleasing to him. She was just as eager as he to spare Mr. Darcy the vulgarity of her mother. That Mrs. Bennet now viewed him as a material conquest was unsurprising, but Elizabeth would rather such things were not discussed within his hearing. He had already learned to appreciate her father’s sardonic wit, leaving the only family member Elizabeth really wished Mr. Darcy to know better to be Jane. Elizabeth was confidant that he could enjoy Jane’s sense and reserve as easily as he once disparaged the nonsense of the others.

She had little expectation of a long conversation between her father and Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bennet considered the matter of their engagement settled before one had actually taken place. He could not importune Mr. Darcy with much to say on the subject now. A quick agreement to whatever terms Mr. Darcy set was all that could be asked for. Her father would never enter into a long debate regarding the settlement of his daughter’s jointure or what would be provided to children of her union. If her suitor had been less austere, Mr. Bennet would have been tempted to make sport of him, but as he had already lamented, her father did not consider such a thing possible.

Mr. Bennet was of such a disposition that sport was to be found regardless. When Mr. Darcy returned to Elizabeth’s side and related the particulars of his conversation, he did so with an air of self-congratulatory conceit that, in light of the anxiety he displayed earlier, was humorous.

Elizabeth could not resist teasing him for his pride. “Proceed carefully, sir,” she warned quietly.

“I have found caution does me less good than I might expect,” he replied. “It was caution that lead me to be silent for far longer than I should have been.”

“That was poorly applied caution,” Elizabeth answered. “In such cases as there is only one possible outcome, there is no need to approach it carefully.”
“A gross untruth; in matters of a lady’s heart, one must always approach with delicacy of feeling.”

“To do otherwise must be tantamount to courting rejection, rather than courting a lady,” Elizabeth admitted, rather self-consciously. She thought of April in terms of her own crimes, rather than his, a view he had not learned to share.

“I had no fear of rejection,” he answered. She frowned at him. “I had borne your rejection before, I could bear it again if I must.” This mollified Elizabeth. “I feared you accepting me out of duty or gratitude alone.”

Elizabeth was overcome by the insensible urge to apologize to him. This notion was soon tempered, for he went on, countenance full of conceit and provocation: “Determined to have me, were you?”

Her father, having no sport in Mr. Darcy, had instead made her his target. Elizabeth would have to get accustomed to the two of them working in tandem. She thought herself equal to that challenge.

“Shamelessly,” Elizabeth replied airily.

Mr. Darcy turned very red and spent the rest of the morning in embarrassed silence.

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They soon resumed their habit of walking out together each day. One of Elizabeth’s sisters was often prevailed upon to accompany the couple. With Jane as their chaperone, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy spent their rambles deep in conversation. Under Jane’s watchful eye, they had many a serious discussion about their upcoming wedding and more than a few foolish exchanges. They were growing in skill at being simultaneously earnest and silly. Though they had much to say and much to plan, Mr. Darcy enjoyed being the object of her teasing, and Elizabeth was not remiss in fulfilling that duty.

"Had you found me in Lambton in a cheerful mood,” Elizabeth posited on one such walk, “if I had smiled and teased you when you had entered, what would you have done?” She twirled her parasol, looking coy, but really interested in how he would respond.
Mr. Darcy did not disappoint. "I would have begged you to marry me."

"Ah," Elizabeth said impishly, continuing her twirl, “I have long thought so."

"And you,” he returned, smiling. “What would you have said?"

"I would have told you," Elizabeth said thoughtfully, “that I admired you greatly.” Looking into his eyes, she could see a shade of melancholy. She pressed on. “That I suspected only two more visits from you would make the difference between respect and love and that I should be very happy to marry you."

Clearing his throat, Mr. Darcy asked, "Now that I have visited many more times than twice, have you found this conjecture proved true?"

"Oh, no, not at all!” Elizabeth cried. “It did not take nearly so many visits! I watched you walk away from me and that was quite enough to secure your place in my heart."

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Though they may have wished otherwise, an engagement was no occasion to partake in only one another’s society. Elizabeth made visits with the ladies of the neighborhood while Mr. Darcy was forced to listen to the raillery of the men. They related to one another what of these encounters they felt was suitable for the other’s ears. Mr. Darcy felt very little bared repeating; Elizabeth, less so. It seemed to her that every woman in the neighborhood felt herself the matchmaker responsible for Elizabeth’s current felicity. This opinion was likewise felt by many of the men.

From no mouth was such an opinion less welcomed than from that of her cousin, Mr. Collins. The man who once adamantly declared that Mr. Darcy would never have her now attributed Elizabeth’s match to his own connection with the House of De Bourgh. This folly, she could have dismissed easily enough, but Mr. Collins was entirely oblivious to the discouragement of others. One morning, when calling upon Lucas Lodge, Elizabeth had the bad luck of visiting when Mr. Collins was at home. He and his wife had yet to return to Hunsford. Their visit had lasted many weeks, something Charlotte attributed to homesickness.

Over the course of the call, Mr. Collins made so presumptuous a proclamation, Elizabeth could hardly stifle her laughter. “Cousin, it shall be my greatest honor to perform the ceremony that binds two so worthy young people in holy matrimony.”
It was plain on Lady Lucas’s face that she approved very much of the idea. Charlotte smiled at Elizabeth in an apologetic manner.

“It is very kind of you to offer, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth replied, “but Meryton has a curate and the office shall be his.”

“I flatter myself,” Mr. Collins protested, “to think that any clergyman can perform the ceremony. Through my patroness, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, I am connected to Mr. Darcy. I wager that he would prefer to have myself perform the ceremony?”

Elizabeth bit her lip to prevent herself from protesting this assumption on two grounds. First, that Mr. Collins lived in fear of his patroness ever since the engagement he now called worthy came about. Second, Mr. Darcy had no preference towards him at all. An accurate representation of Mr. Darcy’s opinion, as Elizabeth had once promised to give should the need arise, would be that he thought Mr. Collins an idiot.

Cast out from Lady Catherine’s favor, Mr. Collins was attempting to court that of Mr. Darcy. He would not find the nephew’s approbation to be won by the same flattery and obedience the aunt required.

Elizabeth heartily hated that her happiness should bring any hardship to Charlotte and her progeny. The family would have to return to Hunsford and make the best of it sooner or later. Though Mr. Collins’ living was a good one, he could not afford to hire a curate and live in a separate establishment. That Lady Catherine could not rescind the living she had given would have to be enough security for the Collinses.

“Mr. Darcy has been introduced to Mr. Musgrove, sir, and found his manners very pleasing,” Elizabeth answered. “Both Mr. Darcy and myself are glad to have Mr. Musgrove perform the ceremony.”

“My dear cousin,” Mr. Collins entreated, “I must beg you to reconsider! Think on what is owed to Mr. Darcy’s family!”

“A very fine piece of advice, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth assented. “One cannot consider one’s family too much. My own family permitted me to run wild as a girl. As a wife, I must learn obedience and temper my tongue. And so, as her ladyship once advised me to do, I have decided to practice. What Mr. Darcy owes his family will be his decision, and I shall follow his example.”
Mr. Collins face showed that this was significantly more reasonable than anything he expected to hear from his opinionated cousin. Charlotte suddenly found the tea things required her attention and crossed the room so that her countenance would not betray her amusement.

“Mr. Darcy, it cannot be said enough, is a gentleman of the highest order. He is an esteemable young man and all the claims of duty are forefront in his mind,” Elizabeth continued.

“Yes, indeed, cousin,” Mr. Collins replied eagerly, “I knew that you should see what a fine gentleman has done you honor, and that you must, in turn, honor him and all his illustrious family.”

“I trust Mr. Darcy’s judgement impeccably.” At this point in her speech, Elizabeth’s composure wavered, and she had to cough to cover her laugh.

“As we all do!” Mr. Collins cheered. How soon he had forgotten, Elizabeth reflected, that Mr. Darcy’s impeccable judgement had required him to forgo marriage to Miss De Bourgh.

“I am afraid that Mr. Darcy has decided his family is owed very little,” Elizabeth said at last. “I have no recourse but to trust in this judgement. So you see, Mr. Musgrove will do well enough for us both.”

Feeling this visit had lasted as long as it should, Elizabeth requested that Mrs. Collins see her out. As she parted with the husband, Elizabeth added, “You need not fear Lady Catherine’s presence at my wedding, Mr. Collins. She will not be invited.”

Out of the sitting room, Charlotte asked Elizabeth, “Is what you said all true?”

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth answered laughingly. “I am convinced Mr. Darcy would be very put out if I stopped running wild for his sake! No, I shall be a very disobedient and opinionated wife who questions his judgement excessively, and he shall be made happy by it.”

“Eliza, about his family?”

Elizabeth sobered. “Lady Catherine cut him off,” she said lowly. “He told her straight away about what he had done for Lydia, and what he hoped to gain for it, and she renounced him.”
“Oh, Elizabeth,” Charlotte whispered. “What a blow to poor Mr. Darcy!”

“He is not,” Elizabeth said carefully, “so upset. He has always been very independent, which is an excellent quality for a man, but not so much for a nephew of his aunt. The way he speaks of it, I suspect he saw it coming and had prepared himself as best he could.”

“And he does not regret offering for you?” Charlotte wondered.

“Certainly not!” Elizabeth scoffed. “Mr. Darcy is perfectly convinced his aunt will relent when the children come, if not before that. She loves him as her own son and maternal feelings will triumph sooner or later.”

“I wish you joy, Eliza,” Charlotte said, kissing her cheek.

“I accept your wish with a heavy heart,” her friend replied. “It pains me to think how much more joy I have already felt in an engagement than I fear you will ever know in marriage.”

Charlotte tookElizabeth’s hands. “I am content with my lot,” she reminded Elizabeth. “I have known more happiness than I dared hope for.”

“Content,” Elizabeth sighed. “I shall not settle for anything less than the happiest creature in the world!”

“And so you shall be,” Charlotte answered as they parted.

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Kitty was no more interested in chaperoning now that her sister was promised than she was when the engagement was a flimsy rumor. While walks spent in Jane’s company were valued for their conversation, walks spent with Kitty were valued for other reasons. Stolen kisses and secret caresses characterized rambles where Kitty accompanied them. At one time, Mr. Darcy had asked for chaperonage because he had feared his desire to kiss Elizabeth may soon overcome his respect for her delicacy. Under the negligent watch of Kitty, Elizabeth learned that the brim of her bonnet was no detriment at all, provided that one of them tilted their head adequately, and that Mr. Darcy
was of the opinion that his tongue belonged in Elizabeth’s mouth more so than his own. Kitty showed an exceptional degree of responsibility if she did not take an entirely different path than the lovers.

Elizabeth, upon reflecting on her words to Charlotte, realized that there was one matter that prevented her from being as happy as she intended to be. She hated to waste a walk with Kitty on an unpleasant discussion, but such a topic could not be entered into with Jane near by.

She asked, “Do you intend to invite Mr. Bingley to the wedding?”

“I had thought not,” Mr. Darcy replied.

“Why?” Elizabeth demanded.

“One wedding gives rise to expectation of another,” he explained. “If Bingley and your sister were to meet again on such an occasion, they would be as good as engaged in the minds of everyone.”

Suspiciously, Elizabeth asked, “Have you reason to believe Mr. Bingley no longer favors Jane?” When she had met him in Lambton, Mr. Bingley gave every indication of still being under Jane’s power. If a separation of eight months had not been enough to make him forget her sister, Elizabeth saw no reason why an additional three should do it.

“He has provided me with nothing of the sort,” Mr. Darcy said, much to Elizabeth’s relief. “I would only wish that whatever understanding they reach is done so with only their own happiness in mind. I would have them meet someplace where there will be no one with any opinion to create obstacles. An excess of expectation can be more a hindrance than a help, as we well know.”

“What do you suggest instead?” Elizabeth asked. “Inviting Jane to London for the season?” Elizabeth had settled on a day in mid-November for the wedding. She hoped to be secure in her role at Pemberley by Christmas and felt a month at the great house should do it. She had not thought to leave again so soon, but the Darcys must make their appearance for the London season.

Mr. Darcy surprised her when he answered, “Ideally, yes. With the amusements and society available in town, and the relative lack of consequence of them both, they should be able to reach an informed decision without any undue interference.”
Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “Aside from our own, you mean.”

He replied, “You may choose to offer any opinion you like, should your sister ask for one. For myself, I have said enough and had better stop.”

“My mother will be very pleased to know you intend to throw her daughter into the path of a rich man,” Elizabeth said. “You found Lydia a husband, then took me off her hands, now you are full of plots for Jane. Who shall you marry off next? Mary? Or perhaps it will be Georgiana’s turn.”

“Georgiana would not thank us for anything of the sort,” Mr. Darcy answered. With a sly glance, he added, “Kitty, on the other hand, I understand would enjoy new gowns and polished society.”

Elizabeth laughed while Mr. Darcy endeavored to make her accept he was perfectly serious. With their mouths made merry with conversation and their hearts filled with happiness for themselves and their sisters, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy walked on.

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The End

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