Season of Courtship
by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Darcy and Elizabeth become better acquainted over the course of their engagement.
Chapter 1

Miss Lydia Bennet’s marriage to Mr Wickham had effectively ended a very promising source of gossip; and Miss Bennet’s engagement to Mr Bingley was hardly better. The only question was why it had taken so long, for they were without a doubt perfectly suited to one another. Even Lady Lucas and Mrs Long, with several very plain charges to dispose of, could not deny it. If anyone deserved happiness in marriage, it was Jane Bennet - or so the Meryton matrons decreed. She was sweetness itself and so very handsome. It was not her fault that she had been burdened with such a family.

However, Miss Elizabeth’s engagement to Mr Darcy was far more lucrative than either. They supposed, naturally, that she had only accepted him for his wealth and consequence. His motivations were not so clear; surely, a young man in his circumstances had met many a pretty young lady? How had Miss Elizabeth - “tolerable” Miss Eliza Bennet - snared him where so many had failed?

“I hope they will be very happy,” Mrs James said. A tradesman’s daughter who had married into the local gentry, she was a young, pretty girl, and very much awed by the other ladies.

Insincere agreement immediately followed. Although, her chances with such a disagreeable man - Mrs Long left it hanging.

“I never thought him so very disagreeable,” Mrs Goulding said, startling nearly all of the circle. She was very quiet, but when she had an opinion gave it most decidedly. “He was always civil to me.”

Most of her elders gazed at her pityingly. It was a fact that young women’s heads could easily be turned by a handsome man - and there was no disputing that Mr Darcy was exceedingly pleasant to look upon.

“I agree,” added Mrs James bravely. “Molly says that she has never worked for a kinder master. Not that she works for Mr Darcy, but he is at Netherfield, so - and her father, Smith, is the butler, and he says that Mr Darcy is the only one at Netherfield who ever concerns himself with the servants, and a proper gentleman.”

It had to be admitted that the servants all spoke very highly of him. “He may be a good master,” decreed Mrs Long, “but that doesn’t mean he will be a good husband. Say what you like about Eliza Bennet, but I pity her.”

The other ladies were fully prepared to follow her lead, but soon found themselves in a peculiar sort of quandary. It was difficult to pity someone who had no idea of her own misfortune. On the contrary - she seemed quite delighted with her situation in general, and with her betrothed in particular. She was absorbed in him almost to the point of incivility, talking to him when he was near, and inattentive when he was not. Her eyes often followed him wherever he went, with a peculiar intent expression that Mrs Long in particular found almost indecent.

As for Mr Darcy, whom they had fully expected to act the part of the besotted, distracted suitor, he was very much as he had ever been. Quiet, reserved, elegant, he was properly attentive to his intended, endured the attentions of local society with rather better grace than had been anticipated, but his composure never faltered. There was no greater sign of his affection for Miss Elizabeth than a softness about the mouth and a distinct partiality for her company. Several of the ladies unashamedly eavesdropped on their conversations, and found them not only dull but incomprehensible.

It was decided that Miss Eliza had chosen to marry Mr Darcy because he was the only man who could actually understand above half of what she said. Mrs James murmured wistfully,
“She loves him. I think it’s wonderful.”

Mrs Long shot her a quelling look. “It might be wonderful if he cared sixpence about her, she said.

“You must be supposing that she proposed to him, then,” returned Mrs Goulding, perfectly serene. “Why else should he marry her? She has nothing to offer; and if he only wished for a pretty wife, I daresay he could find plenty among his own circle of acquaintance.”

Mrs Long and Lady Lucas decided that they had never liked Mrs Goulding, who was too clever by half, and muttered imprecations against those artful Bennets.

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In the first days of their engagement, Darcy and Elizabeth were so deliriously happy that all else faded into insignificance. The curious glances, rampant gossip, and shameless observations that followed them everywhere they went mattered not at all. For that brief time, she had him all to herself, and luxuriated in the pleasure of being so unconditionally loved. She almost solely occupied herself with acquiring a greater intimacy with his ways, her curiosity boundless as they talked, he earnestly and she joyously.

Within what seemed a very short period of time, she knew that he dropped his eyes when considering something, rubbed his thumb and middle finger together when uncomfortable, and frequently pushed his hair back for no reason at all. When he was angry, his lips compressed and his eyes blazed. When amused, a quick, sharp smile curled his lips, while he coloured, glancing away, when embarrassed (and it was very often). She wondered if she was so easily read, and that she had ever found his countenance guarded rarely ceased to amaze, he had become so transparent to her.

There was one little quirk, however, which, while quite endearing, and indubitably amusing, hindered a rather different sort of intimacy. The earnest, almost reverential, respect in which he held her did nothing to alleviate his native primness - for really, there was no other word for such great reserve, and his constant deference to her wishes in that regard, real or imagined, had her quite envious of Jane for almost twelve minutes, until she hatched a plot.

“Aunt,” Elizabeth said sweetly, “Mr Darcy and I should like to walk to the Mount again, but I fear it will be too much for you. You do not mind if we just go on without you, do you?”

Sometimes Mrs Phillips’ senselessness was more welcome than at others. With a speculative remark about the attractions the Mount must have for such a handsome young couple, she unashamedly left them to their own devices. Elizabeth flinched and glanced up at Darcy apprehensively, and was pleased to see nothing worse than fierce embarrassment writ on his face. She proceeded with her plan.

“I saw you talking with John Lucas, Fitzwilliam,” she said, looking about to make sure they were quite alone. “Did you have a pleasant conversation?”

“No,” said Darcy, quite happily. “He had some very ridiculous opinions.”

“You enlightened him, of course.”

“Naturally. We were speaking of the conditions in the North, and he claimed that the poor were solely responsible for their plight, and that any attempt at assistance would only breed indolence and
discontent amongst their ranks.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Darcy grimaced. “It is not the first time, either, that I have come across that sort of thinking. My uncle, although he is not illiberal in general, claims that I am young and idealistic - even naïve and ignorant when he is particularly displeased with me.”

Elizabeth considered asking about Darcy’s uncle, for she had gathered enough to realise that the Earl was unlikely to approve of her, but dismissed the idea. That could come later, and it would only distract both from the present possibilities. She clasped his arm more tightly, and smiled up at him. “Mr Lucas looked quite chastened by the end. I daresay you thoroughly educated him?”

“Yes.” He turned his head to smile warmly and openly at her - a smile she never saw, except when they were alone. Elizabeth guessed at his height and lamented it for quite the first time. If only he were that bit shorter, this would be so much easier.

“I was glad to find that your uncle agrees with me,” Darcy said unexpectedly. Elizabeth, still considering the logistics that his six-foot-three-inch frame necessarily entailed, absently asked, “Mr Phillips?”

He looked startled. “No, I meant Mr Gardiner. During - my business in London - ” (he had a ready supply of euphemisms for all matters which he did not care to discuss explicitly) “we spoke of it. He, too, felt strongly about the matter, but of course - ” Darcy looked slightly vexed - “he is not so young as to be accused of ignorance and naïveté, when he espouses unusual opinions.”

Elizabeth smiled, both at the sentiment (which she shared) and the faintly petulant expression of it, and gazed at him fondly for a moment, briefly relishing her good fortune. “Fitzwilliam,” she said, and he stopped, glancing at her quizzically.

“Yes?”

She placed one hand against his cheek, and met his gaze as directly as she could without paining her neck. He looked startled, but not displeased, and so she stood on tiptoe and firmly pressed her lips against his. For one moment, she was afraid that he would step away, horrified at her forwardness - but after all, did he not admire her for her vivacity? - so she was not too surprised when, after only a brief hesitation, he reciprocated enthusiastically, his lips parting beneath her own, his gloved fingers reaching up to clasp hers.

Breathlessly, they stepped back, Darcy’s pale complexion flushed - but not, she trusted, with embarrassment, as his expression was nothing short of delighted. She could feel heat in her own cheeks, after all, and she was not remotely embarrassed.

“I love you,” she said lightly, and he simply stared for a moment, the other emotions dancing across his face overlaid with utter astonishment.

“You - I - why - ” He stopped, and then, struck, it seemed, by a fit of coherence, said, between kissing her hands passionately, “You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my life. You are - ”

Elizabeth briefly touched his head, startled and touched by the intensity of his response to her careless declaration. She was not quite certain how best to manage the situation, until it occurred to her that his face was conveniently near at hand. She tangled her fingers in his fair hair and kissed him again.
Not since the day he had proposed to her had she seen him so voluble and incoherent, nor had she been so quiet. Elizabeth’s feelings were overwhelmed and disordered enough that she could not understand them with any clarity; but his were easier to comprehend. He seemed taken by a violent delight, overflowing with admiration and a little feverish in the expression of it, stripping off his glove and hers with a quick, breathless, “do you mind?” and lacing his fingers through hers almost before her smiling acquiescence.

Elizabeth laughed at her own silliness in the pleasure she took at the sudden contact, his fingers entwined with hers - at one point she sat beside him on a strategically placed log, turning his hand over in hers and admiring it, making him laugh a little.

“You are so small,” he said in his quiet voice, tilting his head to the side as he looked at her. “You have such presence that one forgets, sometimes.”

“My mother has bemoaned my size more than once,” Elizabeth told him, with a faintly mischievous smile. “She wishes that I were more like Jane, or Lydia.” The look of heartfelt horror on Darcy’s face sent her into gales of laughter. “Although for years she has comforted herself that I shall undoubtedly grow stouter with children - ‘if only she could get me married!’ ”

Rather than laughing, a peculiar expression came over his face, one she had not yet identified. He caught his breath, and at once he seemed intimately, powerfully near, and far too distant and remote for comfort. “Fitzwilliam,” she laughed, tugging at his sleeve, “where are you?”

He came to with a start. “Oh! I was only thinking.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Should I be afraid, losing your attention so early in our engagement? What does this bode for our marriage?”

Alarm flashed across his face, but was as quickly dispelled by her teasing look. “Oh, I am easily distracted,” he said, smiling. “It is better you discover it now, rather than later.”

“Not according to Charlotte,” Elizabeth murmured, wondering what precisely he meant - for once he was set on a course of action, there was no stopping him. But then, perhaps the distractions heretofore had not been interesting enough. Elizabeth dimpled happily, and laid her head against his arm, clasping his hand once more.

“I can well imagine what your friend may believe, but then, she is married to Mr Collins,” said Darcy, then started as he realised he had spoken aloud. Elizabeth laughed heartily.

“You are far superior to Mr Collins, my love,” she said, once she had regained herself. “I think I may safely say that I would prefer to acquaint myself with your idiosyncrasies as soon as possible, so that I may become accustomed to them before we are wed.” Then she smiled, more than a little mischievously. “And, of course, so that I may distract you at my leisure.”

Darcy blushed but only arched one brow, his response all the more powerful for its brevity.

“Oh?”

It was really more than a lady of passionate disposition, with such a strikingly handsome young man at her disposal, could be expected to endure. This time, no planning was involved, and she was not even certain if she or he had begun it; but one moment they were sitting next to one another very decorously, the next she was pressed against his side, and they were kissing wildly. It was, some time later, only the need for air that separated them, and Darcy, emitting a sound rather like a squeak, fled to the opposite side of their log, a safe distance of about three feet from her. Elizabeth was not
certain whether to be offended or merely embarrassed, but the frankly yearning look he gave her returned her to her senses.

“Ah . . . Elizabeth,” he said awkwardly. “Perhaps we ought to join the others?”

Elizabeth looked at him incredulously.

“That is - we have been gone . . . awhile -- and your aunt . . .” Darcy floundered.

“Mrs Phillips would be delighted if you dragged me to Gretna Green,” Elizabeth said bluntly, and Darcy shut his eyes, looking pained for a moment, before regaining his composure.

“Elizabeth,” he said, very gently, “we should bear in mind that we have only been engaged a week.”

“I think it a very promising beginning,” she said.

“Oh yes.” His tone, and sudden smile, had her flushing from head to toe. He coughed, then continued, “However, if one considers that we are far nearer to the beginning of our engagement, than to the end of it . . . the inevitable conclusion one draws is, er, that if we continue as we have begun, er - ”

“Oh!” said Elizabeth, enlightened. “You must think me terribly silly.”

“No, only very - vivacious.”

Elizabeth laughed again, and recovered their gloves, handing him his, replacing her own, and taking his arm.

“We must, then, distr - ” Elizabeth stopped. That word would never have quite the same meaning again. “ - Occupy ourselves with other activities.” She cast a sly glance at her intended from under her lashes, and added, “Most of the time, that is.”

“Elizabeth!”

She laughed, delighted at his prudery, and said, “Come, Fitzwilliam, let us talk. Really, I know very little of you beyond the essentials. Where is your favourite place?”

“Pemberley,” he said instantly, and she laughed.

“I should have guessed at that.”

“And you?” he asked, surprising her. With a faint flush, she said,

“I think - I must choose Pemberley also.” His eyes widened, and for a moment she stopped walking, then looked away.

“We are incorrigible! Very well. Are you accomplished, sir?”

“I beg your pardon?”

She had only mentioned it because she must say something, but liked the idea and gamely went on. “You already know that I am not, at least by Miss Bingley’s standards. I daresay you speak the modern languages well enough, and you most assuredly have, what did she say? - a certain something in your manner of walking.”

“Miss Bingley!” he said derisively, and Elizabeth bit back a smile.
“Poor Miss Bingley, she shall be my sister now, and worse still, yours. Her agony must be acute. But you have dis - misdirected me! Do you play, do you sing?”

“Yes, and no,” Darcy replied, helping her down the steps. Elizabeth was indeed distracted by this sudden information.

“Really? I daresay I have embarrassed myself dreadfully before you, for you are undoubtedly far more proficient at the instrument than I. Is it not so, Fitzwilliam?”

“Of course not,” he said warmly. “Your performance is far more pleasing than mine could ever be - not that I would give one.”

“Oh, you do not perform to strangers, do you? But we are hardly strangers - shall I ask you to play for this evening’s entertainment?”

He looked paralysed for a moment. “Certainly not! I should refuse in any case.”

“I would like to hear you - ” she wrinkled her nose at his obdurate expression. “There must be some way to persuade you.”

“None at all.”

“Not even pleasant distractions?”

Darcy prudently stepped away. “Not even those.”

“If you do not wish to perform, and do not practise, I wonder that you took the trouble of learning?”

“I never said that I do not practise,” he said austerely, “but it was not my idea. My mother began teaching me almost as soon as I could reach the keys.”

“I never guessed,” said Elizabeth, “but of course, you did not wish to perform.”

“No, nor did my father wish me to.”

Elizabeth listened eagerly. Darcy rarely spoke of his father, and then with only a distant sort of respect, and his mother he did not mention at all. She could not help wondering what sort of standard she would be held up to. “You have not played since your mother died?”

“I have. At Rosings, I have always been permitted, even encouraged, to practise all I like. Lady Catherine is really fond of music, her pretensions notwithstanding. I did not take a great deal of pleasure in it myself, after my mother died, but continued practising for her sake; and when Georgiana and I were reunited, I helped her, as Ma - my mother had intended to do herself.”

“She must have been very accomplished.”

“Oh, yes, she drew, and danced well, but music was her passion. She played the pianoforte and the harp, and she had a lovely contralto.”

She sounded terrifying. “What did she look like? Was she handsome?”

Darcy looked uncomfortable. “I - I suppose so. She was said to be very beautiful.” Smiling slightly, he added, “My uncle says that she broke the hearts of half of London.”

There was a laugh, and a slightly dishevelled Bingley emerged from a path just to the right. “Who are you talking about, Darcy? Lady Ravenshaw?”
“Certainly not,” Darcy said coldly, and bowed to her sister. “Miss Bennet.”

“Mr Darcy.”

Surprisingly, he seemed a little troubled, and briefly Elizabeth’s sororal instincts warred with her newer confidence in her betrothed. *I will not leap to any conclusions*, she told herself firmly, and determined to speak to him about it as soon as the opportunity would allow.
As soon as they entered Meryton, however, they were bombarded by the attentions of their erstwhile chaperone, along with less good-natured well-wishers. Darcy put up with it very well, although he instantly reverted to his usual grave composure, his face blank of any emotion to all but those who knew him well. He endured the inevitable impertinences better than Elizabeth had expected, responding quietly and civilly when addressed, and wincing but rarely. Only the grip of his hands and a tightness around the eyes betrayed his discomfort. Jane and Bingley, naturally, were as blissfully unaware as ever and entered into conversation with Mrs Long and her three nieces.

The friendly ambush was of a piece with their lives for what seemed the next eternity. Little if any time was spent alone. Elizabeth, although she had never been particularly fond of the gossiping ladies of Meryton and their insipid offspring, was at first only displeased for Darcy’s sake. She did her best to protect him from the worst of it, but only so much could be done. Later however, the trying company, particularly the incessant questions of the ladies, put such a strain on her, that she wished for nothing so much as to be free of it all. Some days she wondered how she had ever endured them for so long; and the promise of Pemberley was never so enticing as at the present. She marvelled at her good fortune, as she watched Darcy struggling through a conversation with Sir William Lucas. She caught the words “brightest jewel,” a gesture in her direction, followed by “St James,” and sighed. Darcy maintained his composure admirably, but Elizabeth stifled a giggle - shrugged his shoulders dismissively when the pretentious knight turned his back.

At least he waited. Not only had she found an honourable man of decidedly comfortable means, but one more than clever, and peculiar enough in himself to provide her with an endless source of amusement - every earthly blessing tied up in one neat, handsome package.

“I wrote to Charlotte about your engagement, Miss Eliza,” Lady Lucas said. “I am sure she will congratulate you on such a fine catch.”

Elizabeth cringed, for once glad that her intended was distant from her. “Thank you, Lady Lucas,” she replied graciously. She glanced briefly at the other side of the room where Darcy and Mr Bennet stood. Over the last few days, as, it seemed, every corner of the house was invaded, the latter had grown quite disgruntled. For his daughter’s sake (and also out of sheer desperation for even somewhat sensible conversation), he had approached his reserved son-to-be, and was astonished to find a kindred spirit in him. Equally unsociable, the two men had formed an alliance of like minds over fine sherry, philosophy, and rare books.

“Ah, Lizzy, there is little worthy of mockery in him,” said Mr Bennet, “which is his greatest failing, I fear.” He did not quite comprehend the nature of their attachment, for Darcy scarcely spoke of Elizabeth, and then with - as far as Mr Bennet could tell - no great feeling, while Elizabeth could and did wax eloquent on the subject of her beloved. Nevertheless, Darcy’s actions spoke louder than his words, and Mr Bennet was glad to accept him.

“I am content with my choice,” Elizabeth said mildly, but Mr Bennet caught the defensiveness in her look, and raised his eyebrows.

“You are very serious, my dear. Is he rubbing off on you, or has the company of your mother’s friends overwhelmed your delicate sensibilities? Ah - I see, I have struck near the mark. Come, Lizzy, enjoy the absurdity while you still may. You will be free of it soon enough.”

“Twenty-two days!” she said dismally.
Mr Bennet laughed. “Lizzy, my love, these weeks will be over before you know it.”

“I am young and callow, Papa,” said Elizabeth, smiling. “Three weeks of this is a lifetime.”

Mr Bennet conceded that the latter was undoubtedly true. “Your intended certainly seems to think so.”

Elizabeth smiled. “He does try, for my sake, but he really detests all of it. You and he seem to be getting on well, though.” She raised her eyebrows and waited.

“He is rising every hour in my esteem,” Mr Bennet assured her. “I admire all my three sons-in-law highly. Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite; but I think I shall like your husband quite as well as Jane’s.”

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Elizabeth’s thoughts were in a whirl. She thought of Darcy’s frown when he had looked at Jane, of the “Lady Ravenshaw” Bingley had mentioned, of the peculiar uncertainty in his manner to her, so unlike him; and then, brushing her lips with her hand, she shut her eyes and remembered the tentative, gentle first kiss, then, his fair hair smooth against her fingers as she drew him in for another, and finally, later - Elizabeth’s lips curved into a slow smile.

“Lizzy?”

Elizabeth started violently, eyes flying open. “Jane!” she exclaimed, flushing deeply. “I did not hear you.”

“I was not very quiet - you looked rather strange, Lizzy, just now.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I daresay I did.” For a brief moment, she tried to imagine a similar scene between her sister and brother-to-be. Perhaps, in a moment of thoughtless passion, Mr Bingley had lost himself and allowed his teeth to scrape against Jane’s pale throat. She suppressed a giggle and a blush, the former in incredulity at the very idea, and the latter in reminiscence of exactly that. Jane would never, she was certain, behave as shamelessly as Elizabeth did. She smiled again. Darcy would never behave as shamelessly as she did.

“Lizzy? Lizzy!”

“Oh! I am sorry. I have so much to think on these days - but I am very glad to have you to share it with, Jane.” She looked affectionately at her sister.

Jane clasped her hand, then smiled. “Oh Lizzy, I could not be any happier.”

Elizabeth gazed at her, wondering not for the first time at how different they were. Jane’s happiness was undoubtedly full and complete; but it was not what she would wish. She wanted - joy, and laughter, and passion, along with the gentle, mild, sweet affection that subsisted between Jane and her betrothed.

“I am glad for you, Jane,” she said, after a moment’s silence.

“And you, Lizzy?”
She blinked a little. “I?”

“Are you happy?” Jane pressed. Elizabeth’s eyebrows flew up.

“Oh yes.” She smiled ruefully. “I will be happier when I am away from all this, at Pemberley, with my husband.” Her eyes softened, and she gazed towards the window, a little dreamily, before snapping back to the conversation. “I think you and Papa are all that I shall miss, Jane. Otherwise, these shall be the longest three weeks I have ever lived.” Except, she thought, after I left Pemberley and thought I should never see him again.

Jane looked politely bewildered.

“Oh, well - all the ladies, they do not like me, you know - and it is so difficult for Darcy.” She sighed. “He is not at his best, you know, in these situations. With strangers, and always being watched and judged and - it exhausts me, and I am not anywhere so retiring as he is.”

“Yes, it is difficult,” Jane agreed. Cautiously, she added, “I was so glad to go to London, when - that dreadful business happened last year, simply to be away from all the . . .”

“Prying eyes?” Elizabeth suggested.

Jane flushed. “Well, yes. They meant well, I am sure of it, but it can be so trying when one is not accustomed to it.”

Elizabeth smiled a little sadly. “Yes, I think so. But I am happy, and when we are together - just us, or with you and Bingley - I have never been happier in my life, and I feel every day as if I could never be so happy again. Except, I am, more so every day. He is - he is so - I would never have dreamt it, that it would be like this.” She laughed. “I am terribly silly over him - I tell him that it is all his fault, he has made me so silly, so unlike myself.”

“You could never be silly, Lizzy.”

“If I told you half the things that pass through my mind, you would not be able to say so,” she replied, flinging herself back on her bed. “I am ridiculously happy, just knowing that he is there - somewhere - and that every day I shall be able to look at him, and tease him, and touch him, as much as I please.”

Jane gasped. Elizabeth sat up straight. “Did I say that aloud? All of it?”

Her sister nodded, and Elizabeth covered her mouth, dissolving into giggles. “Oh, I am so sorry - I did not mean to embarrass you - but, dearest Jane, surely you have - ” She stopped and considered what might constitute a romantic interlude for Jane and Bingley. A few stolen bird-like pecks; holding hands when certain no one would see - agreeing on every conceivable subject - no, somehow she did not think Jane’s experience was quite the same as hers, for all that it was longer in duration. “Well,” Elizabeth conceded, “perhaps not.”

“Lizzy, what have you done?” a scandalised Jane protested. Elizabeth could not keep herself from laughing wickedly, falling back again. She flung one hand against her forehead, with a melodramatic sigh, then looked sideways at Jane.

“You must prepare yourself for something very awful, dear sister.”

Jane bit back a smile. “Lizzy, please be serious. What if someone had seen you?”

“Oh, I made certain that could not happen. You see, he is so - careful, with me, that I was beginning
to be afraid I should not be kissed until the day of the wedding, and I would really rather have more
time to -" She coughed. “So I took him to the Mount and kissed him instead.”

Jane’s mouth dropped open. “Why, Lizzy - what did he say?”

Elizabeth smiled mischievously. “Very little, as I recall.”

“He must have been very surprised.”

“Not really.” Elizabeth giggled into her pillow. “He knows me fairly well by now, I think.”

“And - ” Jane hesitated - “is that all?”

Turning her head to the side, and blushing a little - “No. I just said I loved him - very absently, not
really thinking. I had not realised that he did not know.” She frowned a little, recalling how he had
looked. Radiantly happy, but also - he had been so very surprised. She briefly chewed her lip.

“He did not know?” Jane said in bewilderment. “But, wh - oh.”

Elizabeth looked up. “What do you mean, ‘oh?’ ”

Jane dropped her eyes. “I should not say. I do not want you to feel - of course you were right, but
still, he cannot help but be - if it is anything like what I feel, then . . . oh, I am sorry.” She took a deep
breath, and turned Elizabeth’s hand over, looking up at her anxiously. “After all those months of
believing Bingley did not care for me, that he never had, sometimes it is difficult to really believe that
- well, that he does care. Of course, he always did, and I know that, but I do not always feel it, if that
makes sense.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, very soberly, “yes, it does.”

“It helps,” she added blushingly, “that he is so affectionate, but I must confess, Lizzy, after being
unsure for so long, feeling so desolate, it is always rather astonishing. And - ” She looked deeply
uncomfortable - “I know that he really loved me all along, so it is not quite the same.”

At Elizabeth’s stricken expression, she earnestly said, “I do not blame you, I am certain he does not
blame you, and he would not want you to make yourself unhappy over it - I am sure you were right;
really, believing what you did about him, it would have been wrong to accept him, it is just, I know
what it is like, loving someone so much, and yet - ” tears actually rose to Jane’s eyes, and she turned
her head away. “Well, all I mean is that it can be very difficult sometimes.”

“Oh, Jane.” Elizabeth put her arms around her sister, who gasped a little, and allowed herself the
luxury of crying one last time. “Jane, I am so sorry. I did not mean to remind you.”

“I am well, truly, and so happy,” Jane said; “it is only sometimes that one cannot help but - I am so
glad I have had you with me. I do not know what I would have done without you, dearest sister.
Only - you will write to me, when you are at Pemberley?”

Elizabeth pressed a kiss against Jane’s dark hair. “I certainly shall. Oh!” She suddenly remembered
Darcy’s cryptic response to her questions about his peculiar behaviour around Jane. “Jane, Mr Darcy
would like to speak to you tomorrow, if that is acceptable to you.”

“Well, of course,” Jane said in bewilderment, “he may speak to me whenever he wishes.”

“No, not with the others. Alone.” Elizabeth remembered his preoccupied, somehow guilty,
expression, and restrained her impatience. “Perhaps on the way to Meryton, I shall walk with Mr
Bingley and tell him stories about what an ill-behaved child you were.”

Jane smiled absently. “Oh yes, that would be delightful.”

“You must tell me, if it is not a great secret, for I am quite overwhelmed by curiosity,” Elizabeth said. “He started to explain why, but Mrs Long interrupted us, so, you see, I do not know either.”

“I will tell you all,” Jane promised. “What could he have to say, that he could not mention before any of the others?”

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The next day dawned bright and clear. As it was still earlier than Bingley or Darcy were usually expected, Elizabeth joined her father in the library, and after their normal conversation, Mr Bennet remarked casually, “I hope Mr Darcy’s letter did not contain bad news.”


Mr Bennet chuckled. “I would not be young again for all the world. No, I meant the letter that Mr Darcy received last evening. Did he not mention it to you?”

“No, I did not know - ” she frowned. “I did not even see a letter.”

“Undoubtedly because he ripped it up and threw it in the fireplace before he had read five lines,” said Mr Bennet dryly. “Are you certain he did not mention it to you? He certainly intended to.”

“No, he - ” Elizabeth remembered, when the gentlemen had rejoined them, Darcy had seemed tense and preoccupied, more than usual, but she had attributed that to a particularly close press of neighbours. He disliked being close to other people. There had been a moment of brief respite - he had looked rather more intense than usual, had said, “Elizabeth, I - ” but they had been interrupted again, and she had not guessed that it was anything of import. “I think, he meant to, but there were so many people . . .”

“Ah, that explains it.”

“Did he say who it was from?” Elizabeth tried to think of any acquaintance who had the power and inclination to so disturb Darcy, and soon found herself at the inevitable answer, even as Mr Bennet replied, with great amusement,

“His aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He wrote and sent the reply immediately.”

“I wond - ” Elizabeth stopped as the sound of a carriage arriving could be heard, and raced to the window. “Oh, it is only the Lucases,” she said, disappointed. Mr Bennet laughed.

“Lizzy, they are never here before breakfast.”

“I know, but - ” Elizabeth shut her eyes, shook her head, and looked again. “Papa? Did you invite Mr Collins to the wedding?”

Mr Bennet considered his response to Mr Collins’ diatribe. “No,” he decided. “Why on earth do you ask?”
“Because, unless my eyes deceive me, he is walking up the drive this very moment. And Charlotte! Charlotte is here!”

A breathless Elizabeth flew into the parlour, just in time to greet her friend.

“I am so pleased for you, Eliza,” Charlotte said, with a warm smile. “I always said he was partial to you, did I not?”

“Yes,” laughed Elizabeth, “yes, you were positively prescient, Charlotte. And how are you? Is your chicken laying well? Oh! Mr Collins. It is lovely to see you too.”

“Cousin Elizabeth,” Mr Collins returned, bowing ponderously. “I, too, offer my congratulations on a most advantageous connection, despite the distress - the very great distress - inevitably caused to my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bour -”

“I’m sure Eliza knows all about her ladyship’s objections,” Lady Lucas interjected with a braying laugh. Elizabeth sighed, then smiled at her friend. At least there was one person whose company she could enjoy - though she was not certain it quite compensated for the sight of Darcy and Mr Collins in one room, the latter having evidently taken her father’s advice as far as he was able.

The younger generation all opted to walk to Meryton, Charlotte and Elizabeth trying to cover as many matters as possible in a brief amount of time, Bingley being his usual agreeable self as he endured Mr Collins, while Jane and Darcy lagged behind, speaking softly and earnestly to one another.

Exhausting as the previous days had been, this one was only more so, and Elizabeth gratefully retired to her room for the night, having parted from her betrothed with nothing more than a decorous kiss on her hand. Before she could so much as sit on her bed, however, she was joined by Jane, who had been far quieter than usual since her discussion with Darcy. Her dark hair was loose and tangled enough that it was evident she had been running her fingers through it in agitation - she was clearly in a state of what passed for high dudgeon with her.

“What is it, Jane?” Elizabeth’s mind went back to the conversation with Darcy, and she stepped forward, alarmed. “Jane, what did he say to you?”

“What did who say to me, Lizzy?” Jane asked, looking away.

“Mr Darcy, of course!”

“Oh, that he convinced Bingley I did not care for him, and knew I was in London, and never mentioned it.” Jane waved her hand at this, her expression closed. “He apologised for that, and I asked him to use my Christian name.” In a faintly wondering tone, she added, “He really felt very badly about his part in it.”

Elizabeth sat down. “He told you? But why - ”

Jane lifted up her head, perfectly still except for the fingers clenching and unclenching her shift. “Because, he said, I am to be his sister.” There was no trace of accusation in her tone, even as she added, “He did not think it right, you see, to conceal such a thing from me, when we are to be so closely related.”

Elizabeth stared at her. “Jane?”

“Elizabeth,” said Jane, her dark eyes bright, “I can understand why Mr Darcy did what he did, and I understand why Bingley did what he did; but could you please - ” she briefly chewed her lip - “could
you please explain why, if you have known since April that Bingley truly cared for me, you never breathed a word of it?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Jane, Bingley was already gone by the time I found out. Telling you the entire tale would do no good - it could only add to your regret. It was Bingley’s place to tell you what had happened.”

Jane turned her head away. “I was right, then,” she said softly.

“I beg your pardon?”

Jane lifted her chin. “I supposed,” she said, “that you did not tell me, because you truly believed it best, because you could not possibly understand that - that - ” she clasped her hands - “that I would have given the world to know that he had felt something, anything, for me.”

“Jane - ”

“That is why he understood,” she continued reflectively; “Mr Darcy, that is - and I suppose it is why he feels so badly about it still. I tried to thank him for Lydia, you know. He said he did not deserve my gratitude - just laughed rather queerly and called it a penance for his sins.”

Elizabeth did not entirely understand Jane’s meaning, but she accepted that her silence had hurt her beloved sister, and apologised. Jane smiled wearily.

“It is quite all right,” she said. “It is all over now, and I hope we have all learnt something from it. Lizzy - ” there was a moment’s hesitation - “take care.”

Elizabeth lifted up her eyes. “Why, what do you mean?”

Earnestly, Jane said, “I know you only meant it for the best, but . . . but if you keep things from Mr Darcy, I think he will be far more distressed than I am. I only want you to be careful, Lizzy.”

“I shall,” Elizabeth promised.
Chapter 3

Elizabeth woke the next day, tired, sore, and in a decidedly ill humour. She was mad to get out of the house, and absconded with Darcy as soon as she found him. She knew he was an early riser, and that he spent his mornings walking or riding about the countryside. Fortuitously, he had opted to remain on foot this morning, so there was no equine monster to disturb her equanimity further.

Of course, the surreptitious meeting was hardly the height of propriety. In her present mood, that was enough to recommend the activity to her, but she knew Darcy’s deeply-ingrained sense of decorum could not so easily be set aside. She was thus rather irritated with him, but knew her feelings all out of proportion - she had knowledge of how quickly matters could escalate between them, and realized Darcy’s caution was far from unwarranted. Nevertheless, when all the tension of the evening and morning combined to a boiling point, she lost control of her temper, but she wished the words unsaid immediately, even before catching the telltale flinch and expressionless look in his eyes.

Oddly, it was he who diffused the situation, quite without intending to. “Elizabeth, are you, er . . .” he began hesitantly.

Since everyone else either ignored her or snapped back at her at such times, she was faintly bewildered at his reaction. “I am very sorry,” she said.

“No . . . that is, I meant . . . are you . . . er . . .” He blushed.

Elizabeth sighed. “I am in a rather poor humour this morning, Fitzwilliam,” she said shortly. “Please say what you mean outright.”

“Ah . . . I do not know what it is called, exactly. Mrs Reynolds never said, when Georgiana - ” He flushed even more. “Is it . . . that time?”

“I do not understand you,” she said.

“The time when you, er . . .” His fingers were tightly clasped and his eyes steadfastly fixed on a rock near his foot.

Elizabeth stared, then smiled as she comprehended his meaning. “How do you know about that?”

“We thought Georgiana was dying; we all did,” he said. “My housekeeper told us what it was.”

She almost laughed outright, imagining poor Mrs Reynolds explaining the matter to her young master and mistress; then she thought of a frightened, motherless girl with no confidant but an austere older brother.

“I see,” she said.

Darcy looked sheepish as he continued, “It was one of those times, that I rather wished my mother or my older sister had survived.”

“Older sister?” Even imagining Darcy with parents was difficult enough.

“There were four children before me,” he said breezily. “The first, Catherine, died about a sixmonth before I was born; she was then seven or eight years old, I think. The others were born too early. We all were, but I lived anyway. Then there were three after me, two daughters and a son, and then - ” His brilliant smile seemed at odds with the subject matter, until he continued in a softened voice,
“then there was Georgiana.”

Elizabeth stared. Somehow this picture was so contrary to the vague sketch she had in her mind. For the first time, she thought of his parents, his family, as not simply the dim shadowy figures who had produced Darcy, vague ideas in her mind, but people as real as Lydia, Mrs Gardiner, her father. She thought of a woman whose wealth and beauty and accomplishments were not enough, who had borne so many children, and lost them all - but for one frail boy, and she could only imagine how dear he must have been to her.

“Your poor mother,” she said.

“Yes,” said Darcy gravely, before turning the subject; “speaking of Georgiana, I received this from her. I thought you might like to read it.”

Elizabeth smiled to herself as she saw the letter. Prolific correspondence seemed to be a family trait; four sheets were insufficient to contain Miss Darcy’s delight at her brother’s engagement. Elizabeth was pleased, for her sake and his, that at least one member of his family approved of their attachment; but she was struck by the almost reverential regard with which Georgiana addressed her brother. Within two paragraphs, it was evident that Miss Darcy worshipped the very ground Darcy trod on; he was to her what Elizabeth had mockingly called him, a man without fault.

* * * * *

“Actually,” Elizabeth confessed, several minutes later. “I was in an ill humour because of my mother.”

Darcy opened his mouth, then shut it again, and simply waited for her to continue, and Elizabeth impulsively stepped closer, absently playing with the sleeve of his greatcoat. While she certainly preferred conversation to silence, one of the very great pleasures in their mostly solitary walks was that she never struggled to make herself heard. There were few, if any, exclamations or interruptions when she spoke, and he certainly never ignored her. Moreover, she never needed to sift through well-meaning omissions, careless words prompted by the impulse of the moment, but regretted later, or outright falsehoods. Darcy never said a word he did not mean.

Contemplation of her fortune instantly improved her mood, and Elizabeth felt more disposed to speak of it. “She is set on going to town, for our trousseaux. All of this has rather gone to her head. Of course, Jane and I do not want to be separated, so we joined with Papa in trying to convince her, but . . .” She shrugged eloquently.

“Why would Jane be separated from you?” he asked, looking faintly perplexed. Elizabeth blushed.

“Not from one another - from you,” she said instantly, then added as an afterthought, “and Mr Bingley, of course.”

“Oh, I see. Well . . .” The faint widening of his eyes told her that he was anxious, doubtless over some imagined insult he had inadvertently dropped.

“Fitzwilliam, what is it?”
“I - Bingley and I were talking, and . . .” He cleared his throat. “That is what we wanted to talk to you about.”

“What is?”

“We both have some business in town, not urgent, but then there are the settlements - ” he looked deeply embarrassed at even so indirect an allusion to the disparity in their situations. “We thought you might find it convenient to accompany us.”

“All of us?”

“If the Gardiners consent, I suppose so.”

Elizabeth smiled a little to herself. “Mama will be pleased. She has already complained to my aunt and uncle enough that they offered to let us stay with them.”

“And you?”

Elizabeth glanced up at his face, which was rather too composed. “Of course,” she said, “the only reason for the disagreement was that we wished to be with you and Mr Bingley.”

Darcy smiled, and upon their return, it was decided, amidst vociferous complaints, that Mrs Bennet should take Elizabeth and Jane to town, and stay for a week, while Bingley and Darcy completed their business. Despite the painful prospect of a journey during which Mrs Bennet and Darcy were both present, Elizabeth anticipated the brief freedom from Meryton, and wrote an effusively grateful letter to her aunt.
Chapter 4

When Jane walked into her room, she saw to her astonishment Elizabeth kneeling near the fire, hands shaking violently as she held several sheets of paper towards the blaze. Then, at the last moment, she snatched them back, with an expression at once whimsical and uncertain. She repeated this action some three or four times before sighing and rocking backwards on the balls of her feet, staring into the flames.

“Lizzy?”

Elizabeth leapt up, holding the letter against her. “Jane! I am so glad you are here.”

“I am always pleased to see you, as well, of course,” she agreed cautiously.

Elizabeth laughed, then made her way to the bed, tentatively bouncing a little. “I am in desperate need of counsel,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I promised Darcy I would burn this,” she said, turning the letter over in her hands. “I did mean to. The only thing is . . .” She frowned. “I can see why he wished it burnt. It is not a proper love-letter.”

“He wrote you a love-letter?”

“No - I mean, yes, in a manner of speaking, but that is not what this is.” She unfolded the letter, and Jane could see how worn it appeared, as if it had been anxiously read and re-read. A line formed between Elizabeth’s brows as she looked down at it, fiddling nervously. “There are parts that are very . . . painful. I understand, I really do, why he is afraid I should have the power of re-reading it. But there are other parts, too - and I am afraid of not having the power of re-reading them. It is very silly,” she continued hastily, with a light laugh, “I am sure he will speak them to me should I desire it.”

Inspiration struck. “Is this that letter?”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes lowered. “Jane, am I very different from a year ago?”

“Well - you are the same - in essentials,” said Jane. “You are still Lizzy.”

Elizabeth smiled tiredly. “But . . .?”

“You are quieter, more thoughtful, and when you laugh, it is not so - well, not at other people so much, but more because you seem . . . happy. You seem softer, somehow.” Jane looked anxious. “I mean no offence, Lizzy. It is only what I think.”

Elizabeth reached over and clasped her hand. “Of course you did not. I - I was wondering how I might seem from another perspective. I feel as if I am someone else entirely, sometimes, and other times as if I have not changed at all.” She looked down at the letter, and sighed. “When he left me, at Lambton, I knew I had no right, no claim on him; but this was such a - such a comfort. He was very angry, and hurt, and bitter, when he wrote it, I think.” There was a peculiar un-Elizabeth-like detachment in her voice; then she regained something of her customary demeanour. “And yet, in spite of all that, I think - I think he must have loved me very much.” She looked pensive. “Of course he still does, but it is different now. That was more bittersweet. When he wrote this, he loved me without . . . without hope of return, without hope of anything, and he trusted me.”
“Good heavens, Lizzy, what did he say?” Then she caught herself, and blushed deeply. “Oh, I am sorry, I should not have asked.”

Elizabeth handed her one of the pages. “You may read the last line.”

Mr Darcy had very neat, painstaking handwriting, as unlike Bingley’s treasured but careless scrawl as could be imagined. The ending read, very simply, I will only add, God bless you, followed by his signature. “He used his name,” she said irrelatively.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was simply wondering why he did not use his initials. It would have been safer, if someone had found it.”

“Fitzwilliam assumed I would burn it.” Elizabeth tilted her head to the side. “I am glad he signed it properly.” Absently, she traced the signature with her fingers.

Jane looked at her sister curiously. “Do you always use his Christian name, Lizzy? - I have never heard him speak of you in any way other than Miss Bennet or Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth blushed and played with the fringe of her shawl, before confessing, “He always calls me Elizabeth when we are alone, from the very first, but he thinks it is improper and disrespectful to do so before company. I told him that he could call me whatever he likes, Lizzy or Eliza if he wanted to, but he prefers Elizabeth. He is the only one who always uses it, and it is how I have always thought of myself. Of course, then it was rather strange to be Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, but I knew his name from the letter - ” she nodded at it - “so I started using it, and he was so delighted that I kept on doing so.”

“That is lovely,” Jane said dreamily. “I cannot imagine calling Bingley Charles, as his sisters do.”

“It did take me awhile to grow accustomed to using it. I really could not imagine shortening it - anything else would be dreadfully common and not right for him, and he told me that most of his relations do use his Christian name, because if they all use surnames it can get dreadfully confusing. And now, it is how I think of him. Even Mr Darcy does not seem quite right anymore.” She looked at Jane plaintively. “I want your honest opinion. Should I burn it?”

“Well, if you promised . . . but did you say when you would?”

“No, or I would have done it earlier.”

“Well, perhaps . . . I am not sure, because Mr Darcy is so different from Bingley, but . . . why do not you simply tell him?”

Elizabeth looked blank. “Tell him what?”

“That you would like to keep it, of course. After all,” she added, fixing a stern eye on her sister, “you should not have to make every concession, Lizzy. If it is that important to you, he should understand. And if he does not, I shall make him understand!”

Sometimes, Elizabeth reflected, Jane was more like Mrs Bennet than at others. Certainly she could be as fiercely defensive. Somewhat comforted, she leaned over and kissed her sister’s cheek.

“Thank you, Jane. Oh - what shall I do without you?”

“Write to me,” said Jane succinctly.
Elizabeth was not certain whether she was going to die of embarrassment or repressed laughter first. Mrs Bennet had found nothing new to say to Bingley, and quickly bored even herself; therefore, she turned her attentions to her other prospective son. Darcy, while too reserved to display his feelings before her, was to Elizabeth’s eyes deeply uncomfortable; the empty politeness in his voice and the blank expressionlessness on his face said as much, more loudly than any words could do.

“This is a lovely carriage, Mr Darcy. So large, and comfortable, and rich!” Mrs Bennet proclaimed. Darcy’s relentlessly well-bred manners, accompanied by somewhat less reserve than had been his wont, had unfortunately encouraged a certain familiarity in his mother-in-law.

“Thank you, Mrs Bennet.”

Her eyes grew sharper. “We know all of Mr Bingley’s relations, but not yours. You must tell me all about your family, sir, since they are soon to be ours as well.”

“I am afraid I shall have to disappoint you, ma’am,” said Darcy, “for there are only two of us, my sister and myself.”

“Oh, so your mother is dead?”

“Yes, she passed on thirteen years ago.”

“You must have been quite young,” Mrs Bennet observed. “Why, you are very young now - pray, what is your age?”

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth - she shrugged helplessly - then an unfamiliar expression crossed his face, his eyes alight with what would have been mischief had they belonged to anyone else. “With a grown-up sister over ten years my junior,” he said gravely, “you can hardly expect me to own it.”

Elizabeth hurriedly turned away, trying to regain her countenance. She had no idea how he had heard of his aunt’s inquisition - perhaps Lady Catherine herself had waxed eloquent on the subject of Mrs Collins’ impertinent friend.

Mrs Bennet unconsciously provoked her still further, by saying dismissively, “You cannot be thirty, I am sure, so you need not hide it.”

Bingley and Jane looked merely curious, aware that they were missing something, and Darcy gave Elizabeth a conspiratorial smile before relenting. “I am eight and twenty.”

“Then you were really only a boy. How did you get along without a mother to guide you?”

“I am blessed with several relations of an advising nature.”

“Oh!” cried Mrs Bennet. “Why, that reminds me; Lady Catherine - your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh - called on us at Longbourn. A remarkably elegant lady, did you not think, Lizzy?”

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged pained glances. “She is certainly very . . . splendid,” she managed to say.

“My aunt and I are estranged,” Darcy said briefly. It was the first time he had publicly acknowledged
it, and Elizabeth bit her lip. She had no fondness for Lady Catherine, who was absurd, impertinent, and arrogant; she certainly did not wish for Darcy to choose his relations over her! Nevertheless, she disliked being the cause of a rift in his family, and she could only hope this was not a harbinger of things to come.

“Oh, that is unfortunate, family quarrels are such dreadful things, one so often doesn’t manage to outlive them,” Mrs Bennet said. “Surely she is not your only relation, is she?”

Darcy smiled faintly. “No, far from it.”

“Your family must be very rich and grand,” she continued speculatively. Only a little flushed, Darcy said simply,

“We have none of us ever wanted for anything that can be bought.”

Mrs Bennet gaped, and embarrassed as she was, Elizabeth comprehended the sentiment, and even felt something of it herself. She knew no specifics of his income and property, except that Pemberley had been worth ten thousand a-year when he inherited it, and there were other, lesser properties, and he could not support a life of serious dissipation and vice. She did know, however, that he was prudent out of inclination, not necessity; when she tried to explain why she did not like to spend half her allowance on a trifle, he simply looked blank and bewildered, as if she were speaking in a language he did not understand.

“Do you have any unmarried cousins?” Mrs Bennet was demanding. Darcy smiled.

“Yes, ma’am; all five of my mother’s nephews and nieces are presently single.”

She looked about to swoon at such unforeseen bounty.

“Three of them are ladies,” he added.

“Two gentlemen,” breathed Mrs Bennet. “Are they all as well-settled as you, sir?”

“I am afraid not.”

She wilted.

“One is an officer - ”

"An officer!"

“- in the army,” Darcy continued imperturbably, “but Lisle receives a generous allowance from his father.”

“Lisle?”

“My cousin Lord Lisle - my uncle’s heir.”

Mrs Bennet had no difficulty putting two and two together when it came to eligible gentlemen. “This uncle is an - earl?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her eyes gleamed. “This would be . . . the husband of one of your mother’s sisters?”

“No, madam; Lord Ravenshaw and my mother, Lady Anne, were brother and sister.”
“Good heavens.” Mrs Bennet smiled beatifically at Darcy. “You must tell me about the rest of your family.” Sotto voce, she added, “Grandson of an earl! Lizzy, did you hear that? You have done very well for yourself!”

There was a choked sound from Bingley’s direction, Darcy could not keep himself from colouring deeply, while Jane and Elizabeth blushed nearly as fiercely. *This cannot be over soon enough,* she thought.
Chapter 5

Elizabeth was amused to see her young cousins make a beeline for Jane, then stop in their tracks when they caught sight of Darcy, and hover uncertainly before dividing into two groups and gleefully attacking each of them. John tried to climb up Jane’s dress, Meg put her hands behind her back and primly curtseyed like the little lady she was, while Neddy attached himself to Darcy’s legs and Polly demanded to be lifted up.

Elizabeth was astonished to see her quiet betrothed laugh out loud, swinging Polly up into his arms - she squealed with pleasure - and then giving Neddy his watch to play with. Darcy had said he was fond of children, of course, but she had not taken it very seriously; it was clear that they already knew him, though, and obviously had formed an attachment - oh, Lydia.

“It is quite all right,” Darcy assured Mrs Gardiner, who was apologising for her middle offspring. “Madam, sir, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

Elizabeth could see Bingley’s lips forming the word again? before Mr Gardiner commandeered his sister and her nerves, and all were settled down in the parlour. The children abandoned their favourites to greet everyone, Meg settling between Darcy and Elizabeth while Polly bounced on the latter’s lap.

“Lizzy,” she demanded, “are you really going to marry Mr Darcy?”

“I am,” Elizabeth replied, ruffling the little girl’s hair. Neddy, seated at his father’s knee, dropped the watch and clapped.

“I am very happy for you, cousin,” Meg said primly. Polly seemed faintly puzzled, and looked from Darcy to Jane with her small brows furrowed.

“Well, Polly?” Elizabeth raised her brows.

“It’s lovely that he’s going to be our cousin now -”

“Cuz-zin?” said John hopefully.

“- because he is ever so nice -” Darcy coloured deeply - “but . . . I should not want to marry a man so much prettier than me!”

Elizabeth could not keep from laughing outright at this, along with most of the room (although Meg whispered a distressed apology), and snuck a look at Darcy, who had covered part of his face with his hand and was shaking slightly.

“I don’t see why it’s so funny,” Polly continued loftily. “He should have married Jane, then he would still be our cousin but they would match. And Mr Bingley is only so pretty as you, Lizzy, so you could marry him.” She beamed.

Jane and Darcy were staring at one another in abject horror, Bingley had bit back laughter but not a smile, and Meg hissed,

“You don’t marry to match, Polly!”

“Well, Lizzy,” Polly conceded, ignoring her sister, “you will still look nice together.”
“Thank you,” said Elizabeth gravely, “I am very much relieved.”

Mrs Gardiner, after a pause, hustled the children off to bed, and the adults enjoyed more conventional conversation, interrupted only by Mrs Bennet on occasion (for her astonishment at the easy camaraderie between her brother and son-elect along with exhaustion had gone a long way in quieting her). After about forty-five minutes, she and Jane both confessed themselves exhausted and retired for the evening, while Bingley, with no great inducement to stay and business at home (namely, his sisters), returned to Grosvenor Street.

“I have already congratulated you,” Mr Gardiner said cheerfully, “but allow me to say, once more, how pleased I am for both of you. This is a wonderful development, if not entirely unforeseen.” He grinned at Darcy, who flushed slightly.

“I must confess myself somewhat bewildered as to how this has come about,” Mrs Gardiner said. “Lizzy tells me that you were not engaged when we left Derbyshire.”

Darcy looked startled. “No, far from it. I would have been surprised to know that she did not dislike me very much.”

Mrs Gardiner raised her eyebrows. “Not dislike you?” she repeated, with an incredulous glance at her niece. Mr Gardiner laughed outright.

“We had . . . quarrelled . . . in April,” he said haltingly. “I . . . said some things . . . that, in retrospect, I was deeply ashamed of, and would not have been surprised if she had grown to hate me even more than before.”

“Things that you were deeply ashamed of?” cried she, laughing. “You could not have been more ashamed than I.”

“I deserved everything you said.”

Elizabeth’s curls flew as she shook her head violently. “No. No, you did not. Not the way I said it. And certainly not in regards to Mr Wickham.”

“Wickham?” exclaimed Mrs Gardiner. “So that is how you found out?”

“Not exactly,” Elizabeth admitted, blushing. “He wrote me a letter - speaking of which, that is something I must speak to you about, perhaps tomorrow?” Her fingers twisted together. Darcy knit his brows.

“You have not burnt it?” He caught sight of her hands and gently stopped the anxious movement.

“No, I - that is what I would like to speak to you about.”

He nodded acquiescence, even as Mr Gardiner cleared his throat. “You wrote her a letter, sir?”

“I did not send it,” Darcy said hurriedly, “I handed it to her. I should have . . . perhaps I should have said it personally, but . . .”

“It was better this way,” Elizabeth assured him, before turning back to her family. “So, that is how matters stood when we went to Pemberley. You can imagine what I felt.”

“That is why you tried so hard to get out of it!”

“A comedy worthy of the Bard,” Mr Gardiner remarked, leaning back.
Darcy smiled at Elizabeth, his look almost as openly affectionate as when they were alone. “It has not been an easy . . . courtship,” he conceded.

“Two more perverse lovers never existed,” Elizabeth declared. “We needed all the assistance we could get.” Impulsively, she kissed her aunt’s cheek. “We shall always be indebted to you both, you know. If you had not taken me into Derbyshire -”

“It was a pleasure,” Mr Gardiner replied, with a warm look for his wife. “Why, we have made the match right under everyone’s noses! I could not ask for anything more.”

“Edward,” chided Mrs Gardiner, “we did no such thing. Lizzy and Mr Darcy were quite capable of managing their affairs themselves. We only gave them a . . . small push.”

“There seem to have been a good many small pushes going on,” Darcy observed wryly. “Elizabeth is correct, though; we owe you, more than any other, our present happiness. For that alone, you shall always be welcome with us. You will be able to come to Pemberley for Christmas, I - we - hope?”

Mrs Gardiner coloured at the praise, which was positively effusive coming from Darcy, and looked hopefully at Mr Gardiner.

“I have a great deal of business . . .”

“It must be a long while since you have seen a proper Derbyshire winter, Mrs Gardiner,” Darcy added.

“Winter in Derbyshire must be very like winter anywhere else - cold and unpleasant,” Mr Gardiner declared, laughing.

Mrs Gardiner and Darcy stared. “My poor benighted husband knows not whereof he speaks, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner explained. “He has never been north of Hertfordshire during the season.” They both eyed Mr Gardiner pityingly.

“Nor I,” added Elizabeth. “Pemberley cannot possibly be more beautiful than when I saw it, surely?”

“It is different,” said Darcy.

“It was winter when I first visited,” Mrs Gardiner added. “I thought it was like looking down on the kingdom of heaven - of course, I was only a girl then.”

“You went to Pemberley before last summer? When was this?” Darcy asked, startled.

“I was eleven, I believe, so it must have been nearly twenty-three years ago.”

“Oh, I was ill that winter, else I probably would have seen you. My mother was very particular about attending to her guests, even - ” he stopped dead, but Mrs Gardiner gracefully saved him.

“Yes, she was. I do not think I have ever felt more welcomed to such a great house in my life, at least not until this year. She was very gracious, very elegant, very kind - a lady of the first order. I was rather overwhelmed, I am afraid.” She shook her head, with a faintly wondering expression. “I would never have dreamed that I should see my niece in her place.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Mr Gardiner remarked, but his wife instantly riposted,

“Not outside of novels. I, a guest at Pemberley? Had you suggested it when you courted me, Edward, I would have laughed in your face and rejected you out of hand, on the grounds of your
insanity. And now . . .” She shrugged. “Forgive me, Lizzy. Good fortune is always more startling than ill.”

“Oh, I understand,” Elizabeth assured her. “You could not have been more surprised than I.” For no particular reason except a natural impulse, she reached for Darcy’s hand, and absently entwined her fingers in his. “So, uncle, shall your business be too pressing?”

Darcy and Mrs Gardiner opened their mouths, doubtless to elaborate on the superiority of Derbyshire winters to those in every other country, but Mr Gardiner forestalled them.

“I think not. I shall never hear the end of it, if Margaret misses another one of your frozen Christmases.”

Elizabeth beamed, and Darcy said earnestly, “It will be an honour, sir.”

*     *     *     *     *

In the morning, before Mrs Bennet and Jane woke, Elizabeth explained the saga of the letter to Mrs Gardiner at somewhat greater length, although still remaining vague about the exact nature of their “quarrel.” She and Darcy had agreed long ago - or it seemed long ago, at the beginning of their engagement - that the particulars of the proposal and their ensuing behaviour would remain a strictly private matter. Only Jane would ever know all, and Bingley if necessary, although she doubted it had gone even so far as that.

Mrs Gardiner’s reaction was reassuringly similar to Jane’s. “Lizzy,” she said, “I do not need to know what was in it. If it is important to you, he will understand.”

“He wanted me to burn it. It was important to him.” She had known Jane was too prejudiced to see, but Mrs Gardiner instantly comprehended.

“Your interests will not always coincide, Lizzy. This may be the first difficulty of the kind you will face, and how you manage this may very well have a powerful effect on how future disagreements are resolved.”

“We have not disagreed yet!” This sounded so childishly petulant that she could not keep from laughing.

“Your wishes are contrary to his,” Mrs Gardiner said calmly. “That is inevitable, Lizzy. Listen to me, dear. Mr Darcy did a great thing, all the greater because he expected nothing in return. To feel somewhat . . . humbled by that, is perfectly natural. But you cannot allow it to create an inequality in your marriage, simply because you do not have such a gesture to offer in return.”

“We are only engaged, we are not married yet - things will be different when we are married.”

“Nonsense. The balance will even be more greatly weighted towards him then. Lizzy, I do not truly think you are in any great danger of becoming too deferential, nor do I think Mr Darcy likely to encourage it. Nevertheless, there is more to marriage than affection. It is a union, and anything that concerns you, concerns him.”

Elizabeth frowned. She loved Darcy - more than she had ever thought she could love another human being - but she was not accustomed to such openness, not even with Jane who had been her
confidante for so many years. And she felt a fierce protective instinct that could not but make her
careful of saying too much. Nevertheless, they could not proceed in this half-distant, half-intimate
situation forever. They would be husband and wife, bound indissolubly for the rest of their lives,
within a matter of weeks.

“You are quite right,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I shall explain it all to him today.”

Her resolution was only slightly shaken by Darcy’s uncharacteristic lateness. Some fifteen minutes
after expected, he arrived, looking rather wearier than he had the night before when they at last
reluctantly parted. Elizabeth was instantly alarmed, although he endured Bingley’s teasing with a
grate tolerance that, earlier, she would have mistaken for veiled offence. When they walked out in a
small park in one of the less fashionable areas of town, taking advantage of the few hours before he
would be locked away with business for the rest of the day, she asked,

“Fitzwilliam, what is it? You look dreadful.”

He smiled tiredly. “I daresay even Polly would not say I am prettier than you, or anyone, today.”

This tacit admission was enough to provoke her further. “Did you sleep poorly?”

“No at all.” He inhaled deeply. “My uncle and aunt called rather early this morning.”

Elizabeth caught her breath, although she could not claim to be much surprised. “They do not
approve?”

“No, they do not.” He looked more troubled than anything else, and although her instant reaction
was a defensive anger - what right had two people she had never met to declare judgment on her? -
she pushed it back and laid her hand on his sleeve.

“Fitzwilliam, surely you do not expect them to?”

He hesitated. “No, but neither did I think - and when he said things - he!” Elizabeth’s
brows shot up - “he had the temerity to speak to me - to me! - of duty.”

“Oh - I beg your pardon.” He took a deep breath, but did not speak, only lowered his eyes.

She could not entirely understand him. He had not cared about Lady Catherine’s opposition, and yet
here he was, distressed and angry over a man who did not sound greatly different, and a woman he
obviously held in deep contempt.

After a comfortable pause, Elizabeth said, “Tell me about your uncle, Fitzwilliam.” When he opened
his mouth, she added, “Not as he is today - you would not care so much, without a reason.” He
stopped and sighed.

“He was . . . very kind to me, when I was a child. He treated me like another son, a favourite son at
that. I would not have been surprised if my Fitzwilliam cousins had grown to hate me, his preference
was that marked. My father and mother were - they were not well-suited, and - you understand what
that is like, Elizabeth.”

This was the closest he had come to any criticism of her family since the letter, but she perfectly
comprehended the spirit of the offering. In this as in so much else they were equals. “We shall do better,” she told him, and for the first time that day his face lightened, and he clasped her hand affectionately before continuing.

“My mother’s family was always very fond of her,” he said, “and therefore of me. As a child, I often stayed at Rosings or Ecclesford - Fitzwilliam and I were all but inseparable. Then, when I was eight years old, several children at Pemberley fell ill with scarlet fever. My parents were so frightened that they immediately sent me to Ecclesford, where I remained for some time. My father travelled a great deal and my mother had her own entertainments.”

“I see,” said Elizabeth inadequately.

“At Eton,” he added, “my cousins made certain I was taken care of.”

She glanced up. “Your cousins took care of you?”

“Well, I was - am - the youngest.”

The idea was at first incongruous, perhaps because she had only seen him in the role of benevolent elder brother, but after a moment of consideration it made perfect sense. The two incompatible pictures in her mind, of the sweet-natured, lovable child Mrs Reynolds spoke of, and Darcy’s own account of himself as spoilt and over-indulged, began to mesh. A handsome, clever boy, the precious heir to his parents, the favoured youngest to the Earl - She looked at the man walking beside her, now appearing more like himself, and thought she was beginning to see how he had become who he was.

“Your uncle and your mother were close?” she pressed.

“Very close. He adored her - that is why he so disliked my father.”

“This is Colonel Fitzwilliam’s father?”

“Yes.”

Here was another figure to add to the mental portrait of those who would be her family. A proud man, who had married the abhorrent creature Darcy had described, but disliked Elizabeth herself without even meeting her. He did not sound remotely likable; but neither did he seem so dreadful as Lady Catherine. He had loved his sister and favoured her son above even his own children. Not something to encourage cousinly affection, and she thought of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s steadfast loyalty in a rather different light.

“Very well, Fitzwilliam; now, tell me what he said that so distressed you. You did not expect his blessing, did you?”

“Oh, he will give his blessing, though I certainly do not require it.”

She stared. “Then - what -”

“He called simply to express his disappointment; he cares too much for family solidarity, or at least the appearance of it, to censure me or my choice publicly.”

“Is not Lady Catherine’s disapprobation known?” she asked, surprised. Darcy shook his head.

“She has few correspondents outside her own circle, and too much pride to make it a matter of general concern, or so my uncle says. That is the only part of the affair he takes pleasure in.”
“Which part?”

Darcy’s lips quirked into a reluctant smile. “Being at odds with Lady Catherine.”

She laughed outright. Their pretensions notwithstanding, they sounded very much like any other large, closely-knit family, with only wealth and a powerful name to distinguish them. She felt that Darcy, however - Fitzwilliam - would not appreciate the observation and only said, “What precisely was he disappointed about?”

“Oh - they had . . . other expectations of me.”

“Miss de Bourgh?”

He blinked. “No, he never approved of that. He did not think I would be happy or respectable married to her.” She started, immediately reminded of her father’s concerns. “He wished someone more . . . suited to me, within the family, or someone else who would bring interest and connections, but whom I could also like and respect.”

“Did you never find any acceptable ladies worthy of your respect?”

“My parents respected each other, at first,” he said baldly, “and thought they liked one another. I did not want to make the same mistakes they did. I found none that I was certain of, no.”

_Someone more suited to me, within the family._ Elizabeth had never considered that she had even hypothetical rivals; as he had proposed to her while at Rosings, he clearly felt no obligation to Miss de Bourgh, and his manner towards Miss Bingley was one of tolerance at best, and often skirted around the edges of contempt.

“Not even one of the half-dozen accomplished ladies among your acquaintance?”

“Not even. Besides, two of them are my grandmother and my sister, and two others cousins I could not possibly look at as . . . anything else.”

“Why on earth not?” she asked perversely, keeping a firm grip on his arm.

“Jane is married, and Rosemary five and thirty. Besides, she has known me since I was in leading strings. It would be unendurable - we are too different.”

“You and I are not alike,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“We are in matters of substance.”

She remembered Bingley’s throwaway comment, which had bothered her, in a trivial, niggling way, more than she liked to admit. “When you were speaking of your mother, Bingley said something about Lady Ravenshaw.”

“Yes, that was my - aunt,” he said, with a look of repugnance. Elizabeth smiled and leant her head against his arm.

“If they truly care for you,” she said, “they will come to terms with your choice.”

“Yes, I daresay they will.” He paused, then said decisively, “That is enough of my family, however. You wished to speak to me about . . . that letter.” The distaste in his voice was clear, and it only made what she had to say that much more difficult.

More happily, the hand at the small of her back was moving in small, distracting circles, although
Darcy himself seemed quite oblivious to his own actions. She elected not to enlighten him. “Yes, I did. Fitzwilliam, I told you I would burn it, and I truly meant to, but I find it very . . . difficult. I do not wish to burn it.”

“Why not?” He seemed genuinely surprised. “It was a dreadful letter.”

“No. Yes. That is, yes, there were parts that were . . . resentful and haughty, of course. But it seemed like - you did not only trust me with Georgiana’s story, and your interference with Bingley and Jane - it was like your entire character was there, under hand and seal.” She flushed under his steady gaze. “And it allowed me to see not only you, but myself, and to correct where I had gone wrong. I do not think on our past with any more pleasure than you do - although I probably do so less often.” She smiled up at him, winning a wry look in response. “Were it not for that letter, I might very well have continued in that path all my life, and I do not know what I would have become.” She thought of her father and said, “Can you not see?”

She was not certain why it was so important that he understand this. His brows were knit together, his entire expression reminiscent of Meg when she was struggling to conjugate an irregular French verb. “Elizabeth,” he said carefully, and something clenched in her chest, “I . . . I do not understand, entirely - ” she properly interpreted understand as a euphemism for agree - “but - ” he shrugged. “If it is truly that important to you, certainly I will not hold you to your word.”

Elizabeth could scarcely keep from laughing, her relief was so profound. “I have less introspective reasons for wishing to keep it,” she confessed. “At first, it was easier for me to believe that you did not truly love me, but later on, after Lydia eloped, it was a comfort to know that you did, that you wanted me to be happy, whether that happiness included you or not.” She looked up, her eyebrows lifted. “You would be astonished at the silly, melodramatic things I thought and did, during that time. Besides - ” she smiled - “it was the first thing you ever wrote to me. Ladies like sentimental keepsakes of that kind, Fitzwilliam.”

“They do? Whatever for?”

“To remember, of course.” They stared at one another in mutual bewilderment, then he shook his head.

“Some things are comprehensible only to your sex, I think. It is your letter, Elizabeth; do with it as you please.”
“I do not believe the green would become your complexion so well, Miss Bennet,” the modiste hinted. Although she remained properly deferential to her client, her manner made it perfectly clear that Madame Leclair knew far better what would suit Miss Bennet than Miss Bennet did herself.

Elizabeth had spent the better part of the day being measured and fitted and poked and prodded, and felt a nagging discomfort at the prospect of spending so much of her father’s money - even if he had insisted upon it. She had also been separated from Darcy for a good six hours; he felt no inclination to join the ladies for their shopping expedition, and a great deal of business that had to be finished before the wedding. At present, she was not in the most cheerful humour.

Most unpleasant were the curious gazes of Madame Leclair’s clientele. All were very fashionable, superior sort of creatures - superior in their own minds, at least - who could not have appeared any more startled than if a trio of gipsies had entered the shop, instead of Mrs Gardiner and her two nieces.

It was only at that moment that the monotony was interrupted. Two ladies not far away were giving an attendant explicit directions as to what they wanted, but at Madame Leclair’s remark, both fell silent. The younger of the two turned towards Elizabeth, pulling her reluctant companion.

“Miss Bennet? I beg your pardon, but are you - are you Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn?”

“I am,” Elizabeth said, somewhat bemused. The other girl seemed at once a perfect stranger and almost - not quite - familiar, her tall full figure and mildly pretty features just like - just like - someone’s. The turned-up nose and wide smile, however, were entirely her own.

“Why, Cousin Susan,” declared the girl, “this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet!”

The instant Elizabeth looked at her companion, a handsome lady of about Mrs Gardiner’s age, she knew them for relations of Darcy’s. The startling eyes and delicately fair colouring were all but identical to his.

The girl said happily, “I am Cecilia Fitzwilliam, this is Lady Ravenshaw, and you are going to marry my cousin, Mr Darcy. I do hope you don’t mind my just introducing myself like this? As soon as I heard your name, I just had to see if it really was you.” She looked at Elizabeth with unabashed curiosity. “You’re not at all what I expected.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth was not certain whether to be amused or offended.

“Well, Lady Catherine wrote, and, well - ”

“Cecily,” said Lady Ravenshaw mildly, then turned with a gentle smile. “My dear Miss Bennet, we are delighted to meet you. I hope you will enjoy every earthly happiness.”

Elizabeth was too well-bred to stare. “Thank you,” she said, while her mind raced. There was intelligence as well as beauty in that face, and Elizabeth instinctively knew that this woman could not be summarily dismissed as Lady Catherine had been. “You are very kind, your ladyship.”

“You must be Miss Bennet’s sister,” interjected Miss Fitzwilliam, her eyes falling on Jane. “Are you the one Mr Bingley is marrying?”

Lady Ravenshaw’s expression shifted to one of cool composure, but she looked on Jane with distinct
approval. Certainly an enigma, Elizabeth thought, and determined to reserve judgment. She seemed charming and sweet tempered, but Darcy’s violent dislike clearly sprang from a very firm, very personal foundation.

“Miss Elizabeth, you must come,” Miss Fitzwilliam was saying. “Oh, and Miss Bennet too, if you would like.” There was a very slight trace of dismissal in her manner towards Jane, which was such a peculiar reversal of the usual way of things that Elizabeth could not help but find it as much amusing as galling.

“Perhaps the Miss Bennets are not entirely at our disposal, Cecily,” Lady Ravenshaw interjected, with a wry smile. “We should be honoured to receive all three of you, however, at your earliest convenience.”

There was no other possible response. Elizabeth accepted on behalf of all three, and her prospective relations swept away.

“I am so sorry to have kept you waiting,” Elizabeth began, but Madame Leclair, her manner distinctly more conciliatory than before, shook her head.

“I understand perfectly,” she proclaimed. “Your fiancé, he is one of the Fitzwilliam gentlemen, and the ladies wish to know you.” She added matter-of-factly, “They are very nice people - not like so many these days, only concerned with themselves; not even the young ones. And so tall and handsome! you cannot find a handsomer family.”

Elizabeth smiled, thinking of Polly. “Thank you, ma’am. I have not seen very many of them yet, but at least one is too handsome for his own good.”

“You are to marry Mr Darcy then, Miss Bennet? Although perhaps Mr Fitzwil - but no. It must be Mr Darcy, for Miss Darcy ordered her new gown yesterday, and she said that she was to have a new sister.” With hardly a pause, she continued, “Perhaps, since you like green, this would be acceptable?”

Elizabeth examined the material, aided by Mrs Gardiner. “It is perfect, madam,” she pronounced, and when she left the Frenchwoman’s shop, it was with all of her wedding clothes ordered to her satisfaction as well as Madame Leclair’s.

* * * * *

When Elizabeth returned home, she was startled to hear Darcy’s voice as she passed Mr Gardiner’s study. “It is not - I am not yet at ease with him, sir.”

Mr Gardiner said something; he did not have Darcy’s clear carrying voice and she could not make out the words.

“It is perfectly unexceptionable,” Darcy said, and Elizabeth, recollecting herself, continued past and joined the ladies. It was several minutes later when he alone entered the parlour. Elizabeth smiled - he was instantly at her side, and after apologising to Jane on Bingley’s behalf, allowed his hand to brush hers.

“Mr Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner said, pouring him tea, “we met some relations of yours today.”
Darcy instantly stiffened, his expression wary, and Elizabeth said hastily, “It was at Madame Leclair’s shop - where we ordered our wedding clothes.”

He relaxed slightly. “Oh, you saw the girls then?”

Elizabeth thought it a rather odd turn of phrase, considering that Lady Ravenshaw could not be a day under forty, but she nodded. “Miss Fitzwilliam seemed very . . . enthusiastic,” she said, smiling, and Darcy’s face lit up.

“Cecily was there? Excellent. I hope you will like her. She is - ” he hesitated - “she does not have many friends.”

Elizabeth stared. “Why - I cannot imagine anyone disliking her, Fitzwilliam.”

“A delightful young lady,” pronounced Mrs Gardiner. Jane was busy looking out the window.

“Thank you. She has many acquaintances, but she is careful not to allow them to ripen into friendship,” he said, a little awkwardly. “She is . . . in some ways, very unlike the rest of us, so she is rather . . . lonely, although we are all very fond of her.”

“I am certain I shall be as well,” Elizabeth said confidently, then added, “Lady Ravenshaw was with her.”

“I hope she behaved properly,” he said, his face hardening.

“Perfectly,” said Elizabeth, and he winced. Clearly communication within the Fitzwilliam clan was less than perfectly straightforward. “They invited us to call on them,” she added.

Darcy blinked. “All of you?”

“Yes, my aunt and Jane and I.” Hoping to reassure him, she said, “They were very civil, Fitzwilliam.”

He shook off whatever mood had come over him, and smiled. “Yes, I daresay they were. Did you get everything you need? - Jane, forgive me, but Bingley’s business will keep him occupied until at least four o’clock.”

Jane sighed.

“Not quite all,” said Mrs Gardiner, “but the majority of it is out of the way. I understand you had some business with Edward, Mr Darcy?”

“Not officially, but yes, I did wish to consult with him on some business matters, among - other things. I have been settling my affairs in order to provide adequately for Elizabeth and any children we may have.” He nodded at her, and she could not help blushing happily at the idea of his, their, children. “My father invested several thousand pounds in what seems, to me, a rather uncertain enterprise, but as I am not very familiar with this type of commerce, I presumed to ask Mr Gardiner’s advice.”

Elizabeth knew, of course, that he esteemed her aunt and uncle, but this level of confidence was something else entirely. She beamed at him, and puzzled but by no means displeased, he smiled back.

* * * * *
“You look lovely, Lizzy,” Mrs Gardiner said.

“I am dreadfully silly,” Elizabeth said. “They are just - people.”

“Of course,” said Jane, throwing their aunt a worried look. “Your hands are cold, Lizzy.”

“I am not frightened.”

Mrs Gardiner’s composure was not quite equal to the task of hiding her scepticism. Elizabeth conceded,

“I am . . . perhaps somewhat apprehensive.”

“Lizzy, you are meeting the people who will be your family, people who do not know you and who are not disposed to approve of you. It is perfectly natural to be a little frightened.”

“Oh, very well. A little frightened.”

Nevertheless, it was with an appearance of cheerful equanimity that she entered the parlour, her back straight and her colour high. The room had only four occupants, Lady Ravenshaw, Miss Fitzwilliam, and two others. One of these was an elegant, elderly lady with a strong nose and green-hazel eyes. The other, a young woman, seemed one of that unfortunate class of females who always look less handsome than they really are. Her dark, rather insipid good looks could not have posed a greater contrast to the vivid pallor of the Fitzwilliams.

“Lady Georgiana, Frederica,” Miss Fitzwilliam announced, “this is Fitzwilliam’s betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet; her sister, Miss Bennet; and their aunt, Mrs Gardiner.”

Jane, Elizabeth, and Mrs Gardiner curtseyed; although the younger of the two unfamiliar women inclined her head with gracious decorum in response, Lady Georgiana scarcely deigned to reply at all, merely looking at them with a critical eye.

“Miss Elizabeth,” said Cecilia Fitzwilliam, “this is Fitzwilliam’s grandmother, Lady Georgiana Darcy, and Lady Ravenshaw’s daughter, Lady de Courcy.”

“Do sit down,” Lady Georgiana said quietly.

Lady de Courcy managed a hint of a smile. “It is an honour, Miss Elizabeth. My cousin has spoken very highly of you.”

“Young men and their infatuations,” his grandmother said lightly; “I hope for your sake, Miss Elizabeth, that his good opinion will last.”

The implication was clear, and Elizabeth, just reaching for the offered cup of tea, froze.

“Fortunately,” Miss Fitzwilliam said, “He is not whimsical or flighty in his opinions, like so many; he knows his own mind, and it is very rarely mistaken.”

Lady Georgiana’s lips tightened, and Lady de Courcy said hastily, “I understand, Miss Bennet, that you are to marry my cousin’s friend, Mr Bingley?”

“Yes, madam, I am.” Jane was rather overwhelmed by her surroundings, as much by the elegance of all four women as by the tense undercurrents she scarcely noticed.
“I hope you will be very happy,” interposed Lady Ravenshaw. “It is an excellent match for you both; he is a most amiable gentleman, and considering his origins, is fortunate to do so well as a respectable gentleman’s daughter.” Jane blinked, and the countess turned to Mrs Gardiner. “You, madam, are a native of Lambton?”

“Yes, your ladyship.”

“A charming town. You shall, I daresay, have more opportunities to visit.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled. “I hope so.”

There was only a moment of silence before Miss Fitzwilliam, with a nervous glance at Lady Ravenshaw, began, “My cousin was here this morning, Miss Elizabeth. He has been very busy, that must have been what kept him. I really had no idea how much dreadfully dull business there is to prepare for getting married. I hope it does not keep him from attending to you properly.” She managed only a very slight curve of her lips, and Elizabeth’s brow furrowed to see the ebullient Cecilia so spiritless.

“Oh, no,” she replied cheerfully, “Mr Darcy is most attentive.” She thought of their affectionate farewell the evening before, and blushed fiercely.

“How fortunate for you,” murmured Lady de Courcy.

“How long have you known my cousin, Miss Elizabeth?” Cecilia enquired.

“About a year. We met last October.”

“I told you,” said Cecilia, lifting her head and briefly appearing the same Miss Fitzwilliam as before. “He would not have taken such a step without considering all the ramifications.”

This, considering the very thorough explanation of the ramifications which had taken place at Hunsford, was undoubtedly true. “Cecilia, mind your tongue,” Lady Georgiana said sharply. Cecilia lowered her eyes and demurely sipped at her tea, her pale cheeks flushed.

“It is good to know,” Lady Ravenshaw said, “that it was a considered decision, not the impulse of the moment. And very like him. - Oh, you do look horrified. It is quite all right, we are all ladies here and we will be family.”

Elizabeth sat upright. “With all due respect, ma’am, I cannot feel myself at leave to discuss Mr Darcy’s attachment in any but the most general terms.”

Lady Ravenshaw frowned; but Lady de Courcy’s lips curled into a faint smile, and Lady Georgiana looked on her with something like approval. Cecilia threw her a conspiratorial glance before attending to the tea once more.

When they left Ravenshaw House, Elizabeth exhaled a sigh of relief. She was beginning to think that Lady Ravenshaw, for all her mildness, rather enjoyed having others under her power. Undoubtedly this explained the tension between the lady and her nephew’s steely grandmother. Yet, despite her early disapprobation, she seemed fully prepared to accept the match. Cecilia and Miss Darcy already had, and while Lady Georgiana was hardly pleasant, she might be won over in the end. The unknown quantity was the Earl, but Elizabeth did not think it likely that such a man would be much influenced by his sister’s mother-in-law.

“Well,” Jane said brightly, “what interesting people!”
“Indeed,” murmured Mrs Gardiner.
Chapter 7

As they sat in Mrs Gardiner’s parlour, waiting for the gentlemen, Jane fidgeted so nervously that Elizabeth nearly feared for her dress. She could barely restrain her laughter; she had never seen her sister so distracted before, much less with such a conventional source. Jane’s anxiety after Lydia’s elopement was nothing to this; she had then been somewhat collected at least, while now, she scarcely seemed to have an idea of where she was. Mrs Gardiner hid her smiles, and Elizabeth resolved to tell Darcy about it later, when they were relatively alone. It would make him laugh.

“Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and Mr Bingley, ma’am.”

Elizabeth very nearly started with astonishment. Darcy had only said that his sister was at Pemberley, but would come down to Hertfordshire for the wedding. She suspected - although it was not a matter she, or he, could speak of - that he was not eager to have Georgiana exposed to the young ladies who lived around Meryton, especially Kitty. Nevertheless, here she was.

She looked rather frightened, although this was so habitual an expression with her, it was difficult to tell if she was upset by anything in particular, and clung to her brother’s arm. They all greeted her warmly, however, and she seemed somewhat reassured.

“I am very glad we are to be sisters,” she told Elizabeth shyly. “I thought - that is, I hoped - well, my brother has always thought very highly of you, and he is so happy . . .” Both glanced at Darcy, who was speaking earnestly to Mr Gardiner about something. He seemed to feel the attention, and glanced up, smiling briefly before returning to his conversation. “It is - pleasant,” Miss Darcy struggled on, “to see him do something - to please himself. I was very afraid he would end up with someone who just liked him for his fortune and consequence.”

Darcy was too clever and too perceptive to be fooled by the most accomplished fortune-hunter, and Elizabeth nearly made a remark to that effect, before recalling Georgiana’s own experience. The younger lady’s face was very grave and pale as she spoke, and Elizabeth impulsively touched her hand. “He has much to recommend him besides that,” she said, smiling. “I am certain many could have liked him on his own merits.”

Miss Darcy smiled shyly. “My brother is a great man,” she said simply. “All those who know him are fond of him.”

“I am very glad to hear it. Somehow, I had the impression that he was not on very friendly terms with your aunt.”

“Oh, well, Lady Ravenshaw is . . .” The younger girl looked briefly caught. “I do not think she likes young people very much, especially handsome ones - and Fitzwilliam - ”

“ - is very handsome indeed,” cried Elizabeth, laughing.

“Yes. I . . . everyone says I look like my brother, but I am not half so like as she is, and by blood, she is only my mother’s cousin. I wish - I always feel - ” She stopped, looking at Elizabeth with large anxious eyes.

“Miss Darcy, we are to be sisters.” Guided entirely by instinct, she reached out to press her warm hands around one of Georgiana’s cold ones. “You may say whatever you wish to me.”

“I do not know what it is like,” Georgiana said timidly. Elizabeth could feel the strong slender fingers shaking beneath her own. “I have never had a sister. Even my cousins are much older than I am,
except Cecily, and Fitzwilliam does not want me very friendly with her.”

Elizabeth with an effort concealed her surprise at this. “Well, I am certain he wishes you to be very friendly with me.”

The other girl returned her smile tentatively. “Yes, he does. I . . . I was only going to say, Miss Elizabeth, that . . . when I am next to Fitzwilliam or Lisle or Ella or Lady Ravenshaw or - I always feel so dreadfully homely.”

Elizabeth felt an instant sympathy. Georgiana suffered nothing worse than the awkwardness of a girl caught halfway between child and adult. The Fitzwilliam features were too strong for her round girlish face, but that would change in time, just as she would grow into her tall womanly figure.

“I understand,” Elizabeth assured her. “My own sister - well, you have seen Jane. No one but your brother would ever think me her equal, and even he did not, at first.”

Georgiana blushed fiercely. “He only wanted to make Mr Bingley leave him alone,” she said earnestly. “He can be terribly persistent sometimes - Mr Bingley, I mean. Not my brother. Although he can be, too . . . not terribly, of course . . .”

“Young brother told you about that, did he? So you see, he did not think me even very pretty and fell in love with me nonetheless. You need not be concerned, Miss Darcy, for you are much handsomer than I.”

“Oh no, I am not. And he did think you very pretty, he said so, when - ” Elizabeth’s eyebrows rose. “He wrote to me about you . . . quite a bit. Fitzwilliam and I always write about everything, because we have been apart for so much of our lives. It was only a few weeks after you first met that he said you were a beauty after all, but not the way other women were. He said it didn’t mean anything with them - it was just how they looked - but that you were different.” She frowned. “I am still not quite certain what he meant by that.”

“We shall have to ask him, then!”

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Miss Darcy glanced towards her brother, her expression both awed and affectionate. “I probably should not have mentioned it - but you are to be married and you shall be my sister, so there is nothing wrong with it, is there? Or should I have asked first?”

“My dear Miss Darcy,” said Elizabeth, “I am quite sure he will not mind.”

“I - Miss Elizabeth, I - I hope it is not - impertinent of me to ask, but - since we are to be sisters, would - would you mind using my Christian name?”

“Certainly not,” Elizabeth said warmly, “if you will call me Elizabeth, or even Lizzy, as my own sisters do.”

Georgiana smiled shyly. “I would like that, E-Elizabeth. I think that is a beautiful name. My great-grandmother was an Elizabeth, though everybody called her Lizzy. She died before I was born but my brother was very fond of her.”

“That explains why he insists Lizzy does not suit me.”

“I do not suppose he spends much time thinking of her when he is with you,” Georgiana said, then blushed fiercely. “Oh dear - did I say that aloud?”

Elizabeth laughed. “I will not tell him, I promise.”
“Oh, I would not keep anything from Fitzwilliam,” Georgiana cried. Her fervour startled Elizabeth, until she recalled the girl’s history. The confidence subsisting between brother and sister - however unbalanced the attachment seemed to Elizabeth - had saved her from the life that awaited Lydia. The thought immediately sobered her.

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Once again, Darcy had arrived without Bingley, and was closeted away in Mr Gardiner’s study. After a moment of speculation, the latter emerged, and smiled rather wearily at Elizabeth.

“Please come in, Lizzy,” he said. “Mr Darcy would like to speak to you.”

Elizabeth started at the formality. “Why - ”

“On what might be termed business,” Mr Gardiner said gently. Elizabeth’s brows furrowed, but she gave her parcels to a servant and followed her uncle into the study. Darcy was standing near the window, looking as deeply uncomfortable as she had seen him in a long while.

“Elizabeth,” he said, then continued in a practised tone, “I will of course give this to your father and we may discuss it a later juncture, if you would like, but I thought you might prefer to make, er, your wishes known at present, while we are still in town and it is simpler to make adjustments.”

“Adjustments? To wha - oh.” She looked at several papers neatly piled amid Mr Gardiner’s organised clutter and felt Darcy’s palpable anxiety briefly settling over her. Nonsense, she told herself. I always knew this would come. She had felt the disparity between them from the first; indeed, he had made certain that she and everyone else knew of it. Perhaps it had not seemed quite real until lately, but she could not be surprised, she was not surprised. Nevertheless, it was impossible to be easy. Mr Gardiner patted her shoulder sympathetically.

“I am - I do not really - I trust you, Fitzwilliam,” she finally managed to say. Darcy relaxed a little, and he gave her the first open, warm smile she had seen for days. She held out her hand. “This does not matter, really - I would have loved you if you only had a tenth as much - you know, and I know, and we are the only ones that matter.”

His fingers curled around hers. Even now, when they stole kisses every evening and most mornings, it was enough to make her shiver a little. She hoped it still would do so years into their marriage.

“Yes, of course,” said he, a little breathless. Mr Gardiner gave them an amused, affectionate smile. “Nevertheless, it is important, Elizabeth. You will be my wife, and it will reflect on you, on my regard for you. It is not - right, but that is how it will be seen. You do understand?”

Reluctantly, she nodded. She did not have to like it, but they could not pretend that society had no claims on them. They were not only who they were, but what they were. She was marrying a wealthy man, and such things were only to be expected. Even this practical resolve, however, was quickly overwhelmed as he outlined the terms of the settlement.

“Almost five thousand a-year?” she protested. “What on earth would I do with that?”

“Four thousand nine hundred sixty-seven pounds a year, and that only after I am dead. I would not leave you dependent on anyone else’s generosity, Elizabeth,” he explained. Elizabeth shuddered a little. Looking at him right now, tall and handsome and in the full vigour of youth, it seemed impossible that one day - No. I shall not think of it. “It may not be precisely that sum,” he added, “it
depends on inflation and taxes and so forth. Naturally my income during the marriage will vary somewhat."

"Naturally." Elizabeth arched an eyebrow at him, and he sighed, before elaborating on her jointure.

"Fitzwilliam, I do not need - oh, never mind. Let us hope you will be the survivor, my love - everything will be much simpler that way."

Darcy blinked, then said cautiously, "Pemberley is not entailed."

"That is a great comfort to me - and to my mother."

Mr Gardiner, who had just sipped on his tea, choked violently.

"Are you quite well, sir?"

Mr Gardiner nodded weakly, and Elizabeth bit her lip.

"Fifty thousand pounds will be set aside, at present, for any daughters and younger sons, to be divided at our discretion," Darcy continued serenely.

Elizabeth caught her breath. "Fifty thousand? Fitzwilliam, what have you done?"

"Oh, the family has acquired a bit of that sort of wealth, here and there," he said vaguely. "It seemed a nice round sum."

"A nice rou - " Her eyes narrowed. Was he teasing her? Surely not in such a grave matter - he was! She laughed in delight; Mr Gardiner looked pleased, presumably that his lively niece need not provide all the spirit in their family. Darcy himself only smiled a little.

"That is what I have been so busy with - consolidating my interests so that I might provide adequately for you and our children."

"Only you," said Elizabeth, smiling affectionately to hide her very real discomfort, "would consider fifty thousand pounds merely adequate."

"Anything will likely have to be augmented later on," he said practically. "I might as well set the bulk of it aside now."

Of course. Even fifty thousand pounds, split among two younger children, would not equal the present Miss Darcy’s fortune. Elizabeth was not so much of a starry-eyed romantic as to fail to realise why he had been so unprepared for these arrangements; he had expected to marry an heiress, who would supply much of it herself. Money was a topic they were still rather uncomfortable discussing. Elizabeth did not particularly care about Darcy’s fortune - he had enough to support them comfortably, and that was all that mattered, or so she told herself. Nevertheless it remained an awkward, unpleasant subject, and of course children had to be thought of.

Really, she had not considered them at all, except as the natural consequences of marriage. Elizabeth glanced at Darcy. She would never accept a man for his looks, but she was glad her children would have handsome parents. Would they be tall, like their father and aunts? would they have Elizabeth’s brown skin and dark eyes, or Darcy’s fairer colouring?

With a sudden fierceness, equal to anything she had felt at the height of her humiliation in Hertfordshire, she longed to be married, to leave Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn behind and become Elizabeth Darcy of Pemberley.
If Elizabeth had been nervous for tea, it was nothing to what she felt now. She was to be formally introduced to all of the family currently in town, and, of course, the invitation included all her relations, as well. Mrs Bennet had been in fits from morning to evening, meaning only to be silent out of respect for her superiors, except when she could show her deference to them, but Elizabeth still lived in fear of some untoward remark. She had never been so grateful for the Gardiners and dear Jane in her life.

The Darcys and Fitzwilliams had assembled for a “small, intimate” dinner; Darcy said dryly that the principal difficulty would be keeping them away from one another’s throats, but Elizabeth did not doubt that they had united in their suspicion and dislike of her.

She had met Cecilia once more, and easily accepted her future cousin’s earnest apologies for what she termed her want of proper resolve. Thank heavens, Elizabeth thought, that she could look forward to some agreeable family members. She did wonder, however, why Darcy did not want Georgiana associated too closely with Cecilia - clearly there was something she did not know.

All were relieved of their coats, and met by Lady Ravenshaw. A brief embarrassment over the contrast between her own plain dress and the countess’ splendid one was fortunate, for it reminded her of Mr Collins’ reassurances, and her inner laughter put her much more at ease.

The house was not as elegant as Darcy’s, where she had called on Miss Darcy and forwarded their relationship as much as she could, to the great pleasure of all concerned - but it was grander. Darcy, with some amusement, had explained that the Fitzwilliams never entirely forgot their comparatively humble origins in Ireland, and therefore went to great pains and expence to make certain everyone else did.

“My uncle, Mr Gardiner, and my mother, Mrs Bennet,” said Elizabeth. The countess greeted them civilly - the latter too overwhelmed to respond in above a whisper - although with less warmth than she did Elizabeth. The others, she said, were all present and in the blue parlour, for Lord Ravenshaw had wished to mark the occasion by a particular gift to Mr Darcy. Lady Ravenshaw’s cheeks flushed pink at this, and she explained quietly that it was a great secret, and all the family looking forward to the surprise. Elizabeth softened a little; whatever their feelings for her, their affection for Darcy seemed sincere, and when they saw him happy with her, surely they would more easily reconcile themselves to the marriage.

The servants announced them, and a gentleman of about fifty or sixty, still handsome with thick fair hair and brilliant eyes, approached. He was leaning heavily on the arm of a much younger man, and despite the former’s small, slight figure, both so strongly resembled Darcy that Elizabeth almost started.

“Uncle,” Darcy said, with a grim, set, look, “may I introduce to you my betrothed wife, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

As she had guessed, the elder gentleman was Lord Ravenshaw. Elizabeth smiled, and as she heard Darcy introducing the others, she observed the earl from under her lashes. He was extraordinarily like Darcy; had she not known better, she would certainly have taken him for his father.

And with that came a sudden startling flash of comprehension. She knew exactly what he felt, quite probably better than he did himself. She still clearly remembered how miserable she had been at the idea of giving pain to her beloved father. Why had it never entered her mind that he might be just as
distressed to do the same - that his family, Miss Darcy and Lord Ravenshaw and Colonel Fitzwilliam and everyone, was just as important and real to him, as hers to her?

It had been months into their acquaintance before she had ever thought of him as a real person, not simply the image she had created and carried around with her. At Pemberley, she realised with astonishment that she had not the slightest idea what he was thinking, that he was truly a separate person in his own right - but she had, perhaps, not entirely abandoned the habit of thinking of him as only the “Mr Darcy” she saw before her, with no existence beyond that. And she knew that Darcy was the earl’s favourite -

He struggled to make himself agreeable to her family. She could do that much for his, and particularly for this man, who reminded her so forcibly of her intended, of Fitzwilliam whom she had tied her life to.

“Miss Elizabeth - ” she accepted his hand - “please allow me to welcome you to our family.”

“And let us hope that we do not frighten her away from it!” cried Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Elizabeth turned, so delighted at a familiar and friendly face, that her face lit up with a smile nearly as vibrant as that she had directed at Darcy. The earl’s eyebrows shot up.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam!”

“Miss Elizabeth.” He bowed. “Miss Bennet, Mrs Bennet, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Gardiner. I had the honour of Miss Elizabeth’s acquaintance when she stayed at Hunsford last spring.” He smiled as warmly as ever he had done, but even his eyes betrayed a now-familiar trace of uncertainty.

Elizabeth was very glad indeed when Darcy took three steps forward and stood firmly at her side, his hand resting lightly and protectively against her back, and cordially greeted her family, with a meaningful glance at his own. The others immediately followed suit, and she met everyone from her intended’s great-uncle Sir James Darcy, seventy if he was a day, to Lisle and Fitzwilliam’s little half-sister Emily.

Not very long thereafter, she found herself seated between Miss Fitzwilliam and Lady Emily, while the earl proceeded with his “great secret.”

“I always meant to give this to you,” he told Darcy, his expression stern and cold. “I should have done so earlier, but this occasion seemed particularly apropos.” He cleared his throat, and said something in an undertone to one of the servants hovering discreetly about. Within a very few minutes, a large flat object draped in a sheet was carried into the room.

Anticipation overcame every face in the room, and Darcy stood at Lord Ravenshaw’s request. His expression was almost as soft as she had ever seen it, and it seemed that he, too, had an idea of what to expect.

The sheet was drawn off, revealing the portrait of a handsome young woman. A hush fell over the room; Elizabeth heard Cecilia catch her breath. Tears rolled, unheeded, down Sir James’ wrinkled cheeks.

The lady had exquisite pearl drops in her ears and another set around her slim neck. Her powdered hair was piled on her head and fell about her shoulders, a black hat set at a jaunty angle atop the mass of curls.

Of course, Elizabeth immediately guessed at her identity - this woman, with her startling black-rimmed eyes and striking features, could only be Lady Anne, Lord Ravenshaw’s other sister and
Darcy’s mother.

As if from a distance, she remembered their conversation, that day at Oakham Mount. *Was she very beautiful?* She now knew why he had been unable to properly reply; anything he said of his mother’s appearance necessarily was also of his own, and his vanity was not sufficient for that.

Darcy took a step forward, his gaze fixed on the identical pair gazing out of the portrait. Most, undoubtedly, would see nothing unusual in his expression - many of his relations did not - but Elizabeth recognised the quiet sorrow in his eyes for what it was, made only more so for its unobtrusiveness. Tears rose to her own eyes, and she looked at her mother.

They had never been close. There was the tie of blood, of mother and daughter, but no more. Mrs Bennet always preferred her eldest and youngest daughters, and often resented her second. For her part, Elizabeth could not remember a time when she had not been bitterly ashamed of appearing in public with her mother, of being forced to acknowledge her. It was not a sentiment she was proud of, nor one which she spent much time thinking on.

She had never considered her lot as remotely fortunate, until now. She felt an echo of Darcy’s grief as her own, and had they been alone, would have run up and slipped her arms around his waist, saying whatever comforting thing sprang to her lips. Instead, she could only look, and think.

Mrs Bennet had become fond of her since her engagement to Mr Darcy of Pemberley, and only more so after this evening. Since Jane was fifteen, her first, and only, goal in life had been to get her daughters married. Jenny Gardiner, who knew poverty only too well, would never have dreamt that she would one day see her daughter married to an earl’s grandson who could count unbroken descent, from father to son, back to the Conquest and beyond. Whatever else he might be was utterly beyond her comprehension; he had chosen her daughter and that was enough.

Elizabeth looked from her mother, deliriously and silently happy, to Darcy, who said simply, “Thank you, sir,” his voice vibrating with emotion at the prospect of having a mere image of his.

She had never been grateful enough; she had never known that she had something to be grateful of. Her mother was alive.

A sudden flurry of congratulations and acknowledgments interrupted the silence. Elizabeth sprang up, but it was some minutes before she could make out anything more than the tip of Darcy’s head amongst the Fitzwilliams and Darcys.

“That was Mr Darcy’s mother?” Mrs Bennet whispered.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Elizabeth. Then she looked at her more closely. Mrs Bennet’s silence did not spring only from respect. She was quite frightened.

How strange was it, to not know what to say to her own mother?

“She died when he was fifteen or sixteen, I think.”

Mrs Bennet scrutinised the portrait. “Mr Darcy’s father must have been displeased,” she declared. “Gentlemen want their sons to be like them.”

Elizabeth sighed.

“Take care that yours do,” she added severely. “Daughters are generally not of much consequence to their fathers, but sons are different. And for heavens’ sake, take care that you do have sons!”
Elizabeth bit back her initial response. “I will do my best, ma’am.”

“I should hate to see you forced to give way to some odious cousin,” Mrs Bennet added kindly. Elizabeth softened.

“Pemberley is not entailed, Mama. If we have no sons, our daughters may inherit, or a son of Miss Darcy’s.” She thought it best, for the sake of her mother’s nerves, not to mention that her jointure was over twice Mr Bennet’s income.

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“What a lovely gesture.”

Everyone had retired to the dining room, where they now sat at Lady Ravenshaw’s command. Elizabeth, between Lady Darcy - Sir James’ wife - and Mrs Gardiner, smiled at the former’s innocuous remark. There was no trace of suspicion, and her manner, to Elizabeth’s great relief, was almost friendly.

“Yes, it was,” she replied, with a warm smile.

“I should not say so, but - ” Lady Darcy lowered her voice - “I would not have expected it of the Fitzwilliams. Oh, I do not doubt their devotion, Lord Ravenshaw especially, but . . .” She shook her head sadly.

The food began to pass around. “Mr Darcy was very glad, I think,” Elizabeth persevered.

“Well, I should imagine so.” She sighed deeply. “Poor Anne. I do not think she ever recovered from Catherine, she became very fussy after she died.”

“Catherine?” Elizabeth blinked.

“Fitzwilliam’s older sister - she died before he was born.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth. “Yes, I remember he said something about that.”

“It was one of those illnesses that come out of nowhere, you know, and - well, to lose a stout, healthy girl like that?” She shook her head. “They were never the same. Anne became so devoted to the next child - Fitzwilliam - and he to her, although of course he did not really understand. He was not like Catherine, not at all - so pale and fragile, and the doctors insisting he was consumptive! I often thought, and so did Lady Georgiana, that perhaps her attachment to him was a little unwise, but they were that darling together.”

Elizabeth tried to imagine Darcy as a delicate little boy with a cough, and failed utterly.

“There were always balls and parties, for George and Anne were very fond of society, and I remember she always had Fitzwilliam with her before she went down. Oh! how they used to laugh. Then she would dance the night away and make herself ill - she was very highly-strung - and want him with her. I really think he took care of her as much as she did of him.”

This was more familiar ground. “That sounds very like him,” Elizabeth said. She was both a little saddened at the portrait Lady Darcy painted, and comforted that she would not be following the
picture of perfection she had feared.

Lady Darcy smiled, and sipped at her wine. “You seem to understand him quite well, my dear.”

“I would not say that,” Elizabeth said ruefully, “I think I finally comprehend him, and then he turns around and surprises me all over again.”

Mrs Gardiner laughed softly. “My dear Lizzy, you may expect that for the rest of your life. Gentlemen are perverse that way.”

“And ladies,” rejoined Lady Darcy. “Undoubtedly he finds you equally unpredictable. Why, Sir James and I have been married for well over forty years, and to this day we never cease to astonish each other.”

Elizabeth smiled. She had seen the care Sir James took with his wife; whatever the circumstances of their marriage, there was no doubt in her mind that they loved each other. “I suppose you are right. F - Mr Darcy insists that he is quite dull and predictable.”

“Well, he is very much a creature of habit,” Lady Darcy allowed, “but dull? - only to those he does not terrify out of their wits. I remember - oh, what was her name? Lord Longtown’s elder girl. Whatever she was called, she was a perfectly detestable young lady, more than unkind, really malicious. Lady Augusta - that was her name! now I remember. Lady Augusta would be very cruel to the younger girls, just out, and she had set her cap for Fitzwilliam - of course he was having none of it - but after he had seen a young lady actually run away sobbing because of something she’d done, seen with his own eyes, Lady Augusta tried to draw him into conversation.

“She talked, I believe, about how superior London is to everywhere else, and of course he made some curt remark about how he did not care for the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of society in town. Well, when Lady Augusta said that she could not help preferring the variety of entertainments in town, he replied, cool as you please, ‘I do not doubt but that you are suited to the society here.’ He did not even try to lower his voice, so of course everyone heard him, and for the next few weeks, she was cut by some of the very young ladies she had frightened the day before, and could hardly show her face. Well, it was unkind of him but everyone was glad to see her dropped a peg or two.”

“Oh, I remember that,” Cecilia chimed in, across the table and a safe distance from Lady Ravenshaw. “What a vile creature she was. Is, I suppose, although I haven’t heard much of her since then.”

“She married an Irish baron,” Lady Darcy said. “Rich, but very reclusive. She will have to be content as a star in the society of St Catherine’s.”

“How tragic,” remarked Lady de Courcy, before returning to her conversation with Lord Lisle.

Elizabeth smiled slightly. She did not truly approve of his behaviour, but comforted by the knowledge that it was a thing of the past, and well deserved into the bargain, she was also somewhat amused. She knew perfectly well that she probably would have had no objections whatsoever had she actually been present.

What caught her attention more than either, however, was the consequence of a sharp comment from Darcy. Ironically, in a society where he was less important, at least by contrast - no longer the great outsider, but instead where he belonged, one of many - his influence was much greater. She had thought of his power in terms of interest and connection and dependents, but never in this way. No one, she thought, would dare to laugh at him, as she had; they could not afford to. And it was not only his power but that of all connected with him; Miss Darcy, were she so inclined, could do the
same thing - perhaps, her shyness being so often mistaken for disdainful pride, she already had.

Why, once Elizabeth, herself, was Mrs Darcy - and doubtless there was the other side, that Bingley had unwittingly taken advantage of - what his approval could mean. She knew perfectly well why Miss Bingley had become so deferential; her acceptance in the circles she was so proud of moving in was dependent on the Darcy connection - she did not dare affront him.

Elizabeth smiled at Lady Darcy, half-attending the conversation. For a moment she wished Darcy was a modest country gentleman like her father. It would have been far easier. But - she had never wanted easy, had she? He was a difficult man - and if she were honest with herself, she was a difficult woman - and their happiness was all the greater because it had been difficult to attain.
The rest of the meal passed away, more pleasantly than anyone could have expected. Lady Darcy’s and Miss Fitzwilliam’s friendliness went a long way in lifting Elizabeth’s spirits, and while Darcy was not near her, their eyes often met in commiseration or amusement.

Afterwards, they all prepared to retire to the same parlour as before, and the earl - to general astonishment - limped to Elizabeth’s side and offered his arm. The Fitzwilliams rearranged themselves unobtrusively.

“Thank you for your kindness to myself and my family,” Elizabeth began civilly.

Lord Ravenshaw smiled with a familiar trace of dry humour. “It is not kindness, it is a pleasure.”

Elizabeth’s old frustration with Darcy’s impenetrable good breeding reanimated itself. She had never been able to catch him in any strict improprieties, for even his most offensive remarks were coloured by an unassailable correctness. Lord Ravenshaw seemed to be tarred with the same brush.

“I must offer you an apology, Miss Bennet,” he said unexpectedly, although his manner remained as stiff as ever.

“I beg your pardon?”

“On my sister’s account; Catherine, whatever her private opinions, had no right to attack you as she did, and certainly no right to interfere in our nephew’s personal concerns. He is eight and twenty and may do as he wishes; we have no say in it.”

Elizabeth met his eyes squarely. “You are not responsible for Lady Catherine’s behaviour, sir. I would not blame you for the impropriety of a relation - you had nothing to do with it.”

Lord Ravenshaw smiled slightly. There was no doubt in her mind that he perfectly comprehended her. She continued, guided only by what she felt, and an impulse of the moment, “Mr Darcy certainly seems to think the opinions of his family more important than that, however.”

“Oh?” The earl’s eyes flicked towards her and then away.

Doubtless Darcy’s first proposal would have been a great comfort to him. Elizabeth nearly shook her head at the thought, and persevered, “He must ultimately depend upon his own feelings and judgment, of course, but I understand that is what his family taught him?”

He gave her a quizzical glance. “To depend upon his own judgment, in any case. We did not wish him to repeat my sister’s mistakes. It is a pity we were not more successful.”

With that non sequitur, as they were at the parlour, he handed her over to his nephew and left.

“What did he say to you?” Darcy instantly demanded. Elizabeth gave him a sharp look.

“This is a lovely room, dearest; I remember, there was one like it at Pemberley, although of course that one was not so crowded.”

He looked slightly abashed, and left at Elizabeth’s nod when his grandmother shooed him away. “Miss Elizabeth, would you mind sitting by me?”

Despite the faint old-fashioned courtesy with which she spoke, this was clearly a rhetorical question,
if one at all. Elizabeth sat.

“I have been talking with Miss Bennet. She is a delightful young woman.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Georgiana’s eyes went from sister to sister, her expression perplexed. Elizabeth said lightly,

“My mother finds it very odd that Mr Darcy should have wished to marry me, rather than Jane, if he were to marry any of us at all.”

“She is very lovely,” said the old lady, “and seems quite sweet-natured, but she is not the sort of lady that Fitzwilliam prefers.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up.

“He tends to like people who are lively and open, or clever and strong-willed.”

*Or both,* thought Elizabeth, without undue modesty. The puzzling friendship between Darcy and Bingley was beginning to make more sense. The latter benefited from her intended’s steadiness and good sense, the former from Bingley’s easy friendliness.

“Yes, I would think so,” she agreed. Her ladyship, after a pause, said,

“I was glad to hear that he was marrying. I should like to see his children before I die - none of my grandchildren have married, and the others are growing older. Why, my niece Alethea is reckoned quite the beauty, yet she is a full eight and twenty.”

*Charlotte’s age,* thought Elizabeth. This unknown girl, rich, beautiful, and well-born, could marry whomever she liked, or not at all. Yet Charlotte, surely no less deserving, had been driven to become Mrs Collins. The injustice of it struck her with a sudden fierceness she had not felt for a long time.

*Well, it shall be over soon enough,* she consoled herself; then her dark eyes opened wide. *No, no, it shan’t!* This evening would pass; and when she married Darcy, these all would be her family, until she died. She took a steadying breath, and threw a glance at her companion’s impassive face.

“Lady Georgiana, may I ask you a rather impertinent question?”

“Certainly.”

“Is there something about me as a person that you find repulsive, or do you object simply to my lack of consequence?”

She blinked. “I am not certain I understand you, Miss Bennet. Are you asking why I dislike you, assuming that I do, or enquiring as to the feelings of my extended family?”

“I meant you particularly, your ladyship.”

“I do not know you very well,” said Lady Georgiana coolly, “but I do not think Fitzwilliam would have chosen you if you were deficient in any way. He has excellent taste. No, at this juncture I must say that I care only for your situation in life.”

“That is a relief,” said Elizabeth, “I should hate to think there was something of substance that I could in any way affect.”

“You can do nothing about your birth, that is true,” the countess agreed. “Miss Bennet, it is not
simply a matter of fortune and connections, although those are considerations. We wished someone of our own sphere, acquainted with our ways. Of course we do not blame you for your circumstances and upbringing - you could hardly help it.”

“Madam,” she said, “I understand your concern, but my father is a gentleman. I am not completely ignorant.”

“My dear Miss Bennet,” replied Lady Georgiana, smiling with a sort of patronising kindness, “do you know why it was that, when my son courted Lady Anne Fitzwilliam, it was his family, not hers, who objected to it, who considered it an unequal match?”

“I did not know there was any objection at all.”

“We considered her unworthy of him because the Darcys were a family of wealth and influence when they left Normandy over seven hundred years ago. They were snubbing upstart nouveaux riches when the Fitzwilliams could dream of nothing higher than selling wool in Dublin.” She flung her head back. “I am the daughter of a duke. With his lineage and connections, it does not matter a whit that Fitzwilliam has no title, his name is enough. He is of our sphere, not yours. Forgive my bluntness, but that is how the matter stands. George chose Lady Anne because she was rich and beautiful, and those were his requirements in a wife. She accepted him because she wanted entry into more respectable circles than her birth allowed.”

Elizabeth smiled. “And, as I am neither beautiful nor wealthy, you do not think I can be a creditable wife to your grandson? I suppose all of you are of one mind on the subject?”

“I do not know what you can be,” Lady Georgiana said. “I only know what you are.”

“The unpolished daughter of a minor country squire, you mean? Not what you wished for Mr Darcy? Not what he wished for himself?” Elizabeth raised her chin. “I suppose you think me the worst sort of fortune hunter, your ladyship.”

“No,” she said. “I do not doubt your affection for my grandson. It is evident to anyone who has seen you together.”

Elizabeth started.

“You have a very expressive face, Miss Bennet.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Georgiana gave her a look of undisguised astonishment. Evidently, it had not been a compliment. Elizabeth suppressed a sigh - she was really beginning to wonder that Darcy had turned out as well as he had. That he was so different from them, with nothing but his own will and conscience to guide him, was little short of miraculous.

“Your ladyship,” Elizabeth said firmly, “Mr Darcy and I are engaged to be married. We shall be married. There is nothing to be done about that, we have made our choice. His family’s antipathy towards me does nothing to shake our resolve, and only makes him unhappy. I see no purpose in it, since you clearly do not wish to repudiate him or me. All that may be done on your part, now, is to help me be what you are so certain I cannot.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Georgiana stared at her. “I do not have the pleasure of understanding you.”

Elizabeth met the older woman’s gaze directly. “You cannot possibly think I did not consider the
ramifications of my choice before now. I have no intentions of being moulded into something I am not, a mere ornament on his arm, of no use or purpose, but that is not the same thing as clinging to old ways which have no place in a new life. Mr Darcy can only marry me because he is a gentleman, and I a gentleman’s daughter, but I know what his lineage means to his place in society. Surely it comes as no surprise to you that I wish to be a credit to him? It is not infatuation on my part any more than it is on his. I want him to be as proud of me, as I am of him.”

Lady Georgiana smiled with greater warmth than Elizabeth had seen all evening. Her eyes filled with tears, and she dabbed at them with a dainty handkerchief.

Elizabeth, who had not imagined the stern old lady could cry, stammered, “Your ladyship?”

“Forgive me, Miss Bennet, I am old and sentimental. You seem a very sensible girl.” With her slender blue-veined hand, she covered Elizabeth’s. “He is too good for this world, you know, and no woman on earth deserves him, but I do hope you shall be happy.”

Elizabeth smiled, a great release of tension easing the pressure in her head. She did not think she had won them all over in a single evening, nor Lady Georgiana alone, but she knew a battle had been won tonight.

“Thank you.”

* * * * *

“Elizabeth?”

While the others were either showing or being shown the house, Darcy snatched up Elizabeth’s hand and pulled her into an unused room.

“Fitzwilliam!” she cried, laughing at her own surprise and his look of boyish mischief. Suddenly, she could imagine him as a child - not the tragic invalid Lady Darcy had described, but a real child, gangly and golden-haired, planning adventures with the quick flashing smile she sometimes saw on the harder, older face before her.

“Shh,” he said, pressing his hand against her mouth and pulling her towards him, “or else they shall hear.”

The clear baritone was indisputably the grown man’s. She giggled against his fingers, then gasped at the sudden touch of his lips against her neck. It was unexpected but very pleasant; the laughter that now emerged from her lips was a low, throaty sound utterly unlike the earlier girlish one. Chills broke out on her arms and a flutter descended to exactly that spot where his gloved hand rested against the curve of her waist. It was the first time, as far as she remembered, that he had ever touched her out of the impulse of the moment, and she was thoroughly delighted.

He lifted his head and said in a light, amused tone, “This room is not crowded, dearest.”

“No, but - Fitzwilliam, we are in your uncle’s house!”

“Yes,” he managed, “that is very fortunate.”

She almost lifted her head. “Fortunate?”

“Yes. When I was growing up, my cousins and I spent a great deal of time here, and we had much
freer reign here than at home. I believe I may say that I not only know this house better than my own, I know it better than my uncle does.”

“Do you?” she repeated weakly. Darcy, with a superhuman effort, stepped back and walked around to face her. It was very dimly-lit and she could just make out his shining eyes and pale hair.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said, recovering more of her ability to speak in coherent sentences the further away he walked, “has something happened? You seem . . . rather unlike yourself.”

“I think they are gone,” he declared, then laughed outright. “I am only very happy, Elizabeth.”

“I would never have known from your behaviour earlier,” she said, trying to put her loose curls back into some degree of order.

“We were in company then. I cannot show my feelings before other people.”

Only me, she thought, quite happy herself. She had always thought she would wish a lover with no qualms about displaying his devotion publicly, but she knew that in this, she would not wish him any different.

“Are you simply pleased with the world in general, or something in particular?” She marched to the window and pulled the curtains open. Pale, dusky light flooded the dark room. Darcy laughed again.

“Oh, I am never pleased with the world in general. I had not known until today, though, how much I . . .” He stopped, and she could see him struggling with his native reticence. His expression had altered into one of such tenderness that it transformed his entire face. Then he stepped forward and captured her hand in his, pressing it against his lips. “Elizabeth, I . . . you . . . tonight, you were . . . magnificent. I - ” he spoke rapidly, like a child giving an apology, “I am proud of you. I have loved you for a very long time, but that is not - I did not realise until I saw you with all of us, that I had not merely chosen well for my (I hope our) personal happiness, but for . . . other things. I am honoured that you have consented to be my wife, and the mother of my children, and the mistress of my home.”

Elizabeth’s eyes jerked up to his in astonishment. She could not think of anything she had done that was in any way different from her usual behaviour - perhaps somewhat tempered in deference to her company, except for her attempt to provoke and placate Lady Georgiana. Yet that, of all things, could hardly account for this sudden effusion. Her natural impulse was to escape the awkwardness of it with a light jest, yet she intuitively knew it would be an inappropriate response to this sort of occasion, even after they were married. She thought this, too, was another important moment, setting the tone for what would happen afterwards, but she had only begun, “Fitzwilliam, I - ” when they heard footsteps.

Darcy winced. “They will have missed us by now; we should go back.”

She could not possibly leave it at that. Elizabeth snatched his hand, wondering a little that she could feel the heat and coldness of her fingers and his, despite the gloves between them. “Fitzwilliam.” She could think of nothing very meaningful, her mind was terribly blank, so she only said, “I love you.”

That seemed to be enough, though. His face lit up with another, more unfamiliar smile, and he replied, “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

As they walked out to give their excuses to their relations, he put one hand against the small of her back as they walked, and, in a gesture more tender than passionate, gently brushed his lips against her temple.
“Lizzy,” said Jane sleepily, snuggling beneath the covers, “why did Miss Fitzwilliam want to talk to you so urgently?”

Elizabeth lay still, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Perhaps the most surprising element of the entire evening had come shortly before their departure. Elizabeth was, of course, aware that her decision to marry Darcy affected many people; but she had not understood how many until Cecilia took her into yet another unfamiliar and little-known room. She had apparently spent her childhood following after her older cousins, and discovered at least as many secrets as they.

“She wanted to thank me,” Elizabeth said. Jane blinked.

“Whatever for? Did you do something kind to her?”

Elizabeth laughed. “No, not really. At least, I did not intend it that way.”

She could see Cecilia before her again, light eyes swimming in tears. If it had not been for this, I should never have dared tell him - tell my uncle what I have done. You see, when Lord Ravenshaw took me in, he gave me a small fortune. It - it’s mostly gone, now. We owe him everything, and if I had not been so silly! - I hadn’t the courage, I just hadn’t. Then Fitzwilliam - Fitzwilliam, of all people! the favourite, the one who always did everything he should, everything that was expected - he dared choose you, and you dared accept, even though you might have been thrown off entirely. And you weren’t afraid, or deferential, like I thought you would be, and you had so much more to gain by it, you were brave. So I - I am going to be brave, too, and explain everything to my uncle, and I shan’t pay another shilling.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to relay all of this, then shut it again. Jane did not mean to be inquisitive, certainly there would be no repercussions if she told - but it had been a confidence. She had given her word that she would not speak of it to anyone but Darcy. It was not the same as when she had confided the details of Wickham’s perfidy; she had never dreamt Jane might someday meet Georgiana. While loyalty to Jane must take precedence, it was nothing to her but idle curiosity. It was Cecilia’s life, and Elizabeth had given her word.

“I am sorry,” she said, looking at her sister with tears in her eyes, “I gave my word that I would not tell anyone what she said.”

“Oh! I shall ask no further,” Jane said easily, and turned the conversation elsewhere before falling asleep. Nevertheless Elizabeth felt very uncomfortable. Her feelings for Darcy, and the truth behind Lydia’s marriage, were the first great secrets she ever kept from Jane, but she had always meant to tell all, and had actually done so. Besides, not speaking of something Jane knew nothing of was somehow not the same as refusing to speak. It was perhaps a fine distinction, but Elizabeth, lying in her bed, thought that something in their relationship had changed, and would never be the same. Her first allegiance would be to Darcy now. She shivered, then her mind veered to Darcy’s uncharacteristic exuberance that evening. Of course - Cecilia would have told him first. That was why he had been so pleased, to see good come of his own happiness.

Elizabeth thought once more of what Miss Darcy had said. Darcy did not want her associating too closely with Cecilia. How had she lost her inheritance? Did he think she would somehow corrupt his sister? He had seemed so fond of her.

She was still trying to come up with an explanation when she finally drifted off to sleep.
“Lizzy, Jane, your mother and I wish to speak to you. Mr Gardiner, I am sure, can entertain Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy for an half-hour.”

The sisters looked at one another in bewilderment, but obediently followed Mrs Gardiner and Mrs Bennet. Mr Gardiner looked particularly grim as he re-set the chess board. Bingley, it seemed, was an abysmally bad strategist.

“Girls,” began Mrs Bennet, her cheeks pink, “we must tell you about your . . . er . . . marital duties. So that you have time to prepare.”

Elizabeth suppressed a giggle. Jane blushed. Mrs Gardiner remained silent, but Elizabeth thought she caught a smile playing about her aunt’s lips.

“You are very fortunate, to be marrying such fine-looking men. I would warn you never to let your husband know, if you find him repulsive, but that does not look as if it will be a concern.” Elizabeth thought of Polly’s *I should not want to marry a man so much prettier than me*, and firmly pressed her lips together. “Still, gentlemen are not . . . built like ladies.”

“I had noticed that, Mama,” said Elizabeth.

Mrs Bennet paled. “Lizzy, you silly girl, what have you done?”

“I have done nothing wrong,” she protested. “But, Mama, how could I not notice? Men simply do not look like ladies, even men like . . . even smaller men. Mr Darcy is over six feet tall.”

“That is so,” she allowed, “but not quite what I . . . meant. That is . . . well, you have seen dogs and cats and horses and such.”

Mrs Gardiner coughed. “Your mother means that the differences between male animals and female ones are somewhat similar to the differences between men and women.”

Jane’s brow furrowed.

“Men have a great deal of hair. Ladies have hair on their arms and legs, of course, but not in such . . . abundance. And some of them - ” Mrs Bennet glanced pointedly at Jane - “have it on their backs, too. Thankfully, your father did not.”

Elizabeth swallowed. She truly did not want to know the specifics of her conception, and still less the source of Mrs Bennet’s information as to the appearance of Bingley’s back. Mrs Gardiner, thankfully, said nothing.

“The first time you lie with your husband,” Mrs Bennet said hastily, “there will be some pain. If your husband is careful, as I am sure Mr Bingley will be, Jane dear, it should not be very much. Afterwards, it can be pleasant, if you encourage your husband to touch you properly. If you have any particular questions about *that*, after you are married, you can ask me, or write to Lydia.”

Elizabeth shuddered at the thought. Fortunately, her mother seemed quite focussed on Jane and did not notice.
“Sometimes, however, it is very unpleasant. My dear girl, you are so delicate, I am afraid you may find it a miserable business. If that is the case, you must simply lie very still until it is over, the pain will be less that way.”

“I thought you said it only hurt the first time,” whispered Jane, her eyes fixed on the floor and her cheeks scarlet.

“Well” - Mrs Bennet looked helplessly at her sister-in-law. “Margaret . . .”

“It all depends,” Mrs Gardiner said gently. “Not all gentlemen are the same, nor all ladies. Some women find the whole affair thoroughly disagreeable and simply endure it for their husbands’ sakes. Others are more enthusiastic than their husbands. Most, I imagine, are somewhere in between. However, if you lack . . . fervour, it can be uncomfortable for you, and even painful if your husband is careless.”

“There are excuses you may give,” Mrs Bennet added. “Of course, when your courses come, he will not wish to be with you, although you may . . . well, never mind that.” Elizabeth stared at her mother in wonder. She did not think she had ever seen her blush so much in her life. “There are always headaches, especially if you are planning balls or parties. You may even take something to make yourself feel unwell, but that is usually unnecessary - a locked door will make your sentiments clear. Once you have produced a son or two, you shan’t have to endure it any longer, if you do not wish it. You may tell your husband as much, and it will be ended.”

And everyone lives happily ever after, Elizabeth thought dryly.

“If you wish,” Mrs Gardiner added. “That is far from obligatory.”

“Of course, of course. Jane dear, if you do dislike it, you can also encourage your husband to take a mistress. For a man as impulsive as dear Mr Bingley, it should be no great task.”

Jane turned white and stared at her mother. “But . . . I do not wish him to.”

“Well, of course not now. But later . . .” She nodded her head knowledgeably. “Believe me, my love, when you are both older, and have five or six or twelve children, and Mr Bingley has grown fat and is losing his hair, and you have no beauty left to speak of - then, you will think quite differently.”

“Not Papa, surely,” Elizabeth exclaimed. Mrs Bennet sniffed.

“Let me tell you, Miss Lizzy, your father was always so proud that he never went elsewhere. Why, I would have been very pleased if he had, I assure you! If it had made him a little kinder to me and the other girls, I should have liked nothing better. Mary and Kitty would have been some other woman’s daughters and then there would have been a son.” She tossed her head. Elizabeth did not even attempt to follow this logic. “But, Jane, if you do like being with him, and you still wish him to stay in your bed, you must take of yourself. You are prettier than I was, and you will be richer. There are creams, lotions - after children, you may have to stop eating to get your figure back, but - ”

“Jane,” said Mrs Gardiner firmly, “you are a beautiful woman, and I am sure Mr Bingley finds you so now and will always continue to do so. He loves you, and he will be kind to you, I am certain. He is a sweet-natured, gentle man, and I have the idea that he probably knows what he is about.” Jane looked perplexed, but Elizabeth remembered what Darcy had written, so long ago - I had often seen him in love before. And Colonel Fitzwilliam had thought that an unhappy love-affair was just the sort of trouble Bingley would get into. She bit her lip. Perhaps it was better that way, for Jane’s sake, but she did not like the idea of it, especially if he had dallied with ladies that Jane herself might meet.
“Just in case, however, I told Mr Gardiner to talk to them.”

Jane’s eyes opened wide. “To . . . both of them?”

Elizabeth could not keep a chuckle from escaping at this. Doubtless it was very awkward and embarrassing, and if Darcy mentioned it to her she would be properly sympathetic, but the image it evoked was too ridiculous. Bingley, Darcy, and Mr Gardiner, men of twenty-three, twenty-eight, and thirty-six years, respectively, all sitting together down to discuss their “marital duties” - she could not quite picture it. She wondered if her uncle talked to them both at once, or took turns, and could not think which would be worse. No wonder he had looked so unhappy as they left!

“Yes,” Mrs Gardiner said composedly. “For your sakes.” She turned to her sister. “Jenny, I think that is all, except . . .”

Mrs Bennet sat upright, and, were it possible, coloured still more deeply. “You may go, Jane. There are just a few little things we needed to talk to Lizzy about. The children have been asking for you all morning, I am sure.”

Jane looked bewildered, but nodded obediently and left to find her cousins.

“Lizzy, you are not like Jane,” Mrs Bennet announced. “You are not tender like she is. We . . . well, there are some things that you should hear without your sister.” Elizabeth’s eyebrows flew up. “For her own sake - so she is not disappointed. She is a perfect angel, but she is not warm like Lydia and me, and you. You are more like us.”

Elizabeth kept the instant revulsion she felt off her face. *I am not like Lydia. She may be my sister, but she has neither scruples nor sense nor -* That, however, was not what her mother spoke of - and Mrs Gardiner was not stopping her. Her vivacity did not come from her father, misanthropic and secluded in his library. Lydia had been the only one with anything like her love of laughter and the ridiculous - they were different, but they were also the same. She thought of Mary King again, and flinched.

“I do not think you will wish to simply do your duty and lie still,” Mrs Bennet continued. “You will probably enjoy - it - as much as Mr Darcy. After the way you have looked at him, sometimes I wonder . . . Well, he is very cold . . . no doubt you will have to seduce him later on, when you wish his - attentions.”

“Jenny,” said Mrs Gardiner, looking sympathetically at her furiously blushing niece, “I daresay you can discuss that after they are married. If it is ever a concern, that time is still far away.”

“I suppose,” Mrs Bennet conceded.

“My dear Lizzy, when a young man and a young lady who are passionately attached to each other marry, their feelings, at first, are quite fervent. I do not think you can possibly comprehend quite how intense they can be, and for you certainly will be. Everything you have learnt about modesty, about decorum - ”

“Which I taught you very well,” Mrs Bennet chipped in.

“- All of those things have nothing to do with marriage, do you understand? They were there to safeguard your reputation, your virtue. But what you do with your husband is your concern, and his, and no one else’s.”

“Forget all of it,” Mrs Bennet said helpfully. “It will do you no good.”
Elizabeth frowned. A lifetime of maidenly modesty could not be put aside just like that. She was rather glad she had never followed those rules like Jane or Mary had. Still, she had never been - well, like Lydia. She blushed at simply the idea of wearing some of the nightgowns her aunt had insisted that she purchase. They were beautiful, but to think of Darcy actually seeing her in some of them - she felt terribly embarrassed, yet also half-anticipated his reaction.

It was, she decided, too confusing for words to express.

Mrs Gardiner cleared her throat. “Now, when you are first married - if you have not been improper together - you will not know what each other’s preferences are. You may not know yourselves.”

“And men simply do not talk,” said Mrs Bennet. Elizabeth’s head spun. “Even chatty men like Mr Bingley, and Mr Darcy is not at all chatty. That will be your part.”

“Talking?” she repeated.

“Yes,” said Mrs Gardiner firmly. Elizabeth stared. It was very strange to see her aunt and mother in such agreement. “And you also must convince him to talk, to tell you what he likes.”

Elizabeth’s hands went to her burning cheeks. “I couldn’t,” she said, feeling prudish and insipid, but - “How could I? I cannot even imagine it.”

“There are any number of things you cannot imagine,” Mrs Bennet said meaningfully. Elizabeth thought that every drop of blood she possessed must have rushed to her head by now.

“And you must tell him what you like,” said Mrs Gardiner.

“Why?” Elizabeth asked plaintively.

“Because he will not know otherwise. No matter how brazen or immodest you think you are, tell him. My own mother told me nothing beyond what I might have guessed already, and horrible stories of pain and humiliation. I cannot say how frightened I was.”

“I am not afraid,” Elizabeth said.

Mrs Gardiner smiled. “We are not all as fearless as you, Elizabeth.”

“I am not fearless, I am afraid of many things,” said she, “but Mr Darcy is not one of them.”
Chapter 11

When Elizabeth and Darcy almost ran into each other, she escaping Mrs Gardiner and Mrs Bennet, he Mr Gardiner, they started and blushed with embarrassment almost equal to that which they had felt at Pemberley.

“Er . . . you have been with your mother? and your aunt?” Darcy asked, his eyes darting from a painting, to the rug, to her shoes - everywhere but her face. His awkwardness went a long way in alleviating her own, and she smiled and said,

“Yes. It was very enlightening.”

He coloured even more deeply but his eyes jerked up and met her own. “Oh? I . . . er . . . how, er, nice?”

Elizabeth laughed. “You need not abuse the language; I was only teasing you. Mama told Jane and me only a very little.”

“But Jane left,” he said confusedly. “Bingley was with her.”

Embarrassed as he was now, she could only imagine how uncomfortable he must have been a few minutes earlier. Doubtless he had been eager to make Bingley suffer what he had.

“Oh . . . yes. Mama had a few things to say which she did not think Jane needed to hear.”

Darcy’s eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing, merely offered her arm and hastily changed the subject.

*     *     *     *     *

They left town the next day, with considerable relief on the parts of all, even Mrs Bennet (she was looking forward to the disposal of her daughters). Oddly, the last few days passed much more quickly than the first had. They were busier now, with wedding plans, invitations to be sent out, the Gardiner children to keep in check, and of course, the never ending social duties.

Both Darcy and Elizabeth were too tired to meet on their customary quiet rendezvous. Elizabeth spent hours awake with Jane, knowing that after the wedding, it might be months, perhaps over a year, until they met again. Then she had to comfort her father, who tried to hide his real dismay at losing both of his sensible daughters at once, particularly his favourite. She knew he had offered to repay Darcy before they left, who had not “ranted and stormed” but simply refused in his usual autocratic manner.

Mr Bennet liked Darcy, she was certain of it; but sometimes she wondered how much Darcy liked him. He was clearly going out of his way to be agreeable, but just as clearly, it was an effort, nothing like the natural ease he had with the Gardiners.

But perhaps it was an unfair comparison. He knew the Gardiners better, Mr Gardiner was the sort of gregarious man whose sociability rubbed off on everyone around him, and Polly adored him. Elizabeth saw her neighbours’ awed, almost suspicious, distance towards Darcy thaw visibly during
that final week. They undoubtedly still thought him taciturn and unfriendly, but it was impossible to really dislike a man who had a six-year-old girl permanently attached to his trousers.

Shortly before the wedding, Darcy’s assorted relations and, less surprisingly, Bingley’s sisters, arrived. Elizabeth was less than delighted to be thrown into the society of the latter, but the Fitzwilliams seemed infinitely less objectionable in the company of her family. Only Mr Fitzwilliam, Cecilia’s clergyman brother, failed to appear - and he sent earnest apologies. They even brought the two little girls, though Elizabeth only saw much of Lady Emily, the dimpled, curly-haired daughter of Lord and Lady Ravenshaw. The other, it seemed, had been thoroughly taught that she was to be seen and not heard, and Elizabeth rather pitied her.

Georgiana was nearly as silent, except for the occasional shocked gasp. Darcy’s protective concern seemed fully justified.

About three days after their arrival, Elizabeth claimed exhaustion and fled to a parlour overlooking the gathered relatives. They were facing away and did not see her; she arrived just in time to see Darcy swing Polly into the air. The little girl squealed with pleasure, suffering none of the shyness or reserve of his own cousins.

Elizabeth sighed a little; though she could clearly make out Darcy’s face, Polly’s was buried into his shoulder. From this perspective, she was simply a slender, long-limbed girl - she could have been anyone. But her hair was not the rich brown of her father’s, it was the same pale gold as Mrs Gardiner’s - and Darcy’s. For one brief moment, Elizabeth allowed herself to imagine that the child was not a cousin but a daughter - her daughter.

* * * * *

Only two days before the wedding, Mrs Bennet seemed to realise her talk with Elizabeth and Jane had been inadequate. She caught the former unawares and bombarded her with advice of every variety, most it contradictory - both how, and why, she should seduce Darcy, and also how to persuade “such a man” to take a mistress, if that was what she wanted. “In some ways,” she said, with what passed for thoughtfulness with her, “he reminds me of your father.”

Elizabeth was trembling with rage, anxiety, and mirth by the time she escaped, quite early the next morning. They had more time now, for everything was arranged, and often met near the mount before the others awoke.

“And then,” she concluded, “Mama told me that if I did not wish your . . . company, I should influence you to find another woman to keep you occupied.”

“What?” His voice had become - not softer, but lower and quieter and more controlled. Elizabeth was both relieved and slightly distressed to see him look so thoroughly offended. Knowing herself to be treading on dangerous ground, for her familiarity with the habits of his set was decidedly limited, nonetheless she said defensively,

“My mother’s thinking is nothing extraordinary, this time. Fitzwilliam, you know such behaviour is only to be expected.”

“I beg your pardon?” He stopped where he was, and turned to look at her. His cheeks were flushed, although with anger or embarrassment she could not tell, and his eyes hard and blazing.
“Not - I do not mean . . .” She was not entirely sure what she meant. She had never given the matter much thought.

“I very much hope you do not mean that such behaviour is only to be expected of me.”

“No,” she replied sharply, “I know that it has been - what did you say? - the study of your life to avoid the weaknesses of mere mortals.”

They stared at one another for a moment; then his expression of icy hauteur shifted and Elizabeth’s mouth twitched.

Darcy said, “I must have sounded very pompous.”

“You did,” she agreed, “although perhaps less so to someone not determined to think the worst of everything you said and did.”

“Yes, someone like Miss Bingley,” he said dryly. Elizabeth laughed.

Fortunately for your sanity, the world is not divided into women like me and women like Miss Bingley.” She hesitated. “Fitzwilliam, you must not change the subject. I have to - I wish to know.”

Darcy blinked. “You should probably ask Mrs Gardiner,” he said.

Elizabeth smiled. “I heard that you subjected Mr Gardiner to another discussion on the subject.”

Colour rushed into his cheeks. “Polly?”

“Meg, actually. I doubt Polly would have comprehended enough to care, had she heard.”

A peculiar pinched look came over his face, and he said, “Children comprehend a great deal more than most give them credit for, Elizabeth.”

“Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth, frowning, “you are upset, and I cannot think it is simply the subject.”

He glanced at her. “Elizabeth, I do not wish to discuss it, and I cannot imagine why you do.”

“Avoiding unpleasant conversations has never done us any good,” she persisted. “We are to be married, Fitzwilliam. We should be able to talk about anything.”

“Once we are married,” he amended.

“We have less than two days left,” she said impatiently, sitting down and forcing him to do the same. “I understand that you are offended by my mother’s intimation, but it is perfectly of a piece with her usual conversation, and you have shrugged all that off.”

He looked at her incredulously. “The occasional impertinence is one thing, and telling you that my faithlessness is inevitable is quite another.”

“I did not believe her for an instant,” Elizabeth said. “You know I did not.”

He hesitated. “Yes - I know.”

“That is not all, surely. I love her, but Mama is far from sensible. I cannot imagine that you care greatly what she thinks of you.”

“Surely you would not have me indifferent to your parents’ opinion of me?”
“Please stop trying to misdirect me.” She added confusedly, “Fitzwilliam, surely you do not mean to suggest that - that you are not - ”

“That I am what, exactly?”

“I hardly know how to say.”

With a look of angry disdain, although she hardly knew who for, he said, “I am not in the habit of seducing respectable women, visiting brothels, consorting with actresses and opera-girls, or taking advantage of my dependants. There, is your curiosity adequately satisfied?”

Elizabeth, at once pleased and stung, stood and paced briefly, before turning to face him. “Fitzwilliam, if you have done as little as you would have me believe, then I do not understand what is wrong with you. We can put off this conversation until our wedding-night, if you are that determined, but it is certainly something I would prefer to have over with by then. Why will you not explain? If you had lived a life of self-indulgence and profligacy, I might understand, but I know you have not; - you have said so yourself, and your cousins told me that your name has never been linked to any lady’s, so I need not fear any embarrassment of that sort.” She reached out and tangled her fingers in his, and felt, rather than saw, his angrily defensive demeanour crack.

He startled her by briefly leaning his head against their clasped hands. “I have not told you all that happened with my family, when we were in town.”

“Your family?”

“My aunt has conceived,” said he, in a tone of utter gloom.

“I should have thought you would be delighted at the prospect of another cousin.”

“A cousin? Well, I suppose - yes, a second cousin, but that is not . . . I try not to think much on that.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Lady Ravenshaw’s father was my grandfather’s brother. Therefore, any child of hers is a cousin of mine, but that is all.”

“Oh! She has a - er - paramour?”

“As you said yourself, it is hardly unusual,” he said, but did not look any more reconciled to it than she. “The gentleman in question, a Mr Mainwaring, is married - unhappily, I suppose - and not a person on whose scruples or discretion I would place the smallest reliance. Neither is he wealthy enough to support his own extravagance, let alone hers. My cousins and I, unwisely, used to assist in discharging her debts.” His mouth twisted into a caricature of a smile. “It was not out of any affection for her, I assure you, but concern for the family’s name and my uncle’s peace of mind. I ceased my contributions not long after - April.”

Elizabeth only had a rather foggy idea of how this all worked together, but she caught the meaning of “April” and said, “Why did you stop, then?”

“I spent . . . after . . . that, I spent a great deal of time simply thinking. It was only when I seriously considered it, that I understood how hypocritical my own behaviour was.”

“Hypocritical?” she cried. “You are many things, my love, but that is certainly not one of them.”

“I helped support her in a life I condemned,” Darcy countered. “I could not in good conscience do so...
any longer. Then, when we went to town, there was the child. All but my uncle know the truth; it would be impossible to pass it off as his, even if we wished to do so. Nothing has been decided upon. Lisle thought to raise it with the other children - with his own daughter! - which the others and myself, of course, recognised as an impossibility. He would not be so foolish, if he had any idea -”

Darcy stopped, then straightened and said more calmly, “The matter has come near to tearing our family apart, all because of their profligacy and selfishness. I very much resented the suggestion that I would do anything remotely similar.”

“Well, I am glad that your resentment is not so implacable as I once thought, then,” she said, and added, “I am sorry. I wish you had told me earlier.”

He laughed unsteadily. “It is a rather difficult subject to weave into ordinary conversation, and I had enough to explain my distress at the time.”

“In the future,” Elizabeth said, “you will not do that?”

Darcy hesitated.

“Fitzwilliam, I do not wish to be coddled and protected as if I were some ignorant miss. How many of our misunderstandings could have been averted if we had simply talked?”

“Eliz --”

“Promise me,” she said, so fiercely that he looked at her in astonishment, “promise me you will not hide anything from me, not even for my own good. I am so tired of secrecy and reserve I can hardly think. I will not go into our marriage ignorant, even if you, of all people, would have me so - and I have heard you deplore studied ignorance in women often enough.”

He looked away. “I am sorry,” he said, without seeming to know what for.

Elizabeth said, “Now that that is over, we ought to . . .” She felt herself blushing, and stood up, taking his arm. “Walk home before my mother goes into a fit of hysterics.”

“Walk home? Very well.” He paused. “I think there was a question somewhere in - all of that.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I do not remember. I certainly did not think you would ever . . .” She bit her lip. “Fitzwilliam, do you remember, when I was a little impatient, with your . . . reserve in expressing your feelings -” Darcy smiled at this speech, as euphemism-laden as his own - “and you said it was because you did not wish to disgrace me?”

“I remember.”

“It would only be disgraceful because we are not married. That is what you meant? - that you do not wish to dishonour me?"’

“Of course.” He looked at her in some surprise.

“So -” Elizabeth was embarrassed, but also determined, and continued, “If . . . after we are married, if I . . . if I want you to . . . to come to me, you would not think it - disgraceful?”

Darcy caught his breath, and was silent for several moments. Then he tightened his grip on her hand and said quietly, “No. No, I would not.”

“I am glad, because - you understand - I do not want you to put me on a pedestal. Particularly not -” She fixed her eyes on the ground, glad she had her bonnet shielding her face, and said more boldly,
“Particularly not when we are alone.”

“I am aware of your imperfections, Elizabeth.”

“My aunt said . . . what did Mr Gardiner say to you?”

Darcy flushed. “He loaned me some books, and, er, discussed them with me.”

“What sort of books?” When he did not reply, she added, “Will you show them to me, my dear?”

“Certainly not!” He looked scandalised. Elizabeth laughed delightedly. She loved the strain of prudery in his character, something she might have deplored in anybody else, and could not begin to explain why.

“I . . . do you remember, before - well, Wickham, when we used to argue?”

“Yes, that was when you hated me on my own merits.”

“No,” she said, “I did not hate you then, and a great deal of it had more to do with me than you. But that is not what I meant to say. It is . . . I suppose it is rose-coloured glasses, but I missed that, a little. Not disliking you, that only made me unhappy, but the way you talked to me.” She laughed. “You talked to me like - almost like I was a man.”

Darcy blinked.

“Or . . . I mean, there was none of that nonsense about my being a lady rather than a rational creature. I was so used to being cleverer than everyone, I think your intelligence was half the reason I so disliked you. Yet it was also the first good quality I ever noticed about you. Well, actually - ” she coloured - “the second.”

“The second?” He turned his head. Elizabeth felt her cheeks turning even redder.

“The first thing . . . well, I thought you had very fine eyes. But,” she said hastily, “then you began talking and I did not think about it again, for quite a long time.”

Darcy laughed outright.

“Still, that is not what I was talking about. After we are married, you will speak to me like you did before? I rather like being challenged. And - ” she smiled ruefully - “I think it is probably good for me.”

“Of course,” he said. “Elizabeth, I could not be a pliable, mild fellow like Bingley, even if I tried.”

“I would not want you to be like Bingley!” she cried. “I like him, of course, but . . .”

“You would not want to be married to him. I know - I admire Jane greatly, but - ” He shook his head. “I daresay that I will be my usual argumentative self once we are married.”

“Once we are married? Why only then?”

He smiled. “You shan’t be able to get rid of me, then.”
“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church - ”

Elizabeth smiled to herself as Jane’s hand was placed in Bingley’s. Mr Beresford looked pleased. She imagined he did not often have the opportunity to marry such a pair, young, in love, and deserving of the happiness they would undoubtedly enjoy. Bingley had a wide, slightly foolish smile on his face. His untidy brown hair had fallen in his eyes again, but she knew he felt nothing of it. Jane was a picture of blissful serenity.

Mrs Bennet tried to cry, but was too delighted with her accomplishment to manage it. Not a nerve troubled her now, although she had certainly been in a fit of hysteria that morning, fussing over the brides’ hair and clothes. Jane had gained a little weight and so the fit of her best new gown was not quite perfect, and the scattered freckles on Elizabeth’s nose had sent her into a frenzy. But now, nothing could diminish her happiness.

Mr Bennet was blinking. Elizabeth sighed a little. Poor Papa. He would miss them bitterly, she knew. Of course he would always be welcome at Pemberley, but she did not know how often he would make the journey, he so disliked travelling. She would write, she promised herself, long rambling letters full of news.

Kitty looked bored, and rather lonely, occasionally throwing a covetous glance at the lace on Georgiana’s gown. Elizabeth felt a twinge of conscience. She had hardly spared her younger sisters any thought, her mind had been so full of her own affairs, and Jane’s. Kitty was nearly as awed by Miss Darcy as she was by her brother, yet often stared at her with mixed wonder and envy. Word of her fortune had passed as quickly as her brother’s, and most of the neighbourhood seemed to regard her as a strange foreign creature. Mary only frightened her, but she had actually spoken to Kitty. If the latter could be taken away from Meryton and given a proper education, she might improve, she was still young.

“First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.”

Elizabeth thought fondly of the Gardiner children, the little boys and then the girls, the elder always trying to be a model of propriety, Polly following Darcy or Jane about with constant questions and one hand gripping skirt or trousers. She briefly wondered about the nieces and nephews she would have, who they would resemble, how they would behave. What sort of life could Lydia’s children expect, what sort of happiness would be possible for the offspring of such a union?

She looked down at her folded hands. There was no point in distressing herself over people who did not yet exist, not on this day, of all days. The Bingleys, now, would be as different as could be imagined. Unless - she briefly entertained herself by imagining them as parents of a girl like herself, or still worse, Miss Bingley. Well, they would take far greater care. Bingley was lackadaisical, to be sure, but she had no doubts that Jane or Darcy would take him in hand if it became necessary. His easy ductile temper had its advantages.

“Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.
“Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.”

Elizabeth lifted her eyes and met Darcy’s. He was in a great happiness, she could tell; he was not Bingley, he did not show it with that mirthful, exuberant grin on his face, although he did smile, a little, when he looked at her. She wondered what he was thinking; he seemed graver than usual. Regret, perhaps, at his role in dividing these two who were so evidently suited for one another; something of the same high nervous spirits she felt? She had no doubts as to her choice, but so much was changing. Afterwards, they would be indissolubly bound, they would never be the same again.

She saw a tear rolling down Jane’s cheek and paid close attention then, ignoring all else but the four of them, her sister, the man who would be her brother, and her betrothed. Soon Bingley was a sliding a pretty gold band onto the fourth finger of Jane’s left hand. It had been a new purchase. The Bingleys were just setting out, beginning their descendants’ history, and most of what Jane received from her betrothed had never passed through another woman’s hands, certainly not this. It was better, perhaps, for them; Elizabeth would never admit it, but she could not help preferring the weight of the centuries upon Darcy and most of the things he gave her. She felt, somehow, as if it she had become part of something greater and more important than herself, a feeling she had never had before, but which she relished.

“Forasmuch as Charles and Jane have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

And then, it was their turn. Jane, now a married woman - Lydia’s demand to be given precedence flashed into her mind, and as quickly left it - kissed her, and before she quite knew what had happened, she and Darcy were at the altar. The silence was almost deafening. She thought of his family, thought that she could never go back, and wanted to look back for reassurance, at Jane, her mother, Georgiana, anyone. Instead, she glanced up at Darcy. He looked perfectly composed, too composed. She knew him well enough, now, to recognise that particular composure, the expression without expression that signified the height of feeling with him, and smiled a little.

How many times had she heard the ceremony? She could not remember. Only a moment ago, she had been half-listening to it; certainly it was familiar, she could have recited it in her sleep - and yet it was wholly different now. She fixed her eyes on Mr Beresford and listened with far greater care than ever before.

How could it pass so quickly? One moment he was saying, “- therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God” and making her think, yet again, of Lydia and Wickham, then, for all her determined attention, her heart was pounding in her ears as the pleasant monotony of Mr Beresford’s voice was replaced by Darcy’s clear baritone.

“I will.”

Elizabeth caught her breath. She had not cried when Jane had pronounced the same words, she had felt only happiness, but now -

“Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy
estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only to him, so long as ye both shall live?"

“I will,” said Elizabeth, and blinked away the moisture in her eyes. She did not dare weep. Her father did, though, his cheeks damp as he gave her to his old friend, and she could only smile reassuringly. Then Darcy took her hand, and he said, still in that steady voice - only Elizabeth could hear the faintest hint of a tremble, and only she could see the exhilaration in his eyes -

“I, Fitzwilliam, take thee, Elizabeth, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

She no longer had the slightest desire to cry now, she felt a rush of anticipatory delight, as if the world were opening before her, when she took his hand in her own, and she said, “I, Elizabeth, take thee, Fitzwilliam, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

Almost reluctantly, she released her grip on his hand, feeling dizzy with it all as Lady Anne’s ring slid onto the fourth finger of her left hand. It was perfectly lovely, of course; he had given it to her when they were in London, and had it re-set for her.

“With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.”

Her hand looked different now, with that ring that she would never remove - no longer a girl’s hand, but a woman’s. She smiled vibrantly, unable to stop herself, as they knelt down together.

“O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life; send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, (whereof this ring given and received is a token and pledge,) and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together - ” was such a thing even possible? - “and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Once again, the last time, their hands were joined. They stared at one another, Darcy with his lashes lowered, she, her lips parted, and their fingers tightened together as Mr Beresford pronounced,

“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

*     *     *     *     *

The moment after her marriage, easily a half-dozen thoughts at once dashed into her head. Wonder that it had finally happened - Miss Elizabeth Bennet was gone, and she was Mrs Darcy. She would be this man’s wife, live with him, bear his children, preside over his home. She was no longer a Bennet, but a Darcy of Pemberley. As far as the law was concerned, she had not become his, she had become him. She had not the slightest fear of him, but that knowledge, that whatever kind things he might do by her, it was now in his power to do them or not, made her intensely aware of how much had changed in her life. There had been four marriages in her family, this last year. Charlotte and Mr Collins, Lydia and Wickham, Jane and Bingley, and finally, her own, and all so
different. She was suddenly, fiercely, grateful for the happiness she had so nearly missed.

The choir sang, “Blessed are all they that fear the Lord,” and afterwards Elizabeth signed for the last time her old name, as the new ring sparkled up at her.

The Bingleys, Hursts, Darcys, and Bennets walked directly to Longbourn from the church. The carriages had been sent on ahead. Kitty and Mary immediately walked together, behind Mr and Mrs Bennet, but Georgiana stood uncomfortably by herself. The Bingley sisters turned towards her, clearly intending to invite her to join them, and Elizabeth instantly broke from contemplation on her married state.

“Georgiana, you must join us,” she called out, and the younger girl’s face lit up with a relieved smile.

“Oh, I do not want to intrude - ”

Darcy, speaking with his customary softness in dealing with his sister, said, “Come, my dear,” and offered his free arm. It was strange and rather awkward to not only walk without Jane, but before her, so Elizabeth turned her attention to those who would be her companions now.

“I feel quite silly for having never asked, but Georgiana, where are you to go, if Fitzwilliam and I are to be alone at Pemberley?”

“I am staying in London, with my uncle,” she replied meekly. “I did not know you were going to Pemberley.”

“Yes, we are leaving tomorrow. We decided long ago that we preferred some time without the chaos of town, and I so want to see it again.” She smiled as reassuringly as she could.

“It is very pretty in the winter,” Georgiana offered, before flinching at the sound of quarrelling from Elizabeth’s sisters. From then on, she only listened to the light conversation between her brother and his wife, offering soft assent when she felt particularly brave.

The breakfast was at Longbourn, and they arrived not long before the ever-punctual Fitzwilliams. Elizabeth, without even thinking, fixed a smile on her face as her new family approached. To her astonishment, their manner to her had altered considerably; they might not be warm, but that hint of disapproval and distance was gone, and her smile quickly turned genuine. They all shook her hand formally and called her “Mrs Darcy,” the Earl with shiny eyes and his wife with teary ones.

Elizabeth offered the former her handkerchief.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said.

“You are quite welcome.”

Lord Ravenshaw stood still, looking at Darcy, who was talking quietly and earnestly with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Lisle. “They have been as thick as thieves ever since they were children, just like Anne and I were.” He blew his nose. “You saw the portrait. He is just like her.”

“Yes, he looks like her,” Elizabeth said gently.

“She should be here today. She would have wanted - ” With that, he wandered away. Elizabeth had only a moment to herself before Cecilia joined her.

“Poor Ravenshaw,” she said. “I do not think he can be happy, really, he never puts his grief away. I hope you do not mind; it is your wedding-day.”
“I understand,” said Elizabeth. Could a man of twenty-eight be called an orphan as a girl of sixteen might? She had wondered why his more distant family came at all - but of course they wanted to fill the absence of his own parents’ blessing. Cold they might be, but they did love him; and because she was his wife, she had become one of their own.

Elizabeth shook her head and towards the end kissed her father and mother, who in their very different ways beamed proudly and a little sadly at her. Polly and Emily, the old cousin and the new, hovered around Darcy, one tugging at him until he lifted her up, the other simply staying near, gazing up at him with the wistful, brilliant eyes of all the Fitzwilliams. He took her hand and she smiled shyly. Elizabeth bit her lip. From this day on, she might conceive, an heir, a daughter - indeed, she should, that was her duty above all others. She felt a strange longing to hold their child in her arms, to present him, or her, to Darcy, to see him swing their daughter up, or walking hand-in-hand with the next Master of Pemberley.

“Miss Bennet?” a timid voice said. Elizabeth looked down at Lord Lisle’s daughter. Her name was Sophia, but somehow it was difficult to think of her by it. Something rather whimsical might have suited her better. “I mean, Mrs Darcy. Could I call you Aunt Darcy? I call Mr Darcy ‘uncle’ because he’s my godfather. He’s Emily’s, too.”

Elizabeth heard her own voice say, “Of course you may.” There would be others, she knew, her own nephews and nieces - but little Sophia Fitzwilliam was the first who had ever given her that name, and her heart was absurdly touched. “Was there something you wanted to ask me?”

“I was thinking, Uncle Darcy is so happy with you, perhaps you could find a wife for my papa? He is always so sad.” She blinked up at her solemnly.

“That is so.” Sophy contemplated her father, who stood a little apart from the others, speaking to his mother-in-law. “He talks to Lady Ravenshaw a great deal, even when nobody else does. Everyone is unhappy with her, and my uncle Fitzwilliam shouted, but Uncle Darcy did not even though he was very, very angry. They quarrelled with Papa. Then everyone was unhappy with Cousin Cecily too, and Grandpapa is probably going to send her to my great-aunt in Kent. I hope he doesn’t, because Lady Catherine is scary and doesn’t like children. If she goes to Yorkshire, though, I think we shall go too and perhaps come to Pemberley. Oh! Will I be able to stay at Pemberley even though you are there? Cousin Georgiana never minded.”

“Neither shall I,” Elizabeth assured her.

“Sophia!” Lady Ravenshaw shepherded the girl back to the other children. Sophia, her face turned away, stuck her tongue out, and Elizabeth smiled before turning to Lord Lisle, who was waiting patiently by her side.

“She Darcy. Welcome to our family.” He shook her hand. She rather wondered that it had taken him so long, but she was not surprised.

“Thank you.” She studied him a moment. Despite the resemblance between them, his tousled curls and dark brooding stare ensured that he would never be mistaken for his cousin.

“Mrs Darcy, I daresay you will think me a boor to ask you this on your wedding-day,” he said nervously, “but I was wondering if you might . . .”

It was not a very far leap to make. “You wish me to speak to my husband” (she thrilled a bit at the sound of that word on her lips) “concerning your disagreement?”
“At present I would be happy with peace,” said Lord Lisle. “I see Darcy has already told you everything.” Something of wonder, and envy, entered his gaze.

“I really cannot promise anything today,” Elizabeth said, “but of course I think family quarrels are very disagreeable.”

“Thank you, cousin,” said Lisle, with a shy smile. She started at the appellation; he bowed and departed.

By the time they were ready to leave, she had received no less than four requests from different members of his family to intercede with Darcy, and convince him to make peace with his cousin. Two more appeals regarded unrelated matters.

Once or twice, Elizabeth exasperatedly looked over to her sister, and saw Jane enduring the attentions of her new sisters. Then she felt almost grateful for the Fitzwilliams. At least they were sincere, and would not embarrass her in public. She linked her arm with Darcy’s as they prepared to go, and after embracing and kissing various relations, turned to Georgiana.

“You are all leaving this afternoon?”

She nodded timidly, throwing a fearful glance at her family. Elizabeth smiled sympathetically. She was not remotely afraid of the Fitzwilliams, but to a shy, nervous girl like Georgiana, afraid of doing wrong, they were undoubtedly as aweful as Bingley had once accused Darcy of being. Elizabeth took her young sister’s hands and whispered,

“You must come as soon as you may, after a week, perhaps two. Pemberley is your home now, and you are my sister, and I wish to know you as well as I do my own. So you must not think that you will be intruding or unwelcome in any way.” She stepped back and raised her voice. “We both want you with us. Is that not so, Fitzwilliam?”

“It is,” said he, succinctly.

Georgiana’s lips curved into a tentative smile. “Everyone said you would want to be by yourselves.”

“Perhaps for a little while.” Elizabeth glanced at Darcy and the couple blushed. “But I have never in my life been without some female company, and your brother shall go quite distracted if he cannot fuss over you.” Georgiana’s eyes widened, and she looked at Darcy - he did not seem upset, only rather amused. She swallowed.

“The Gardiners are coming for Christmas,” he added. “You must be at Pemberley a week before that.”

“That is only another week,” Georgiana said doubtfully, “but I will come as soon as you want me.” She smiled shyly at her brother.

Elizabeth embraced her, and Darcy bent to kiss her cheek. After many more affectionate farewells, they joined Jane and Bingley, both of whom seemed guiltily relieved at their escape, and took their respective carriages to Netherfield, where they were to spend the wedding-night.

* * * * *

The afternoon was spent with the newly-married Bingleys. All four enjoyed themselves immensely, wandering around the park, eating a well-prepared luncheon, and simply talking. To be among sensible, refined people, intimate friends no less, could not be underestimated. Nearly all of the
tension from breakfast faded. Jane confessed that she had always longed to see a really cold, snowy winter; Bingley claimed they were miserable and existed only as a test of character; Darcy accused his friend, or rather brother, of being subverted by a pampered London existence. Elizabeth, Jane, and Bingley laughed all through the day, and Darcy smiled. No mention was made of the night that lay ahead, or the Wickhams, though they discussed every other couple of their acquaintance in some fashion or another; there seemed an embargo on both subjects.

It was only as the couples bade one another farewell that Elizabeth felt any hint of unease. Bingley seemed eager and Jane apprehensive, although not unduly so. Darcy had grown quiet and grave, even for him, and Elizabeth - she hardly knew what she felt, only that her heart was hammering madly, both from natural bridal anxiety, and eagerness that finally all those feelings which had risen up at every stolen kiss or caress would no longer be forcibly suppressed, but that they were now perfectly natural and permissible.

The knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of what was to come erected an almost physical barrier between them. Elizabeth was not afraid, not of him, but she was unarguably apprehensive. Her breath came quickly, and the thick silence made her so nervous that she tripped over a small stair. Had it only been a moment, a half-moment, since they had left Jane and Bingley? She had never thought it a large staircase, nothing to Pemberley’s -

And, as quickly as that, the intense discomfort was broken when Darcy reached out and grasped her elbow, steadying her. “Elizabeth?”

She felt a rush of happiness. They were married, man and wife, and nobody would ever look askance at too many long walks together, too much time alone in a shut room, too much anything. No one could tell them what they could and could not do. Or, if they did, neither had to listen. Propriety could be hanged - when they were alone, that time belonged only to them.

It seemed as if the people who had been Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy of Pemberley were vanished to-night, or rather, that they were only masks donned before the world, and wholly unnecessary between the two of them. Darcy and Lizzy, the selves they were to their friends, they too had fled this evening. She felt as if she had been stripped bare of all but her essentials, leaving only her innermost self, the part that wasn’t a part, Elizabeth. Did he feel the same? He looked slightly anxious. Oh - she remembered.

“Do not worry,” she said, “I am well, I only stumbled.”

Her thoughts had taken them to the doorway she could only assume was hers. For a moment the awkwardness sprang up full-fledged again as they looked at one another.

“I . . . I shall need some time. To prepare.”

“Of course.” He nodded distractedly. “Will an half-hour be sufficient?”

“Twenty minutes,” she said immediately, then coloured a little. “I will not need more than twenty minutes.”

“I shall join you then.”

He was blushing too, and she loved him all the more for it. “Shall I - is there anything you . . .” She did not have the words, or could not say them.

“Go ahead, Elizabeth, I shall wait for you,” he said, with what she always thought of as his portrait-smile. She had turned away, a little uncertainly, when he stopped her. “Except - there is one thing -”
She turned her head, eagerly said, “Yes?”

“I would like - ” he sounded breathless, and took a steadying breath before continuing. “Will you leave your hair up? Just like it is now?”

Elizabeth raised one hand to the elegant coiffure Sarah had laboured over. “My hair?” she repeated wonderingly. “Well, if you would like . . .”

“Yes, I would,” he said, gazing at her with an intent look that was at once familiar and very strange. It was not only desire, for that was certainly no stranger to them, but something else. Something had altered in him -

*Purpose*, she thought. Before he was always restrained, it was almost as if those feelings did not signify, for he would do nothing - and now, now they do -

And perhaps there was something else, but she could not say what it was. She lowered her hand self-consciously. “Then you shall,” she said, with a bold look that could not possibly be misinterpreted, and left a kiss that was a mere whisper against his cheek. She could hear his soft laughter as she slipped through her door, and felt her breath catch. She did not know exactly what the change was in him, but she was certain there was an echo of it in herself. It was certainly not unwelcome.

* * * *

Elizabeth could hardly imagine anyone seeing her like this. She thought of Mr Collins with a nervous giggle, thanking heavens that the man she would face without petticoats or lace to protect her was nothing like her cousin.

After fifteen minutes, she told her maid, “That will be all.”

“But Mrs Darcy, your ha - ”

Elizabeth felt a flush of pleasure at the title, which was still new and wonderful to her ears, and a self-consciousness still this side of embarrassment, at her hair, still coiled on the back of her head.

“That will be all,” she repeated, more forcefully.

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl said, and with a glance that was half awe, half sympathy, she slipped away. Elizabeth took a deep breath, looking at the watch she had left on the vanity. Eighteen minutes already. As if she were being married all over again, she felt her heart racing, her cheeks flushing a deep red. She had never been so indecently clad before any man - no, she told herself sternly, *it is not indecent, he is my husband*. Yet he remained a man, a man who had once been rendered speechless by the sight of her stocking-clad ankle. She chewed her lip, turning to gaze at her reflection. In her white gown, pale with nervous anticipation, a few wayward freckles dotting her nose, she looked rather like a maiden about to sacrificed to some heathen god. Well - Elizabeth plucked at the skirt - no respectable maiden would venture out of doors in this. Mrs Gardiner had insisted and it was so pretty, but - would he like it?

At that very moment, just seconds after her watch struck the twenty-minute mark, a knock came at the door, and then his voice,

“Elizabeth?”
She felt a flutter in her belly. Nothing would ever be the same, after to-night - she would never be the same. And he? She did not know how it was for men, being married and lying together. Certainly she could not look at him as she always had.

Elizabeth pressed one hand against her stomach, striving for some measure of composure, and said, “Come in.”

It was very strange, she thought. In dressing-gown and nightshirt, he was nearly as covered as in the most formal of attire, and yet it was so very different. Her eyes instantly went to his bare neck. How silly, that the sight of something so natural and ordinary could make her heart pound and her blood race. Yet she had never seen it, never seen any more of him exposed than his face and hands, and somehow he looked so different in that robe than in day-clothes. Taller and thinner, and - and she longed to touch the blue silk. She liked him in blue, although she had never seen him in it. Why did he not wear it? Every other man of her acquaintance did - why always black?

By the time she checked her rambling thoughts, Darcy had not moved at all.

“I - I think, Fitzwilliam, that we are expected to do more than look at one another, however agreeable that might be,” she said, with the most impertinent smile she could summon up at the moment. Darcy came back to himself and shut the door behind him with an audible click.

“It is very agreeable,” he said quietly, covering the space between them in a few quick strides. “You are -” His eyes left hers and briefly examined her - Elizabeth blushed - “you are quite beautiful, my dear.”

“I - ” She felt more uncertain than she had in her life, and since she had nothing else to hold on to, she reached out and clung to one of his hands. “I love you,” she said suddenly. “I love that you think I am beautiful.”

He reached out and briefly caressed her cheek. Her skin tingled under his fingers, and she felt her lips curving tentatively at the pleasant, soothing warmth of it. If it was like this, she thought, she need not worry, this she could bear with no awkwardness. “Are you afraid, Elizabeth?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head, nodded, then shook her head again. Darcy smiled, and she laughed. “I am not afraid of you. You would not hurt me for the world,” she said honestly. “But I am a little afraid of - oh, not knowing. I mean, I know - theoretically - but that is not the same. And I want to please you, and I am afraid I will not.” They had told her to talk, but it was so difficult. She could only do her best; -Elizabeth tightened her grip on his hand.

“Elizabeth,” Darcy said, “there is very little you could do, tonight, that would not please me. But . . . if you are not pleased, you must say so. In fact, you must tell me if you are, as well, so I shall know to . . . so I shall know what brings you pleasure.”

She blushed furiously, but only held on tighter to his hands, and said, “I will; -and you will do the same?”

“I shall try.”

They smiled at one another, both relieved without quite understanding why. “I did not let Sarah take my hair down,” she told him, feeling absurdly like a child presenting a treasure.

“I see that,” he said, and the tips of his fingers danced along the loose tendrils of hair. This, too, was pleasant, and Elizabeth briefly closed her eyes to savour the sensation. Then it occurred to her that it was decidedly unfair that he should be able to explore, while she simply stood there - and surely he
would like it, as well?

“Fitzwilliam, may I touch you?”

They were so close, she could see every fleck of gold in the steel grey of his irises. “Elizabeth,” he breathed, staring at her. She took that to mean “yes,” and released his hand, glancing down a moment before reaching up to touch his hair. The fine pale strands caught in her fingers, as she gently pushed some of it back.

“Your hair is exactly the colour of my aunt Gardiner’s,” she said, watching with interest as his eyes fluttered closed, just as her own had done. “It is darker now, but it was almost silver, at Pemberley.”

He opened his eyes, and said, “Even then?”

“Oh, I always saw how handsome you are, my love, I am not blind.” She could hardly stop laughing at the colour that predictably rose to his cheeks. She pulled her hands back. “Did it ever bother you that anyone can see when you blush?”

“Often,” he said indistinctly. “Elizabeth - ” he took her by the shoulders, and turned her to face the mirror. For a moment they simply looked at their shared reflection; Elizabeth took a step back, into his arms, and smiled contentedly.

“I am very happy,” she said, “did I tell you?”

“No,” he said, “I do not think you did, today.” One of his hands went to her dark hair, then dropped to her neck. Elizabeth shivered.

“That is nice,” she said dreamily. “It is an odd thing, that necks should be so . . . sensitive. I never noticed before, except that mine itched in early spring.”

He gave a slightly choked laugh, then froze when she whirled and eagerly pressed her lips against his throat. “I remembered - I liked that. Do you?” she asked.

“No - yes, I - not yet,” he said, stepping away until he was gripping one of the bedposts. With something of his old - and to the rest of the world, usual - autocratic manner, he said, “Your hair, Elizabeth, take it down.”

“I may - later?” she said, “I like it.”

He acquired a faintly martyred look. “You may do whatever you like, later,” he said, “I will be entirely at your service. But now, take it down, I want to see you.”

“That is not what my mother said,” Elizabeth observed, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“Your mother!”

“Where did you think we all came from?”

He blushed. “Some things do not bear thinking about,” he said primly, and she laughed at him. Then she sobered, and said,

“Come here. You are too far away, and I want to see you.” He immediately acquiesced to her request, if request it could be called, walking over and leaning against a bedpost with his arms crossed, and fixing his eyes on her reflected ones. Elizabeth could not keep a slow, distinctly provocative smile from crossing her lips as she slid into the chair and raised her arms, enjoying the
intent look in her husband’s eyes, and the colour burnt into his cheeks. She plucked one pin out - then another - and another. Sarah’s work did not actually take all that many, so only a few quiet, intense moments passed before her hair uncoiled and fell down her back. Almost immediately, he took two steps to her, and with one hand resting lightly on her neck, he reached for the brush, and began combing her hair.

Nobody mentioned anything about hair, she thought vaguely, but I like it, and if he wants to - oh, I had better talk, like Mama and Aunt Gardiner said.

“That is nice,” Elizabeth said, “you are gentler than Sarah is.”

He smiled. “I learnt as a child, with my mother. It always soothed her.”

“I do not think I need soothing.”

His hand trembled against her skin. “I think I do.”

“Are you nervous, my love?”

“Are you not?”

“I have reason to be,” she told him. “It cannot be the same for you, for any man.”

His hand stilled, and he met her eyes gravely. “I do not think - Elizabeth, this must be perfect, for you. You deserve nothing less.”

“Oh no,” said Elizabeth, “I could never bear to live with perfection. You must not think that.” She shut her eyes briefly, as he continued the smooth, regular strokes through her hair, suppressing a shiver at the tingle running through her. However lovely this was in general, the knowledge that the person wielding the brush was her husband, it was Darcy, his fingers only inches from her scalp, made the whole thing so different.

“What do you want, then?” he said, briefly halting the slow caress. Elizabeth made a murmur of protest, and with a startled, pleased smile, he began again.

“I want . . .” She tried to let go of her embarrassment, to truly give him a truthful answer. Forgetting scruples and propriety and modesty was much harder than she had thought, even when she wanted to. She had a brief, horrible picture of Lydia and Wickham, who had no such difficulties, and almost envied them for a moment. Then she remembered the life they must have together, and thought, Wickham would never ask such a question, he would never need to, and would never care enough to ask. I am glad - glad, that Fitzwilliam has to ask, that he doesn’t know already, that this is not some sort of - gilded seduction, that it will not be perfect and we shall learn together, we shall have to. I would rather have some shyness and awkwardness, tonight, than share him, wonder every time we were together, or every time I see him with a woman, who and how many knew him as I have.

What did she want? Elizabeth shut her eyes and for a moment, stopped thinking, let the impulse of the moment guide her wishes. “Touch my hair some more,” she said, “I love that - did you know? It feels wonderful. And then - ” she could barely bring herself to say it. “Then, I want to touch you. And after that - ” Darcy’s eyebrows rose - “you must tell me your wishes.”

When she felt his hand caress her newly-brushed hair, her eyes actually fluttered. The mirror made everything more, for she was blind to what he did, yet able to see his face, and her own. She stumbled to her feet.

“What?” he said inelegantly.
“I didn’t want it getting in the way. You took your hand away.”

“Do not close your eyes,” he said, taking a step closer. Absently, almost as if he didn’t know what it was doing, his free hand began running up and down her neck. The other, much more tentatively, went to her temple, and pushed the wayward locks out of her eyes, then running his fingers through it. “You have beautiful hair,” he said softly, “I wanted to see it like this, touch it like this, for - ” He stopped, as if unable to go on.

His voice was quite different, somehow. Elizabeth blinked, tilted her head back against his shoulder, kept her eyes opened and fixed on their reflections. She could hardly believe that the man and woman staring back at them were any people she knew, let alone themselves. She looked a wild creature, her hair tumbling every which way, her breath gasping through parted lips. What did she look like to him? Certainly his expression was not one of repulsion, quite the opposite. His default expression was not one of warmth, or of anything, but his eyes were so expressive, too expressive much of the time - tonight she did not mind, as long as they stayed open. They were fixed on her unwaveringly - her, not the mirror-Elizabeth - and so she could see him and he could not, could see the look of wonder in his eyes when her hair twisted around his hand, the way he stared at her, and she could also simply admire how very beautiful a man he was, somehow even more so without all the trappings of his wealth and position.

“Fitzwilliam - ” she began to twist towards him, flooded with an odd, exulting happiness - his hand slipped out of her hair, and then the joy almost hurt - “I want to - ” She could not find the words, so she reached for his hands by the wrists, feeling the racing pulse beneath her fingertips, and somehow was comforted that he was as affected as she was. “Please,” she said plaintively, “please - you remember that day at the Mount? - you stopped, you practically ran away, because everything happened so fast.”

He twisted his hands so that they were not simply passive in her grip, and he could hold hers in return. “I remember,” he said in a low voice. “I had no idea how I was supposed to survive weeks more.”

“We are married,” she said, meeting his eyes squarely, “there is nothing to stop us now.”

He simply looked at her for a moment. “If anything happens - if you are displeased in any way - you will say?”

“Yes, just like I promised,” she said, laughing and slipping her arms about his neck, standing on tiptoe and lifting her face. He bent his head to meet hers, one hand instinctively burying itself in her hair, the other pulling her sharply against him. Somehow the pressure of his hand seemed incongruous with the gentle tenderness of his kiss; Elizabeth blinked briefly, then excitement flooding her as she truly realised, with her whole being, that they were married, nothing was going to stop them, and she could simply act on the impulse of the moment, as soon as it came over her. She lifted her hands to his face and held tightly to him, tilting her head and parting her lips for no other reason than because she wanted to.

At this the tenor of their embrace altered abruptly. Elizabeth, her thoughts tumbling wildly over one another, hardly realised what was happening when her teeth grazed his lip.

“Oh! Did I hurt - ” she began, pulling back, but the effect on her husband was so remarkable that the query was rendered quite unnecessary within seconds. He jerked her back to him, and she could feel the sudden loss of restraint in the hands that had dropped to her waist, then ran over her body lightly. Elizabeth gasped, her eyes flying open - this was certainly not soothing - and briefly slid her lips away to his jaw, trying to catch her breath. As soon as she could, though, she returned to his mouth, pressing her body up against his, returning his feverish kisses in equal measure.
It was like that wild moment at Oakham Mount, only increased tenfold; like then, she could scarcely think for the wicked chills racing through her, and afterwards, sharp fragments of memory were all that she could recall, the rest lost in the passionate haze enveloping her. The first thrilling touch of his long fingers against the curve of her breast - his pale skin burning crimson against her lips when she ran them down his throat - one brief moment of sanity when they briefly halted and stepped back, both breathing labourously as if they had run from Longbourn to Netherfield. She met his eyes, black now, a bright sliver of colour around the edges all that remained of his irises, and already felt oddly desolate, with a bare six inches between them.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said, the first word either had spoken for what seemed like days, and her voice fell loud and harsh into that enchanted silence - she could not bear it and held him in her arms once more, standing on tiptoe so that she could feel his whole body against her. With a single caress, it all began again, and she was lost.

Hours, or perhaps a few seconds, passed, but the moment that most clearly leapt to her mind was when one of her sleeves fell off her shoulder, almost unaided, and her husband’s fingers immediately went there, touching her as neither he nor any other man had done. Elizabeth gave a small cry and he immediately halted, resting his forehead against hers.

“No, no, do not stop,” she said incoherently. It was so wonderful and unexpected that her only thought was that it must not end, but her hands, almost of their own accord, went to his waist and began untying the sash of his dressing-gown, eagerly pushing it off his shoulders. Then, as his fingers on her hesitated, Elizabeth laid her own flat against his chest, something of that early awkwardness coming over her again.

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, “may I?” Her hand stilled over the first button.

“Yes,” he said, his voice thick, and pushed the other sleeve over her shoulder. At some point he had untied the cord and the whole thing fell down. Elizabeth gasped and pressed herself against him, then rapidly began unbuttoning his shirt, distracting herself as much as she could.

“Elizabeth - wait,” he said, pulling her a little away. She gave him a reproachful look.

“You said I could - ”

“Yes, I know - ” He took several deep breaths. “You must not be ashamed, you are beautiful.”

“My mother always said that no sensible man would admire my looks,” Elizabeth said, too caught up in all that had happened to guard her tongue. The man who stood before her, his hair rumpled, cheeks flushed, shirt half-unbuttoned, was a creature as unlike the staid Mr Darcy as possibly could be imagined. “My hair is too fine and my figure too thin.”

Mine. The primitive possessiveness that surged through her almost made her laugh at herself.

“Your mother has the dubious distinction of knowing nothing about men, despite having lived nearly five and twenty years with one,” he said, his eyes alight as he looked up and down her. “I have been admiring you since the third time I saw you.”

Her mouth twitched at such precision, at such a moment. “I have the advantage of you there, then,” she said, lifting her mouth to be kissed, and using his distraction to work on some more buttons.

“Elizabeth - ”

She stopped at his waist, then lifted her eyes seriously. “May not I admire also?” Tentatively, she ran her fingers over his bared skin, laughing delightedly as his muscles reflexively contracted. “Men are
very different from women, but not as different as I thought you would be.”

She thought he said “oh?” but it was difficult to tell.

“You are so tall, and your shoulders are very wide, of course,” she added conversationally. “But you are slender here at the waist, like me, and you aren’t nearly as hairy as I thought you’d be, from what my mother said.”

She tried to mimic his earlier movements, and was gratified to receive something that was half-moan, half-gasp, in return.

“No,” he said, “it is too much, too fast - ”

Elizabeth opened her eyes wide. “But, darling, it is only how you touched me, and I should get my turn, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s different - ” and before she could reply he swung her up, one arm beneath her knees and the other at her waist. Elizabeth could not stop the laughter that bubbled out of her lips as the room whirled before her eyes, and it mingled with his own, the joyous sound echoing in her ears. For a moment, they simply looked at one another, smiling; then Elizabeth, enjoying the novelty of looking down at him, leaned down and languorously kissed her husband.

“Elizabeth,” he breathed against her mouth, his eyes shining; he broke their gaze only long enough to look around for a chair that would adequately support their combined weight in whatever passionate interlude would come next.

Elizabeth locked her arms around his neck and rested her cheek against his hair. “Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, “take me to bed.”
Chapter 13

The next day, Elizabeth Darcy woke with no doubts as to who and where she was. This undoubtedly was due in large degree to the presence of her husband in the bed they shared. It was not her bed - she had never slept in it before this night. They were in a borrowed room at a rented estate. Somehow it was impossible to feel quite at home in such a place.

On the other hand, they had discovered any number of small conveniences. Darcy preferred to have the right side of the bed, she the left. Neither of them snored. Elizabeth tended to be too hot to rest comfortably, and Darcy too cold, but neither had any such difficulties when they were together. Last night, after they tiredly wrapped themselves around each other, they had quickly and contentedly fallen asleep in a tangled pile of arms and legs and sheets.

Elizabeth blinked up at the ceiling. She felt a little sluggish, as if she had slept in. Which, given the light pouring through the window, she undoubtedly had. Elizabeth stretched and carefully extricated herself from her husband. She could not see his face - he did not sleep on his back, as she did, so except for his outflung arm and mop of fair hair, she could just make out the outline of his figure beneath the covers.

She walked to the window, wincing a little. There was a residual soreness though, at the time, the slight sharp pain had been almost entirely subsumed in the pleasure.

It was another bright wintry day. Elizabeth tightened her robe, a little self-conscious, and glanced back at her slumbering husband. She had rather enjoyed lying against him, skin-to-skin, but of course she did not want the servants to see her like that, and even more she did not want the servants to see Darcy like that.

He had not actually mentioned this consideration. When she first asked what he needed his robe for, he coloured and said he was not a savage to go about without a stitch of clothing on.

“Am I a savage then, dearest?” she asked. Darcy laughed low in his throat - a very different sort of sound from his usual laughter; she had told him it sounded like a purr, which only made him laugh more - and gently stroked her hair off her forehead.

“Only occasionally,” he said.

Elizabeth smiled to herself as she remembered, letting her forehead rest against the glass. She would have liked to see the sun rise this morning, but then, the park was so unattractive, it could only have been disappointing. That was something she wanted to save for Pemberley. She felt suspended between her past and the future; only when she was at Pemberley would she really step into her new life. Everything would begin there.

She turned her head and caught a glimpse of her reflection. She walked over, wondering how she would look this morning. Yesterday, the self in the mirror had been a small, slender girl with wide curious dark eyes and freckles dotting her small nose. And now?

She looked back at herself. She had not grown in stature, her freckles had not vanished with her father’s name, and not even her husband’s could add dignity to the nose. The clear brown complexion and narrow face, the plain gold chain about her neck, the sharp pointed chin and quizzical smile, they were all the same. Yet as she instinctively raised her hand to her stomach, the sapphires in her ring glinted. She caught her breath, and took a step closer. Her eyes were different;
the same in shape and colour, but the expression utterly unlike anything that had ever been there before. More thoughtful, but still merry; at once less confident and more so. This was someone different from the girl Lizzy.

It crossed her mind that this was the person Darcy saw when he looked at her. To him, she would never be the young whimsical girl her family and friends thought they knew, just as the frail boy clinging to his mother was someone she could never truly know. She had always been, and would always be, the woman Elizabeth to him.

“Elizabeth?”

She whirled to look at the bed. Darcy had not moved; he seemed to have barely stirred, then reached out for her and found her gone. Without a second thought she dove for the bed, catching only a brief glimpse of her clothes lying haphazardly across the floor, his neatly folded on a chair.

“I was looking at the mirror,” she said, pressing her toes against his legs.

“Elizabeth, your feet are cold,” he complained, but only held her a little closer.

“I wanted to see if I seemed very different, after . . . after . . .” She couldn’t keep blood from rushing to her cheeks, and looked away shyly. Darcy sat up, pushing his hair out of his eyes. She idly noticed that it was much less tangled and generally untidy than her own. “You look different,” she added, reaching out to touch his cheek. Something glinted there - a small growth of beard, almost rough against her fingers. She had never seen him so; she could not think whether she liked it or not. “This is even lighter than your hair. That must be why you always look clean-shaven.”

“I daresay.” He moved the covers aside and stood up, absently straightening his robe. “I ought to shave and get dressed. I must look wild.”

Elizabeth considered. “Well, rather.” At his grimace, she added, “There is something to be said for the occasional wildness.”

“I beg your pardon?” He looked over his shoulder at her.

“Under good regulation, of course.” She swung her legs out. “Fitzwilliam, you have been awake for nearly three minutes and you have not kissed me yet. I expected a more dutiful husband.”

She was pleased that he no longer looked vaguely distressed as he often did at such banter during their engagement. Instead, he laughed and walked over to where she sat at the edge of the bed, bending down to kiss her soundly; not as a cautious lover, but with the easy passion of a young husband.

She was of half a mind to lift up her arms and kiss him again, when there was a tentative knock at the door. Both looked at it with some chagrin.

“I think that must be Sarah,” she said ruefully. Her cheek stung, and she touched it. “You were quite right, Fitzwilliam.”

“I was?”

“You should shave before you kiss me.”

His mouth twitched. “Of course - and you should talk to your maid. She seems quite distressed.” His gait was as light as she had ever seen it when he walked back to his own chambers, absently picking up her clothes and folding them on his way out. Elizabeth felt almost dazed by the sparkling
cheerfulness suddenly pervading the plain, borrowed room, and she opened her door with a cheerful
smile.

“Yes, Sarah?”

The maid looked deeply apologetic. “Mrs Darcy, I did not mean to - that is, I thought you might . . .
you said not to come until you called for me, but they said . . .”

“Sarah,” Elizabeth said kindly, “what is it?”

“Your mother, mi - ma’am. Mrs Bingley has been with her these fifteen minutes. And then Mr
Bingley came down and Mrs Bennet was wanting to know all sorts of things, and asking ever so
many questions - ” there was an unfamiliar trace of censure in her tone - “and so they sent me.”

Elizabeth had never heard the girl speak in such a fashion. But, of course, she was Sarah’s mistress
now. The maid’s loyalty was no longer to the Bennets, but the Darcys. Undoubtedly she would pass
on servants’ gossip to Elizabeth as her mother did to Mrs Bennet.

“Thank you, Sarah. I shall be downstairs soon.”

Sarah looked deeply relieved. “Shall I help you dress, madam?”

“That should not be necessary to-day,” Elizabeth said, “just go down and tell them what I said.”
Sarah bobbed a curtsey and Elizabeth, shutting the door behind her, sighed. She did love her mother,
in her way, but Darcy had not been entirely misreading her when he concluded that she would not
wish to be settled near Longbourn. It would be three days’ travel in good weather. Mrs Bennet
would never trust her nerves to a journey through Derbyshire, at least not in winter.

There were most assuredly more benefits to being married than her husband’s fine person.
“Fitzwilliam,” she called. Darcy, restored to his usual black-clad, clean-shaven, impeccable self,
almost immediately returned to her room.

“What was it, Elizabeth?”

“My mother,” she said. “She is here.”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose. “Now? Why, it is only - ”

“I know.” Elizabeth sighed. It was fruitless to wish her different; she would never change. “Jane and
Bingley are with her.”

“We should probably join them.” Darcy had half-turned, suiting actions to words, when Elizabeth
stopped him with a touch on his arm.

With a smile, she said, “Sometimes Jane is too good for the rest of us. Saintly as she is, I have no
inclination to follow her example. We shall be down in our own time.”

“As you wish.”

This was a touch too much docility. Elizabeth threw a suspicious look over her shoulder.

“I have not Bingley’s desire to please and be pleased by the whole world. If you feel yourself in no
great hurry - well, she is your mother. I will follow your lead, in this.”

“An important caveat!” She looked around randomly for her brush. “What should I wear?”
“There is certainly no danger of my growing too agreeable to be endured. Elizabeth -” He pulled out a drawer and handed the brush to her with a faintly bemused expression. “No wonder your father insisted on sending the maid with you.”

“It is your fault. You are distracting me.”

“You did not want me to leave,” he pointed out, looking very handsome and very out-of-place. He was always striking, but amidst the feminine frills and fripperies of the room, the effect was heightened an hundredfold. Elizabeth abruptly realised how underdressed she was, compared to her fully-clad husband, and to hide the sudden awkward embarrassment she felt, went searching through the clothes suitable for travelling, throwing them about in her usual haphazard manner. Darcy prudently stepped away from the bed, where he had been perched, and watched with his arms folded and one eyebrow raised.

“There, it has to be one of these,” she declared. “Do you like blue or yellow better?”

“I - Elizabeth, why are you asking me? I know as little as any brother is permitted on the subject. Surely anyone else would provide a better-informed opinion.”

She laughed, and met his bemused eyes. Would it always be like this? Would there always be this rush of happiness at the mere sight of him? Hers was a naturally affectionate disposition, but this - this was quite out of the ordinary realm. “You cannot think I care anything for any other person’s pleasure in me,” she said.

He blinked a moment, swallowed, then said judiciously, “I prefer you in yellow.”

She beamed. “So do I. It is my favourite colour, you know.”

“I know.” In his usual disconnected way, he said, “You were wearing yellow at Pemberley.”

“I was! That was my favourite dress.” She hummed a little to herself as she changed her clothes. “Fitzwilliam, help me.”

“What can I do?” He sounded appalled.

“I cannot reach all the buttons. I forgot that this one is so complicated.”

The awkwardness in his usually graceful hands made her laugh, as he struggled to manage the small buttons, and the warmth of his breath against her shoulder made her turn around and kiss him without forethought or care, her hands tightening on his neck. He was surprised but by no means unenthusiastic; his lips lingered on hers a moment before they parted.

Despite his sudden high colour, he said composedly, “You never combed your hair, dear.”

She could not keep herself from wrinkling her nose at him, and sat down with a flounce. “It would serve you right if I sent you to face my mother alone and let Sarah help me. She is becoming quite the martinet. ‘You must not forget your robe, Mrs Darcy.’ ‘You must not forget your tea, Mrs Darcy.’ ‘If you say so, Mrs Darcy’ with the most impertinent look! Although it is really because she is so frightened, poor thing. She is as afraid of erring as Georgiana, I think.”

“I shall tell Mrs Reynolds to be gentle with her,” said Darcy.

“I can manage well enough on my own, I am not used to having my own maid. Jane and I always shared her before,” she admitted. “There.” She finished pinning up the last curl and turned to face him. “Am I handsome enough to tempt you?”
He gazed at her for a moment, an expression of quiet pleasure on his face. Then he straightened and extended his arm. “My dear Elizabeth, I hope you know by now that I find you infinitely tempting.”

“It is very wrong of you to say such things,” she replied, laughing; “soon I shall be in danger of losing my composure.”

He studied her intently for a moment. She could not read his expression, it was unfamiliar - or rather, she recognised the mischievous glint a moment too late. With the door open, allowing any passer-by to see them, she fully prepared to don the mask of Mrs Darcy of Pemberley, he captured her face in his hands and allowed his lips to lightly and briefly dance over hers, a bare hint of a kiss she could scarcely feel.

She raised her brows. “You look very satisfied with yourself, Mr Darcy.”

“I am very satisfied with myself, Mrs Darcy,” he said unashamedly. “Today, I am satisfied with everyone.”

“That I can understand.” She smiled up at him, then added, as they went downstairs, “Let us hope you include my mother in that statement. My composure does not seem quite what it was.”

* * * * *

Elizabeth could not help blushing as she entered the parlour. Not only her mother, but her sisters and father, were present. Her first thought was to scold Sarah, the next to take Darcy’s arm and stand straight and proud at his side. Perhaps she did not look very different, although Kitty and Mrs Bennet did not think so by the volume of their exclamations over her gown, but she knew where her place was.

Still, there was a sadness too, particularly once it was all over and she was kissing them all good-bye, for the final time. She loved her father, and yet simply knowing Darcy, let alone loving him, had made a divide between them. Seeing what a man of sense and wit and intelligence could be, and seeing what her father was, left a bitter taste of disappointment in her mouth. She had seen his failings before, but never in such sharp relief.

It was a revelation, that she loved the part of her husband that was Mr Darcy as much as Fitzwilliam, the grave, inscrutable man quiet at her side, as well as the tender, passionate one who in her arms cried out her name. She could not keep her eyes from returning to his face again and again, only for snippets of moments, but it was enough.

“Goodbye, Papa,” she said, glad of the reassuring warmth of Darcy’s hand against her back. “Kitty, Mary -” She was surprised to see the younger of her sisters burst into tears; she had never had much to do with the middle girls.

“I will write to you, I promise,” she said.

Catherine sniffled. “Lydia said she would, too.”

“Oh, Kitty. I would not give my word if I did not mean to keep it.”

Kitty nodded and embraced her once more. “I will miss you, Lizzy.” She looked fearfully at Darcy, who was talking to Bingley with the air of a fretful mother hen whose chick has just leapt head first
out of the nest.

Elizabeth smiled fondly at her husband. Kitty glanced from one to the other, blushing, then bit her lip and at his approach extended her hand.

“Mr Darcy,” she said bravely, “I hope you will be very happy.”

He was very surprised but clasped it. He did not kiss it, as Wickham would have, and Elizabeth rather thought that a relief - Kitty might have fainted otherwise. “Thank you, Catherine.”

“I am glad you are our brother, you will take proper care of us,” she blurted out. Elizabeth was not sure whether to be gratified for her husband’s sake or share her father’s pain; she decided on the former as she accepted Mary’s grave good wishes, then turned to her last, or first, sister.

“Oh, Jane. How long shall it be before I see you again?”

They embraced one another tightly, exchanging fervent promises to write. “Do not forget that you are the mistress of Netherfield,” Elizabeth whispered. Jane laughed.

“I shan’t. Oh Lizzy - do take care.”

“I will want you, I know I will. How shall I get along without you?”

“I would not know better than you,” Jane said seriously.

“No, but you would assure me that whatever I did was right!” She clasped her sister’s hands tightly. “Goodbye, Jane.”

“Goodbye, Lizzy.” Jane was unashamedly weeping. Elizabeth kissed everyone goodbye a final time, then gravitated to her husband’s side.

“Fitzwilliam,” said she, and he needed no more than that. They bid their last farewells, Darcy shook Mr Bennet’s and Bingley’s hands, helped her into the carriage, and their journey began.

To Pemberley they were to go.

The End

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