In Want of a Vice

by MorganAW

Summary

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, who prides himself on his self-control, must be in want of a vice. For William Darcy, that vice is Elizabeth Bennet. Modern AU.

Notes

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“Do you have to be such an asshole?” Elizabeth finally lost it and tossed her mediocre book down on the table.

“Excuse me?” Darcy asked, looking up from his own book.

“We’ve been sitting here for half an hour and you haven’t said one word to me.”

He placed a marker in his book and looked at her with a furrowed brow, “you haven’t spoken to me either,” he defended.

“That’s not the point! I’m not speaking to you because I was trying to make a point, you’re just being an asshole.” Elizabeth fumed. She’d been stuck here in this overpriced house that her sister’s boyfriend had rented up in the Berkshires for a whole long weekend. Elizabeth was only supposed to be there for a party, but Jane had gotten sick, Charlie had insisted that she stay there, and Jane had begged Elizabeth to stay with her. Charlie Bingley himself was a sweet guy, but she’d had to put up with the cattiness of his sisters Caroline and Louisa, the piggish indifference of Louisa’s husband, and worst of all the arrogance of his best friend, Will Darcy. Toward the beginning of the weekend she’d enjoyed several stunning hikes, but today it was raining and she was trapped indoors. She’d taken refuge in the gorgeous library whose shelves were, unfortunately, stocked only with medical texts and trashy fiction novels ca. 1950. It had been a dull but satisfactory refuge from the superior sisters until Darcy had ambled in and filled the space with tension.

“Please explain to me the logic that permits you to remain silent for a half hour in good faith while the same conduct on my part is malicious?”

“I’ve never seen you start a conversation, you only talk when directly asked a question, and even then it’s like pulling teeth. I wanted to see how long you’d go if I didn’t talk first.”

“You were reading, forgive me for assuming that you chose to retreat to the library because you wished for quiet. That is, after all, common courtesy in libraries is it not?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, “ok, that accounts for this particular incident, what about all of the other interactions we’ve had?”

“There’s no crime in being laconic.”

“How about downright antisocial?”

“I assure you I’m not plotting the downfall of society just because I don’t talk much.”

“Yes, because when forced to interact with people the best strategy is always to fall back on pedantry and ignore the otherwise accepted colloquial use of words,” Elizabeth quipped.

“Forgive me if I prefer to be precise in my elocution.”

“Precise isn’t exactly the word I’d use,” Elizabeth said mockingly and reveled in the twitch in his jaw she elicited. “Oh wait, I forgot … according to Caroline you can’t be mocked, even when you use words like ‘laconic’ and ‘elocution’ in a casual setting.”
He stood and raked a hand through his hair as he began pacing. “Oh, I’m sure you could find a way to mock anyone if you tried, whether they deserve it or not.”

“I’m not some troll that just picks fights for the hell of it, but I can’t help finding amusement in folly and nonsense,” she stood up and intentionally stepped in his path to break his pattern of pacing and throw him off. “It’s not my fault that in all of your snobbery you can’t admit to yourself that you can be just as much of a fool as the rest of us mortals.”

He clenched and unclenched his fist at his side. “Perhaps we are all fools, but it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule.”

Elizabeth was tired of his stiff upper lip and ‘posh’ British accent (Caroline had explained in mind-numbing detail the distinct elegance of his voice and tone and how it implied ‘good breeding’ the day before) and wanted to rattle his cage a bit.

“Such as vanity and pride?”

She challenged, taking a step closer.

“I am not vain,” he said quietly, “and I’d like to know what is wrong with pride when coupled with a real superiority of mind.”

She turned and suppressed a smile at how smug the dude sounded then replied in a cloyingly sweet tone, “well I now have it on the highest authority that you have no faults ...” as if conceding to his god complex. Turning back to him she stepped further into his personal space and added dryly: “you told me so yourself.”

“I never said anything so deluded. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for. It is, I believe, too little yielding—certainly too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offenses against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. My good opinion once lost, is lost forever.”

“That is a failing indeed!” Elizabeth, conceded. Suddenly struck by the urge to prove him wrong by puffing up those immovable feelings, she pouted as she added “what a pity that I can’t laugh at implacable resentment.” Then she went for the kill by leaning in and whispering in his ear, “I dearly love to laugh, but I guess you’re safe from me.”

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Darcy’s last bit of restraint snapped at that and before she could pull back he’d slipped his arms around her and captured her lips in a kiss. For a moment she stood still in his arms before all of that passion she’d thrown into their argument seeped its way into her kiss and she was responding to him. He slowly walked them toward the door and after a few fumbles managed to close and lock it.

Elizabeth pulled away and raised her eyebrow at him, “rather presumptuous of you, isn’t it?”

“Would you like Caroline to walk into the room at this moment?” He asked as he trailed kisses down her neck, she moaned and leaned her head back to allow him better access.

“And what makes you think this will go any further than a few kisses, Mr. Darcy?” She asked, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt.

“We could stop anytime you’d like Ms. Bennet,” he replied, lifting his head and hands fractionally, relinquishing all contact with her body but lingering nearby with the hope of more. She stared back at him with a raised eyebrow, challenging him to make a decision. He wondered if she was making another point, refusing to make the next move. Refusing to break the stalemate, he allowed his
eyes to wander paths he hoped his hands would soon follow.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and muttered, “insufferable man,” as she lunged forward and was kissing him again, walking them back into the room. She broke the kiss long enough to add “arrogant,” and Darcy took advantage of the pause to lift her shirt over her head. She growled and similarly divested him of his shirt as she added “presumptuous.”

By the time the backs of his legs hit the chaise lounge they’d both shed the majority of their clothing. Any anger that he’d felt toward Elizabeth had sizzled into passion, but as she was clearly enjoying the litany he decided to play along. “I’ll add impatient to this list of my faults,” he said as he sat down, pulling her onto his lap.

“Selfish,” she murmured, scraping her fingernails across his chest.

“Selfish?” he repeated incredulously. At her nod he swiftly lifted her and sat her back down on the chaise while he hovered over her and murmured against her skin, “We all have a tendency to some particular evil,” he paused to punctuate the sentiment by nibbling her right breast, “a natural defect,” he added as he moved on to her left.

“And your defect is to hate everybody!” She said, though the sting of her words was removed by the breathy moan she’d said it with.

He trailed kisses down her body as he replied in kind “And yours,” he replied with a smile, “is willfully to misunderstand them,” he concluded as his tongue made contact.

While this turn of events had never even entered Elizabeth’s mind before this afternoon, she had to admit that Darcy’s talent with his tongue went beyond linguistics. She cried out in pleasure, gripping her fingers in his hair as he added a finger to his assault. As pleasant as this was, however, she felt the urgency of their argument slipping as he rather masterfully brought her to the edge then eased back. Now that she’d had a taste, she wanted to test his … diction … as well and she knew if he continued to be this tender she’d lose her nerve.

“Darcy!” she moaned, “would you get up here and finish this already?”

He lifted his head up and looked at her with that same intense gaze that she’d noticed directed at her countless times. “I was just trying to dispel your notion that I’m selfish, Elizabeth,” he said with a smug tone, his finger continuing to tease her as he spoke.

“Ugh, then get up here and fuck me you smug asshole!” she replied in frustration, rolling off the chaise and motioning for him to recline.

“No need for false sentiment,” she said as she straddled him.

“Who says it’s ungh …” He cut off with a groan as she slid herself onto his length, effectively ending their capability for speech. Elizabeth rode him hard, throwing all of her frustrations toward this enigmatic, entitled, rich guy into her frenzied thrusts. She had to admit that this was a far more stimulating outlet for her anger than shouting matches mediated by the altogether biased referee, Caroline Bingley. She felt another surge of gratification at the knowledge that for all of Caroline’s fawning, she was the one who’d broken Darcy’s control.

She came fairly quickly after Darcy’s earlier ministrations and as she came down she noted his
increasingly frantic thrusts and rolled off of him. Considering it only fair play, she even gave him a hand as he finished. He pulled her tightly against him as he came, shuttering and sputtering into her hand as he called out her name.

For a few moments, Elizabeth laid there in his arms as they caught their breath, soaking in the heat from his body and enjoying the languid way he was rubbing her back.

“Elizabeth...” he started in a shaky voice.

After that earth-shattering event – and let’s face it, tectonic plates colliding was an apt analogy for Elizabeth Bennet and William Darcy in an all out argument turned sexual encounter – Elizabeth didn’t want to spoil it with any awkward conversations or explanations … or worse, him assuming she was after his money … so she cut him off. “Well, that was ...” she said as she got up and cleaned her hand on some tissues, “... wow. I never really realized how amazing hate sex could be.” Then she started to gather her clothes.

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“What!?” Darcy asked, stunned out of his post-coital bliss by that sickening statement. He’d been fighting his attraction to Elizabeth Bennet for weeks and when he’d finally given in and she’d responded so passionately it was better than he’d ever imagined it could be – and he’d had a very active imagination despite his constant attempts to reign it in. And now she was saying … what, exactly?

“You hate me?” He asked, confused. He’d had women throwing themselves at him his whole life and the first one he’d thrown himself at hated him?

“What gave it away?” She asked in mock surprise. “The constant arguments? The fact that we don’t agree on anything? Our complete abhorrence for each other’s social class and way of life?”

“It was you stating it outright, actually,” he replied sullenly.

“Aww, and I thought you were smart,” she replied, patting him on the cheek like a fucking child. “Anyway, are you clean?”

“Clean?” he asked in bewilderment as he looked down at himself, sweaty and sticky, and pooling a bit on the rented lounge in Bingley’s rented home.

“I know it’s usually a question for before sex, but you know … heat of the moment and all. I don’t have any STDs, and I’ve got an IUD so between pulling out and that we should be set as long as you’re clean,” she said in a rush, a blush flushing over her face.

In other circumstances he would enjoy kissing away that blush … but apparently she hated him, so he just impassively answered her question, “I’m clean I haven’t ...” been with a woman in years, he was about to say, but that was a conversation for that alternate universe where she loved him and they were happily cuddling in the afterglow, “... I’m clean, you needn’t worry.”

“Good,” she replied as she finished dressing herself, “next time we should probably use a condom, but we’re probably fine for now.”

“Next time?” He asked, wishing that the blood would return to his brain so he could respond somewhat more eloquently.
“Well...” she responded a bit flustered herself, “... I’m not saying there will be a next time, but we’ve obviously got chemistry and I’m an open minded girl,” she shrugged, “let me know the next time you get the itch.” With that she unlocked the door and quietly slipped out, leaving him to pick up his scattered clothes and the pieces of his shattered heart.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so this is my first real attempt at anything explicit, I don't think I'm terribly good at smut, but I thought I'd give it a try. Let me know what you think.

I've got this outlined out as a 6 chapter story. I usually prefer to upload whole stories so I can edit across chapters when I've got the whole story, but I'm going to try updating chapter by chapter this time.
Straying Thoughts

Chapter Notes

I wanted to start the story with a bang, as it were, so I just jumped straight to it in chapter 1 to establish a tone. As a consequence, this chapter will have a lot more narrative exposition to catch us up on how we got to this point. Enjoy!

Elizabeth and Jane had made their escape from Netherfield – yes, the house even had a pretentious name of it’s very own – the following day when everyone had to get back to work. This whole summer had seemed unreal Elizabeth reflected as she looked back on it. Jane had met Charlie Bingley at a bar on the last day of school. She’d joined several of the teachers from the elementary school where she’d been student teaching for drinks to toast the last day of school, Charlie had asked her to dance, and it was love at first sight – Jane’s words, Elizabeth had nearly gagged at her dreamy retelling.

Apparently he was some sort of business man from England who was helping to set up the Boston branch of his company and had rented a house in the Berkshires to escape to on the weekends. Elizabeth was immediately skeptical of the rich, handsome, British guy who went slumming it to the bar in the local town rather than the fancier resort bars made for tourists like him but then she’d met him and he seemed genuine and agreeable. She had to admit that Jane had liked stupider guys in the past, so she just let it go as a summer fling.

While Jane was living out her Disney-esque fairy tale with prince Charming, Elizabeth’s experience had been more Grimm. The next weekend, he’d brought his sisters and friend with him to the bar and that’s when Elizabeth’s torment started. Caroline started in almost immediately with barely concealed insults which she seemed to think were quite clever. Louisa only tittered and agreed with her sister. Her husband, whose name Elizabeth couldn’t even remember since she’d never had a conversation with him, just got blackout drunk and slept it off in the corner. Then she’d heard Darcy flat out refuse to dance with her: “at a sleazy dive bar such as this dancing with any of the locals would be a punishment” and “I guess compared to her neighbors Elizabeth’s not bad, but not pretty enough to tempt me.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure why they kept coming out here when they clearly hated everyone and everything about it, but they did. Unfortunately, since Bingley and Jane were joined at the hip on weekends, his sisters and friend’s company had been forced on Elizabeth weekly. She had found herself as a secondary character in this bizarre world where she and Jane had friends dropping hundreds on bottle of wine and treating them to fancy dinners while also looking down on them for having attended a public school and never visiting Paris.

Since the whole group of them had a long weekend for the fourth of July, they’d invited Jane to stay the at Netherfield to celebrate. Charlie was embracing the ‘when in Rome’ mentality, but based on their body language his friend and sisters still seemed offended to be celebrating the defeat of the British by lowly colonists. Elizabeth had been invited to stay the weekend as well, but initially only planned to come for the party on Thursday night, she felt moderation was best when it came to entitled snobs. Unfortunately Jane’s illness forced her hand. So for that one long weekend she was stuck in that other world where 4th of July parties had caterers and William Darcy fucked her in the library then ignored her for the rest of the stay.
The whole encounter with Darcy had been so surreal that she’d half convinced herself that she’d just imagined the whole thing. Given how much she disliked the man she wasn’t sure why her subconscious would do such a thing to her but he was, objectively, an attractive guy if you could separate his body from his personality. She’d tried to put the whole thing out of her mind and get back to her routine but seeing as it was summer there was little to distract her and images of a naked writhing Darcy kept creeping up.

She was a student at Longbourn College, a small liberal arts school where she studied Art History and Art. She was a student curator at Longbourn’s art gallery, but over the summer there was little for her to do at work other than return artwork to the student artists from the spring exhibit and monitor the largely deserted gallery during the abbreviated summer hours. She walked into her Wednesday evening life-drawing class hoping for a distraction, but the new model – tall, well built, British accent – did little to divert her attention away from Darcy. She found herself comparing the two men’s bodies and poor George kept falling just a bit short, which was a pity since he far exceeded Darcy in social charms.

By Thursday, she’d decided that given the directions her thoughts had been going it would be best to avoid Darcy that weekend so Elizabeth strategically invited Jane out to dinner that night to get some sister time in before she was claimed by Charlie for the weekend. She was about halfway through a funny anecdote about one of the artists who came in to pick up artwork at the gallery that day when her sister’s face brightened and Elizabeth turned around with trepidation.

“What are you doing here?” Elizabeth and Jane asked in unison, though with drastically different emotions evident in their tones.

After quite possibly the least productive week of his life, William Darcy had woken up in an undignified state that morning and decided there was nothing for it but to see Elizabeth Bennet again. While her declaration of hate had thrown him at the time, after more serious reflection, he’d come to realize that this all might be for the best after all. It was clear that his feelings were more … invested than Elizabeth’s, but until the moment he’d kissed her he’d been trying to convince himself against it. Elizabeth Bennet was beautiful, but she was also a bossy middle-class American. Depending on how swiftly he was able to establish the Boston branch of Pemberley, he’d be back to London within months. Her life was here and no matter how much his baser desires might protest, she would never fit into his world. If she’d been as … invested as him and they’d started dating after last Sunday he knew that it would only lead to a more painful separation when he had to leave. As it was, he could slip off to Netherfield to have his dirty weekends, indulge himself while he could, and return home without any lingering guilt or broken hearts.

Once that decision was sorted, he’d felt an urgent need to see her again. It had been a relatively easy task to lead Bingley into suggesting that they leave tonight and work remotely tomorrow. They’d left work early, stopped off to pack for the weekend, and rolled into Meryton just in time to catch the Bennet sisters sitting down at a typical greasy diner full of local manners, ‘American’ portions, and likely several health and safety violations. It was the sort of place he’d generally avoid, but the prospect of seeing Elizabeth just that much sooner bolstered by the fact that the personal chef would not be in residence at Netherfield until the following evening made the decision for him.

He was surprised as they approached to hear Elizabeth discussing her day at the gallery. He’d never thought to inquire what she did for a living – Caroline had mentioned that she’d worked retail and he had no reason not to believe her – and he was surprised to find it tangentially related to
his own work heading up an international art auction house. He filed that information away for the future as she turned and the ladies asked what they were doing there in chorus.

“We decided to work from Netherfield tomorrow and surprise you tonight, I saw your car outside and decided to pop in.” Bingley answered cheerily as Jane bounded up with a smile to hug him, a sharp contrast to Elizabeth’s scowl.

“Oh! We haven’t even ordered yet, will you join us?”

“Absolutely!” Charlie answered immediately.

“You don’t mind, do you Lizzy?” Jane asked her sister as an afterthought as Charlie sat down next to her.

Darcy mused that ‘Lizzy’ looked like she very much minded and he took some pleasure in being the one to discompose her for a change. She had a silent argument via glances with her sister, but Jane’s pleading doe eyes and gestures indicating she should budge up won and Elizabeth sighed and made room in the booth.

After they’d ordered their meal and Charlie and Jane were lost in their own world, Elizabeth turned to him and repeated, “what are you doing here?”

“Well, you did tell me to inform you if I ‘got the itch’ and here we are.”

Her eyes widened and Darcy chose to read promise in her expression. “And you’ve been particularly itchy?”

He winced, “must you always be so common?”

“No, not always. It’s just so fun watching your face contort.”

“Enjoy getting a rise out of me, do you?”

“I got off rather well last time,” she replied saucily.

Before he could continue the string of double entendres, the food came and spoiled the veneer of intimacy. Conversation at the table became more general and William had to content himself with watching Elizabeth, the sparring would have to wait for later.

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Elizabeth felt like the temperature in the diner had steadily increased over the course of dinner. Darcy had barely taken his eyes off of her. While this in itself wasn’t rare, in the past she’d always attributed his stares as an attempt to find fault with her. Given recent developments in their relationship that interpretation no longer held up. While not the height of sophistication, it would seem odd that he found so much fault with her licking the dribble of condiments off of her finger that he couldn’t quite suppress a groan in response.

While Jane and Charlie were distracted with a conversation about movie selections, Elizabeth whispered to Darcy, “would you stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” He leaned in and Elizabeth felt the heat radiating off of him.

“Like you’re undressing me with your eyes.”

“I’ll stop undressing you with my eyes once you allow me to undress you with my hands. Until
them I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do.”

“You know, until recently, I assumed that your glare was one of disapproval.”

“Aww, and I thought you were smart,” he repeated her response from last week and she flared up in anger, she reached over and pinched his thigh under the table in retaliation. He smirked and trailed his finger along her thigh, “When you refused to dance with me at Charlotte’s party with such mirthful defiance in your eyes I wanted to drag you off to a private room…” her breath hitched. “That first day at Netherfield, when you walked in on me alone in the billiards room I wanted to bend you over the table and take you from behind.” He’d hitched her skirt up and his finger was now tracing patterns on her exposed thigh as she looked down at the remains of her dinner to avoid looking into those piercing eyes. “When Caroline dragged you into walking around the room I marveled at how effortlessly graceful you were even next to Caroline’s contrived elegance and I couldn’t help imagining how graceful you’d be in bed. Good God, woman, how can you manage to get me fired up just by walking across a room?”

“So, are you guys in?” Charlie asked, breaking whatever spell Darcy had cast over her.

“What?”

“We’re going to go catch a movie, if we leave now we can make the 8:15, do you want to come?” Jane asked eagerly.

“No,” Darcy answered quickly, then scanned the room for a reason. “I think I’m going to stay here and have some … pie.”

Charlie looked surprised, “you never take desert.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth momentarily then looked back at his friend and managed to maintain a straight face when he replied, “this particular pie looks too enticing to pass up.”

Elizabeth stifled a grin. “I think I’m also in the mood for a slice of pie, you guys go ahead. Besides it’ll be a nice change of pace for you to have a date without any sisters along.”

“Thanks Lizzie, will you be able to get home ok?” Jane asked solicitously.

“I’ll take Elizabeth home,” he answered a touch too quickly and Elizabeth hoped that Jane and Charlie couldn’t see his hand on her thigh.

Charlie threw down some cash to cover their meals and escorted Jane out of the restaurant. “Have fun you two!” Elizabeth called after them.

As soon as their headlights cleared the parking lot, Darcy grabbed her hand and said, “let’s go!”

“Wait a minute,” she teased, “you promised me pie.”

Darcy growled and looked at her pointedly but the waitress wandered to their table and asked if they wanted anything else. “I’ll have a slice of cherry pie, and a slice of sweet potato pie for the gentleman please,” Darcy glared at her and she added just before the waitress left: “with extra whipped cream … and the check.”

Any annoyance he felt about the delay was almost made up by the exaggerated noises of delight Elizabeth made as she ate her pie. He supposed this was only fair after the way he’d teased her.
The moment she ate the last bite of her pie he tossed enough cash on the table to more than cover
the bill – he didn’t have the mental acuity at the moment to calculate tip – and pulled her out of the
booth, walking behind her to hide his arousal.

As they approached the door another man entered and Darcy reared back in shock as George
Wickham smiled and warmly said, “Elizabeth! How lovely to see you again.”

Elizabeth looked puzzled for a moment then smiled and replied, “George! I almost didn’t recognize
you with your clothes on!”

“I suppose my face wasn’t what made an impression on y...” he trailed off and paled as he looked
up to find Darcy standing just behind the woman he was brazenly flirting with.

Darcy, fighting a strong urge to punch the bounder in the nose, moved between him and Elizabeth
and clipped out: “Wickham.”

Elizabeth looked between the two in confusion then swiftly said goodnight and led Darcy out of
the restaurant. He gripped her hand and nearly dragged her to his car. He opened the passenger
door, but she shook her head no and opened the back door instead and got in. He followed her
mutely, still trying to piece out how George bloody Wickham could possibly be here.

After a few moments of silence, she slid her hand over to his arm and asked, “do you want to talk
about it?”

“Talk?” He sneered, shifting toward the middle and tugging her face down across his lap. “We
don’t talk, not about anything real,” he said, running his hand down her back, across her ass, and
back up, pulling up her skirt. “We’re about to bunk up in a Benz for fuck’s sake,” he said, bringing
his hand down on her ass. “We’re not dating,” he said with another smack, “we’re not even lovers,”
another smack punctuated by a moan from Elizabeth. “This is what you wanted, wasn’t it
Elizabeth?” another smack followed by a stroke to stimulate her.

“Yes!” Elizabeth gasped.

He tried to be surprised that she’d enjoy this but it seemed fairly on par with their relationship thus
far. “Hate sex, right Elizabeth?” Another slap.

“Yes!”

“Which means no talk about emotional baggage,” his hand came down again while he began
stroking her consistently with his other. “I don’t even get to ask you why you’d recognize George
fucking Wickham better without his clothes,” the last was punctuated by a slap for each word.

“Stop!” She yelled, and he lifted his hands immediately as she sat up.

“Is that what this is? You think I’m fucking George?”

“Well, we didn’t exactly pledge fidelity so I can’t be too upset, can I? I’m new to the fuck buddies
scene. Though I’m glad I brought condoms this time because I can’t believe a slag sleeping with
Wickham is clean.” He was suddenly pulled out of his rant by a solid slap to the face.

“Don’t you dare!” Elizabeth said, straddling him and slapping him on his other cheek. “Do you
wanna know how I know George? He’s a model for my life drawing class. I met him yesterday,
spent three hours staring at him naked in a room full of people lamenting that his dick was smaller
than yours,” she emphasized this by rocking and eliciting a moan from him. I then spent three
minutes in conversation while he wore the standard floral robe that’s been provided for the models
presumably since the seventies. Then I ran into him tonight with you, on my way to be fucked in
the car after you teased me halfway through the dinner. I’m not screwing anybody else and you
won’t be screwing anybody at all if you keep this attitude up. Now drop your pants and follow
through or you can wallow in your own misery,” she said as she reclined as well as she could in the
backseat of a car and slipped off her knickers.

William swiftly dropped his pants, retrieved the condom and hovered over her sheathed within
thirty seconds. “Will you forgive me for being such an ass?” He asked, kissing her.

“Not if you keep talking when you could be using your mouth much more favorably,” she
whispered breathlessly. He shifted her hair and her shirt off of her shoulder and bit down as he
entered her. She cried out and he moaned against her shoulder as he thrust into her.

He felt her hand smack resoundingly against his ass and he growled in delight. “You can expect a
fair return on whatever you do to me, Mr. Darcy,” she said, smacking him again and biting his
neck. He fought the need to come at that and reached his hand between them and stimulated her
establishing a rhythm. He sighed in relief minutes later as he felt the first waves of her orgasm and
finally allowed himself to come biting down again against her shoulder.
Darcy was sitting in a meeting on Monday morning when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Checking it under the table, he nearly choked on a sip of coffee. It was a text from Elizabeth: “WTF you asshole, 4 days later and I still can’t wear a tank top.” The text would have been mildly amusing on its own, but it was accompanied by a picture of Elizabeth’s bare shoulder, hair swept off her neck to reveal distinct bite marks with a fading hickey in the middle.

Deeply regretting looking at his phone at that moment he put it away and tried – unsuccessfully – to get that image out of his head and focus on the task at hand. When he got back to the privacy of his own office he sank into his chair and replied “I seem to recall you rather enjoying the experience at the time.”

“Yeah, but did you have to physically mark me like that?”

He verified that the door to his office was indeed closed then unbuttoned his shirt and took a photo. “Fair returns, right Elizabeth?” he texted along with the image of the scratch marks she’d left during Saturday’s tryst – they’d slipped off to the billiards room at Netherfield after Jane and Bingley had fallen asleep partway through a movie and acted out Darcy’s fantasy.

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“Would you consider sitting for your portrait?” She texted Darcy on Wednesday evening. She’d just finished her life drawing class and was reflecting that good portrait was as much a character sketch as a catalog of physical features. Her sketches of George from tonight’s class had come out well, but his open, easy going personality was easy to capture. She wanted someone with more layers.

“I have done so before.”

She scoffed, there was probably a mediocre oil painting of him in a suit on the wall of some corporate offices somewhere. “Why doesn’t that surprise me. What I mean is, would you sit for me to draw your portrait?”

“You and I, nude in a room for hours … I can see the merits of that plan.” He responded.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, “If we were both nude I doubt I’d get much drawing done.”

“That’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.” Of course he didn’t get what she was asking him.

“Ass.”

“If it’s not sexual, then why me?”

“intricate characters are the most amusing and you are the most confounding person I know. You’d make a good study.”

“That’s not terribly surprising. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.”
Just when she’d started thinking of him as human and interesting he had to go and say something like that to remind her of what an asshole he is. She opens up just the tiniest bit to him about something she cares about and he goes and insults her entire community. “You know what, never mind. Forget I asked,” she furiously typed. She heard the notification of his response but ignored it.

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For the second week in a row he’d only made it to Thursday before he had to see her again. The flirty texts had stopped after that poorly phrased joke about Meryton society and he felt oddly unsettled. Luckily, Charlie was already on board with the plan to drive out on Thursdays and both men had packed in advance to leave for Meryton after work today. It was also fortunate that as the head of the company only a portion of his work week was allocated for establishing the Boston branch, so working remotely one day a week didn’t impact his schedule too severely.

He knew Charlie already had dinner plans with Jane, so that afternoon he laid some groundwork with Elizabeth: “Do you have any fantasies?” He had some ideas.

"Do you think the last couple of weeks have been normal for me? Isn’t that what this whole thing is about? He was somewhat surprised that this wasn’t normal for her, she took charge so readily it seemed like all of this came naturally to her.

“So if I had a request?”

“... need details”

“pulling a stranger at the pub?”

He got nervous when she didn’t immediately respond. They’d already experimented farther than he’d done with his past partners. He didn’t think that pretending to be strangers was too far of a stretch. He just wanted, for one evening, to pretend that they didn’t have this baggage, that he hadn’t offended her, that she didn’t hate him. “Sorry, had to look that one up. You know, you could just go pick up an actual stranger at the bar.”

“Please, Elizabeth.”

“Mmm … there is something appealing about you begging me. Let’s file that one away for the future. Sure, let’s pretend to be strangers.”

“Meet me at the bar at Ashworth around 7:30?”

“Ashworth? You better be buying the drinks sir!”

~~~

Elizabeth felt absurd driving up to the valet at Ashworth in her old but reliable Civic. The mansion turned resort catered to snobs like Darcy and she felt ten types of out of place. The valet was obviously unimpressed by her car, but she held her own as she stepped out of it and handed him her keys. Her little black dress wasn’t designer but she wore it well and she’d managed to artfully tame her curls into an elegant style. She’d had a hard time shaking off the incessant questions of her mother and younger sisters after they’d seen her doing her makeup – they were convinced that she had a date or knew of a good party somewhere – but she sidestepped them with the explanation that she was going to a gallery opening a few towns over.

She felt silly dressing up for Darcy – after all this wasn’t even a date really – but if tonight was a
fantasy, she wanted to fit the part. She felt the need to prove that she could fit into this world, if nothing else just to rattle his snobby cage a bit. She drew some attention as she walked into the bar and felt comfort in the knowledge that she looked good. But not pretty enough to tempt me, his words from that first night echoed in her head. It still stung.

She perched on a bar stool and was trying to wrap her head around the cost of drinks at this place when he materialized beside her, looking far too attractive and rich and British for Elizabeth’s peace of mind. “Is this seat taken?” She laughed and raised an eyebrow at him. “It’s what they always say in the American films,” he justified with a shrug as he sat down. “May I buy you a drink?”

“Someone better, it looks like I’ve been stood up.”

“Anyone who would stand you up is a fool.”

“I would tend to agree, but he would probably be affronted by the accusation.”

She saw a momentary twitch of emotion cross his face before he said in a soft voice, “perhaps you should put him out of your mind for the evening.”

“Perhaps,” she smiled at the absurdity of having a conversation about Darcy with Darcy.

“I’m Will,” he offered his hand.

“Lizzie,” she responded in kind, using the nickname only her family called her.

“I’m very pleased to meet you Lizzie,” he trailed his thumb across hers, eliciting far more of a reaction out of her than she would like to admit.

“I take it from your accent that you’re not from around here,” she said, beginning the type of small talk that she would have with a stranger at a bar.

“No, I’m from England.”

“What brings you all the way out here?”

“Work brings me to Boston, but friendship brings me out here. I’ve met some of the most fascinating people out here.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrow at him. It was unfair of him to bring up their conversation about character sketches in a country neighborhood when she was unable to respond as Elizabeth to him as Darcy. Instead, Lizzy changed the topic and asked, “and where’s home? Is everybody from the UK from London, or is that just the way it seems to us Americans?”

“I suppose I do fall into that stereotype as I primarily live in London these days, though my family home is in the north of England in Derbyshire.”

“Do you get up there often to see your folks?”

He looked down and responded quietly, “my parents are both dead, it’s just my sister and I now.”

Elizabeth instinctively reached out for his hand in sympathy. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.” Caroline had spoken at length about his sister, but she must have intentionally shied away from this painful subject.

“How could you know,” he asked with a sad smile, “we’re practically strangers.”
Elizabeth was recalled back to her role in this charade and soldiered on as if she knew nothing about him and asked about his sister. He told her all about Georgiana, how he’d practically been a father to her since their parents deaths, about her nearly crippling social anxiety, and about her current affinity for music. Elizabeth used this as a bridge to lighter topics and spoke of Mary’s studies.

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Three drinks in and Darcy was bewitched. He’d considered her the most attractive woman in the room in a tee-shirt and jean shorts, but tonight she was nothing short of stunning. As ‘Lizzy’ and ‘Will’ they’d been able to talk about a wide variety of topics – ranging from family to art to books to politics and frequently cycling back to flirtation – without the underlying acrimony of their typical dialogue. She still teased him but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult to take offense.

Even as he basked in their banter he filed away the differences in ideology or opinion and the crass stories about her family lest he drift too close to falling in love with her. He found himself constantly reminding himself that there was no future for them. He couldn’t actually date someone like her but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t pretend, just for a little while.

“Lizzy,” he said, trailing his finger up and down her forearm where it rested between them on the bar, “would you care to take this conversation somewhere more private?”

“What makes you think I’m that kind of girl? We just met after all,” she made a mock protest, pouting in a way that made him want to capture that lip between his teeth.

“I think,” he leaned over and whispered into her ear, “that you’re a woman who knows what she wants, regardless of what others may think.” He was close enough to feel her breath hitch and it was driving him mad.

“In that case,” she turned her head and her lips grazed his ear briefly before she leaned back and finished her drink, “let’s go.”

He followed her out of the bar and when she started in the direction of the valet he grabbed her hand and indicated another hallway. “Where are you taking me?” She asked, her excitement evident in her voice.

“My room, of course,” he answered with a wink as he hit the button for the lift.

Her eyes widened, “you got a room?”

“Of course, where else would I be staying?” He hoped she would keep up the game, he didn’t want to have to take her back to Netherfield and sneak around. He wanted her here, now, in a proper bed. That’s why he’d chosen Ashworth in the first place.

“Of course,” she said, rolling her eyes and no doubt thinking he was being excessive.

When they got to the room, Elizabeth walked in and looked around in awe. “It’s beautiful! I’d heard that when they remodeled this place in the 90’s they restored a lot of the old fixtures they’d found stored in the attic. They used old photographs and journals to decorate the rooms in the style of the original mansion circa the early nineteenth century. I’ve been in the main rooms downstairs for events before, but I’ve never been in one of the guest rooms!”

He was charmed by her enthusiasm and laughed at her exuberance as he wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, “you should see my family home, there are rooms full of antiques that just
need someone to catalog them.” As soon as he’d said it he had to tamp down the desire to see her at Pemberley, walking the halls and gaping waxing rhapsodic about the history of the place – that future could never be.

“Be still my heart!” She mock swooned against his shoulder and he took the opportunity to trail kisses down her neck. “Living with that daily it’s no wonder you can’t take the time to appreciate the beauty around you.”

“On the contrary, I appreciate beauty in all forms,” he said, spinning her around in his arms and raking her with a heated gaze, “but I find it hard to appreciate the beauty in anything else when you’re in front of me.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” she said, toying with the strap of her dress and shifting it off of her shoulder.

“I certainly hope so,” he said as he took over undressing her. Their first time together had hit like a bolt of lightning, a brief flash that was over almost as soon as it had begun and left him dazed. Their second time had been dark and frenzied and they hadn’t even bothered to remove more than the necessary clothing to accomplish their task. Tonight he intended to take his time and savor the experience. “You are so beautiful,” he murmured as her dress wafted to the floor, pooling around her feet.

“And you ...” she ran her hands over his chest and shifted off his suit jacket, “are wearing too many clothes.” She took her time undressing him as well, tempting him with lingering hands and teasing glances.

By the time they collapsed naked to the bed in a tangle of limbs, Darcy was already painfully aroused but he was determined to draw this out as long as possible. “Would you care for a massage, Lizzie?” He asked, tracing his fingers up her arm then down her back.

“That sounds wonderful, Will,” she purred and his heart beat faster at the sound of his name on her lips. In their previous encounters she’d always called him ‘Darcy’ and even then it was typically in frustration. He determined to draw his name out of her in pleasure as many times as possible tonight. He gently rolled her to her stomach and began rubbing circles on the small of her back while kissing her shoulder blades. Elizabeth moaned and he drew courage from that to straddle her, careful to keep his weight on his knees so he wouldn’t crush her.

Elizabeth felt the hot weight of him nestled on top of her as he worked out the tension in her shoulders and moaned. She’d had boyfriends use ‘massage’ as a euphemism for sex before and expected the same half-assed shoulder rub transitioning directly to the main event as she’d experienced in the past. Darcy – Will, she reminded herself, tonight he’s Will – was clearly ready to continue further but he remained focused on her. She moaned as he leaned forward and kissed her neck as his hands radiated out, massaging her upper arms. He drew his hands back over her shoulders and slowly kneaded down her spine, trailing kisses behind his touch. She cried out when his hands completed their descent and arrived at her buttocks. “Sorry, I’ll try to keep it down,” she said into her pillow, embarrassed at losing so much control.

Will laughed against her skin, sending shivers through her, “be as loud as you wish Lizzie, there is nobody here to disturb us,” he said, dipping his tongue into the tip of her crevice and eliciting a groan. “Are you enjoying this Lizzie?” He asked, dipping further down.

“Yes,” she answered breathlessly.
“Would you like me to continue?” he asked, running his finger along her crease. This was a new experience and she was somewhat hesitant, but so far he’d always stopped when she asked him to and she was curious.

“Yes,” she replied again and his tongue continued it’s path at an agonizingly slow pace. He moved one hand down and stimulated her just as his tongue hit its target and she cried out: “Oh Will!” He groaned against her at her cry which heightened the sensation. She tested the waters and discovered that calling out his name consistently gained her that reaction and cried it repeatedly until the stimulation from both sides built up and she came screaming his name. He moved off to the side and pulled her into his arms, kissing her.

She could feel him pressed against her hip, hot and aroused and holding back so she lifted her head and asked, “is it my turn?”

He laughed and replied, “that wasn’t your turn?”

“My turn to explore,” she said, gently pushing him onto his back and lightly trailing her fingernails across his chest. “My turn to make you lose control,” she whispered into his ear, biting the lobe playfully.

“As if you’ve ever had any trouble accomplishing that goal,” he whimpered and Elizabeth thrilled at his response, at the power she had over him. She trailed her mouth down to his nipple and suckled it teasingly, drawing out a strangled “Lizzy!” from him. She bit the same nipple causing him to growl before she moved on to the other. Her hand moved down, caressing his abs, trailing over his hip and thigh, then returning up to his stomach. She repeated this trail several times, each time inching closer and closer, drawing a gasp every time she came near.

She bit down on his nipple at the same time her hand finally closed around his shaft and he cried out her name and bucked his hips into her touch. She only managed a few pumps before he caught her hand and flipped her to her back, settling himself between her legs.

“No fair, Will, I let you play for far longer than that,” she pouted and he leaned down and bit her lip.

“If I’d let you ‘play’ any longer the game would be over before I even entered you.”

He reached to the night stand and grabbed a condom. “I see you had expectations for the evening,” she teased him.

He rolled his eyes at her and replied, “yes, we’re both terribly surprised by this outcome,” as he put on the condom.

“So you went down to that bar tonight looking to pick someone up?” She asked, feigning shock to play into his fantasy. She was slightly confused that instead of excitement at their game he gave her a sad smile.

“My intentions hardly matter,” he said as he again settled between her thighs, “what matters is that I found you there with your witty stories and bewitching eyes.” She closed her eyes as he pushed in – her standard habit during sex so she could shut out other stimuli and focus on the sensations.

“Keep your eyes open for me, love,” he said softly. As she opened them she found herself staring into his intense gaze. “You have the most beautiful eyes,” he said as he continued to thrust.

“They’re full of life and energy. The color seems to shift and swirl with your mood and temper.” His hands wandered, stroking her, exploring, teasing, but his eyes never left hers. “You can convey
“more meaning in a single glance than most people can using carefully chosen words.”

Over the last weeks they’d explored so much, pushed so many boundaries. They’d given themselves over to their baser desires and it had been so much more intense than any other sexual relationship she’d ever had. Given that, she was surprised by the intensity of the pleasure she was feeling now. It was by far the blandest of their encounters – missionary style in a bed – but with that deep, cultured voice waiving over her and the intensity of his eyes she was feeling the same thrill she had in their steamier encounters.

“Oh, Lizie!” He shouted and his thrusts intensified as he reached down to stimulate her.

“Will!” she whimpered, and the look in his eyes when she said his name was enough to send her over the edge into another orgasm just as he reached his peak as well. When their shocks had subsided, he rolled them onto their sides and kissed her forehead. She knew that she should get up and head home, but for the moment she was content to lie here and catch her breath. Before long she was dozing off in Darcy’s arms.

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“Mmm … ‘lizabeth?” Darcy moaned as he felt her warmth moving away from him.

“I’ve gotta get up,” she said and Darcy opened his eyes. She was sitting beside him stretching, still naked and with her previously elegant hairstyle askew with stray strands wafting down her back. It was a perfect sight to wake to. “I’ve gotta get home.”

“Stay,” he said, reaching out for her, “we’ve got the room all night.”

“You mean Ashworth Mannor doesn’t rent rooms by the hour?” She turned to him and laughed. “Besides,” she added, putting on a coquettish smile, “I just met you tonight, it wouldn’t be right to stay.” This was, of course, the downside of the way he’d framed his fantasy to her. She thought he was still acting when any pretense on his part had long since evaporated. He’d gotten everything he’d wanted out of the evening and now that it was coming to an end he just wanted more.

“Elizabeth, please stay,” he pleaded, using her full name to convey that he wanted her there, not some fantasy.

“I know you’ve got a perfectly good room at Netherfield you could be getting back to,” she replied, breaking the act as well.

“Do you know what’s waiting for me at Netherfield? Caroline, with her complaints about her surroundings, her vicious gossip, and her ridiculous complements towards myself.”

“See? You’re all set!” Her smile wavered and he hoped it was from a twinge of jealousy, “you don’t need me.”

“Caroline Bingley is all fur coat and no knickers, she’s been trying to impress me for years to no avail.” He said, sitting up and kissing her shoulder, “you, on the other hand, are fascinating,” a kiss to her other shoulder, “intoxicating,” a nibble to her neck, “and I just want to spend the evening with you without trying to sneak around Netherfield.”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said as she got up and ambled to the bathroom and Darcy’s heart sank. Tonight had been perfect and he wasn’t ready for it to end.

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed from the bathroom. Darcy scrambled up to see what was wrong and … she was staring at the tub. “Do you see the size of this thing? And it’s a vintage claw-foot too!”
Lord, she’s adorable! Darcy thought and wrapped his arms around her from behind, “if you stay, you could have a bath, we could order room service, have a bit more naughty fun, then breakfast in bed.”

“Hmmm … that is tempting.”

“You draw the bath while I order room service?”

“Deal.”

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Elizabeth woke up from a dream where she was being bound captive to discover that those bonds were in fact Darcy’s arms around her as she slept. What was she doing here? This wasn’t part of their arrangement. They had sex in inappropriate places while hurling insults, they didn’t cuddle and eat breakfast in bed. She suddenly felt trapped and she knew that if she woke Darcy up he’d just tell her to come back to bed. She managed to extract herself from his grasp with only a groan and a whimper from him and silently dressed herself in the dark.

She quietly left of the room, relieved that it was still early enough to slip back into the house before anyone was awake. She couldn’t handle her father’s quick wit or her mother and sisters’ giddy questions this morning. She didn’t know where or when this relationship had taken a turn, and she certainly wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Last night was wonderful, but this was still Darcy and she wasn’t sure she could handle more with him. She needed space and decided to avoid him for the rest of the weekend to gain some perspective.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is a chapter that wasn't in my original outline, but I wanted to get in one more scene before the Netherfield ball. So that brings us up to at least 7 chapters total ... maybe more, we'll see.

I've also started updating the tags as we go, because a large part of the dynamic between these two is sexual exploration, we'll just have to see where all they go ;)
Chapter Notes

There won't be any Elizabeth & Darcy interactions in this chapter, they needed to cool off a bit and I needed to throw in some non-sexy plot development to prop up the Netherfield Ball. I promise the smut will return in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, let me get this straight,” Charlotte Lucas said, pinching the bridge of her nose, “you are having ‘the best sex of your life’ with a handsome, attractive, rich guy who is begging you to stay the night with him and you don’t know what to do?”

“You left out the part where he’s an elitist snob who insulted me the first time we met,” Lizzie said. Charlotte shook her head, this whole scenario was just so patently Lizzie Bennet. She was so confident in her ability to read people that she immediately categorized them into tidy little boxes and if they wanted out of that box they’d have to claw their way out.

Charlotte could relate to William Darcy at this moment far more than anyone would expect. She’d lived in Lizzie’s shadow her whole life and had always loved her. When the time for experimentation came around in college, they’d figured who better than your best friend: she’s safe, you trust her, you already have a rapport. The downside to sexual experimentation with your best friend is that you might have a life-changing experience that opens your eyes to certain truths about yourself that you’d always peripherally known but never truly acknowledged while she sums it up as a ‘neat’ experience that she was glad she’d shared with her best friend … before she moves on and continues to complain about boys.

After she’d realized that her love for Lizzie exceeded friendship, Charlotte had resigned herself to the fact that she’d always be in Lizzie’s ‘best friend’ box. It was clear that Lizzie was predominantly interested in guys and that was fine. She supposed it was better than being stuck in the ‘elitist asshole’ box where Darcy resided. It was clear to Charlotte that Lizzie was fighting some pretty strong feelings for the guy but Lizzie herself just couldn’t come to terms with that drastic of a shift in her perceptions.

“So you’re just going to ignore all of the recent evidence of Darcy’s character and rely on that one overheard comment? I mean, obviously the dude thinks you’re more than ‘pretty enough’ if he can’t keep his hands off of you.”

Lizzie’s phone beeped and she ignored it as she responded, “sure, but he’s still a guy who doesn’t think that a woman’s artistic pursuits count toward their ‘accomplishments’ … scratch that, he’s a guy who has a list for women’s accomplishments! And even last night, when he was being so oddly nice, he chose a place to hook up that he knew I couldn’t afford like he was testing me or something.”

“Or he just wanted to go somewhere nice where you were unlikely to run into anybody you knew so you could have some time alone.”

“Why are you defending him? He’s clearly an asshole!”
Charlotte could have happily continued to chip away at Lizzie’s flimsy reasoning, but before she could respond a smooth British accent chimed in with: “who is an asshole now?”

Charlotte cringed as George Wickham slid into the booth beside Lizzie, something about the guy gave her the creeps. She knew that he was technically employed by the school as a life model, but that didn’t explain what he was doing in the student center on a Friday afternoon hitting on college girls.

Lizzie just rolled her eyes and answered: “Darcy!”

“You’ll get no argument from me, but then I’m hardly an impartial audience.”

“Yeah, what was that between you two?”

Charlotte noted the opportunistic glint in his eye as he replied: “Darcy didn’t tell you? I thought you two were … friends.”

Lizzie laughed a bit too loudly and replied, “hardly! I can barely stand the man!” Right, but you’ve got no problem straddling him, Charlotte laughed internally.

“That’s refreshing to hear, usually people are too busy sucking up to him to realize what a wanker he is.”

“I can guarantee you I’m not impressed with his wealth and pride,” Lizzie responded.

“In fact, Lizzie was just explaining how his fortune was one of his faults,” Charlotte added sardonically, though her companions barely noticed her.

“Well, as a sacrificial victim of his pride, I appreciate a young lady who can see past his wealth.”

“Darcy wouldn’t say a word about you, he just sat there fuming,” then spanked you and fucked you in the back of a car Charlotte mentally completed for Lizzie, who was obviously having some truth problems. “I’m dying to know what happened,” Lizzie begged the sleezeball.

“Well, I’m too much of a gentleman to deny a lady,” George replied flirtatiously and Lizzie giggled. “My father was the estate manager for the Darcy family property, Pemberley. Because of that Darcy and I grew up together. We both lost our mothers young and saw each other through that grief. When my own father died old Mr. Darcy, my godfather, adopted me. He paid for my education and allowed me to stay with them over breaks, I was like a second son to him. Historically, my family has been involved in the management of Pemberley for generations and old Mr. Darcy intended for me to continue that tradition. However, the winter before I finished at Oxford Mr. Darcy died and William took his place. As you can probably deduce by my role as itinerant male model, I did not get the job.”

Charlotte stared at him disbelievingly by the end of that speech, there were so many holes in that plot – including hiring based off of merit rather than nepotism – but when she looked over at Lizzie for support she saw a look of outrage.

“How could he do that? Was there nothing in Mr. Darcy’s will to protect you?”

“He’d made his intentions clear to William and to myself, but there was nothing legal to fight back with.” Yeah, because you can’t legally bequeath jobs. “I wanted to uphold the legacy of Pemberley, William elected instead to break up part of the collections of the estate for some PR project and scale things back at Pemberley. I think he knew I wouldn’t go along with that. Not to mention that he was always jealous of my relationship with his father.”
“So you were punished for wanting to preserve tradition and honor his father’s legacy? What an
asshole!” Lizzie fumed, “you should turn that PR stunt right around on him and show the cost that
his project had … breaking up family collections and tearing apart family ties just for some good
press.”

“I could,” George said hesitantly and Charlotte could practically see the hamster running on the
wheel in his brain to come up with a plausible reason he couldn’t, “but I have too high a regard
for the father’s memory to go after the son like that. Hopefully someone will knock him off of his
pedestal someday, but it won’t be me.”

Lizzie seemed to be eating this all up and Charlotte just groaned softly. She noticed George’s eyes
flick away for a second and gain a calculating glint. “If you’ll excuse me ladies, I’ve got to be
going,” he said and sauntered off in the direction of Mary King, a freshman with freckles and
saucer eyes almost as big as her trust fund.

“See!” Lizzie shouted excitedly, “I knew there was something off about Darcy! I was just looking
for something concrete to tip the scales, and now I’ve got it!”

“So you’re just going to take his word for all of that instead of, you know, trusting the guy you’ve
known intimately for much longer?”

“Come on, you saw how open and artless he was when he explained it all: names, facts, everything
mentioned without ceremony. If it’s all a lie, let Darcy contradict it!”

“Right, it makes perfect sense to just spill your life story to near strangers,” Charlotte deadpanned.
This was exactly the sort of thing that confirmed Lizzie was, in fact, straight – for all of her quick
wit and social charm, she was still such an idiot when it came to cute boys.

As Lizzie continued to
complain about Darcy and George, Charlotte resolved that she needed to get out there more for
herself, stop living so much in Lizzie’s shadow … maybe have some amazing sex of her own and
get over this infatuation.

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Darcy fought the urge to check his phone again as he finished up an email to the international
marketing team. It had been ten hours, five run-ins with Caroline, and three unreturned text
messages since he’d woken up alone at Ashworth and he’d felt Elizabeth’s absence keenly through
all of it. He hadn’t been this infatuated with anyone since he was nineteen, at university, and had
the time and emotional energy to throw into his passions. Now he was an adult with a job and
hundreds of employees relying on him. It was his duty and his privilege to head this company so he
bloody well would focus on his work.

He lost the battle and checked his phone again, no response. He sent her one last text before he
would almost certainly return his focus on his work and forget about the maddening woman:
Could you please, at the very least, respond and let me know that you arrived home safely?

He tossed the phone to the other side of the table to remove the temptation to constantly check it and
returned to work.

He managed about a half hour of nearly focused work before Caroline sauntered into the room
wearing a ridiculously revealing sun dress in a shade of orange that clashed with her fake tan. “Oh,
William, you’re such a diligent worker!” she said, lounging onto the chair across from him.

“I would get far more work done with fewer distractions,” he replied tersely.

“But that’s half the fun of working from home! You could pop off to bed for a … nap and nobody
would be the wiser,” he was too well disciplined to respond in any way to that obvious invitation. She fiddled with the stacks of papers between them, no doubt trying to straighten them, and he fought the urge to yell at her. This was more her house than his, he was a guest after all. “You type so fast! I’ve tried, but I can never get above 30 words per minute!” She said solicitously, Darcy mused to himself that perhaps she’d type faster if her press-on nails were shorter. “How fast do you type? I bet you type over 200 words per minute!”

“No, I type at a rather average speed, I prefer to focus on accuracy rather than speed.”

“I’m sure you excel at both!” He fought the urge to roll his eyes. How did she possibly see this ending? That he’d be so enraptured with their conversation about mundane office skills that he’d finally give in and date her? A picture of Elizabeth’s teasing eyes came unbidden to his mind to reinforce how futile Caroline’s attempts at flirting were. He lowered his head to his hand and tried to clear his mind. Elizabeth was just supposed to be a summer tryst to pass the time until he could go home, she wasn’t supposed to overtake his thoughts and distract him from work.

His phone pinged and he reached out for it but Caroline grabbed it first, glancing at the screen. “Elizabeth?” she frowned at the screen and he gave silent thanks that his phone was password protected. “Is this that lovely Elizabeth Elliot that Lady Catherine introduced you to? The one who’s father is a baronet?”

He swiped his phone out of her hand and replied tersely, “no.”

She didn’t even bother hiding her jealousy, but tried to turn it to her advantage by listing off prominent London socialites by the name of Elizabeth – if she couldn’t have Darcy the only acceptable alternative was losing him to a member of the peerage. He knew that he should wait until he was alone to read the message, but he was unaccountably desperate. He unlocked the phone and read: I made it home alright, sorry for bailing like that this morning. I just need some space.

While he was glad that she was safe, his tension only relaxed marginally. Space was the last thing he wanted. He wanted constant, burning contact that consumed him like fire. He wanted her to be the one distracting him from work and flirting over piles of invoices. He wanted to swipe the papers off of the table like they did in the films and have her right there. He wanted ...

“Eugh!” He jumped as he felt Caroline’s bony body press against his side, her arm draped across his shoulder. “Your Elizabeth is local?” she asked as she read his screen over his shoulder. He flipped the phone down and shuffled sideways out of his chair.

“She is not my Elizabeth,” he protested feebly, “and I’ll thank you to respect my space and my privacy!”

“But who do you even know that’s loc...” she cut herself off in a strangled gasp and looked up at him in horror. “Elizabeth Bennet?” He just stared at her defiantly, daring her to speak out against Elizabeth. The silence in the room drew out – a new experience with Caroline, who usually filled empty silence with meaningless chatter – and he fully expected her anger and frustration to erupt more violently at any moment. Fortunately for Darcy, Charlie interrupted their standoff.

“We’re throwing a party!” Charles announced as he obliviously walked into the charged tension of the room.

“Oh Charles! How could we possibly, I’ve hardly recovered from the last time you invited all of those country bumpkins up here!” Caroline turned on her hapless brother, correctly assuming that
he was an easier target to vent her frustration on. “As I recall some of them even refused to leave after the party!” Darcy felt his hand clenching at his side at the reference to Elizabeth’s extended stay.

“But next weekend will be two months since I met my angel and I feel like celebrating!” Charlie said exuberantly, “it was her sister Lydia’s idea! I’ve already sent out the evites.”

“What, are these Bennet girls drugging the local water supply or something?”

“Come now, Caroline, you know that Jane is perfectly lovely.”

“She is entirely unsuitable for you!” She protested, throwing much of her temper about Darcy and Elizabeth into her tirade about Jane. Darcy slipped out of the room as the siblings were bickering and sent a response to Elizabeth: *I can respect your request for space, but I do hope to dance with you at the party next weekend. He hoped that the space would be good for him too, allow him to re-focus and tamp down his eagerness. He couldn’t afford these types of distractions.*

*He nonetheless nearly dropped the phone in his eagerness to read her reply when it came a minute later. I suppose I’ll have a slot or two open on my dance card. He smiled and put his phone away. He’d go on a quick hike to clear his head and hope that the dining room would be free to resume his work when he was done.*

Chapter End Notes

Confession: Darcy obsessively checking his phone is also me checking my email for comments after I post a story.
The music had already started downstairs but William was still camped out by the window in his room watching people arrive. He was growing accustomed to feeling foolish about his reactions to Elizabeth Bennet and anxiously watching for her arrival like a puppy seemed par for the course at the moment. He’d respected her wishes and had spent the whole long week with no contact with her. He’d stayed in Boston and worked from the office on Friday then timed his arrival on Saturday for after Caroline had started getting ready. She’d spent the remainder of the previous weekend viciously teasing him about Elizabeth to the point that even Charlie had started picking up on it and Darcy couldn’t stomach any more of her nonsense.

If he’d thought that spending the time apart would allow him to regain his equilibrium he was laughingly wrong. He felt an unmistakable pull toward Elizabeth that was increasingly hard to deny. He knew that he’d have to head back home soon – in fact they’d officially completed the last of the work that required his presence in Boston that week – but he’d decided to remain here to supervise for a bit longer. It was agonizing for him to know how limited the time they had left was and yet squander that time.

Nothing about this trip was going according to plan. Initially Charlie was supposed to come out on his own to supervise the new branch to give him more independent management experience. Then some of the partners insisted that Darcy himself be present at the launch to insure it went smoothly. He was only supposed to be here for a few weeks but the clients and the board kept finding issues that required Darcy’s attention.

At the outset Charlie had put up a fuss about the responsibility of establishing the branch but now he was talking about transferring to Boston permanently. The Bennet ladies sure had done a number on them. Charlie, who was typically a serial monogamist that drifted from one relationship to another at least once a month, was talking about uprooting his life and moving across the world for a woman. Darcy, who typically avoided the hassle of dating altogether, was daydreaming at work about Elizabeth charging into his office and ‘punishing’ him for working late and counting the hours until he could see her again.

He spied Elizabeth’s familiar old worn-down car pull up the drive and tried to muster up his usual criticisms of her relative poverty in relation to him but his body betrayed him and his heart raced. When she stepped out of the car she looked radiant in a white empire waist sun dress. If she’d exuded elegant sex appeal and sin that night at Ashworth, tonight she was closer to an angel – to borrow a phrase from Charlie.

Her younger sisters all poured out of the car and he tried to remind himself about how low her connections were, how crass and ignorant her youngest sisters and her mother were, how unsuitable she was for him but he didn’t quite have the heart for it. He made his way downstairs determined to take his lead from Elizabeth tonight. He’d keep his distance as long as she wished it, but he had little faith in his self-control the moment she gave him the slightest encouragement.

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“It’s been nearly an hour since we arrived and Darcy still hasn’t even said hi to me,” Elizabeth grumbled to Charlotte. He’d remained true to his word and left her alone for the week but it hadn’t been as satisfying as Elizabeth had expected. She’d been oddly restless all week when left alone to
stew with her own thoughts.

“So we’re back around to wanting Darcy’s attention?” Charlotte asked. Lizzie didn’t appreciate her amused tone.

“I don’t know. I mean, sure, in general he’s arrogant and disagreeable, and maybe he didn’t give George the job his father had wanted him to but he can also be almost sweet sometimes.” Charlotte gave her a knowing smirk. Lizzie sighed and added: “And yes, he has a remarkable talent for making my insides melt with desire.” Charlotte rolled her eyes at Lizzie’s hyperbole.

Even now, when he was keeping his distance at the party he was so extremely present. His eyes rarely left her even if he remained on the periphery of her vision, she could feel his heated gaze even from across a crowded room.

One of Charlie’s co-workers from Boston … Tom? Tim? Something like that … interrupted her meditation and asked her to dance. She figured it was better than holding up the wall, so she said yes. She overtly made eye contact with Darcy as she glided into the other man’s arms, biting back a smug smile at the clear jealousy in his eyes.

Her partner had clearly consumed some liquid courage and his hand slipped down her back and rested at the top of her ass. Darcy’s gaze had turned into a glare at that wandering hand and he started circling the pair from a distance like a shark. Elizabeth caught his eye again and issued him a challenge, if he was so jealous, he would just have to do something about it.

Tim leaned in and slurred a cheesy pickup line into Lizzie’s ear and she reeled back at the smell of his breath. “Mr. Stevens,” Darcy was suddenly beside them and addressing her partner with his CEO voice.

“Mr... Mr. Darcy!” Tom jumped a bit away from her and looked flustered at his boss. Darcy glared pointedly at the hand that was sill on Elizabeth’s ass and Tim pulled it away like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Would you mind if I cut in?” Darcy asked in the same glacial tone.

“Of … of course not, Mr. Darcy,” Tim stammered and stepped back, gesturing for Darcy to take his place.

“Don’t I get a say in the matter?” Elizabeth asked saucily as Tom scurried away and Darcy moved in.

“Miss Bennet,” he bowed like the hero out of some historical drama and held out his hand, “would you give me the very great honor of your hand for the next dance?”

She laughed, “it will have to be the next one since your question stretched through the end of the last.”

He took her in his arms and they began swaying to the music. “Did you have to be so heavy handed with poor Tim? I think he’s off in the corner hyperventilating.”

“I wouldn’t have been so imperious if Todd hadn’t had his hands all over your body,” he said in an indignant tone.

She leaned in and whispered in his ear, “as if you wouldn’t have your hands all over my body in an instant.”
“I would undoubtedly like to reacquaint my hands with your backside, especially after you goaded me like that,” he traced tiny circles on her lower back, but his hands didn’t stray further, “though I will have the decency to wait until we’ve achieved slightly more privacy.”

“And how much more privacy are we shooting for tonight, Mr. Darcy? The library? Perhaps the billiards room?” She asked, playing with his tie and enjoying watching his eyes darken with lust.

“Alas, I believe both are in use for the party, so we’ll have to settle for my bedroom this evening.”

“How conventional.”

“Yes, well. I believe it’s the only space in this house that Caroline won’t bother us. She swiped my phone last week and read your message, so she knows about us.”

Elizabeth cringed, “I thought she was sharpening her claws on me just a bit more than usual tonight. Ah well, I suppose it had to happen eventually.”

“Luckily I think Caroline’s still trying to impress me with her skills as a hostess too much to directly invade my room.” He gestured with his head toward the door, apparently impatient to get her alone but Lizzie saw Todd sulkily watching them from the corner and shook her head no. “I think we should last through this song at least, for the sake of appearances.”

He sighed, looking around at the assemblage of her neighbors and his employees, and nodded. They danced for some time in silence, the tension just increasing with every beat of the music. “I believe we must have some conversation Mr. Darcy,” she prodded.

Do you talk by rule, then, while you are dancing?”

“I like to talk while doing a lot of strenuous activities, it enhances the experience,” she said flirtatiously and grinned as his ears flushed at her reference to their heated conversations during sex.

The song, thankfully, ended and Darcy squeezed her waist before letting it go, “meet me in my room in ten minutes?” He asked with an urgent entreaty in his eyes.

“Let’s make it five,” she said as she casually walked away from him, resisting the urge to turn around and see the look on his face as she walked back to her friend.

“Well, he just bolted,” Charlotte narrated the scene, craning her neck to see over Lizzie’s shoulder, “and knocked into two people. What did you do to him?”

“Told him I’d meet him in his room in five minutes,” Elizabeth said smugly.

“So we do like Darcy today then?” Charlotte teased.

“Well enough, I suppose,” Elizabeth feigned.

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Darcy impatiently paced his room and fought the urge to do sit-ups or something similarly masculine to burn off some energy as he waited for Elizabeth. He likewise resisted the temptation to light a candle or turn on sensual music. He took off his jacket and hung it in the closet, verifying that everything else in the room was tidy, then returned to pacing. He hated how eager he was, how far he’d fallen under her spell and yet he couldn’t stop himself.
As soon as she knocked on the door he pulled her in and kissed her. When he pulled up for air he locked the door and slipped the bag off of her shoulder, confused by its presence. “I ran into some friends on my way out of the room, I lied and said I needed something from my car to get away from the party. I figured I might as well follow through.” She explained as he shifted the cap sleeve off of her shoulder and kissed it.

“Very clever,” he murmured, kissing southward towards her breasts.

“Well, we wouldn’t want all of your employees to know where you were off to now, would we?”

His earlier annoyance flared back up and he pulled back to look at her, “was it necessary to go and flirt with my subordinate?”

She raised her eyebrow at him and replied: “He asked me to dance and I accepted since I had not other dance partner. How was I to know he’d paw at me like that?”

“But you just let him.”

“It was all under control and in a room full of people I knew would help if it gout out of hand. Besides,” she looked up at him with those irresistible eyes, “it’s quite fun to see you jealous.”

“Is that so?” He asked, walking her back to the bed.

“You got this predatory gleam and pulled out your best autocratic boss voice.”

“Mmhmm,” he spun her around, pressing himself against her back and whispered in her ear: “and are you prepared to face the consequences of my jealousy?”

“Yes, please,” she sighed.

He leaned her forward onto the bed, running his hand down her back. When he reached her bum he gave it a resounding slap and she moaned. “You ought to be punished for such behavior,” he said as he flipped her dress up and smacked her other cheek before removing her knickers. “You ought to know better,” another two in quick succession. “I don’t like the idea of anyone else’s hands on you,” he admitted, running his hands over her cheeks. She wiggled herself into a more comfortable position and he was the one to moan this time. “You do enjoy teasing me, don’t you Elizabeth,” he said with another smack, this time more playful.

“Only because it’s so easy to get a rise out of you,” she said as he began caressing her, enjoying the feel of her heat beneath his hands again after their separation.

“Do you know, I used to pride myself on my self-control before I met you?”

“Oh, I believe you! It wasn’t obvious at first,” she continued, “but now that I know you better, I can see it in your eyes and I can’t resist prodding at your restraint,” this earned her another slap to her rear.

He leaned over her, brushing her hair to the side to kiss her neck, “I missed you this week, Elizabeth.”

“I didn’t think I would ...” she said, gasping as he bit her earlobe, “but I missed you too.” Darcy felt his heart flop at that and for the first time he allowed himself to wish for something more out of this relationship. Kissing her nape, he ground his hips against her arse and was frustrated by the barrier of his trousers.
He stood up and quickly dropped trou. “Here,” he reached for the pillows from the head of the bed, “you’ll be more comfortable with these,” he said as he arranged them under her hips. He allowed his hands to wander, thrilling at every moan and groan he elicited from her.

He licked his finger and used it to tease her back passage, enjoying the sight of her spread out before him. “Do you remember what you said about fair returns?” He asked, as he grasped himself and replaced his teasing finger with the tip of his shaft, imagining all of the possibilities they could enjoy together.

“Mmm, really?” Elizabeth moaned.

“God, yes!” he said, resisting the urge to push into her right then. “Unfortunately, I’m not equipped to take you like that tonight, and even less so for you to take me,” he growled, as he pulled back and reached for a condom. “I have no lubricant and I have no desire to hurt you.”

“I appreciate your consideration,” she teased, but her laugh was cut off by a gasp as he entered her quim. “Another time though?” She asked in excitement.

“Yes!” he cried out as he thrust into her, “another time, my dear.”

She moaned and asked, “and you’ll let me take you as well?”

“Yes!” The idea thrilled him.

“You’ll let me put on a strap-on and have my way with you?”

“Yes!” He’d never been taken like that by anyone, man or woman. He’d never wanted to give that much of himself up, but the idea of allowing Elizabeth that amount of control over his body just felt right.

“You’ll let me dominate you?”

“Yes!” As if you don’t dominate me already! He thought.

“You’d let me bend you over the way I am now and watch you writhe beneath me?”

“Yes! God, Elizabeth!” He called out as he tumbled over the precipice, grasping her hips tightly as he gasped against her skin. He placed one last lingering kiss to her back before he stood up, mindful not to crush her with his full weight.

She shuffled the pillows out of her way and flipped onto her back, pulling him down by his tie. “Who would have thought that the stiff and sober William Darcy would be such a lech?” she asked, kissing him passionately and groping his balls affectionately.

“Well, if I have such power over you, does that mean I can compel you to do dirty things to me?” She asked expectantly and he belatedly realized that she hadn’t come yet.

“I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours,” he said, trailing kisses down her until he reached her core and liked and fondled her. He glanced up, meeting her eyes as he continued to stimulate her. He could quite happily watch this woman’s passion for the rest of his life. She was so vital and alive and by giving her pleasure he felt that some of those qualities seeped into his well-regulated life as well.
After she came, he tenderly wiped her off and settled against the pillows, pulling her up with him. They chatted about their week apart for a while before drifting off to a contented sleep.

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As Elizabeth drifted back into consciousness, she again found herself in William Darcy’s arms but the panic didn’t rise as it had the week before. She tried to drift back to sleep, but she was unaccustomed to being asleep at this hour and was unfortunately very awake.

She shifted out of his grasp without disturbing his slumber and went over to her bag. Consulting her phone she saw that it was only 10 and she could still hear the music of the party going on downstairs, so she figured she still had some time before she had to leave. She resisted the urge to snoop around his room and instead rifled through her bag until she found a sketchbook and some pencils.

Sitting in the chair beside the dresser, she observed Darcy in his sleep. He seemed so much younger and carefree as he slept propped against the pillows and the headboard. She started absently sketching his face as she mulled over their situation. It seemed that this thing was happening and she should probably just stop fighting it. Cutting off contact for the week had done little other than frustrate her. In all of their previous encounters they’d been caught up in the moment, in the fantasy. Tonight there had been plans … implying a future.

She supposed it was even a relationship at this point, though she wasn’t sure what to call him. The term ‘boyfriend’ didn’t suit him at all – he was neither a boy nor particularly her friend – and it seemed kind of childish for such a serious man. ‘Partner’ seemed too stable and permanent. ‘Lover’ strayed too close to love for her comfort. What was the male equivalent of ‘mistress’? After some internal dialogue on the sexist nature of gendered terms for a sexual partner, she finally decided that ‘paramour’ fit the best.

He moaned in his sleep and pawed at the bed beside him, groaning and dropping his head in defeat when he couldn’t find Elizabeth. She felt a pang of guilt for leaving him alone like she had at Ashworth, but there was little she could do about it now. He opened his eyes and slowly panned the room in a sleepy daze, initially passing over her, but doubling back in surprise. “I thought you’d left,” he said with a soft smile.

“Not tonight,” she replied as she finished her sketch of his face and turned a new page, “I was just too awake to lay there and listen to you snore.”

“I do not snore!” he defended indignantly,

“Perhaps everyone else in your life is too impressed with you to tell the truth, but I suffer no such problem,” she said as she started outlining her next sketch, “you snore.”

“Do you know what I like about you?” his brow unfurrowed and he looked at her indulgently.

“Based on tonight’s activities? I’d say my ass.” She teased while she continued her drawing.

“That too. And your breasts are astounding as well … and the area just where your neck meets your shoulders … and I could just get lost for hours staring into your eyes!” She stifled a grin as he grew harder as he continued to list off her physical attributes, his eyes wandering across each as he said them. He shook his head as if to clear it, “but no, one of my favorite things about you, Elizabeth is that I can always count on your brutal honesty.”

Elizabeth laughed at the contrast of that statement to the drawing she’d begun of him sprawled out
on the bed. Though he was still naked from the waist down, he hadn’t removed his shirt or tie. He
looked like some sort of modern satyr, civilized on the top and debauched from the waist down and
she just ran with the idea. “What are you up to over there?” He asked.

Elizabeth blushed as her pencil stopped shading in his erect phallus. “I’m merely illustrating your
… character …” she answered vaguely, hoping for a bit more time to finish before he shifted
poses. She giggled and added, “I am trying to make it out.”

“And what is your success?”

She looked down at the hybrid creature she’d drawn that reflected both his stuffy snobbery and his
passion. It was somewhat strange for her to think that it was the civilized Darcy who insulted
people and ruined lives, whereas the animal was more eager to please. Even though she realized
now that she wanted this, she still had trouble reconciling the guy who whimpers when he wakes
up and can’t find her beside him with the guy who ruined George’s life. “I do not get on at all. I see
and hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly.” It was closer to a confrontation
about the Wickham situation than she’d intended, but having said it she raised her chin defiantly.

He seemed to catch her reference. “I can readily believe,” answered he gravely, “that reports may
vary greatly with respect to me, but perhaps not all accounts you hear are reliable.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think unless I hear both sides of a story?” She asked, her pencil
halting as she locked eyes with him.

For an instant he looked pained and indecisive – an odd look for Darcy – but before long he looked
at her resolutely: “Perhaps that not all stories ought to be told. Please trust me on this, Elizabeth.”

“I suppose I have little choice in the matter,” she said, and returned her focus to the drawing,
finding particular joy at that moment in adding the satyr’s horns. But Elizabeth was not formed for
ill-humour and before long the silliness of her drawing raised her spirits back to playfulness.

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She had been silently sketching for far too long in his opinion. He knew that she wanted to hear
what was between himself and Wickham, but that was Georgiana’s story to tell, not his. His unease
grew when he remembered that the last time she’d been this quiet she’d been testing him. “May I
see?” he asked solicitously in atonement for their previous disagreement.

Elizabeth blushed again as she explained: “I believe I have managed to capture multiple facets of
your personality,” though she kept the sketchbook out of his view.

“And will you share it with me?” He asked, truly curious about any insights into how Elizabeth
saw him.

She looked down at the sketchbook, laughed, and nodded, slowly handing it to him face down. He
turned it over and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or be insulted. His torso and face were familiar,
with his eyes locked expressively onto the viewer. The rest though... his legs were hairy and
cloven, he had horns, and a massive erection. “You have to admit,” she laughed, “that it’s a fairly
accurate depiction of your current state.”

He looked down and noted the pristine shirt and tie opening to a rather prominent erection and
hairy legs. He laughed at the ridiculous picture he made. “With that outfit and the pose you were
in, you looked just like a satyr. You try so hard to be proper and dignified, civilized if you will” she
moved to the bed beside him and added in a confidential tone, “but deep down I know there’s an
animal in there: fierce and territorial and … primal.” He couldn’t help leaning forward and
capturing her in a brutal kiss at that description. *Good God, this woman would either be the life or
death of me!* he thought.

“I know that the horns are primarily a Renaissance convention,” she said with a smirk, her hand
traveling down to graze his shaft, “but you can’t deny that you’re horny.”

“That side is reserved for you, love,” he said huskily as he tossed the sketchbook onto the
nightstand, flipped her on her back and hovered over her, alternating between kisses and nips along
her neck.

“Mmmm, Darcy!” she groaned, grinding up towards him.

He bit her shoulder hard then growled down at her, “Mr. Darcy is the civilized business man,” he
didn’t want to be civilized right now. He wanted to be fierce and primal, he wanted to take her and
mark his territory … but he wanted her to want *him*, the man who couldn’t contain the feelings this
woman dredged up within him.

“William?” she purred, tracing her nails across his back.

He growled again and bit her other shoulder, “William is a friend, an acquaintance,” he wanted
more, he wanted fire and passion but also intimacy.

“Will, please!” she whimpered digging her nails into his back. He surged into her at that, thrusting
frantically. He continued to bite at her shoulders, marking her as his. Her fingernails dug into his
shoulders in a similarly territorial marking.

“Oh, Lizzie! You bring this side of me out,” he panted, “only you!” Lizzie moaned beneath him,
urging him faster.

“I’ve never,” Lizzie panted, “been like this,” she interrupted herself with a loud moan, “with
anyone else, Will! Will!”

“Lizzie!” He shouted as he came, he stayed inside of her, stimulating her with his hand until she
came as well. He collapsed to her side, pulling her close.

“Well fuck!” said Lizzie, still panting and throwing her arm over her head.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Will said, kissing her bruised shoulder tenderly, “too much?”

“Don’t apologize, that was incredible!” She said as she snuggled closer to him. For the first time in
a very long while he felt truly happy. He was close to dozing off again when the throbbing thud of
the music downstairs stopped and after a minute he could hear introductory cords played on a
piano.

“Oh no!” Lizzie moaned, burying her face in his chest, “Mary!”

“What?” He asked, lazily stroking her hair.

“We’ve apparently reached the point in the party where Mary feels it’s her Christian duty to point
out the sins of debauchery … through song.”

He chuckled, “let her be, she’ll be done soon enough.”

Lizzie moaned and replied, “I ought to get back down there.”
“No, stay,” he protested, wrapping his arms tighter around her, “you could just sleep here tonight.”

“I drove, remember?”

“Let Jane or Mary drive your sisters home.”

“If I don’t arrive home with my sisters my mother will know something is up,” his arms loosened a bit in surprise as she continued on, “trust me, the last thing we want is my mother going around bragging about my ‘conquest’ of a rich man.”

Darcy’s arms went slack and Elizabeth got up and began to tidy herself. “Do … do you mean to say that you still live with your parents?” He supposed a lot of people of her social status remained living with their parents, but the thought that Elizabeth was one of them had never even occurred to him.

She rolled her eyes and replied, “I know, Charlotte tried to convince me to move into the dorms with her, but it seems like such a waste of money when we live so close to the college.”

Darcy’s heart dropped, “you’re still in college?”

“Yeah, didn’t you know?” She asked breezily as she packed her sketchbook back into her bag … her backpack. Darcy started to panic as he quickly put his trousers back on … was he one of those creepy old men? Pushing thirty and preying on young girls? One of those predators like … like Wickham?

Elizabeth, unaware of the world crashing down around Darcy’s shoulders, stood on her toes to give him a kiss. “I suppose we should head down separately? Throw people off the scent?” I should bloody well think so! I can’t have my employees knowing that I’m … he merely nodded.

She smiled and said, “I’ll text you tomorrow, ok?”

He nodded and followed her to the door. She opened it and almost immediately after the door closed behind her he heard her shout, “Lydia Bennet! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Lizzie?! OMG, probably the same thing as you! I didn’t think you had it in you!” A giggling voice replied.

“I’m not … I came up here to escape and … do some sketching,” Lizzie replied, Darcy dropped his head against the wall, hoping that her sister didn’t ask to see the sketches.

“Riiight … and I’m sure that’s just charcoal and pastels on your neck then!” Her sister teased, and Darcy felt like a monster for marking her like that.

“That’s not the point, you’re only fifteen!” She scolded, her voice took a harder tone as she presumably turned to the man, “she’s only fifteen!”

“I … I didnno …” an inebriated man’s voice replied.

“Well now you do, I suggest you go find someplace to sleep it off … alone. And I hope you remember enough in the morning to be grateful that you’re not going to prison.” Her words tore through Darcy as her footsteps echoed down the hall, was he any better? She’d called him a lech and it seemed she was correct, he was nothing more than a lecherous creep.

“I can't wait until I’m eighteen, then you’ll all get off my back about these things. It’s just sex after all and mom says …” the sulking sister said as they walked off. If her sister was only fifteen, how
young was Elizabeth? Presumably eighteen based on her sister’s arguments … a full decade younger than him! Perhaps even younger. He spent another fifteen minutes berating himself in solitude before he ambled back down to the party.

Another one of the Bennet sisters … was she really called Kitty like some exotic dancer? … was literally chasing after one of his CPAs. Mary seemed to be joining Elizabeth in scolding the errant Lydia. Jane was with Charlie and a group of the lads from the office. Charlie left to get her another drink and Darcy watched Jane continue to smile … one might even say flirt … with each of the lads with the same serene smile she gave Charlie when he returned with her drink. How old was Jane? Was Charlie seriously considering uprooting his whole life for some child who clearly didn’t feel as strongly for him as he did for her? Was he being just as blind? Had he too fallen for an illusion? Was this the curse of the Bennet sisters?

He remembered Elizabeth’s description of her mother and Lydia’s careless words … were they all just following Mummy’s orders to raise their status? A whole gaggle of enticing young women taking advantage of all of all the rich men Charlie had brought to their miserable little town to marry up? Darcy latched on to this idea as the most logical explanation. Somewhere in the back of his mind he acknowledged that it was easier to think that Elizabeth had used him than to think that he’d taken advantage of her. Caroline walked over and began spouting vitriol against the Bennet sisters, he let her chatter flow over him and mingle with his own criticisms. Eventually Caroline hit on an idea and for once he was in complete agreement with her: They all had to get back to London as soon as possible.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo … I'm giving you two sex scenes to make up for none last chapter ...

Sorry for the cliffhanger, but you knew it was coming right? I'll just be swiftly working on the next couple of chapters so I don't leave you hanging too long
There was one chair in one corner of the bedroom that she shared with Jane where Elizabeth could sit, have wifi access, and her computer screen was not visible to the door, Jane’s bed, the window, or any other prying eyes. Growing up in a three bedroom house – four if you counted the unfinished room in the basement that Mary chose to use rather than share with her Kitty and Lydia – with seven occupants privacy is a premium. Elizabeth had carved out that spot when she was thirteen and it had been her sanctuary for many discrete activities ever since.

The morning after the party at Netherfield, Mary, Jane, and their mother were at church, Lydia and Kitty were still sleeping it off, and their father was closed into his ‘study’ – a converted storage room off of the kitchen. Elizabeth took advantage of the quiet to hunker down in that one place of prime real estate.

After verifying that she’d opened an incognito browser window, she began her research. If she and Darcy were going to do pegging, they were certainly going to do it right. It didn’t take long into the process for her to get excited about the prospect. She grabbed her phone to text Darcy, but the idea of Caroline Bingley reading a text about her reaming Darcy made her gag a bit so she had to phrase things discretely. She finally settled on: I’m doing research on that particular … joint endeavor we discussed last evening. Want to meet up for coffee and discuss options?

She went back to browsing for bit and after another half hour picked up her phone again, frowning at the lack of response. She shot off another text: We may need to make a field trip for some of the equipment if we don’t want to end up in a sleazy side of the highway type place. There’s a nice place in Northampton but maybe I should just come visit you Boston this week?

An hour later she was deep in the research zone, having found several fascinating guides and informative comics – ignoring the straight up porn, because, lets face it, that never sets a good example of best practices for beginners – when Jane walked into the room and quietly sat on her bed. “Nothing!” Elizabeth said nervously as she slammed her laptop closed, “I wasn’t looking for anything in particular.” She hadn’t even told Jane about her and Darcy yet, she wasn’t ready to explain her current browser tabs. Elizabeth’s fear of discovery rapidly dissolved along with Jane’s brittle smile as her sister began crying.

“Oh Jane! What’s wrong?” Elizabeth asked as she tossed her laptop on her bed and enfolded her sister in a hug.

“I got an email from Caroline this morning ...” Jane said, trying to calm herself, “apparently they’ve all left Netherfield early this weekend because ...” her story was interrupted by another wave of sobbing. Elizabeth feared the worst, was someone ill? Injured? “Oh Lizzie, he’s gone!” Dead? Elizabeth thought in a panic, No, that’s implausible.

“Shhh, I’m sure he’ll be back on Thursday just like always,” Elizabeth soothed.

“No, according to Caroline, they’re headed back to Boston today so that they can pack ...” she hiccuped and struggled over her next words, “… they’re flying back to London tomorrow.”

Elizabeth recoiled back in shock, “that’s not possible! He would have said ...” and checked her phone in vain for a response from Darcy. Maybe it was just the Bingley sisters heading back,
Elizabeth wasn’t sure what they did or why they were here in the first place.

Jane, assuming the ‘he’ in question was Bingley, continued: “Charlie isn’t answering my calls and now Caroline says it’s unlikely any of them will be back to Netherfield this year.”

“I don’t understand, why is all of this coming from Caroline? Why isn’t Charlie explaining this to you himself?” Or Darcy explaining it to me, she silently tacked on.

“I don’t know!” Jane whimpered, grabbing onto her pillow for comfort.

“You know what I think? I think this is Caroline’s wishful thinking. I think she doesn’t want her brother staying in the US, so she’s pushing to leave early. But Charlie’s a grown man, he can make his own decisions, I have to believe that he’ll be back as soon as he can.”

“But then why won’t he answer my calls?”

“I don’t know sweetie. Why don’t you just lie down for a minute, I’ll get you some tea,” Elizabeth said, covering her sister with a blanket. And some answers! She thought as she left the room and pulled out her phone, dialing Darcy’s number. It rang twice then went directly to voicemail – that asshole just declined my call!

“What the fuck is going on?” She said menacingly to his voicemail, “Last night you were balls deep describing what we’d do in the future and telling me I’d bewitched you and now I have to hear indirectly from Jane via Caroline that you’ll be leaving the damn country tomorrow? Call. Me. Back! I’ll be over here picking up the shattered pieces of my sister’s heart.” This is what she got for letting her guard down. She’d disliked Darcy from the start but she’d let him wear her down only to disappoint her in the end. She tried to collect herself as she put on the kettle and made the tea. Jane needed her to be strong now. Elizabeth may be angry, disappointed, and frustrated, but Jane was the one with the broken heart.

Later that evening, after several heart-to-hearts with Jane, dealing with the fallout of their mother finding out about Charlie’s defection, her father’s careless teasing, and ten more un-returned messages and calls to Darcy, Elizabeth finally opened her laptop again – in the one private corner of her room that had witnessed her hope and folly – and closed the incognito window. A notification popped up asking if she wanted to close multiple tabs at once, her mouse hovered over it for a moment. She’d been so hopeful and excited this morning and closing the browser seemed to confirm that she was closing off all of those possibilities. With a sigh, she clicked ‘close tabs’ and whisked the moisture away from her eyes. She must be getting fall allergies or something.

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William Darcy sat in the executive lounge of Logan airport examining his scotch. He was getting some skeptical looks from other passengers for drinking at 10am on a Monday morning, but it was the afternoon in London and he may as well get a jump on resetting his internal clock. It’s not as if he’d gotten much sleep over the last couple of nights regardless. He’d been cycling through various emotional states: hurt that she’d deceived him, that what he’d thought was real was just an illusion; anger at her for leading him on, at himself for taking advantage of her; repulsion at himself for being even remotely like Wickham and his ilk; sadness that he’d never see her again. Even in spite of all of that, he’d finally admitted what he’d been trying to deny all along: he loved her.

Rationally, he knew that leaving was the only sensible option. He refused to be one of those men who carried on with younger women for sport. It was sad and manipulative and would gain him even more censure than the fact that she was an overbearing middle-class American with a crass family would. He would not be made a laughing stock. He owed it to his family and to his
company to maintain a dignified public profile. And he owed it to Elizabeth to allow her to date someone closer to her in age and temperament, someone whom she didn’t have to learn not to hate. He also knew that if he stayed in Boston he would be tempted to visit Netherfield. If he visited Netherfield he would see Elizabeth. If he saw Elizabeth he would lose his resolve and end up in bed with her.

His phone pinged as if to test his wavering resolve. It would be Elizabeth, again. She would be angry, still. She would ask him for an explanation that he couldn’t give without admitting that he hadn’t even considered her age once in the past several weeks. He turned the phone off without even looking at the text. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to listen to her voicemails, let alone talk to her. If he heard her voice he would cave.

He looked at Charlie’s desolate face across from him and reminded himself that if his resolve broke, Charlie’s would be even worse. They’d managed to convince him that Jane just wasn’t as serious about him as he was about her, but it had been a hard-won battle. Caroline had confiscated her brother’s phone yesterday lest he break down and call Jane. Darcy was fairly certain of his own judgment in the matter, Jane wasn’t a woman who felt deeply and Charlie would move on soon enough once they returned to London. If Charlie stayed, he would upset his whole life for an unobtainable illusion. Darcy couldn’t allow his best friend to ruin his life like that. No, it was best for everyone if they all just went home and put this whole trip behind them. He drained the last of his drink and tried to eradicate Elizabeth’s face from his memory. He couldn’t allow himself to be weak. This was for the best.

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Elizabeth sat in the back of the room seething and regretting her lack of foresight. She had used her sketchbook for her figure drawing class to do the drawings of Darcy and hadn’t thought to remove them from the sketchbook before she turned it in for review by her professor. Professor Phillips had loved the satyr sketch, declaring that it was the perfect combination of Elizabeth’s background in Art History within the bounds of the class. She had strongly suggested that Elizabeth clean it up and develop it for her final project. Since Elizabeth had a distinct problem saying no to professors, she’d spent the better part of the two and a half weeks since Darcy had disappeared staring at his snobby, smug, horny image – fleshing out every detail from the intense gaze that followed her anywhere in a room to the veins on his erection.

The drawing was like rubbing salt in all of the wounds. She’d worked on it exclusively in her room so that her mother and younger sisters wouldn’t see it – She didn’t want to find out what Lydia and Kitty would do if they recognized her sitter – but there was no hiding it from Jane. She’d reluctantly had to explain her whole sordid history with Darcy to Jane and the sisters had a good cry together about their mutual abandonment. Jane tried to keep calm, but Elizabeth could see that the regret and pain that shaded her typically placid eyes increased whenever she saw that drawing. It was just a constant reminder of what they couldn’t have.

Elizabeth wanted to just hate Darcy – he was obviously just some entitled asshole who took what he wanted and felt no problem walking away without a word when it suited him – but that damn satyr just kept bringing up conflicting emotions. She couldn’t deny that the man was hot. While he wasn’t overly athletic or toned, his body was almost too perfect, like he couldn’t allow himself flaws. Working on that piece, she couldn’t help but remember what she felt when she was with him: how his hands glided over her skin, the look in his eyes whenever she was able to break that rigid self-restraint, how he was equally happy giving or receiving commands in bed … how comfortable it had been to just lay there and talk with him.

And now she was stuck in the back of a stuffy art studio on the fourth floor of an old building in
the sweltering heat suffering through a critique where her peers kept praising a work that she herself could happily burn in effigy. Not to mention that she couldn’t quite suppress the memories when her classmates brought up how wonderfully she’d captured his eyes and anatomy, how she’d successfully blended the animal elements with the trope of the refined business man. She almost welcomed Lucy Long’s comments about the impropriety of the piece – “It’s obscene, almost bordering on pornographic” – because Elizabeth hoped that it would force the class to move on. Unfortunately, another classmate defended that the erect phallus was part of the human anatomy and therefore fell under the preview of a life-drawing critique.

She was ready to bolt by the end of the critique when she was intercepted by George Wickham. “And I thought you weren’t ‘friends’ with Darcy,” he said with a hurt expression.

“We aren’t … weren’t. I… Its … complicated,” he looked at her with a challenging look and she let out a frustrated sigh. “It doesn’t matter anyhow, he’s gone back to London,” she added, shoving her highly acclaimed drawing back into her portfolio before her classmates could ogle it more.

“Ah yes, Darcy never was terribly reliable in the relationship department. He has too high an opinion of himself to think much of the feelings of others.”

“Sounds about right,” Elizabeth replied.

“You know,” George said in a low tone, “if you’re feeling lonely I’d be happy to help out.” He gave her an appreciative once over, biting his lip.

This was not the kind of offer Elizabeth would typically consider – excluding her thing with Darcy, casual sex wasn’t her usual style – but why the hell not? He was an attractive man with a witty personality. She was an independent woman who had a recent appreciation for a good British accent and who’d been staring at her former paramour’s penis for weeks in frustration without any satisfaction. Not to mention the added bonus that this would piss Darcy off so much. He’s the one who left, she had no obligations to him.

“Sure, why not?” She said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. He smiled and led her out of the building. They chatted on the short walk to his place, mostly small talk sprinkled liberally with innuendo. His studio apartment was small, sparsely furnished, and as close to campus as possible without actually being a dorm. Elizabeth barely had time to look around her before he took her portfolio and backpack and set them to the side.

“Now, Little Lizzie, I believe you’ve got the advantage of me. You’ve seen me naked many times, but I’ve yet to see you,” he said, placing his hand on her hip and teasing the hem of her shirt with his thumb.

“No preamble then? What happened to romance?” She asked teasingly, leaning in for a light kiss.

“If you wanted romance, you wouldn’t have come straight to my place,” he said pulling her taught against him and kissing her roughly. The kiss started out well enough, but she just kept waiting for a spark that didn’t come. He took the couple of steps to the couch where he sat down and pulled her onto his lap. “Do you like older men Little Lizzie?” He asked, rubbing his palm across her ass. She’d never really considered her attraction to men in terms to their age in that way. “I suppose I just like men who know what they want,” she responded truthfully.

“And boys your age just don’t know what they’re about,” he answered with a smack to her ass. “So you’re a naughty little girl,” he continued with another slap, “you don’t want to play with boys your own age,” smack, “you’d rather tempt older men to sin.”
Elizabeth felt uncomfortable with the direction of his dirty talk, so she shut him up with a long lingering kiss. With his mouth put to better use, she started to get into it and shifted so she was straddling him, grinding against his hard shaft.

“Such a naughty Little Lizzie!” he groaned, peeling off her shirt. “Such pert breasts!” He murmured, rubbing his stubbled chin across them. Elizabeth tried to ignore his words and focus on the friction, on his mouth teasing her nipples. “So supple and nubile!” He moaned appreciatively into her flesh, “so, so young!”

“Ok, can you please stop talking about how young I am, it’s really creeping me out,” Elizabeth finally said.

“Come on now Little Lizzie, when a girl your age goes after a man my age, we both know what you’re after,” he spanked her again, “you want a mature lover, one who knows how to handle impertinent little girls like you.”

“Eew, seriously stop saying that shit,” Elizabeth’s interest was waning with every word out of his mouth.

“Don’t play shy with me Lizzie,” he said with another slap to her ass that was just a bit too hard to be playful or flirtatious, “I bet poor old Darcy wasn’t up to the task, so you had to come to a real man.”

“Ok, we’re done,” Elizabeth said, shifting off of him and standing before he had a chance to grab her.

“Don’t throw a tantrum Lizzie, get back here,” he said, with a flash of temper. She reached for her shirt but he grabbed it and held it out of her reach, “don’t be a tease Lizzie, come back here and finish what you started like a good little girl.”

“You’re holding my shirt ransom? Now who’s being childish? Give me my shirt back!”

“Not until you finish what you started,” he said.

“Coercion isn’t a good look George, give me my shirt,” Elizabeth said, starting to worry about the menacing glint in his eye.

“I’m losing my patience, Lizzie,” he said.

“You know what? Keep it,” Elizabeth replied, hastily readjusting herself in her bra, grabbing her bag and portfolio and making her way out of the door, beginning to fear what he might do in retaliation. She ran down three flights of stairs with her heart beating rapidly. She stopped to pull on the sweatshirt that was in her bag and made her way quickly to her car, sweating bullets. She tossed her stuff in the backseat, got in, locked the door, and rested her head on the searing wheel and waiting for her heart to slow down.

Say what she would about Darcy, he always stopped when she asked him to. He may have made her socially uncomfortable, but he’d never given her reason to fear retaliation. Even when they were playing out fantasies, he was attracted to her not some fetishized ideal of youth. She slumped back, that was one less layer of bad behavior to absolve Darcy of, and she was afraid that if she lost her anger at him she’d have to confront her other feelings about him.

Chapter End Notes
So, if age play is your thing, that’s great! I’m not trying to kink shame anyone. Acting out your kink with another consenting adult is just fine, no matter what it is, but this scene was creepy because Elizabeth was clearly not into it and Wickham wouldn’t listen to her boundaries. The Wickham interlude was mostly about consent, revoking consent, and pointing out the differences between Darcy & Wickham (plus I think it’s what a modern Elizabeth would do if Darcy just bailed and she’s still trying to pretend it was casual). Sorry about the sermon along with your smutty story.

There’ll be one more chapter with no interactions b/w Elizabeth and Darcy before they stumble back upon each other.

If you’re interested in Elizabeth’s research, I was thinking primarily of Oh Joy Sex Toy comics. She’s got a lot of good sex education packed into amusing comic format! (Pegging: https://www.ohjoysextoy.com/pegging-by-kazimir-lee/ BDSM: https://www.ohjoysextoy.com/bdsm/ and Consent: https://www.ohjoysextoy.com/consent/)
The Fall

Chapter Notes

I've gotten way carried away from my initial outline of 7 chapters ... this will be longer (at least 10-11 total?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September

“Guys suck!” Elizabeth said as she plopped down next to Charlotte in the student center.

Charlotte felt she’d already heard way more about Lizzie’s sex life than was healthy for her to process and she really didn’t want to hear any more. She was committed to the ‘new year, new Charlotte’ plan but couldn’t help slipping back into her familiar best friend role regardless. “Tell me about it,” she commiserated.

“So, you know Wickham? The life-model?” Charlotte didn’t like the direction this was going, that guy was definitely a creep, but just nodded. “Well, after the critique last week I went back to his place...” *Oh no* ... “and things started out okay-ish. But then he kept calling me ‘little Lizzie’ and talking about how young I was. I asked him to stop and he got … creepy.”

“Shocker!” Charlotte said with an eyeroll, “especially from an older guy hanging around flirting with college girls.”

“No, I mean ...” Elizabeth said nervously and paused, “when I told him to stop he got more insistent … then he took my shirt hostage ...” Charlotte snapped to attention with a sense of dread.

“God! Lizzie, are you ok?”

Lizzie nodded, “he was getting all intense and wouldn’t give it back so I just left because I wasn’t sure what would happen if I stayed. Luckily I had a sweatshirt in my bag otherwise it would have been a super awkward walk to my car,” she added in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Charlotte hugged Lizzie, noting that her friend was trembling slightly. “Man, I knew he was a creep, but I didn’t think … uugh!” She shivered.

“I know, I know. It’s not rational. I know it’s not rational.” Lizzie leaned her head on her arm against the table. “Guys suck!”

“Yes!” Charlotte agreed.
“Maybe I’ll just give up on guys entirely!”

Charlotte couldn’t help the little flutter in her treacherous heart. “I’m with you on that one,” she said quietly, wishing that just once Lizzie would get it.

“No more men for Lizzie Bennet!” She said it so flippantly.

Charlotte had to remind herself that Lizzie wasn’t torturing her on purpose, that she didn’t realize how painful this was. She knew that this was just cathartic for her friend, so she tried to play along. “Good riddance!” She agreed, slightly wistfully.

“So, are we giving up men in sisterhood?” Lizzie asked.

“I haven’t been with a man in almost a year,” Charlotte replied. She’d made a couple of attempts after her illuminating night with Lizzie … both with women and men … but those encounters only confirmed that she just wasn’t that into guys at all, that she was into girls, and that she wasn’t at all over Lizzie.

“Oh, sweetie! We really need to get you laid.”

“You don’t need a man for that,” Charlotte replied bluntly. It was the closest to coming out to her friend as she’d ventured so far.

“True,” Lizzie said, toasting with her bottle of soda. After a minute she added resignedly, “don’t you miss ‘em though? I don’t know if I’d be able to go without it,” Lizzie said with a clarifying gesture indicating men’s parts.

“I find …” Charlotte started sheepishly, “that I prefer going without it.”

“Really?” Elizabeth looked stunned and Charlotte could see her processing it before she caught on and smiled, hugging her friend, “well alright then, we’ll just need to get you a girlfriend then.” Charlotte smiled, she’d made such a big deal out of this in her head that it felt freeing to just be able to say it out loud to Lizzie.

She only had a couple of minutes to revel in that acceptance before Lizzie spoke up: “Oh! It’s 2:50, we don’t want to be late for our Museum Studies seminar,” Elizabeth said, gathering up her stuff.

*Damnit,* Charlotte thought, as soon as we get one bombshell out of the way I’ve got to drop another one. “I’m, um … I dropped the Museum Studies class.”

“Why would you do that? It’s only offered every other year, so you won’t be able to take it if you don’t take it now.”

Charlotte’s ambitions had always been a bit vague. When she and Lizzie had started college, Lizzie had done all of the research and announced that they could major in Art History and minor in Art and hit all of their interests. Charlotte had just gone along with the plan. She’d realized in her Freshman and Sophomore years that she was more interested in the studio courses than the lectures, but she hadn’t wanted to rock the boat. ‘New Charlotte’ had decided to follow her own interests for once.

“Well, there’s this sculpture course being offered by a visiting artist and I don’t want to miss the opportunity.”

“Oh,” Lizzie said, looking disappointed and breaking Charlotte’s heart just a tad, “but you’ll still need another Art History seminar this semester to meet the degree requirements.”
Charlotte took a deep breath and decided to rip off the whole damn band-aid since she’d already come this far. “I actually met with my advisors last week. I’m switching my major to Art and my minor to Art History.”

Lizzie just gaped, but Charlotte knew that this distance was for the best. How could she move on if she still followed her life plan as drawn up by Lizzie and saw her in all of her classes? “Look, you should get going, you don’t want to miss your class. We can talk about it more later.”

Charlotte walked to her class in a daze and took a seat, reminding herself that she couldn’t keep giving in to Lizzie. It wasn’t healthy. She could do this, she could be her own woman.

“Hello! I’m Willa Collins,” she was startled out of her thoughts as a girl with short curly hair and thick rimmed glasses that she’d never seen before sat next to her. “I’m studying abroad here this semester from Rosings University in Kent, and I don’t really know anybody yet, may I sit here?”

“Um, hi! Sure, I’m Charlotte Lucas.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Charlotte! My advisor, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, suggested that travel and diversifying one’s education would be a boon to my artistic abilities…” Charlotte let Willa’s plentiful chatter flow over her, drowning out her thoughts about Elizabeth at least until class started.

October

Elizabeth tried to drown out Collins’ obsequious monologue as she focused on her food. She wasn’t sure what Charlotte saw in her, but she was trying to be supportive. This was Charlotte’s first girlfriend and her family hadn’t all taken it so well, so she needed her friends. Still, though, did Collins have to be so obnoxious? Her self-importance seemed to grow with every passing day and she just couldn’t shut up about her advisor.

For the last several weeks she’d insisted that people call her ‘Collins’ only – “Because all of the greatest artists are remembered by their last names: Picasso, Rembrandt, Van Gogh…” Lizzy had bit her tongue to stop herself from adding on a De Bourgh to the list, knowing from previous monologues that ‘her ladyship’ likes to have the distinction of rank preserved and consequently always insists on people using her title.

“It is such a privilege studying under the illustrious Lady Catherine De Bourgh,” Collins droned on, “you know her famous Chimney-Piece alone sold for eight hundred thousand pounds at auction just last year. I do hope that you’ll be accepted for the Rosings study-abroad trip next term dearest Charlotte, you could learn so much from Lady Catherine, and be exposed to far more culture than you’d get if you stayed here your whole life.”

Lizzie’s head shot up. “What study abroad?”

Charlotte smiled and explained, “well, Longbourne has an exchange program with Rosings, which is what brought Collins here. There’s an opportunity for us to study over there next semester.”

“And you’re just going to go to another country … for a whole semester?” Elizabeth tried to wrap her head around this concept.

“Ideally, yes. I’ve applied, but it’s a long shot.” Elizabeth didn’t like what was going on here at all. Her whole life had been upset since August. Jane was just a sad shell of her usually chipper self, moping around with her broken heart and dreams. Charlotte was in completely different courses from her for the first time since kindergarten and if she ever did want to spend time with her best
friend, she had to endure the presence of Collins. Now Charlotte was talking about following this girl that she’d just met all the way to another continent. She tried to tamp down the feelings of abandonment, but it had been hard since he left with all of his friends.

Later that evening, she was scrolling through the schools study abroad options to know what she was up against when Jane walked in. “Hi Lizzie, how was your day?” she asked placidly, though her sister could still sense the tension behind it.

“Uugh, Charlotte is following her back to England!” Elizabeth announced.

“Collins? What about school?”

“It’s a study abroad program at Rosings.”

“That sounds like a great opportunity for Charlotte,” Jane commented as she pulled out a stack of worksheets to grade.

“Yeah, but she’s only known Willa for a little over a month and she’s already taking this massive leap!”

“Oh Lizzie, I know you’re not as trusting in relationships as some of us, but if they’re in love ...” she drifted off sadly. After a moment she added so softly that Lizzie barely heard it: “… I would have followed.”

Lizzie’s heart broke all over again for her sister. She’d finally found the listing of programs in the UK and her eyes rested on a program in London, focusing on primary school education. “Jane,” Elizabeth said cautiously, “what if you could follow?”

“What? Just run after him with no idea where he is or if he wants to see me? What about school?”

“No, look! There’s a study abroad in London, in your field!” Elizabeth pulled her laptop over to Jane’s bed.

“We both know that you’ve just got a few electives left to take next semester as you’ve completed all of your requirements. It would get you to London and who knows what could happen?”

“I can’t just go chasing after him like that Lizzie!” Jane blushed.

“Ok, then look at it this way. Do this for you. For your career. Don’t you think it would be a great line on your resume to say that you’ve had teaching experience in both the US and UK? Wouldn’t exposure to different teaching styles and structures improve your skills?”

“This does look amazing,” Jane said, turning the monitor closer to herself.

“And if you happen to run into some mutual acquaintances while you’re there all the better! If nothing else, you deserve some closure.” Elizabeth’s mind momentarily flitted back to Darcy and her own lack of closure, but that was an issue for another day.

“Goodness, the application deadline is in a week!” Jane said, marking it in her calendar in pen along with a note to talk to her advisor about a recommendation, a clear sign to Elizabeth that she was at least taking it seriously.

December

Darcy flipped the collar up on his coat to shield himself from the rain as he left the office. It was
late, but then it always was. He’d spent the past months since his return to London desperately trying to throw himself into his work, anything to distract himself. He couldn’t allow himself to be one of those men, not after what happened to Georgiana. But no matter how frequently he reminded himself of the reasons he couldn’t be with Elizabeth his heart still couldn’t let her go.

He wasn’t proud of the number of times he’d looked at that one picture she’d sent him. He’d turned off his American mobile phone in Boston and hadn’t looked at it since, but he’d already synced the media to his laptop before everything had come crashing down on him. That picture taunted him. There were virtually no identifiable features – her face, her enchanting eyes, her raised eyebrow, and her taunting lips were off screen. And yet the curve of her neck, the tumble of hair out of focus in the background, the clavicle that he just wanted to devour were all so temptingly familiar to him. The bite marks and bruising he’d marked her with also taunted him, evidence long-since faded of a relationship that couldn’t be.

Even on days when his self control held and he didn’t gaze longingly at her image, everything reminded him of her. A witty comment at a dinner party, dark curls bouncing down the back of the woman in front of him on the tube, pie in a bakery window. The bloody happy couples that all of a sudden seemed to be everywhere on the streets of London were the worst of it. Surely they’d been there all along, but they’d never bothered him in the past. Now they were just an ever-present reminder of what he couldn’t have. They had each other, interconnected lives that they shared together. He had his memories to torment him and an out of focus photo to wank to in his lonely flat.

Initially he’d tried distracting himself with books – throwing himself into dense literature to occupy his mind – but he’d always conjured up what Elizabeth’s opinions would be or imagined the arguments she’d make. Films were no better, apparently her tastes had woven their way into the back of his head and she’d either mock him for his pretentious choices or tease him for stooping to the level of the common populace. He’d picked up fencing again – a sport he’d otherwise left behind at Eton – because it allowed him to work off some tension.

He’d like to think that work was the best distraction, that he’d funneled all of this frustrated energy into productivity, but his mind was just distracted. He’d regularly stay hours past the end-of-day and barely accomplish his usual work load. Passing Charlie in the halls, he was uncomfortably aware that the rapid recovery that he’d envisioned had been anything but. The poor bloke still tried for cheer, but he was less lively than usual. Neither himself nor Charlie had seen other women since their return despite Caroline and Louisa’s best efforts. They’d just shriveled into a pair of depressed recluses.

Walking home he was barraged by adverts anticipating the holidays. Diamond rings, happy families, and none-too-subtle suggestions to cherish and spoil the one you love were all painful reminders. When shopping for Georgiana he unconsciously purchased a gift based off of one of Elizabeth’s stories about her sisters. He continually found items that he wanted to give to Elizabeth – a sapphire necklace that would accentuate her eyes, a book that she would enjoy, that diamond ring that would bind her to him far more permanently than the bite marks he’d given her in the back of a car (he shuddered at the reminder of the tawdry affair that it actually was and quickly reminded himself why he couldn’t marry her).

He readjusted his collar against the rain, needing something to do with his fidgeting hands. “I shall conquer this,” he muttered to himself, willing himself to believe it.

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“Why can’t you just be happy for me Elizabeth!” Charlotte yelled as she jammed clothes forcefully
into her luggage. Willa had left for the UK three days ago, Charlotte and Jane would follow her there in a week and a half for Spring semester, and Elizabeth was being impossible.

“Because you’re not being reasonable, Charlotte!” Elizabeth yelled back from the doorway. “A few months ago you start dating Collins and all of a sudden you’re changing your major and not spending as much time with your friends, and now you’re following her across a freaking ocean. I know there are some crazy stereotypes about lesbians moving quickly, but really, this is insane. She’s your first girlfriend for Pete’s sake!”

“First,” Charlotte said, aggressively tossing pairs of socks at the bag, “I changed my major before I met Willa. Second, let’s leave the stereotypes about lesbians at the door, ok? Third: everyone spends less time with their friends when they enter a new relationship – I mean you just ditched me for hours at the Netherfield party while you went off and fucked Darcy.”

“Don’t bring him into this, that wasn’t at all the same.”

“Right,” Charlotte rolled her eyes, “because you ‘didn’t have any feelings for him’ – ‘it wasn’t a relationship.’” Elizabeth clearly still hadn’t come to terms with that breakup, she still mentions him constantly – but sure, no feelings were involved!

“I didn’t, and it wasn’t. And if you’re comparing your relationship to whatever I had with Darcy that’s an even better reason not to follow her across the world! That obviously wasn’t a lasting thing!”

“Not everyone is like that! Sure, Willa is a bit loquacious,” Elizabeth scoffed at that, “and she’s not the brightest person, but she’s sweet, loyal to a fault, and she likes me for me! Speaking of which, you keep tying my shift in focus to my relationship with Willa, but have you ever considered that I switched majors because I want to create art not just write about it? Because I’m tired of just following in your shadow? Because I want to live my own life?”

“We had everything planned out, excuse me for taking a moment to question why you changed your sexuality, your major, and your personality in such a short period.”

“Fuck you, Elizabeth. You don’t think I agonized about all of this for months? You think that this conversation right here, this is why it seems like it all happened overnight. Everything has happened gradually, naturally, but I didn’t want to upset you. You’re so against change that I was afraid of how you’d react. I just decided over the summer that I needed to worry less about what you thought of me and more about what I needed. These changes have nothing to do with Willa and everything to do with me.”

“Charlotte...” Elizabeth said with a hurt expression, “I didn’t know.”

“Exactly. We’ve been friends for two decades and you didn’t know. You were so caught up in your own drama that you didn’t even ask.”

“Ouch...”

“Look. I know that you’re still processing this, but I need this, ok? Yes, I’m going to Kent. Yes, Willa will be there but it’s not like we’re getting married or anything. I’m not doing this for her. I want to experience life outside of Massachusetts, I want to travel and explore and learn from brilliant artists.”

“Ok, that’s all fair. I’m just worried that you’re rushing into things.”

“Yeah. So you said,” Charlotte said on a sigh, “but Jane was only with Charlie for two months,
then he disappeared for four months and you encouraged her to go off to London. Maybe you ought to examine why your opinions are so different between us.”

Charlotte and Elizabeth just stared at each other for several minutes in the dead silence that followed that statement. Neither one of them wanted to list off Lizzie’s reasons out loud.

“Charlotte!” Her mom yelled up the stairs, “dinner will be ready soon, should I set a place for Elizabeth?”

“No, Mrs. Lucas, I’m heading home,” Elizabeth yelled down. Turning back to Charlotte she quietly said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean … you know that I support you, right?”

“I know,” Charlotte replied, trying to re-arrange the haphazardly thrown socks in the suitcase.

“Ok, I’m going to head home, but …” Elizabeth reached out and hugged her, “I love you, I just want what’s best for you.”

“I know, I love you too,” Charlotte said numbly. After Lizzie’s form had retreated through the door she quietly added, “that’s why I’ve got to leave.”

Charlotte had grown quite fond of Willa Collins over the last semester, she was all of those things she had listed to Lizzie just minutes ago and most importantly, she adored Charlotte. After years of drifting in Lizzie’s shadow, of being the adoring sidekick, it was a refreshing change of pace to be adored, to be seen. And yet, she knew that she didn’t love Willa. She didn’t see a future with her after next semester. This semester abroad was more about distance. She didn’t love Willa and she probably never would love anybody else if she couldn’t get some space away from Lizzie, some time to think and sort herself out.

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify, Elizabeth's reason for supporting Jane going to England and opposing Charlotte going is because once Elizabeth has an opinion about something she doesn't like to change it. She decided early on that Jane and Charlie were perfect for each other, so she wants to fix it. She doesn't like Collins, so she doesn't want to solidify Charlotte's relationship with her. (She's stubborn, not homophobic)
Elizabeth hunkered down for another Saturday night in. It had become almost a routine after Jane and Charlotte had left: Kitty and Lydia would put on far too much makeup and too little clothing and go out, her mother had her ‘book club’ (she and her friends established it a decade ago with a rather ambitious reading list, though when it turned out that none of them enjoyed reading they decided to just get together weekly to gossip), her father secluded himself in his study with a new book for the weekend, and Elizabeth and Mary would sit down and do a puzzle together.

With her best friend and her closest sister out of the country, spring semester had been long, boring, and tedious thus far – and it was only February. In the absence of her two usual confidants, Elizabeth had been trying to develop a better relationship with Mary. Sure, they had their differences but they also found a surprising amount of common ground as well. Mary could never truly replace Jane or Charlotte but Elizabeth was realizing that she’d never really given her middle sister much of a chance either.

Their puzzle routine typically included swapping between who chose the music – once one album ended the other sister made her selection. This week they’d started off well: Mary had chosen a nice classical album that made good background music to their conversation about creative arts therapy and the ways that it bridged between their fields of art and music. When that album ended, Elizabeth selected a catchy pop album without much thought and continued working on the puzzle. By the fourth song in the album – and the first allusion to sex – Mary began a sermon about the dangers of popular music to the moral fabric of society and how it promoted over-indulgence in sex, drugs, and alcohol. Lizzie sat through this monologue through the next half hour, biting her tongue because she knew that arguing with Mary on this would get her nowhere. When the album ended, Mary selected a Christian rock album. Elizabeth, in turn, pointed out that Christian rock as a genre was merely emulating rock and pop music in a sanitized form that stifled the creativity of the original musical expression. At the end of that (thankfully) brief album, Elizabeth had had it with her sister and put on Marilyn Manson’s *Antichrist Superstar* just to piss her sister off.

As they shared the Bennet stubborn streak, both refused to leave the table first and therefore lose the argument. *How many more pieces do we have left, maybe fifty? A hundred?* Elizabeth thought to herself as she fit in the last missing piece to the section she’d been working on, cursing herself for choosing a puzzle with so many repetitive patterns. Mary had just been silently fuming as she worked on the far corner of the puzzle. Elizabeth moved to the central portion. A half hour later Elizabeth triumphantly placed the last piece and both sisters stormed away from the table. Collapsing on her bed in the room that suddenly felt too big and empty, Elizabeth reflected on her current loneliness. She missed Jane, but she’d had regular emails and texts with her to know that she was enjoying London and finding her courses and shadowing interesting. She felt Charlotte’s absence more keenly since they hadn’t really talked after their fight. They’d hugged goodbye before she left, but things still weren’t normal between them. Had she over-reacted? It was true that she’d practically pushed Jane into her study abroad while trying to pull Charlotte back. If she was honest with herself, neither reaction was based on the academic and cultural enrichment opportunities the programs offered. Jane had been so sad since Charlie left and the two had been such a perfect couple that Elizabeth was certain that if they could just see each other again it would all work out well. They were in love and whatever Caroline and Darcy had done to separate them surely wouldn’t hold up if they could just talk to each other openly.

With Charlotte and Willa it was different. Charlotte *liked* Willa, they were cute enough together when Willa wasn’t blathering on about Lady Catherine, but Elizabeth could tell that Charlotte’s...
heart wasn’t as invested as Jane’s. She had witnessed all of Charlotte’s relationships from middle school on, she had seen Charlotte in love, and this wasn’t it. She didn’t like to see her friend settle for less than she deserved and Charlotte deserved love and acceptance and passion. Elizabeth’s mind wandered of it’s own free will to Darcy disheveled and breathless whispering that she’d bewitched him. For that brief bubble, closed off in his room with the party raging downstairs she’d thought she might have found … well, she knew better now.

She’d made plenty of her own mistakes and she couldn’t bear to see her friend fall down the same hole. Willa was kind and affectionate but the compliments she gave Charlotte seemed too general, too rehearsed, as if their recipient could be swapped out without much fuss. Her friend deserved better than that.

Her thoughts drifted back to Jane. The fateful night at the Netherfield party Charlotte observed that while it was obvious to Jane’s family and friends that she was in love, to an outsider her guarded affection could come off as cold. She’d seen a similar phenomenon with Darcy’s passion, she’d initially noticed no preference on his side until they’d slept together and all of a sudden his disdainful glare looked far more like a passionate gaze. Perhaps she had been too harsh in her assessment of Collins. Perhaps beneath all of those studied compliments and officious chatter she really did care deeply for Charlotte and Lizzy just couldn’t see it.

She pulled out her laptop and tried to coral all of these wayward thoughts into a coherent apology to Charlotte. She missed her friend and couldn’t bear it if this stalemate festered through her entire absence. She would put aside her reservations and trust Charlotte’s judgment.
Elizabeth could hardly believe how quickly everything had come together in the past month. Charlotte had responded to her email and they’d had some serious heart-to-heart exchanges culminating in Charlotte inviting Elizabeth come to visit her over spring break. Several meetings with professors, an argument with her mother (backed up by her father), and half of her savings account drained, Elizabeth was on her way to the UK. She’d spend a week with Charlotte, then another week in London with Jane before heading home. She’d managed to convince most of her professors to give her an extra week off before the official spring break started with minimal impact to her grade if she did extra credit assignments. Since most of her courses were Art-centric these extra credit opportunities were built around the collections and museums that she’d planned to visit in the UK anyway.

Yesterday she’d flown in to Heathrow and spent an evening with Jane in London. Now she was on a train to Huntsford. As the British countryside sped past her window, Elizabeth reflected on Jane’s subdued mood. She’d had nothing but good things to say about her program, the friends she’d met, the students she was working with, London itself … and yet she lacked her characteristic cheerfulness. It seemed she hadn’t seen Charlie on this trip. Jane had emailed Caroline a couple of times to let her know she’d be in London and had met up with her for coffee shortly after she’d arrived, and again almost a month later but Jane hadn’t had the heart to directly ask about Charlie. Elizabeth decided that she’d have to see what she could do about that situation when she got to London next week.

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Charlotte waited nervously at the train station for Elizabeth’s train to come in. She felt like she’d grown so much as a person in the last few months and a small part of her feared that she’d slip back into the same old Charlotte as soon as she saw Lizzie.

Stop fussing, you’ll be fine. She read the message from her girlfriend and looked over the short distance to where she waited in the car. She’d told her the whole story about Elizabeth a month ago when she’d been freaking out about Lizzie’s email and Charlotte was so grateful for her support.

Where would I be without your reminders? Charlotte texted back and stuck her tongue out at her.

Lord, don’t ever let my mother see you do that, she’d consider you as even more of a crass American than she already does.

Shush, you know you love it! Charlotte texted back and blew her a kiss just as the train pulled to a stop.

Lizzie emerged and Charlotte was relieved to note that while she was excited to see her friend, her heart didn’t do that troublesome little flip it had been up to last time she’d seen her. Ever since she’d fallen in love – like real, reciprocated love – she’d been pretty sure she was over her crush on Lizzie, but it was nice to have it confirmed in her presence. Lizzie bounded up and engulfed Charlotte in a hug.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. I was an ass.”
“You kinda were,” Charlotte teased, “but I forgive you.”

As she pulled back, Elizabeth asked, “where’s your girlfriend? I expected Willa to be here.”

Charlotte looked up and met Anne’s eyes where she waited for them in the car. She felt a bit guilty for not explaining the whole story in her emails, but Elizabeth had just come to terms with Willa and this whole trip and Charlotte had been reluctant to admit that Elizabeth had been right about her first girlfriend. “Actually, I’m not with Willa anymore.”

“What?” Lizzie’s head shot up, “what happened?”

“Living on the same floor as her she got to be too much and too clingy early on. We broke up in January.”

“Oh, Charlotte, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s for the best,” Charlotte looked up and smiled at Anne again, “besides, I have a new girlfriend I’d like you to meet.”

“That was fast,” Elizabeth answered skeptically.

“You’ll like her Lizzie, she’s adorable. At first she was so shy that she was easy to overlook, but once I got to know her I saw how sweet, kind, funny, witty, and intelligent she was,” Charlotte maintained eye contact with Anne and watched her blush, knowing that they were close enough for Anne to read her lips, “and all of that in spite of her mother!”

“I can’t wait to meet this paragon!” Elizabeth said.

“Luckily, you don’t have to, she’s our ride,” Charlotte said, a bit nervous about the coming conversation. “Now, before you meet her, there’s something we thought you should know. Her mother would kill me for saying this to a new acquaintance,” Charlotte said, looking towards Anne, who nodded in confirmation, “but I really want you to get to know her without silly social barriers. Anne is mostly deaf from a bout of measles as a child. Her mother doesn’t like to show weakness socially, which is why she doesn’t speak much in company.” Although they had discussed this at length – Anne was shy and incredibly self-conscious about this and thought it would be better for Charlotte to get the explanation out of the way ahead of time – Charlotte still felt like it wasn’t her story to tell.

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“Oh, I’m … sorry?” Elizabeth mumbled, not sure how to respond to that. Charlotte looked happy – happier than she had with Willa – but this was a lot of information to process on short notice.

“We don’t want to make you uncomfortable, she just wanted me to explain because she really wants to make a good impression. She can read lips well and we text a lot, but she won’t be able to understand you in the car if she can’t see you.”

“Noted. But … measles wasn’t that like eradicated?”

“She was born in 1999 and her mother did her ‘research’ … she consulted Dr. Wakefield himself, who assured her that the MMR vaccine could cause autism. She was too dignified to allow that to befall her offspring, so Anne wasn’t vaccinated and got measles when she was ten.”

“Eesh!” Elizabeth said as Charlotte linked arms with her and grabbed one of her bags. She led her to the parking lot and approached a petite brunette leaning against the door of a car. She looked
something like a porcelain doll in a dress that was a couple notches too ornate for a casual occasion and emphasized her small build and pale skin. “Lizzie, this is Anne, Anne, this is my best friend Elizabeth Bennet!”

“How do you do?” Anne asked in a soft voice with a bit of a lilt and curtsied. What century is this? Elizabeth thought to herself.

“Hi!” Elizabeth said with a wave.

“You’ll have the ‘pleasure’ of meeting her mother tomorrow, we’ve got a mandatory dinner party to attend and you were graciously invited … lucky you. Lady Catherine rivals even your mom in her absurdity,” Charlotte added, “though at least your father had the sense to over rule her from time to time. Lady Catherine was given free reign.”

“Wait, ‘Lady Catherine?’ I’ve heard so much about her!”

“All of it from Willa and all of it good?” Anne asked.

“Yep!” Lizzie responded.

“Don’t believe a word of it,” Anne winked, “mum’s a dragon.” Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh at the contradictory feedback about the ‘noble patroness of the arts’ she’d heard from Charlotte’s two girlfriends, though she had a feeling that Anne’s assessment held more truth.

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Darcy was lost in thought as he drove out to Kent for his annual visit to his imperious aunt. Almost nothing about the length of road between London and Rosings resembled the drive from Boston to Meryton but the act of driving into the countryside brought back the memories nonetheless. The contrast in the drives almost hurt more than similarities would have. Those drives had been full of excitement and anticipation, every mile bringing him closer to Elizabeth. Now he followed the familiar path to his Aunt’s home with the expectation that he’d have the same conversations he did every year even if the students rotated. The instructors at Huntsford always got their students’ hopes up with the annual exhibition and hints that a representative of a prestigious auction house would be present. Every year he was left to dash those hopes when few if any of their works met the Pemberley standards. No, there was nothing on the road ahead for Darcy to look forward to.

“Are you seriously not going to tell me what’s wrong?” His cousin’s voice broke into his melancholy thoughts.

“What makes you think anything is wrong?”

“You’re acting as grave and sullen as if we were already at Rosings. In fact, I don’t believe I’ve seen you smile in months.”

“I’ve had little to smile about.”

Fitzwilliam’s smile dropped, “it’s not Georgiana, is it? Last I heard Wickham had left the country.”

“No, Georgiana is … as well as can be expected. She’s still a bit subdued after what happened at Ramsgate, but she is improving.” He saw Fitzwilliam’s tension ease and felt he had to elaborate on his second point. “I can verify that Wickham is in America, I saw him last summer. It took every bit of self control not to punch the tosser in the face especially when …” He stopped himself mid-thought, he wouldn’t bring Elizabeth into this. The less information his cousin had on that front the better.
“If it’s not Georgiana, what is it?” Fitzwilliam asked, “even if he’s up to his old tricks again, there’s little you could do to stop him. Georgiana didn’t want to go through with a trial and without her cooperation …”

“I’m aware of the circumstances, thank you.” Darcy snapped. He knew that Fitzwilliam was right and yet … he could have told Elizabeth. He’d seen the way that Wickham had leered at her. He’d told himself that Elizabeth was too smart to fall for that man, but then Elizabeth could have warned others. A man like that had a reason for hanging about a college campus and posing nude in front of young women.

His cousin, apparently bored with Darcy’s short temper, diverted his attention back to the passing scenery. Darcy allowed the memories of Elizabeth to wash over him once again. He cycled through the now familiar emotional kaleidoscope – passion, desire, love, anger, self-loathing, regret – until he realized that of all people Fitzwilliam might be able to help him sort things out. Other than the Darcy siblings, Colonel Fitzwilliam was the only other person who knew the whole story about Georgiana and Wickham and could gauge Darcy’s actions and reactions.

“Fitzwilliam …” he began hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“Given what happened at Ramsgate…” How to go about this? He couldn’t just tell his cousin the whole story outright, some mild obfuscation was in order. “If you had a … friend … who was making a mistake … falling for a girl who was beautiful, witty, charming … but much, much younger than him … would you step in?”

“I suppose that depends, what are my ‘friend’s’ motivations? How much younger is she and what are her feelings.”

“His motivations are purely …” well, there was nothing pure about those encounters with Elizabeth, he thought to himself and redirected his explanation. “Let’s just say his interest is real … Suppose he didn’t know her age exactly but … young, and it seemed that her feelings weren’t as deep as his … and her family was … questionable.”

“It would depend on the situation, but if I felt it needed to be addressed I would probably bring it up,” Fitzwilliam answered earnestly. After a moment of reflection he smiled and asked, “why? Was Bingley up to his puppy-dog tricks in the US? Mooning after some young girl? A new angel?”

Darcy swallowed, he wasn’t exactly wrong about Bingley and Jane but Darcy had been describing his own situation with Elizabeth. It was probably better to let him continue to believe his initial assumption. “Well, you know …” he laughed nervously, “some blokes you can’t allow out without supervision.”

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Elizabeth grit her teeth against the tedious stream of advice as they walked from the Huntsford University campus over to Rosings, Lady Catherine’s family estate. They were a large group but Willa Collins had taken it upon herself to prepare the foreigner for the honor of meeting Lady Catherine De Burgh. Her stated reason was that she was the best guide, having attended both Longbourne and Rosings, but it was fairly evident to Elizabeth that she was trying to make Charlotte jealous. Because of Lady Catherine’s downright Victorian views on propriety, Charlotte and Anne were keeping their relationship discrete so Collins perhaps thought she still had a shot.

“I know you wore the best dress you’ve got Elizabeth, and that’s ok. Lady Catherine will realize
that as an American your tastes won’t be as refined as hers.”

Elizabeth was prevented from returning a scathing retort by a text alert from Charlotte: *Don’t let it get to you Lizzie, just keep walking.*

**Charlotte:** *And turn off the volume on your phone.*

**Lizzie:** *Why, is it insulting for your phone to ring in Lady Catherine’s presence?*

**Anne:** *She thinks so, yes. But more importantly, this way we can hold a much more entertaining conversation discretely while mummy drones on.*

**Charlotte:** *Trust me, it makes these dinners far more bearable.*

**Lizzie:** *Ooh, I’m in!* She typed and set her phone to silent.

“And I assure you that your hair looks just fine, dear Elizabeth,” Willa added.

**Lizzie:** *Ok, I know I didn’t pack a formal enough dress for this froofy event, but what’s wrong with my hair?*

**Charlotte:** *Nothing, Lizzie, you look lovely.*

**Anne:** *I wouldn’t take fashion advice from Willa anyway, she looks like an over-groomed poodle. She even sits at my mother’s feet and begs for approval too!*

“Mark the windows! There are 64 in all. 64!” Collins said as they approached the building. “And I have it on good authority that the glazing is almost entirely original. Now, I know you probably know nothing about British architecture Elizabeth, so allow me to explain …”

**Lizzie:** *Should I tell her that I wrote a paper on the country estates of the gentry in my British architecture course, or is it just easier to let her ramble?*

**Charlotte:** *Oh, she doesn’t like it when other people are smarter than her. Go ahead and interrupt her, it’ll be fun to watch.*

**Anne:** *No! Wait until you get here, I wanna see Willa put in her place!*

**Lizzie:** *Ladies, we have all week to demonstrate to Collins that she’s not the smartest one in the room.*

Collins managed to stop talking of her own accord when the butler opened the door and showed them into the drawing room. Once they were seated around the room Lady Catherine began dispensing useful tips to her students.

After all of Collins’ build-up, Elizabeth was underwhelmed by the magnanimous Lady Catherine De Burgh. Charlotte had taken her to the gallery at Huntsford yesterday where the *Chimney Piece* was on permanent loan from an anonymous private collector – it was literally just a sooty old chimney in an otherwise pristine white cube of a gallery. Lady Catherine seemed to be one of those aging artists who had been edgy in their youth and rode that fame for their whole lives without ever adapting with the times. She required worship from her students and fostered and promoted students like Willa Collins who fed her ego while ignoring and marking down those that didn’t.

As a mother she was even more infuriating. Elizabeth liked Anne, she was funny and intelligent and sweet when she was out of Rosings, but within her mother’s domain she was forced into this
rigid, stifling structure. Her ideas about Anne’s health were absurd: she’d been reckless enough to allow her to get measles, but insisted that Anne couldn’t learn piano because her delicate health didn’t allow it – and this happened far before the measles. Anne’s mild speech impediment was too embarrassing for her mother and therefore she was forced to remain silent or scolded for voicing an opinion. She insisted that Anne do everything she could to blend in to society and therefore forbid her from learning sign language or participating in deaf culture. After meeting Lady Catherine, Elizabeth could also tell who dictated Anne’s awkward clothing choices as their wardrobes seemed to match. She also noted with amusement that Willa’s glasses bore a striking resemblance to her Ladyship’s horn-rimmed frames.

The group message with Anne and Charlotte was a lifesaver in the tedium of the afternoon and evening. She was amazed at Anne’s ability to maintain a neutral, somewhat haughty and sour face given the hi-jinx of their texted sub-conversation. She could see how Charlotte would have initially overlooked her if this was her public persona. The poor girl was so oppressed by her mother’s will and dictates.

After all of her professorial advice was dolled out Lady Catherine turned her eagle eye to Elizabeth. Her ladyship was in the middle of a rather thorough interrogation on Elizabeth’s (apparently substandard) education when two newcomers walked into the room. Elizabeth’s latest response died on her lips as she gaped her first sight in seven months at the man who’d just left her without looking back.

“Ah, Darcy, Fitzwilliam, so glad you could join us!” Lady Catherine greeted the two men.

Charlotte: *Breathe Lizzie!* Elizabeth only glanced at Charlotte’s message before her eyes reconnected with his equally stunned gaze.

Anne: Why does Lizzie need to be reminded to breathe?

Charlotte: *Because the ‘best sex of her life’ just walked through the door.*

Lizzie heard Anne’s gasp that turned into a coughing fit and the ensuing flutter of concern from her mother about her health.

Charlotte: *Breathe Anne!*

Anne: *Eeew … that’s my cousin. I always knew that Fitzwilliam was a ladies man, but …*

Charlotte: *Nope, guess again!*

Anne: *Darcy?! I don’t think I’ve ever even heard him talk about a girl! I didn’t think he had it in him!*

Charlotte: *Technically he had it in Lizzie ;)*

Anne: *Eeew! Still my cousin!*

Lizzie: You guys are really not helpful. How small is this country? I can’t exist in the UK for two days without stumbling into my ex?

Anne: *In the future, if you’re trying to avoid someone, maybe don’t visit their relatives.*

Lizzie: *I had no idea you were related. What should I do?”*

Anne: *Other than breathe?*
Charlotte: *You might want to start by picking your chin up off the floor, wiping off the drool, and peeling your eyes away.*

Elizabeth couldn’t deny that she was affected by his mere presence. He looked a bit thinner than the last time she’d seen him, but he was still devastatingly handsome and his eyes still held that same spark of passion. He finally tore his eyes from her as his aunt demanded his attention and Elizabeth felt like she could breathe a bit easier. Without his eyes mesmerizing her she was able to remind herself that he was also the asshole who left her without a word for months!

Lizzie: *I’m freaking out here!*

Charlotte: *I’m sure you could slip off to the library for a bit ;)*

Anne: *I don’t think I want that wink explained to me*

Elizabeth was still trying to sort out her feelings and regain her equilibrium when a male voice interrupted her. “Hello, allow me to present myself: Richard Fitzwilliam, at your service,” he gave a mock bow, “most people just call me Fitzwilliam.”

Elizabeth looked up and him and was struck by some similarities between him and his cousin, though she couldn’t help but note that Fitzwilliam was neither as handsome nor as tall, as his Darcy and appeared older. After a moment of quiet study, she realized that she ought to respond. “Elizabeth Bennet, pleased to meet you,” she replied, silently hoping he wasn’t just playing wingman.

“Mmm, American,” he murmured and she nodded. He leaned in closer, “you appear a bit flushed, I could show you the gardens for a bit of air if you’d like?” She’d never met this man before, but figured there could be little harm in stepping outside with him at his aunt’s house in the middle of a gathering.

“I’d like that,” she said and followed him out.

Lizzie: *He’s not going to murder me, right?*

Anne: *Nah, he’s mostly harmless. He’ll definitely flirt though.*

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Fitzwilliam had watched the new girl transform from a Valkyrie holding her own in a verbal sparing match with his aunt to a doe-eyed girl silently blushing in the few moments it took him and Darcy to enter the room and draw attention. It was enough to pique his interest. When he glanced over at his cousin he’d been equally intrigued to find Darcy turned to stone and staring at the girl. He had to admit that though she was pretty she was not ‘stop dead in your tracks’ gorgeous. Given his cousin’s reaction he decided the situation merited further investigation so as soon as Aunt Catherine had monopolized Darcy’s attention he’d made his way across the room. She did look a bit warm, after all, fresh air might help.

“Anything important?” he asked, nodding at her phone as they exited into the garden. He knew there were limits to his charm, but he expected a woman to be a bit more interested in a dashing officer escorting her to a secluded spot than her focus on her phone implied.

“Just verifying with Anne that you’ll be a gentleman,” she said and turned her phone toward him. He read the last few texts with amusement. Before she pulled it away someone named Charlotte texted: *Ooh, yes! Flirt with him! Make Darcy jealous, it worked well last time.*
This was getting interesting. “Hm, other than the fact that you’re extremely beautiful, why would flirting with you make my stuffy cousin jealous?” Elizabeth blushed and he suddenly put the pieces together … American, beautiful, witty, young? … Darcy hadn’t been talking about Bingley in the car. “Ah, I see. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, I believe I’ve heard much of you and none of the praise has been exaggerated.”

She went a bit pale and gaped at him, “I can’t imagine his opinion of me is very high or he wouldn’t have fled the country without a word.”

“Damn, I always knew my cousin was socially stunted and awkward but I didn’t realize he was stark raving mad to boot!”

“Mad, by just about any definition of the word pretty much covers the our whole relationship, if that’s even what you would call it.”

“I can tell you that he’s been in something of a mood since he returned from Boston,” Fitzwilliam said, hoping there was a solution to this problem.

“Good! It’s comforting to know he hurt himself more than he hurt me,” hm, perhaps Darcy’s feelings were more affected than hers, he thought, but then, she may just be angry at his abandonment.

He looked through the window to catch his cousin’s jealous glare and smirked. He conspicuously put his hand on the small of her back and leaned in to whisper to her: “it seems we’ve already got an audience, would you like to enact your revenge through flirting? If nothing else, it would make this party less tedious.”

She gave him a dazzling smile and he could see how his cousin had been hooked. She leaned in and whispered into his ear: “I think a little flirtation is in order, yes. Let’s show that smug asshole what he’s missing.” Fitzwilliam inwardly groaned, if Darcy hadn’t found her first …

He’d spent the rest of the dinner party talking and flirting outrageously with Elizabeth, enjoying watching the rage build in his usually stoic cousin’s eyes. It was particularly amusing since Aunt Catherine kept Darcy busy with a continual stream of hopeful art students that wanted to talk shop about the art market.

Darcy’s reactions aside, Fitzwilliam had sincerely enjoyed his evening with Elizabeth. Darcy was correct that she was beautiful, witty, and charming, – and add to that a wicked sense of humor and an ability to tease anybody into a good mood – but she was probably not as young as Darcy feared. In the course of their small talk she’d told Fitzwilliam that she was 21 and just over a year away from obtaining her degree.

After dinner, as the Huntsford students were ceremoniously taking leave of his aunt, Darcy came over and hissed at him: “You should watch out with that one, do you know she’s only in college?”

Fitzwilliam laughed, “Oh, mate! You do realize that ‘college’ in America is essentially the same as university, right?”

“What??”

“It’s apparently a difference in the governance structure between the two, but the students are all university-aged adults.” He laughed at Darcy’s confusion and clapped him on the shoulder: “You may want to tell your friend that Elizabeth is 21 and that the generally accepted rule to calculate is to take your age, divided by two, plus seven. If the gap is within that range, you’re good to go.” He
watched Darcy do the mental calculations and his eyes widened with guarded hope. Fitzwilliam suspected that the Wickham incident was still bothering Darcy so he leaned in closer and added in a low voice, “you also have to realize that there is a world of difference between a seven year age gap between adults and a fourteen year difference between an adult and a teenager nearly half his age.”

Darcy looked at him with a desperate plea for acceptance. Fitzwilliam nodded and gave him a nudge towards the door. “Please make my excuses to Lady Catherine,” Darcy said as he bolted after the Huntsford group.

“That looks promising,” Anne said as she came up beside him.

He turned to face her and replied, “I sure hope so, he’s been insufferable for months!”

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Whatever level of jealousy Darcy had felt at the party at Netherfield when Elizabeth danced with Todd was far surpassed by the agony he’d experienced this whole long evening. After months of self-imposed exile from Elizabeth he finally sees her again, only to watch her flirt shamelessly. With his cousin no less! While his aunt barraged him with student after hopeful student who each asked the same tedious questions about the art world, all he could do was helplessly watch as she aimed those brilliant smiles and flashing eyes at Fitzwilliam. If she was too young for Darcy, then Fitzwilliam – on the wrong side of thirty to date someone her age – was far far worse.

When he was finally able to break away from the litany of questions, Elizabeth was huddled in with the other students but he was able to confront his cousin. It took enormous restraint not to plant a fist in his face.

And then Fitzwilliam dropped that bombshell … 21 … it was certainly still young, but not as bad as he’d thought. According to the formula she was just on the far edge of the acceptable age range for him to date. Acceptable … they may still have to endure some raised eyebrows, but their relationship could be accepted. He was not like Wickham. She was an adult and could make her own decisions, he would not be taking advantage of her. For the first time in months he felt hope swell in his heart and he hurried after her.

As he caught up to the group, he was happy to find Elizabeth trailing behind lost in thought. Barely able to restrain himself he hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her off the road and silently led her a ways into the forest. When they’d gained a modicum of privacy he pressed her against an obliging tree, kissing her passionately. For a moment she kissed him back and his heart soared but all too soon her hands snaked into his hair and tugged him back roughly as she lifted her head.

“Seven months, Darcy!” She whispered harshly.

“It felt like an eternity,” he agreed, too happy to have her in his arms again to pick up on the storm in her eyes.

“You just left out of nowhere, you didn’t answer my calls, respond to my texts. What the fuck?”

“I’m sorry, I was an idiot,” he said against her skin as he kissed down her jawline to her throat.

“You realize you haven’t even said hi to me, right?”

He pulled back slightly and looked into those bewitching eyes, “Hello.”

“You can’t just do this, you can’t just pick up where we left off before you ditched me without
even an explanation,” she said angrily. He lowered his head to her shoulder and let out a sigh.

“You’re right,” he said, sitting down beneath the tree and pulling her onto his lap. “I panicked a little when I found out you were still in school.”

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Elizabeth snapped herself out of it and stood up, pacing in front of him. She couldn’t think properly when he was touching her like that. “Panicking a little would have been driving back to Boston then calling me later after you’d calmed down to sort it out. You went from making plans to booking a fucking flight out of the country in a few short days!”

“I’m sorry, I just … I couldn’t be one of those men. I’ve seen what it can do …” Elizabeth waited anxiously for him to finish that thought, whatever happened seemed to be crushing him and for a moment he was lost struggling with some inner demons. Once he’d composed himself, he continued: “I’d never even considered your age, I always saw you as such an independent woman. But then you tell me that you live at home, and you’re in college, and your mother wants to marry you off to a rich man and then your sister implied that you were eighteen!”

“What?! Which one of my sisters told you I was eighteen?”

“None of them directly, but when you caught your sister trying to sneak off with a guy all of your criticisms of him seemed to apply to me as well and then your sister said she couldn’t wait until she was eighteen, so I just assumed …”

“God! You’re such an asshole!” Elizabeth yelled in exasperation as she smacked the back of his head. “You could have just fucking asked me like a normal person, but no. You’re William Darcy and heaven forbid you make an error in judgment!”

“I’m sorry Elizabeth,” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her down next to him. “I knew that if I talked to you, if I saw your face or heard your voice I would cave in.”

“Text message, email, instant messaging, snail mail … fucking smoke signals would have been better than just leaving like that.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she wanted to stay angry at him, but he was actually starting to sound more contrite each time he said it.

Grasping at straws, she shouted: “I never even got to peg you!” Reminding her of another grievance to fuel her anger.

“Peg?” He asked, confused.

“That’s the official term, you know,” she said, her arousal growing just by thinking about it again. “Me with a strapon, you sweaty and writing beneath me.” He groaned and pulled her closer, she shifted her leg and straddled him.

She was still angry at him, but hell, that’s how this all started in the first place. It had been seven months and she was horny, he was hot and obviously willing – she demonstrated this to herself by rocking forward and feeling his length against her. “I did research, you know,” her tone was harsh, falling back into old patterns. She kissed him roughly, biting his lip and eliciting another groan. “I was ready to follow through on the plans we made,” her hands fumbled for his zipper.

“I’m so sorry sweetheart,” he moaned, his hands roving over her back, “God, I missed you!”
He was being tender and Elizabeth wasn’t ready for that, wasn’t ready to let go of the hurt and anger so she slapped his cheek, eliciting a needy whimper from him. “And whose fault is that?”

“I was utterly and completely to blame,” he admitted, running a hand up the side of her dress and shifting her panties to the side to stimulate her. “I thought about you constantly,” he added, slipping a finger into her and she couldn’t suppress a moan. “It’s like I’m addicted to you, I can’t get enough,” he slipped a second finger in while continuing to stroke her with his thumb.

“So you decided to just quit cold turkey?” She asked in frustration, freeing him from his pants and stroking his shaft.

He lifted his free hand to her face and turned it so she’d look into his eyes, “I’ve never felt this way before, it scared me.” That look of entreaty in his eyes stirred things inside of her that she’d rather ignore and she had to look away. She was horny and angry and confused but she refused to admit any other feelings into this. She couldn’t trust him after what he’d done, but she also didn’t want this to end. She impatiently shooed away has hand and guided him to her entrance, sliding down on him.

“Oh, Elizabeth!” He shouted as his head lolled back against the tree and his hands came to rest on her hips.

“You’ll have to work on your control, Darcy, if we’re too loud someone might find us,” she said, rising and falling over him.

“As far as you’re concerned, I have no control,” he moaned, obviously attempting to moderate his volume.

“In that case, why haven’t I gotten laid in seven months?” She whispered, biting his ear. A goofy grin spread across his face and she realized that she’d just admitted she hadn’t slept with anyone since he left. The angry, vindictive part of her wanted to tell him about the close call with Wickham – revenge was one of the motivators for that ill-advised choice after all – but the part of her that had missed him, that was currently alive to his touch and riding this wave of passion didn’t want to ruin the moment.

“It took an ocean between us to achieve that feat,” he answered breathlessly and moved his hand between them to stroke her as she continued to ride him at a frenzied pace. After such a long period of abstinence on both sides, their reunion couldn’t last long. Elizabeth soon felt herself shatter and bit down on his shoulder to muffle her scream as Darcy mumbled incoherent endearments into her ear. He followed soon after and Elizabeth kissed him hard to swallow down his own shouts of pleasure.

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Elizabeth slumped forward, burying her face in his neck and Darcy wrapped his arms around to cradle her. He could hardly believe this was real. This morning he’d been driving to Rosings with no prospects of enjoyment and now he was blissfully happy, sated, and clinging to the woman he loved. He kissed the top of her head, wishing that this moment could just stretch on forever – he was willing to live out the rest of his life under this tree as long as Lizzie was here and happy with him – but he knew that the fight wasn’t over. He’d managed to foul things up colossally and Elizabeth was still justifiably angry.

She slowly sat back up and he raised his legs slightly behind her and rested his hands on the small of her back. She crossed her arms but, to his relief, she stayed there straddling him rather than getting up. The sting of their argument would at least be softened by the contact. “You’re not off
the hook, you know,” she said.

He winced and ran his hands up her arms, “I know.”

“I’m still furious with you for leaving.”

“I know.”

“We both know that this would never work out long term.”

“Do we?” He asked, desperately trying to cobble together any possible future for them.

She laughed that magical teasing laugh of hers, “Darcy, we live on different continents, I don’t think either of us could handle that commute.”

“True,” he said somberly. “How long do we have?”

“I leave Kent on Sunday.”

“So soon?” His hands instinctively tightened around her, “that’s hardly long enough to get over the jetlag, can’t you stay longer?”

“I have to get back to school, I’m just here for spring break.”

He sighed, “where are you staying?”

“With Charlotte.”

“In the dormitory?” He growled.

“Yeah, I blew all of my money getting here, so I’m just crashing with her.”

“That’ll never do,” he grumbled. “I’m staying at my aunt’s. We can’t very well do this there, can we?” He gestured to their entwined bodies.

“Who says we’ll be doing this again?” She asked raising her eyebrow and mocking his previous gesture.

“Our historical inability to keep our hands off of each other and your desire to ‘peg’ me,” he tried to match her mixture of sweetness and archness, though he was fairly certain that his desperation seeped through.

“It would take a lot of groveling on your part,” she replied.

He pushed his back off of the tree and leaned in closer to her, “I’m not above pleading and begging you, Elizabeth.”

“Hmm, we’ll see.”

“Please, Elizabeth,” he whispered, leaning his forehead on hers, “can we please just enjoy ourselves as long as we can?”

“Ooh, is the groveling starting already?” She asked.

“I can grovel now, tomorrow, as often and as long as you’d like sweetheart.”

“Well, I think that’ll have to do for tonight, it’s getting late and Charlotte will be wondering where I
He groaned and pulled her in for one last kiss before he slackened his grip and she stood up, sorting out her disheveled clothing. He followed suit and soon they were walking back holding hands. When they came to the road, she indicated her direction and he realized he’d have to go the opposite way. “I could walk you back,” he suggested, not wishing to part from her quite yet.

“Right,” she said sarcastically, “how long do you think it would take your aunt to find out about this if you walked me right up to the Huntsford dorms?”

He sighed in acknowledgement. “Elizabeth?” He stopped her just as she was turning to leave and swept his parched eyes on her beauty, “If I haven’t said so yet, you look lovely tonight.” She quirked a smile at him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before walking off into the night.

Chapter End Notes

-Hooray for the return of smut! Let's face it, this story is way more fun when they're on the same continent ;)

-I feel like I need to say a few things here about my decisions for Anne. In Pride and Prejudice she is given no agency, personality, or dialogue. She's just vaguely sickly and obviously coddled by her mother. I wanted to translate that into a modern setting, but give her some character development outside of Lady Catherine's reach. Given the stress she places on propriety and honor, it felt right that modern Lady Catherine would be a helicopter parent; given her tendency to rely on her own opinions and give (often horrible) advice, it felt right that she'd be an anti-vaxer; and given the importance she places on duty and honor, it felt right that if her daughter did have a disability she would try to hide it as much as possible (thus L.C. preventing Anne from talking in public or being allowed to learn sign language).

I also felt that both Charlotte and Anne had spent most of their lives being overpowered by strong personalities, so finding quiet acceptance with each other could be cute, fun, and a much better option than Collins or spinsterhood.

I also strongly believe that since disabled people exist in the world, they should be represented in fiction more frequently than they are. I'm trying my best to write a deaf character who was raised with internalized shame from an ableist mother; however, I should note that I am not deaf and have never been a part of the deaf community. (I do have other disabilities that I’ve had to deal with internalized shame about and the desire to 'pass' for 'normal' though)
The following morning Charlotte and Anne took Elizabeth on a tour of their studios and snuck her in to preview the works Charlotte had in the annual exhibition that opened on Friday. Elizabeth had been unimpressed by Lady Catherine and Willa Collins and was mentally criticizing the merits of Huntsford’s art department until Charlotte had shown her the incredible kinetic sculptures she’d been working on. They combined whimsy, wonder and dystopian aesthetic that was consistent with Charlotte’s familiar style and yet the new format of the moving sculptures added a dynamic aspect her art had previously lacked. Apparently, while Lady Catherine was stale and officious, Lady Metcalf had been a far more influential advisor for Charlotte.

Anne was also producing kinetic sculptures – it had actually been Lady Metcalf pairing them on an assignment due to their mutual interest that allowed Charlotte and Anne to get to know each other in the first place – but while Anne’s works were technically brilliant and mechanically flawless, their artistry was lackluster. Anne explained that her primary interest was in mechanical engineering but her mother insisted that she live up to her family legacy and pursue an art degree. Kinetic sculpture was the closest she could come to her true passion at Huntsford.

That afternoon Elizabeth was enjoying a stroll along the open grove which edged that side of the park under a nice sheltered path while Charlotte was in class. In the solitude of her ramble, she finally had time to reflect on her present situation. This vacation had veered drastically off course yesterday and she was unsure how she felt about it. The sex with Darcy was, as always, fantastic. That man could apparently do things to her that nobody else could and it was unnerving. She was especially uncomfortable with her chronic lack of inhibition with him. It was an open secret that her parents had married because her mother was pregnant. Nobody quite believed that Jane was an eight pound ‘premie’ and they certainly hadn’t married because of their common interests. Due to this, Elizabeth had always been careful in her own sex life. However, all of her caution seemed to fly out the window under Darcy’s passionate gaze. Last night was now the third time that her and Darcy had been so caught up in the moment that they’d completely forgotten to use a condom (along with their first time in the library and the post-satyr exploration of Darcy’s animalistic side). Sure, she did have an IUD and he said he was clean but that was no reason for her to be so reckless. Not to mention the fact that they’d done it out of doors in a public area just a short walk away from the road where anybody could have come across them.

What if Charlotte had turned back and gone looking for her? Or even worse – Collins? The news would have spread through all of Huntsford and Rosings within the hour. As it was, she’d had 35 new messages in the group chat between Charlotte and Anne by the time she’d made it back to the dorm. At first they asked where she was, then they started suggesting increasingly implausible places that her and Darcy could be off making out – ‘in the woods’ was the third suggestion Anne offered but Charlotte had declared it was too risky and Elizabeth wouldn’t dare. Apparently Charlotte gave her more credit for self control than she had.

This introspection was interrupted by a snapped twig behind her and she whirled around, on edge, only to come face to face with the object of her thoughts.

“Elizabeth,” he said, looking somewhat flustered. He held out a gift box, which she instinctively took, and said, with a look of haughty composure, “I have been walking in the grove some time in the hope of meeting you.”
“Okay ...” She replied, unsure what the tenor of this meeting was supposed to be. He looked flustered and haughty and nervous and arrogant all at the same time.

“I originally planned to have it delivered by courier, but apparently those are harder to find out here than in London.” He looked anxiously at the box, “aren’t you going to open it?” She lifted the lid and dropped it quickly, looking around with a blush. “You mentioned your disappointment last night that you didn’t have a chance ...” he coughed. “Anyway, I’ve procured the necessary items.”

“I see ...” she said, somehow more embarrassed to have a conversation about this than she would be to do it. She looked around again and her eyes widened, “and where are we supposed to use these items. A girl can only take so many grass stains on her knees.”

He looked confused for a moment then patted his pocket. “I meant to put it in the box,” he handed her a key with ‘Huntsford Inn, room 401’ embossed on the keychain.

“I’m afraid I have another engagement at the moment,” he began and she raised a questioning eyebrow at him. “I have a meeting with Aunt Catherine.”

“Ah, so an entirely different kind of engagement then,” she laughed.

“Quite,” he said with a look of horror. “If you would please meet me there at 9:30, I assure you I’m ready to … atone.”

“And accept your punishment?” She asked.

“ I look forward to bending to your will,” he said as he leaned forward and kissed her. By the time she’d opened her eyes he’d turned and was walking away.

When she was alone, she opened the box again and surveyed the contents: a riding crop, a harness with a dildo, and a bottle of lube. She smirked as she thought of a few items she’d like to add to the box of goodies.

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Charlotte was thoroughly amused by the awkward tension in the car as they pulled up to the adult toy store. “Do you … want to come in?” Lizzie asked Anne.

Anne screwed up her face like she’d eaten something sour and mouthed one word: “No.” Charlotte felt bad for her poor, sweet, Anne. Her mother had kept her so sheltered that when Lizzie showed them the treasure chest from Darcy she’d squeaked and looked away. When Lizzie proceeded to ask Anne for a ride she looked like she was battling her fight or flight reflex but she’d eventually given in and drove the whole way with her face as red as a tomato.

It’s not that Charlotte and Anne hadn’t been intimate – they had – but poor Anne had a lot of trouble discussing sex even with Charlotte and the concept of discussing such matters with another person was completely foreign.

“I want to go in!” Charlotte said, finding the entire situation hilarious. She turned to her girlfriend and gave her a peck on the cheek and added in a conspiratorial tone, “I’ll get something fun for us as well.”

As Lizzie and Charlotte opened the door, Anne blurted out: “I don’t want to know what you’re getting, make sure the bags are opaque!”

“Sure thing, Doll!” Charlotte said with an endearing smile. Poor little thing, she was still so new to
this whole life apart from her mother.

As they went into the store, Charlotte let out a bark of laughter at Lizzie’s destination. Last summer, the whole Darcy situation had driven Charlotte crazy. She couldn’t bear the thought of Lizzie, her best friend, the woman she loved, doing the things she did with that smug asshat. Of course she’d seen through Lizzie’s protestations and knew that this was more than just a fling for both of them, but it had still felt like salt in a festering wound. Now that she’d had distance, met Anne, and lived in the world outside of Lizzie’s orbit long enough to sort out that her general attraction to women had crossed wires with the love she’d felt for Lizzie as her best friend when they’d experimented together, Charlotte could appreciate the humor in the whole situation. Those two idiots had yet to figure anything out, but their bumbling attempts were fun to watch.

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Darcy anxiously paced the hotel suite. He’d done everything he could do to prepare. He’d spent the morning obtaining the … equipment, he’d given Lizzie the box, the room key, and the invitation. There was a bottle of champagne chilling by the sink, he’d brushed his teeth, checked his hair a dozen times, and far surpassed his daily number of steps from all of the pacing – according to the smart watch Georgiana had given him for Christmas. He’d done everything he could do … and she was late.

He’d completed another two laps around the room before he heard a soft knock on the door and leapt to answer it. “Elizabeth,” he cleared his throat and tried to modulate his voice and sound less eager, “I wasn’t sure you’d come, you’re a quarter of an hour late.”

“Sorry,” she said as she swept into the room, carrying the box he’d given her earlier with a smaller box on top. “I had to stop and get you a little something,” she said, handing him the smaller box. He took it and opened it, willing his hands not to shake. He pulled out a collar and a matching leash. “I wanted to make sure you were aware that you weren’t out of the dog house quite yet.”

It was degrading, dehumanizing, and insulting … but also so fucking arousing. He’d never allowed himself to be dominated by anyone before but he could hardly wait for Elizabeth to take control. He next pulled out a vibrator, “so that I can have some fun in this whole process,” she explained.

The object at the bottom of the box was unfamiliar to him. “What’s this?”

She laughed, “that just shows that you haven’t done your research,” she stepped in and whispered in his ear, “it’s a sheath to stimulate yourself while I’m fucking you. Are you claiming you’ve never seen such a thing before?”

“I’ve never had much use for such an object,” he swallowed as he answered.

“Well, consider it an early parting gift, to keep you company once I’m gone.”

The idea of returning to his empty home, cast back into that bleak, gray existence with only his memories and the one photo to keep him company was too painful to think about at the moment. Instead he held up the collar: “and what am I supposed to do with this?” He asked, struggling to maintain his typical tone.

“Put it on, of course,” Elizabeth walked to him and took the collar out of his hands, motioning for him to turn around. He obeyed and she attempted to put the collar on over his suit jacket and tie. When it didn’t fit, she slid her hands under his lapels and helped him shrug out of his jacket. She fastened the collar, slipped two fingers under it, and pulled him into a kiss. Before he had time to deepen it she stepped out of his reach and leaned back, looking at him.
“Good, now,” she said with a gleam in her eye, “sit!” She snapped and pointed at the ground.

“On the floor? That’s rather undignified,” he replied shortly. She raised her eyebrow and snapped her fingers again. Remembering that he’d promised groveling, he sunk to his knees and sat back on his feet.

“Good boy,” she ran her fingers through his hair. Then she stepped back and slowly, agonizingly, began to shed her clothes. From any other woman he might have expected lingerie, but his Lizzie was too practical for that, she revealed a simple matching black bra and panties that hugged her curves and suited her well. He groaned audibly when she dropped her knickers and slowly pulled on the harness, fixing the dildo in place with the vibrator pressed flush behind it.

“Now,” she said as she lounged on the foot of the bed, crossing her legs and clutching the riding crop – the image so alluring he had difficulty staying still. “Ground rules: the goal is for both of us to have a good time. We need a safe word. We could go with something silly like ‘hot potato,’ but I like the idea of green, yellow, red.” She ran the riding crop up his thigh, “green means that everything is good,” she flicked the crop against his hip. “Yellow means ease up,” she ran the crop up his arm then pulled it away. “And red means stop, no matter what,” she laid the crop on the bed beside her. “Got it?”

“Yes,” he said, losing his battle to stay still and crawling toward her on his knees. “Who gave you permission to move?” She asked, flicking him on the ass with the riding crop.

“Please, Elizabeth,” he gave her a contrite smile, “you just look so tempting there, and as you’ve risen to the occasion, there’s just something I’d beg your indulgence in trying. I believe you’ll find it enjoyable”

“Hm, I suppose I could allow you a very little indulgence,” she caved and he prowled up to her and ran his tongue along her phallus. He heard her groan as he took her shaft into his mouth, bobbing his head up and down, each time pressing the vibrator tighter against her. He enjoyed her evident surprise at the pleasurable sensation.

“Mmm, who knew that Mr. William Darcy had this hidden talent?” she purred.

“Frank Tilney at Eton,” he answered, moaning at the memory, “It never went any farther than this, though I might have been tempted had he not bragged about his conquest.”

“No, Mr. Darcy wouldn’t like to be anyone’s conquest,” she said, threading her fingers through his hair.

“I eagerly await your conquest of me, Elizabeth.”

“Well then, she tugged his head up, I think I’ve indulged you long enough,” she smirked. “Up!” She gestured for him to stand and he followed her order. “Drop your pants!”

“My pants or my trousers?” He asked.

“Ugh, do you have to be so pedantic?” She growled, “and both!”

He fumbled to unclasp his belt and unfasten his trousers. Swiftly pulling down both garments at once, he stepped out of them and closer to Elizabeth. She ran her hands up his thighs then began unbuttoning his shirt, leaving small kisses along his stomach and chest as his shirt opened further. She stood and lifted his collar. Loosening his tie, she gently tugged the shirt out from beneath it, leaving him stood in nothing but a tie and a dog collar. She smiled and fastened the leash to him then used it to draw him closer and pull him into a kiss. He was gasping and needy when she
pulled back and twirled her finger, indicating that he should turn toward the bed, “bend over!”

He did as he was told and she grasped the riding crop. “Now,” she said, running it up his inner thigh, “you’ve been rather naughty!” She said, swiftly bringing the crop down on his cheek. “I was promised groveling!” Another smack.

“I’m so sorry, Elizabeth!” he said. She hit him again and, enjoying the sting of her punishment, he gasped, “Green!”

“What are you sorry for, Darcy?” She asked as she rapidly hit a tight cluster of slaps.

“I’m sorry for leaving you!” She continued her assault. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer your calls!”

“Such a naughty boy,” she repeated, moving her weapon to his hip.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t talk to you then, sort it out!”

“I was promised begging!” She reminded him.

“Please, Elizabeth!” He called out.

“Please, what?” she asked as she ran the riding crop up his thigh.

“Please fuck me!” he cried as she landed another blow. “I’m sorry I deprived you of the opportunity when I left!”

“Oh, you better be!” She said as her assault paused and he felt a slicked finger teasing his arse.

“Green!”

“You like that, don’t you Darcy?” She asked as she slipped a finger inside him.

“Yes!” He gasped.

She leaned over and raked her teeth over his shoulder blade as her finger smoothly pumped in and out of him. His breath caught at the sensation. A second finger slipped in, working him open. “Are you ready?” She asked, her breath fanning against his skin.

“God, yes!” he shouted.

She removed her fingers and he heard her squirting out more lubricant. The room was heavy with anticipation. He felt the tip of the dildo run along his crack and groaned.

“Still green?” she asked as she leaned in.

“A bit yellow,” he admitted, “you’ve sort of, ah, missed your mark.

“Oh,” she said, slipping out of her aggressive, dominant tone and sounding unsure of herself for the first time that evening. He felt her make a few unsuccessful attempts before she moved away.

“Here,” she said, “pulling the pillows from the top of the bed, put these under you.”

He stood up to do so and couldn’t resist pulling her in for a quick kiss before he settled on top of the pillows, with his ass angled higher. She added a bit more lube, ran her finger over his rim again to help her aim, and began slowly pushing the tip in. He cried out at the fist intrusion, hardly knowing if it was in pleasure or merely in surprise at the unfamiliar sensation. She pulled back and pushed in a bit farther on her next thrust. After several more progressive thrusts she stopped, fully
“How are you doing?”

“She pulled back and thrust in again, setting up a slow rhythm. “You like that, don’t you!” she asked.

“Yes!”

“You’ve spent too long as the CEO,” she said on another thrust, “the boss. Always in control.”

“Yes!”

“You just need someone else to dominate you, don’t you?” She punctuated this with a tug on his leash.

“Oh, Elizabeth!”

“You need someone to take control!”

He could hear her quickened breath and his passion grew more as he realized that she was enjoying herself as well. “Only for you, Elizabeth!”

She stopped and pulled out and he groaned at the loss of contact. He heard her rustling behind him. “Here,” she said pulling up on his hips and sliding the lubed up sheath on him. His hips surged down into her grasp. She pumped him a couple of times, then instructed him to take control of the sheath so she could continue. He happily obliged her then cried out as she sunk into him again, his pleasure intensified by the addition.

He began pumping into the sheath as she continued pounding him from behind. After a few minutes of this bliss, she fumbled out of him. “You really need to learn how to let someone else set the pace Darcy!” She chided him, “If I’m going to do this I can’t keep up with your erratic thrusts. Be a good boy, keep that sheath still, and let Lizzie do all of the work.”

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Elizabeth was surprised by how much she was enjoying herself. It’s not that she was getting much actual stimulation out of this, but the way he looked beneath her was so fucking hot. She’d seen William Darcy fall to pieces multiple times at this point, but she felt an added sense of power this time. He looked so far gone from the rigid stuffy man who had entered the drawing room yesterday. Apparently replacing the stick up his butt for a dildo made a world of difference.

After her admonishment he tried to correct his behavior. He followed her lead, allowing her to set the tempo. When he began bucking against her rhythm again she retaliated with a swift smack to his ass. He gave a guttural groan and clutched the bedsheets with one hand while he held on to the sheath for dear life with the other. She was so pleased with his reaction that she began interspersing more playful smacks, working him into a frenzy.

“Oh, Lizzie!” He cried as she increased her speed, pounding harder, faster. “Lizzie!” He cried as he let go and she could almost see intensity of his pleasure to wave over him, “Lizzie! Lizzie! Ughn!” He climaxed hard, gasping down into the sheets. She pulled out of him and looked down at her night’s work. The poor man looked exhausted and spent. Red welts were visible all along his buttocks from her earlier thrashing, the outline on some so clear that she could see where the stitching was on the leather head of the crop.
She ran her hand soothingly over the marks as he caught his breath. “I’m sorry about your ass,” she said softly, “it looks like I left some marks.”

He laughed into the bedsheets then rolled over to his side and looked at her. “My ass has never been better, I assure you. That was amazing, Lizzie … I’ve never done that, you know?” He said reflectively. “I’ve been curious, interested even, but I’ve never trusted anyone enough to give them that much power over my body until you, Elizabeth.”

That look of contentment on his face made her feel more accomplished than she probably should and for a moment she smiled tenderly at him. She slipped down to the bed next to him and kissed him. “Thank you for trusting me,” she whispered.

“Always,” he says, trailing a finger down her cheek tenderly. Elizabeth shook her head to clear away that gnawing sense that there was something more here and returned to the scene.

“Well,” she said suggestively, forcing herself back into her dominant voice, “now that we’ve taken care of you, I believe you owe me more groveling.” She tugged on his leash to emphasize her point. “On your knees!”

He gave her a wolfish grin and complied with an eager, “yes, ma’am!”

She slipped out of the harness and tossed it and the top pillow – now coated in lube and semen – onto the floor. She adjusted the other pillow under her head as she lay on her back at the foot of the bed. Darcy positioned himself between her legs and made eye contact with her as she used the leash to pull him closer to her core. He licked her slowly at first, teasing her. After a minute of this torture, she dug her fingers into his hair and pulled him closer.

“Mmm, yes, pull my hair Lizzie,” he murmured against her, sending shocks through her from the added vibration, “let me know what you like.” She moaned at the sensation his words evoked. After a few minutes he inserted a finger in her and moved it in time with his mouth.

“Darcy!” she whimpered, tightening her grasp on his hair.

“Call me Will, love,” he said, “please, Lizzie!”

“Will!” she sighed and he moaned and increased his pace. She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the sensations. When she opened her eyes again he was looking at her with that penetrating gaze. He removed his finger and fumbled with the bottle of lube. A moment later his probing finger returned, joined by one in her ass. She cried out initially at the unexpected intrusion, but quickly adjusted to the sensation and before long found herself tumbling into an orgasm shouting his name.

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Darcy rested his head against her thigh as she recovered her breath. He was enamored with this woman. She had been so fierce and forceful this evening, but now she was calm and peaceful and still letting out mewling little moans as the aftershocks rippled through her.

“So,” he asked when she looked up at him, “was it everything you expected?”

“At the risk of sounding predictable,” she smiled, “it was everything I wanted and more.”

He kissed her thigh as he got up and offered her a hand, “good! I’m glad.” She tugged herself up and he pulled her to him, kissing her passionately.

“And what about you?” She asked, “was it as good as you expected?”
“Oh, Lizzie,” he caught the note of uncertainty in her voice and kissed her softly on the forehead, “it was so much better.” She nuzzled into his embrace and he savored the feel of her in his arms. As the afterglow began to ebb, he realized how sticky and gross he felt so he suggested: “What do you say to a quick rinse in the shower while the bathtub fills up, then we can soak and relax?”

“That sounds wonderful!” she replied, “I don’t know about you, but I used muscles tonight that are not used to that level of exertion.”

They went into the bathroom and he began drawing the bathwater, as she stripped off the rest of her clothing and started the shower. He added the vanilla bubble bath that he couldn’t resist picking up earlier that day because it reminded him of the scent of her hair. When he joined her in the shower, he snaked his arms around her from behind, kissing her neck. Their quick rinse was frequently interrupted by kisses and wandering hands as they ‘helped’ each other wash up, but they just managed to get out before the bathwater hit a critical mass.

As Elizabeth sunk into the oversize tub Darcy turned on the jacuzzi jets and laughed at her squeal of delight. He poured them both a glass of champagne and handed one to her before he sunk in beside her, pulling her close.

She looked around the lavish bathroom and teased, “you really just can’t lower yourself to pay-by-the-hour places for hookups can you?”

“Come now, a place like that wouldn’t have a tub like this and I know how much you enjoy a good bath.”

“Mmmm, true.”

“Besides, I think you’ll be much more comfortable here.”

“What?” She asked drowsily.

“I’ve paid for the room through Sunday so we have a place to meet,” he said nervously, anticipating her refusal.

Her eyes snapped open and she looked at him in annoyance, “that’s rather presumptuous of you!”

“Would you rather try sneaking around Rosings and risk Lady Catherine finding us?” She gave an exaggerated shiver at that suggestion. “It’s either this or the wilderness, my dear … and I know your low opinion about grass stains,” he teased.

She sighed, “I suppose you’re right … but I’m still not happy about it.” He bit his tongue to prevent himself from pointing out that it was the first time ever that she’d told him he was right. Instead, he kissed the top of her head.

“I should probably get back soon, I don’t want to keep Charlotte up on a school night.”

“Love, we have this room all week, you’re welcome to sleep here.” She looked like she was about to argue so he added, “you could go sleep on the floor of the dorm if you prefer or you could sleep in that large, comfy bed.”

“Hmmm …” she pretended to mull it over, “ok, fine.”

“Good!” He sighed in relief. “Aunt Catherine has a strict routine. She retires for the evening at 9pm, then emerges from her suite of rooms at 9am, which gives me plenty of time to slip over here, spend the evening with you, and return there before she notices my absence.”
“Hey! Nobody said anything about sharing that large, comfy bed with you!” She teased.

“You’d rather sleep on the floor at Charlotte’s than in a bed with me?” He asked, hurt even though he knew that she was teasing.

“She doesn’t snore!”

“Please, Elizabeth?” He asked, all humor drained from his voice. They had so little time together and he wanted to spend as much of it as possible with her. “Please.”

“I suppose when you grovel so nicely… ” she said, snuggling her head against his chest, “you’re lucky you’re cute.” He smiled against the top of her head, it’s not the declaration of love he would like to hear from Elizabeth, but he would take it none the less.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to my husband on this chapter. I don't have a beta for this but I do read each chapter to him before I post it and he gives me feedback. For this chapter he went above and beyond: Dressing up and role-playing the scene with me for ... research. You know ... to make sure it was realistic.
The following evening, Elizabeth was hunkered down at the (super comfortable) desk in the hotel room working on homework while Charlotte was in a night class. She’d put up with a healthy dose of teasing from her friend as they transferred her bags over to the inn earlier that day and she was enjoying a bit of alone time for the first time in days.

Her makeup assignment for her digital methods class was to create a digital rendering of one of the artworks she encountered on her travels. She’d decided to do a 3-d rendering of Lady Catherine’s Chimney Piece since she was in Huntsford and had heard so much about it – and because it was composed of fairly simple geometric shapes that were easy to model within her limited experience.

She’d completed the basic structure and was filling in details with textures she’d created from photographs when Darcy came in. She looked up and smirked at his harried appearance. “Long day?” She asked.

He looked up, seeing her for the first time since he’d entered and his scowl was replaced with a grin. “It’s getting better by the minute,” he replied as he walked over to her, swiveling her chair to have better access and leaning over to kiss her. He stood up and took off his suit jacket, hanging it in the closet.

“You’re earlier than I expected, I was just getting some work done while Charlotte is in class and you were with your aunt,” she said, shuffling her notes and sketches into some semblance of order.

“I believe I was too persistent in my insistence that we sort out her estate matters for her tastes, so Aunt Catherine retired early.” He said as he removed his tie, unbuttoning the first two buttons of his shirt.

He returned and pulled Elizabeth up out of the chair, giving her a quick kiss before sitting down himself. Initially she was annoyed that he’d displace her like that, but then he pulled her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her waist with a sigh. “What are you working on?” He asked, resting his chin on her shoulder and peering at her laptop. She explained the project and he laughed, “Lady Catherine will not be pleased.”

“That’s just a bonus!” She laughed.

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Darcy leaned down and kissed her at the junction of her neck and shoulder. He hadn’t been prepared for the effect this level of domesticity would have on him. He hadn’t expected her to be here when he arrived, when his aunt had retired early he opted to relax for a bit at the inn before Elizabeth joined him for another interlude. He somehow hadn’t realized, even after he’d invited her to stay there, that she would in fact spend time there without him.

It had been a trying day. His aunt had accountants and property managers to look after things, but he somehow always had to sort out the tangles she’d made when he he visited. His cousins weren’t any better company this evening. Fitzwilliam teased him incessantly about Elizabeth and Anne could barely meet his eyes and yet she somehow seemed to know what he was about with Elizabeth – which was unfair since he hardly knew himself what he was about in that arena. He’d
spent the walk to the inn trying to figure their situation out. After all, considering the mess he’d been for the last several months, he feared he could expect even worse disappointment when she left him again. And yet, he couldn’t think of a way for them to be together without one of them drastically changing their life. Was he just pulling himself deeper into this mess with no route out? He’d therefore entered that room weary and bleak, but she’d improved his mood with a single smile.

Now they were just sitting sharing details about their days and enjoying a quiet intimacy. He couldn’t help but wish that coming home to this beautiful lively woman was part of his daily life. That thought was enough to make him go hard and grind against her.

She retaliated by rocking back against him. “I see you’re eager tonight,” she moaned.

“I’m always eager for you, Elizabeth,” he responded, biting lightly at her neck. “What do you have planned for us tonight, my dear?” He asked, nipping at her ear.

“Hmmm,” she savored the moment before responding, “I thought we’d do everything we did last night … but reverse the roles,” she breathed and he groaned as her arse rocked back over him again, a preview of what was to come.

“Mmm, fair returns and all.” He stood, pulling them both up and tugged her shirt off, trailing kisses over the newly exposed skin. She turned in his arms and began unbuttoning his shirt as she kissed him.

She broke away and trailed kisses down his chest and stomach on her way down to her knees. Once there, she deftly unfastened his trousers, trailing her hands down his thighs as she lowered them. He shivered in anticipation. “Don’t you think it’s weird that you gave me a blowjob before I gave you one?” She asked, her breath fanning against him, teasing him.

“I suppose I’ve been too focused on …” his breath hitched as her tongue teased the head of his shaft, “I’ve been too focused on mutual pleasure …” he hissed when her mouth closed around him, “on your pleasure to even ask for it.” She moaned around him, sending shock-waves of pleasure through him.

She looked up at him with those fine eyes and said, “that’s what I like about you Darcy,” she paused to lick his length, “I know you’ll never ask me to do anything I don’t want.”

He saw a momentary flicker of something like hesitation or regret in her eyes and he pulled her up, sitting them both on the bed eager to reassure her. “You know I would never push you into anything,” he entreated, worried about this change in her demeanor.

“I know,” she whispered, leaning in to kiss him. When she pulled back all hints of hesitation were gone and she gave him a saucy smile, “that’s why I want you to take charge for the night.”

“Mmm,” he murmured against her shoulder, intrigued by the possibilities.

She stood up and handed him the riding crop before she took off the remainder of her clothing. “Don’t forget the condom this time though, we’ve been careless.” He laughed at her contradictions: asking him to take control while still giving him commands. He nonetheless followed orders and put on a condom. She’d already spread herself out, bent over the foot of the bed, clearly wishing for the same treatment she’d given him yesterday.

He looked at the riding crop beside her on the bed, but decided to take a few minutes to warm her up first. He gently ran his hands up and down her back, working out the tension. On his second
pass, he followed the path of his hands with his mouth. She moaned in pleasure, but also reached her hand out beside her and nudged the riding crop toward him. He smirked at her impatience and her reluctance to actually relinquish control of the situation.

He gripped the riding crop and ran it up one of her legs, then the other, landing one smack on her ass. Elizabeth moaned and his own interest – which had flagged somewhat at the interruption – was piqued. On the second swat, she moaned so sensually that he couldn’t suppress his responding groan. It wasn’t until the third hit that he noticed the red welts beginning to form.

“Red!” He cried, lifting his hands in the air.

“What!?” She shouted, “you’re the one with the whip!”

He dropped the riding crop and ran his hand tenderly over the marks marring her beautiful skin, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It’s all green over here. I’m enjoying it, you’re not hurting me any more than I hurt you yesterday,” she explained in frustration.

“Logically I know that,” He had enjoyed it when he was on the receiving end, but still … “seeing those marks gives me pause.”

“You’ve spanked me before,” she reasoned, she tossed a smirk over her shoulder and added: “rather forcefully even.”

He recalled the previous times, first after the run-in with Wickham then after Todd had his hands all over her ass at the party. “That was different. I was jealous...” and I hadn’t realized I loved you yet.

“Hmm, I could call your cousin and flirt right now, fire up the jealousy a little bit if that’s what it takes.”

“You will do no such thing!” he said, slapping her ass with an open palm as his anger flared – the thought of her even flirting with another man was infuriating – but then he continuing to caress over her heated flesh.

“Mmmm, there, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“It’s different with my hands, this way I can feel you,” he squeezed a little and both of them moaned. “The riding crop feels so impersonal, I have no connection, I can’t feel you flinch under my palm, or tease you between strokes.” He demonstrated as he explained, switching between spanks and caresses.

“Green!” She moaned, “I think you’ve converted me.”

“Good,” he sighed, “you do deserve some punishment for mentioning another man while we’re together!” He said with another resounding smack, enjoying the ripples under his palm.

“Yes!”

“It’s very naughty to flirt just to get a rise out of me,” another smack.

“Is it the same punishment for talking about flirting with another man?”

“God, you are so impertinent!”
He continued his alternating swats and strokes for several minutes before his attention was almost entirely consumed by stroking her core. He reached for the bottle of lube and began fingering her back passage. She gave a strangled cry that he couldn’t read so he asked, “still green?”

“Green,” she exhaled as his finger plunged in farther. He knelt behind her for better access to stimulate her quim as he worked her open from behind. From that vantage point he couldn’t resist leaning forward and nibbling on her buttock. She moaned and he stuck an additional finger in.

He was determined to prepare her as much as possible before he proceeded – he didn’t want to hurt her – but after several minutes she looked over her shoulder and whimpered, “Darcy, please!”

He groaned and grabbed the lubricant as he stood back up. “Are you ready for me dearest?”

“Yes!” she shouted, her eagerness tinged with a hint of frustration.

He brought his slick shaft to her entrance and slowly began pressing in. She screamed and he was afraid he was hurting her so he again asked, “green?” She didn’t answer right away, so he pulled out. From this position he couldn’t see her face, couldn’t gauge her reaction so he flipped her over. “Sweetheart, are you ok?” He asked nervously, cupping her cheek.

“Sorry, yes, it was green, just a shock,” she said, her breath unsteady.

“I think I like this position better regardless,” he said, looking into her eyes as he tugged her closer to the edge of the bed and draped her legs over his shoulders.

“I’m really fine, we can continue as we were,” she argued.

“But this way I can gaze into those beautiful eyes,” he said as he grabbed his shaft again and repositioned it from this new angle, slipping in slowly. She cried out again and he raised his eyebrows in concern but this time he could see her expression as she nodded yes to his silent question. “I love to see your passion, Elizabeth,” he groaned. With reassurance that she was enjoying it as well, he allowed himself to push fully in and enjoy the tight warmth of her.

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She’d been thinking all day of going through the same motions from last night in reverse – a choreographed dance and she’d already learned the moves – so she was somewhat skeptical when Darcy flipped her over. She’d been fine, really, the initial push was just a bit much compared to his fingers and it was momentarily painful. She didn’t want to break the script she had in her mind, but then when he’d pushed in again with her on her back it had been more comfortable. She’d enthusiastically come around to the change when his fingers began stroking her in time with his thrusts.

Last night was passionate and intense and violent and so fucking hot … this was slower, more intimate, and still … “God, Will!” she moaned as he found the perfect rhythm and everything got so much more intense. She had always been slow to change her opinions, so she’d been reluctant to accept this shift in her plan but with every thrust the pain diminished and the pleasure built.

“Oh, Elizabeth!” He whispered, cupping her cheek again, “you are so beautiful.” His free hand roamed down, resting on her shoulder with his thumb stroking her clavicle. “You are always gorgeous but right now,” he groaned, “when you’re flushed and sweating and writhing beneath me …”

Elizabeth noticed the increase in his pace and the urgency in his voice and knew that he was close. She lowered one of her legs and wrapped it behind his back, pulling him closer. She knew from
their prior encounters how to push him even further.

“Will,” she whimpered, running her hand down his chest while locking his eyes – and that was all it took for him to come crashing over the edge. With one last deep thrust he crumpled over her, resting his head in the crook of her shoulder and whispering her name.

After a moment to collect his breath, his fingers continued to stroke her clit as his mouth migrated down to her breasts. His spent phallus slipped out of her and the fingers of his other hand began to take its place. She’d enjoyed the experience but was starting to get a bit sore. “Will,” she ran her fingers through his hair to get his attention, “green on the clit, but yellow on the ass?”

“Of course,” his hand dropped away like he’d been burnt and he shifted his head up level with hers to meet her eyes, “what would you like, Elizabeth?”

“I think some good, old fashioned fingering is in order,” she teased.

He gave her a wolfish grin and pulled them both fully onto the bed. He spread out next to her and resumed his attentions. Her head rolled back on the pillow as his finger slipped inside her and she called out his name.

“I love the way you shout my name, Elizabeth,” he said, hovering over her. She opened her eyes and met his, whimpering at his attentions. “And the fire in your eyes scorches me.” Her back arched into his touch. “Your neck is enchanting, we can be in a crowded room with a dozen conversations buzzing around us and all I can think of is when I’ll be able to taste you again,” he said, nipping at her neck and she couldn’t help but moan. “Do you remember the photo you sent me? The bruises and bite marks on your shoulder?” He asked, grazing his teeth along that same path. “I looked at it constantly after my return, lamenting the fact that those marks had faded,” he sunk his teeth into that spot and Elizabeth cried out. “I would focus on that picture and imagine what I would do if I could see you again, how I would mark you again as my own,” Elizabeth felt the pain of his bite along with the pleasure his hands were weaving and her hand shot up to run through his hair, pulling him closer. “My Elizabeth, My Lizzie,” he whispered against her skin and she came screaming his name.

As her breathing calmed, Will continued to press kisses against her shoulder – now soft and sweet nibbles in contrast to the harsher bites from earlier. She’d never been overly fond of referring to lovers as possessions, but obviously his words had appealed to something in her. Nonetheless, she couldn’t help teasing him a bit. “God, you’re such a caveman!” she smirked, “you’re squeamish about the riding crop, but you’ve got no problem marking your territory!”

She felt him smile against her shoulder, “I don’t believe anyone has ever accused me of being a caveman before.”

“Oh, I bet! On the outside you’re all proper and British and detached but get you into bed … or library or car … and all of that civility just melts into a primal mess.”

“My boyhood tutor would be so disappointed, he worked so hard to turn me into a gentleman.”

She rolled her eyes, “of course you had a tutor.”

“Of course,” he said haughtily, then slipped into a sheepish tone to ask: “was it too much, Elizabeth?”

“No,” she laughed and kissed the top of his head, “as it turns out, I prefer the caveman to the gentleman.”
“Good,” he said, snuggling closer and snaking his hand over her stomach.

Elizabeth pondered on the ‘gentleman’ Mr. Darcy. He was the one who had left her. He was the one who would sit for a half hour in a room with someone without talking. He disapproved of her family. Sure, he probably did have family standards to meet and … “Wait a second …” she exclaimed as she connected the dots, “your aunt is a ‘lady’ …”

“Yes, her father was an earl and her husband was a knight,” he responded.

“Which makes your grandfather …” she prompted.

He sighed, “an earl, yes.”

“Of course he was,” she rolled her eyes, “and that’s why Caroline’s so very interested in you?”

“Sadly, yes. I’ve had women like Caroline after me for ages, chasing after the family name, the estate, the family jewels.” he lifted onto his arm to look down at her.

“Poor baby,” she lifted her hand to stroke his hair. Elizabeth almost felt sorry for him, wading through life with that sort of family baggage – a bullseye marking him as a target. Sure, she had some embarrassing sisters and a loud-mouth mother, but she didn’t think there was anything she could do that would cause them to turn their backs on her … and she was positive nobody had ever dated her for her money or connections.

“That’s one of the things I like best about you,” he said, tracing small circles on her stomach “… you have no interest in all of that.”

“What would I do with the family jewels?” She laughed, picturing herself walking around campus wearing her faded Longbourne sweatshirt and a tiara.

“I don’t know,” he said suggestively, “you’ve already found some rather creative uses for my family jewels.

She giggled at his use of slang. “Mmmm,” she leaned up to kiss him, “I love it when you talk crass! It reminds me you’re human like the rest of us.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is all about both of them experimenting together and pushing boundaries. My favorite part of this chapter is that Darcy's kink he's experimenting with is domesticity.

For those of you wondering, my husband walked into my office and asked me if I had another chapter that I needed to do 'research' on ;)


“That is amazing!” Charlotte laughed at Lizzie’s model. Lady Catherine was taken way to seriously at this school and the brilliant thing about Lizzie’s project was that it could be seen as an homage … or a joke. “Is it watertight?”

“It should be,” Lizzie responded, “it’s a simple enough model.”

“We have a 3-d printer in the lab, we could print it out …”

“Wait,” Anne said, biting her lip in that adorable way she did when she was constructing plans, she got out her sketchbook as she talked and began drawing out schematics, “if we printed it out, we could build an aperture with legs, turn it into a walking mockery of my mother’s masterpiece!”

“I think it’s a brilliant plan,” Lizzie said, “but I’m outta here by the end of the week, so I won’t have to deal with much fallout.”

Charlotte considered the plan. It would be amazing, of course, but she didn’t want Anne to have to deal with the consequences. “I’m only here for another month or so, there’s little she can do to me, it’s you I’m worried about,” she said to Anne.

“Well, mummy is always talking about how I’m not living up to my family legacy as an artist, who better than a DeBurgh to post-postmodernize her work?” Anne smiled quietly down at her plans, “besides, maybe I’ll finally push her far enough this time that she’ll let me study what I want.”

Charlotte was proud of her girl. When she’d first met her, Anne never would have done something so blatantly antagonistic towards her mother. She’d always fallen in line like a good little daughter of the aristocracy. One of the things that they’d bonded over was that they were both trying to quietly crawl out of the shadows of more dominant personalities. Charlotte had grown so much as a person once she’d given herself space to find her own way but it was nothing compared to Anne’s transformation. Outside of her oppressive household Anne had grown into a witty, funny, vibrant person that Charlotte considered herself lucky to love. It still stung every time she had too see her back in Lady Catherine’s presence, stifled, silent, and haughty.

Charlotte hoped that this was a sign of changing tides, that Anne was starting to break away from her mother’s influence. Which was great, because Charlotte had some clear ideas on how Anne could definitively break away from Lady Catherine.

“I’m in!” Lizzie raised her arms triumphantly, “let’s do this!”

“Oh my, what happened to your shoulder?” Anne asked Elizabeth. Charlotte looked over just in time to see a rather impressive hickey through the gaping collar of Lizzie’s shirt before she blushed and lowered her arms covering it back up. She smirked, apparently Anne had made some progress, but was still shockingly innocent; they’d been taking things slowly.

“That would be Darcy,” Elizabeth responded sheepishly.

Anne’s eyes widened, “William hurt you?”

“No, babe, it’s a hickey, a love bite,” Charlotte reassured her, “it didn’t hurt.” Anne looked at her
skeptically. “I’ll give you a demonstration later,” Charlotte winked, imagining all of the places she could place a hickey that would be hidden by clothing.

“Yeah, Will’s a bit too afraid to hurt me, even when it’s for fun. He’s such a puppy, right down to slobbering all over me and marking his territory,” Lizzie laughed.

“That’s far too much information about my cousin,” Anne answered. Charlotte took pity on both of her embarrassed companions and shifted the conversation back to their collaborative project.

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“I cannot begin to count the occasions on which her ladyship has pressed upon me the importance of respecting an artist’s intentions. What you have done, taking one of the greatest pieces of artwork of the last century and turning it into nothing more than a windup toy is … well, it’s blasphemous!” Elizabeth did her best to tune out Collins’ diatribe but that effort was giving her quite the headache. Charlotte had made the print of Elizabeth’s model yesterday and Anne had finished the mechanical components this morning. They’d been gathered around with Lady Metcalf and a group of students gleefully watching the small model walk on a pair of chicken legs across a desk when Willa Collins walked in and flipped her shit.

Collins knew that Elizabeth had worked with Anne and Charlotte on the project, but since Anne was Lady Catherine’s daughter, and Charlotte was Willa’s ex that she still thought she had a chance of winning back, all of her anger and officiousness was aimed at Elizabeth. It was now Friday evening and Collins’ rant had bled into the gallery opening for the annual exhibition. Charlotte, Anne, and Darcy were all busy with the opening so she couldn’t escape to any of them for relief.

“This monstrous mockery of Lady Catherine’s genius and your utmost lack of decorum while visiting this esteemed institution …”

“Excuse me,” Elizabeth sighed in relief as Fitzwilliam interrupted Collins, “I hope you don’t mind, but I need to steal Ms. Bennet away for a moment, there’s someone I must introduce her to.”

Collins looked torn between explaining Elizabeth’s crimes to the newcomer and her natural deference to any member of Lady Catherine’s family. In the end, she just ended up nodding as Fitzwilliam put his hand on the small of Elizabeth’s back and led her off.

“And who is this paragon that I must meet,” Elizabeth asked when they were out of earshot.

“I wanted to introduce you to blissful silence for a while, I’ve been watching and I don’t think that blow-hard has taken a breath in ten minutes. What have you done to her?”

Elizabeth smiled and pulled out her phone, pulling up a video of their creation. “It was a collaborative project with Anne and Charlotte, but Collins is willfully ignoring that and placing the blame fully on myself. She’s been like this all day,” Elizabeth whined.

Fitzwilliam barked out a laugh, then looked around realizing that he was being too boisterous for a gallery opening with his Aunt standing across the room. “Fantastic! Has she seen yet? Can I be there when she does? I promise I’ll take cover from a safe distance to avoid the fallout,” he pleaded like a small child.

Elizabeth laughed, “I don’t think anybody has had the heart to share it with her quite yet, I think they’re all waiting for their final grades to come in before poking the beast.”

At a curious glare from Lady Catherine, they shifted their conversation to more neutral topics.
They eventually settled on Fitzwilliam telling stories about Darcy’s childhood. He painted a much softer picture: an awkward, quiet youth trying – and often failing – to fit in.

“Sadly, he changed after his father died. He had to take on the welfare of the company, head the family finances, the estate, not to mention raise his pre-teen sister.” He sighed before perking up and adding, “I’m glad he’s got you now though, he needs someone to loosen him up a bit.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, “he doesn’t have me.”

“Is that so?” He asked with a challenge in his eye, “then would you care to explain why you’re wearing a jumper over your dress when it’s 27 degrees in here?” He lifted up a hand to pull back the cardigan and she swatted it away.

“That’s different, it’s no-strings … casual, I’ll be headed back to Massachusetts soon. Any chance we had at more ended when he left the first time.”

His face went serious, “please don’t say that, I know that decision ate him up inside. He’s had some past … traumas … that caused him to overreact, but he does care for you.”

Elizabeth didn’t want to hear these things. She knew that Darcy was infatuated with her, but if it was more … no. He’d known since she arrived that this would end on Sunday. They could spend the next couple of days together then go their separate ways.

“You know,” Fitzwilliam laughed, “on the drive out here, Darcy implied that it was Bingley that had entangled himself with a beautiful, young, American. I should have seen from his body language that he was talking about himself.”

Elizabeth’s mind reeled at that. How had she forgotten about Jane in all of this? Was she so weak that she’d been willing to overlook all of Darcy’s faults and just jump back into bed with him? His explanation for why he left never quite explained Charlie’s abandonment as well. Her headache pounded harder, she could hear her pulse rushing in her ears, and the stifling heat of the room became overwhelming. She swayed a bit, suddenly unsteady on her feet.

“Are you ok?” Fitzwilliam put a hand on her arm for support.

“I … have a headache,” Elizabeth answered, unable to answer further.

“Let’s get some air,” he said leading them out onto the lawn. She gasped in fresh though humid air – she still felt oppressed. “Where are you staying? Shall I walk you back?”

“The Huntsford Inn,” she said quietly.

“Come on, I know a shortcut.”

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Darcy was never fond of over-crowded rooms and small talk, but tonight had just been maddening. As the ‘honored guest’ of the evening, he was required to mingle, make small talk, and give feedback on the artwork when all he wanted to do was go to Elizabeth’s side. He’d seen that obnoxious Collins girl droning on to Elizabeth and was initially relieved when Fitzwilliam intervened. That relief quickly turned to jealousy at their teasing banter. She knew what it did to him when she flirted with other men, and yet here she was flirting with his cousin … again.

He was trapped in a conversation with one of the deans when he saw Fitzwilliam take her arm and lead her out of the room. That had been half an hour ago and his stomach was turning. He wanted
to believe that she wouldn’t … at the very least that he would never … but what else could explain their prolonged absence?

He was giving feedback to the Collins girl when Fitzwilliam re-entered the room alone with a serious look on his face. Darcy walked away from the astonished student without even acknowledging her presence and grabbed his cousin’s arm roughly, leading him back out of the gallery. “What is going on? Where is Elizabeth?” He asked menacingly.

“Calm down Darcy,” Fitzwilliam held both of his hands up, “she has a headache so I walked her back to the hotel.”

“She’s ill? Is she ok?” His anger swiftly turned into concern.

“She’ll be fine, it’s just a headache,” his cousin responded with a knowing smirk, “oh mate, you’re so far gone on her!”

Before Darcy had a chance to defend against this accusation, Lady Catherine’s imperious voice wafted into the hallway, “Where are my nephews? Darcy, Fitzwilliam?” her sour face followed her voice out of the door and she continued: “There you are. Fitzwilliam, don’t think I didn’t notice your exit nor your prolonged absence. Ms. Bennet may be lively prettyish sort of girl, but you are the son of an Earl and you are expected to have higher standards,” she said with a significant look toward the elder of her two nephews. Darcy’s stomach dropped, knowing that her censure would not be lighter in regards to a relationship between himself and Elizabeth. Turning toward the other, Lady Catherine said with a sickly sweet tone: “Darcy, they are nearly ready for your speech, you are needed on stage in five minutes.”

“I shall be in directly Aunt Catherine, I have an urgent telephone call I must make.”

She looked at him in displeasure, “five minutes,” she said before turning on her heel and returning to the gallery, pulling Fitzwilliam along with her. Darcy sighed and pulled out his mobile.

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Elizabeth sighed into her pillow, far more comfortable with her solitude, pjs, and air conditioning. That’s one more comfort that Darcy’s fancy hotel room offered at least. Her pressing needs met, she was left with no option other than to re-examine her behavior that week. Their first encounter was fairly on par for them – she was angry and when the argument got heated, they got heated.

Then she’d wanted to punish him and fulfill the fantasy that she hadn’t even known she had until he put it into her head.

After that was when her behavior became questionable. Her anger had begun to diminish. She didn’t even like him, right? He was arrogant, and selfish, and entitled. On reflection, selfish didn’t exactly fit. He seemed to be more focused on pleasing her these days than on himself … hell, that even reached back to the first time in the library. And true, he had paid for the room for the whole week without talking to her first, but he had asked her, he had given her the option to go back to Charlotte’s dorm.

She shook her head to clear it – immediately regretting the action as her headache was still raging – and tried to reclaim that anger. He had separated Jane and Charlie! He had broken her sister’s heart! That asshole! But then again, he said that they’d already finished their work in Boston, perhaps they all just went back to their regular jobs. Even if Darcy had talked Charlie into leaving, it was still on Charlie to follow that advice, to cut ties without even talking to Jane.
Her introspection was broken by a soft knock at the door. Darcy wouldn’t knock, it was his room. Perhaps Fitzwilliam had come back to check on her or sent Charlotte. She got up and answered the door to find a porter with room service. “I didn’t order this,” she said blankly.

“Mr. Darcy called and ordered it,” he said and handed her a note: Elizabeth, I heard you weren’t feeling well, I hope this helps. Get some rest sweetheart, I’ll see you as soon as this thing is over. Know that I would rather be there with you, ~Will

She smiled and allowed the porter to set the tray on the table. When he was gone, she surveyed the tray: two bottles of water: one seltzer one still, a bottle of aspirin, a bowl of soup, some bread, and a single rose. How could he be such a sweetheart and such an asshole at the same time? That brought her back to the other startling disclosure Fitzwilliam made that night: Darcy cared about her. This was just supposed to be casual, how had it spun so far out of control? Could she, in good conscience, continue with this if she knew his feelings were involved? She pondered on this question as she quietly ate her soup, trying to convince herself that he was also just in it for the mind-blowing sex. After she ate, she took two aspirin and settled in to bed concluding that the damage was already done, how much worse could it get in two days?

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It was near midnight when Darcy was finally able to get away. After the reception, a professor who had been good friends with his mother and who had known Darcy since he was a toddler asked him out for drinks with some of the other faculty. He had come bloody close to just telling them that his girlfriend was ill and he had to go check in on her but that would have gotten back to his Aunt and he didn’t have the energy to fight that battle tonight.

He’d slipped into the room quietly and was trying to undress for bed as quietly as he could in the dark when she woke up with a sleepy, “Will?”

“Hey you,” he whispered as he sat on the bed next to her and rubbed her back, “I didn’t mean to wake you. How are you feeling?”

“hmm, a little better,” she yawned and snuggled a little against him, melting his heart, “I’m not up for sex tonight though.”

He chuckled and kissed her forehead, “of course not dearest, I just wanted to be close.”

“Just sleep?” She asked wearily.

“Just sleep, we’ve only got two nights left and I’m not going to waste one of them sleeping alone at Lady Catherine’s.”

“ Weird kink, but ok,” she mumbled.

He smiled and asked softly, “is there anything I can get you before I go to bed?”

“Just sleep,” she yawned again and nuzzled her head against the pillow like a cat. He stood and slipped under the covers, wrapping himself around her with a contented sigh.

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Elizabeth stretched and yawned as she slowly woke the following morning. Almost immediately she felt an arm tighten around her waist as he dropped a tender kiss behind her ear. She was on her side and he was spooning behind her.
“Were you watching me sleep?” She groggily asked Darcy as she looked over her shoulder and saw him propped up on his free arm gazing down at her.

“Perhaps,” he responded as he leaned down to kiss her, “this is the first time I’ve woken up with you in my arms.”

As he bent to nibble on her neck, Elizabeth thought back and realized it was true. Because of the jet-lag she’d been waking up at odd hours of the early morning since she’d arrived in the UK, so she’d always slipped out of bed and let Darcy continue sleeping. “You know you could have just gone back to sleep or gotten up like a normal person,” she teased, although she had to admit that she was enjoying this attention as well.

“Well,” he said against her skin, trailing his mouth up to her ear, “I want to fuck you,” he bit down on her ear and she moaned. “A shower might have helped with the immediacy of the problem, but not as satisfactorily as simply waiting for you to awake.”

“Mmmm,” she whispered, grinding back into him, “sounds like solid reasoning to me.” Her doubts of the previous evening were fading in the soft morning light. Darcy murmured in assent as his hand stroked down her side and reached her core, eliciting an appreciative moan.

For the next several minutes, Elizabeth was content to lay there on her side as Darcy pampered her with attention. In her drowsy state, she was willing to take a passive role and just sit back and enjoy herself. Eventually she felt like she ought to reciprocate, so she exerted herself to turn in his arms.

“Good morning,” she said with a saucy smile as she reached down to stroke him.

He gave a guttural growl and replied, “it’s shaping up to be … mmm … the best morning.” He gently her rolled her onto her back and settled on top of her, kissing her neck tenderly. His exploration was exceedingly thorough and methodical, as if he wanted to map out every curve of her body with his tongue. He began at her throat and made his way downward, taking extra time to plot the topography of her peaks before crossing the expanse of her stomach and traversing the flare of her hips.

“Will!” She plead, impatient for him to release some of the tension he’d just coiled her into. He bit her hip lightly then looked up, that familiar intense gaze boring into her as their eyes met. His eyes refused to release hers as he slowly, agonizingly, moved his head down and settled his mouth on her core. Like the rest of his exploration he maintained a slow pace, savoring the moment. Elizabeth melted under his care but wanted more.

She pawed at the bedside table, managing to grab a condom before she tugged his head up by the hair. “I want you inside me.”

He groaned and gave her one more gentle kiss before shifting upward. He hooked her legs over his shoulders as he rose to his knees and put on the condom. “Oh, Elizabeth!” He cried out as he entered her. He seemed determined maintain his lazy Saturday morning pace. His eyes roamed the same path that his lips had taken and his gaze felt like a ghost of past caresses.

She lifted her arms up to his neck, threading her fingers through his hair and causing him to look back into her eyes. His eyes softened when they met hers again – or was she just recognizing more of the emotion? His gaze was as intense and focused as it always had been, full of lust and desire, but now she also saw a tenderness behind them as well. “Lizzie,” he whimpered, raising his hand and caressing her cheek. “You’re so beautiful.”

Elizabeth fought down a sudden stroke of panic about his feelings – and perhaps a bit about hers as
well. This was temporary. This was casual. This was ending tomorrow. They had no future. She
closed her eyes and focused on the rhythm, the friction, the heat between them. She focused on the
mind-blowing sex, the draw they had on each other, the animal magnetism. That was real. That
affected her – not some deeper emotional connection that Fitzwilliam had imagined.

She could feel that he was starting to struggle to maintain his languid pace, so she spurred him on:
“Faster, Will!”

With a grunt he quickened his pace. She moved to start stimulating herself, but he grabbed her
hand and kissed it. “Allow me, dearest.” His nimble fingers began to work their magic as his
thrusts lost their measured tempo and became more frenzied. Her pleasure increased and she was
nearing her peak when he commanded, “open your eyes, love.” When she complied that heat and
intensity in his eyes spurred her on. “I love watching your passion, your fire,” he moaned, pressing
harder on her clit.

“God, Will!” She cried as she reached her climax.

“Oh, Lizzie!” He echoed as he came with her, “Lizzie!”

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Darcy gave her one last lingering kiss before shifting to the side, aware that her legs were probably
tired from maintaining that position for so long. He took off the condom and laid back down beside
her, pulling her close and allowing the contentment to seep into him. This morning had been truly
spectacular. Waking up with Elizabeth in his arms felt so perfect and right that he wanted to do so
every morning.

He tightened his arms around her as he remembered that she would be leaving him tomorrow. They
had a deep connection. He loved her more than he’d ever realized was possible, the deep, fulfilling
love that the poets and Charlie Bingley and similarly emotional people talked about but William
Darcy had always assumed was hyperbole. When she wasn’t near he physically ached from
wanting her – probably brought on by tension and stress without her soothing presence, but a
physical reaction nonetheless. It would be madness to let this go. After this week, he couldn’t
imagine returning to a life without her smiles, her laughing eyes, her passion and liveliness.

There was nothing for it, he would have to convince her to move to London. It would have to be
tonight, before she slipped out of his grasp again. She was stubborn and adverse to change, so he
would have to do something spectacular, show her what life here could be like. “Elizabeth,” he
asked as a vague plan formed, “would you go to the opera with me tonight?” It would be perfect,
they could drive into London, use the family box at the Royal Opera House, then she could stay at
his home and see where she would live.

“Ugh!” Elizabeth groaned – not the reaction Darcy was hoping for. “Could we be a bit less Pretty
Woman about this situation? I mean, you’ve already put me up in this hotel for the week, do we
really have to do the whole opera shtick as well?”

It took Darcy a moment to place her reference and when he did he gave a horrified gasp, “you are
not a whore, Elizabeth!” It came out sterner than intended, but the very idea offended him.

“True, but lets not do anything that will emphasize our differences, ok?”

He sighed, realizing that grand gestures probably wouldn’t be welcome. “I just wanted to show you
London before you had to leave.”
“Well,” she said hesitantly, “I will actually have a chance to see London, I’m visiting Jane next week before flying back.”

“What?” He asked, his heart beating faster at the prospect that they had more time. “Why didn’t you say?”

“Well, initially I was mad at you,” she said with a stern look that quickly faded into her habitual playfulness, “then Fitzwilliam told me you’d be here for two weeks, so I figured it didn’t matter.”

“Plans can change, Elizabeth,” he said, pinching his nose and creating a mental checklist of everything that would need to be done to depart Rosings tomorrow with Elizabeth instead of the following Friday.

“I don’t want you to upset your schedule – not to mention your Aunt – for me.”

“I would gladly risk Lady Catherine’s displeasure for another week with you, Love.” She blushed slightly but rolled her eyes and reached for her phone.

“Shit, I’m supposed to meet Charlotte and Anne in fifteen minutes, we’re taking a scenic drive to see some of the countryside,” she said as she slipped out of his grasp and began hastily getting ready.

“I wish I could join you, but I have some loose ends to tie up.”

“You seriously don’t have to change your plans for me,” she said and he appreciated her consideration for his schedule and his time.

“Nevertheless, I will. Some things are worth it, Elizabeth.”

She sat back down on the bed to pull on her shoes and turned to give him a quick kiss. “Let’s talk about it tonight, alright?” She seemed a bit flustered as she hopped up and grabbed her purse, but Darcy supposed that was to be expected when running late. Watching her disappear through the door, he resolved that he would still make his proposal tonight. That way they could make plans while they were in London.

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Charlotte grumbled as she went to answer her door, pulling on a loose shirt and a pair of pajama pants. Anne scrambled to put her pajamas back on as well.

“Lizzie, we weren’t supposed to meet for another hour, what are you doing here?” She asked, taking in her friend’s haphazard appearance.

“I’m Freaking out,” Elizabeth said pushing her way in as Anne tried to tidy her appearance from the bed.

“What did he do?” Anne asked.

“He invited me to the Opera!”

“That bastard!” Charlotte replied sarcastically.

“And he wants to change his plans so he can be in London with me next week.”

“This surprises you?” Anne asked, “I mean, mummy won’t like it but Darcy hasn’t paid much attention to her this last week anyway.”
Lizzie got up and started pacing. “I think Darcy likes me.”

“You think?” Charlotte snorted, snuggling back into Anne’s side.

“No, I mean he likes me likes me.”

“What is this, middle school?”

“What’s she saying, I can’t read her lips when she’s moving like that,” Anne asked in frustration, causing Lizzie to apologize and sit nervously on the foot of the bed.

Charlotte turned toward her, “Lizzie is just now figuring out that Darcy has feelings for her.”

“What?” Anne shouted in shock, “how could you miss that the guy is totally in love with you? Even I can see that and I was practically raised without social interaction.”

“Ladies, what am I going to do?” Lizzie said, flopping dramatically on the bed.

“What do you want to do?” Charlotte asked, amused.

“Fuck if I know,” Lizzie moaned.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry to do this to you guys (especially since you can probably guess where next chapter is headed), but I'm going to be traveling for the next couple of weeks. I'm not sure when the next update will be but I promise I won't abandon you.

Since this story is super kink-positive, I feel that I should note that I'm not trying to be anti-sex-worker with Darcy's 'whore' comment, it just feels like the way Darcy would respond to that comparison.
Elizabeth was nervous as she approached their hotel room. She’d stretched ‘getting a drink’ with Charlotte and Anne as long as she possibly could but they’d eventually convinced her that she’d either have to go back and face Darcy sometime or abandon all of her belongings in Kent. She stopped at the door and could hear him moving around inside. With one last deep breath she put the key in the door and walked in.

He stopped pacing when she entered and looked up at her, “you’re late!”

“I was at the pub with Charlotte,” she shrugged.

“You’ve been drinking?” He looked annoyed.

“What? It’s my last night here and I wanted to spend it with my friend … my friend who I came all the way to England to visit,” she added sullenly.

“Of course,” he said, his annoyance softening somewhat, “it’s just that I had something I wanted to talk to you about.” Elizabeth sighed and sat in the chair, bracing herself for this conversation.

“These are for you,” he grabbed a gorgeous bouquet of flowers off of the desk and handed it to her, leaning in to give her a tender kiss.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

He began pacing again in silence. She knew where this was going and all of this anticipation was just making her more tense. “Elizabeth ...” he began.

“You know, I should really put these in some water,” she cut him off and jumped up from her chair.

“They’ll keep for a few minutes,” he said, putting the flowers back down and taking her hands. “Elizabeth ...”

“I’m not sure they’ll survive the train ride tomorrow,” she added. As anxious as she’d been a moment ago for him to get it over, now she was equally desperate to delay the inevitable.

“Elizabeth,” he began again, somewhat exasperated. She began to interrupt again, but he put his finger to her lips to silence her. “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

For once in her life, Elizabeth Bennet was speechless. She’d been prepared for feelings, for a wish for more, for something … but hearing him profess his love – not affection or attraction or infatuation but love – somehow still floored her. Apparently he took her silence as sufficient encouragement to continue. “I’ve never felt like this for anyone else. I knew that getting involved with you was a bad idea from the start, but you were irresistible. The more time I spent with you, every time we made love I fell harder and farther. When I returned to London I tried to put you behind me, to move on but you’ve rarely strayed far from my thoughts since I left Boston. I have struggled in vain. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. We owe it to ourselves to give this a shot, to have a real relationship.”
Elizabeth finally found her voice to point out: “Will, we live halfway across the world from each other.”

“So move to London with me.” At first she thought it was a joke but the look of earnest entreaty on his face told her how serious he was.

“I have to get back to my life, I have school,” Elizabeth reminded him, beginning to lose her patience.

“So transfer to a university in London, the UK has a superior education system anyway,” he suggested casually, as if he were suggesting a restaurant for lunch rather than rearranging her entire fucking life.

“Yeah,” she said sarcastically, “I’ll get right on that.”

“You can sort it out later,” he dismissed her objections. “When it comes to it, you don’t even need to finish your degree. I have more than enough money that you don’t even need to work and let’s face it, an Art History degree is fairly useless anyway.”

“Excuse me?” She asked indignantly. “What are you expecting? For me to just be some kept woman in an ivory tower? What happens when you get bored with me and move on? I’d be stuck in a foreign country with no degree, no career, and no prospects!”

“Elizabeth, I love you, I would never let that happen!”

“Right, because you’ve been a model of constancy so far! What am I supposed to do next time you just up and leave me?”

“I’ve already explained what happened last time. I’ve gotten past that and I promise I won’t leave you again,” he reasoned. Elizabeth just raised her eyebrow at him and glared.

Will was beginning to lose his patience with Elizabeth’s reluctance. He’d thoroughly thought this all through and it was the most sensible solution to their problem. He knew that she was stubborn, but with everything he could offer her, he hadn’t expected her to be this difficult.

She was obviously worried about his intentions, so he decided to prove he was all in. “Look, we could even get married if it made you more comfortable. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about getting a visa, you’d be protected financially in the unlikely instance that we broke up, and you’d have the assurance that I am committed to you.”

“I’m glad that you are so committed to completely upending my life!” She shouted.

He finally snapped at that. “I’m offering you a life of luxury and ease, what’s waiting for you back in the US? A shared bedroom in your parents’ small house? A mountain of student loan debt? A sub-par education in what’s typically an MRS degree intended to find a wealthy husband anyway?”

“Fuck the fuck off Darcy!” She yelled and started storming around the room collecting her belongings. “I happen to love my life and my family. My father is a professor at Longbourne so I don’t pay tuition and have no student loan debts. I love my program, my advisors, and the education I’m receiving in a field I’m passionate about! And I’d be willing to bet there are several people with Art History degrees working at your art auction house who would be incredibly offended by how low you consider their education!”
He immediately recognized his mistake and tried to smooth things over. Coming up behind her as she was hastily trying to fold all of her clothing back into her bag he put his hands on her shoulders and said with a voice of forced calmness, “Elizabeth, I’m sorry for losing my temper. I’m just frustrated that you won’t even have a civil conversation about this when I’m so committed to making it work.”

“I’m not being civil?” She scoffed, “I could ask why with so evident a desire of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil?” He blushed at her account of his behavior and took a moment to collect himself. Before he could respond, she added: “it’s also significant to point out that for all of your commitment, your plan doesn’t require you to make any major life changes.”

“Elizabeth,” he sighed, “my job is important, I have my family’s legacy to protect. I can’t just walk away from my responsibilities, my company to pursue my own whims no matter how great the temptation.”

“And yet you see no problem with me dropping out of school? Abandoning all of my own career ambitions?”

“That was a poorly phrased suggestion. Don’t abandon your dreams,” he argued, “transfer to a London university, find a job, get a PhD, do whatever you want to do … just please, do it with me.” By this point he was desperate, he couldn’t just let her go. “I love you Elizabeth, these past seven months were torture until the day you reappeared into my life. I beg you to relieve my suffering, and give us a chance.”

Her eyes glittered with tears and for a brief moment he thought she was relenting, but then she shook her head sadly. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I can’t trust you. I thought we were in a relationship before. I thought we had plans. I thought … but then you just disappeared, how can I be sure you won’t just ghost on me again?”

“Marry me then,” he repeated his offer, “let me prove to you that I won’t hurt you again.”

She gave a bitter laugh, “you’re making the argument that husbands never hurt their wives? That a hasty marriage before we even have a chance to date would solve all of our problems? Trust me, I’ve seen how that can work out.”

“That doesn’t have to be us, we love each other …” he began.

“I don’t love you,” she said flatly, knocking the wind out of him. “I’ve said all along that this was casual, I’m sorry.”

“But …” he sputtered, “this last week …” He’d been so convinced that she reciprocated his feelings that he was having a hard time processing this new information.

“This last week has been fun, but we both knew that it would end,” she answered with a shrug, “I knew I couldn’t let myself feel more.”

“But what if you could? Wouldn’t you be willing to give it a try?”

“It’s not as simple as that. There’s also Jane’s broken heart to consider.” Darcy’s head shot up,
when she hadn’t mentioned Jane all week he’d taken it as evidence that she hadn’t been too affected by their departure. “Charlie told her he was going to transfer to the Boston branch permanently, that he’d fallen in love ‘with the neighborhood’ … then you have your meltdown about me and all of a sudden he’s gone too. Can you deny that you have been the principal, if not the only means of dividing them from each other?”

He shook his head and muttered, “I didn’t think she was as attached to him … I didn’t want him uprooting his life for someone who didn’t care …”

Elizabeth laughed bitterly, “and what do you think any one of my friends who had merely observed us in public would say to me moving to London?”

“That’s not the same,” he began. She raised that eyebrow at him and he deflated. She was right, of course. Nobody but the two of them would really know what they were to each other.

“Then there’s Wickham,” she interrupted his train of thought and he felt physically ill.

“What about Wickham?” He asked with trepidation.

“When you left I was hurt, confused, angry … vulnerable. Who do you think was there, trying to ‘comfort’ me?”

“You slept with Wickham?” He asked in horror. How could his Elizabeth fall for that man’s charm?

“No,” she answered quietly and he calmed fractionally, “but it was close. He was there and willing,” she shrugged and his heart broke. “I was so angry at you and I thought, what better way to get back at him than to sleep with the guy he despises. I went back to his place and things got creepy fast. He kept talking down to me like I was a child, commenting on my age. When I asked him to stop it he got … insistent.”

She stopped and let out a shuddering breath, wiping a tear away from her eye. He had a crushing sense of *deja vu*. The image of a teary-eyed Georgiana trying to explain what had happened to her big brother flashed before his eyes. He didn’t know if he could handle the answer, but he had to know … “Elizabeth, did he hurt you?” His voice broke on the question, “are you ok?”

“I left. He wouldn’t give me back my shirt so I just ran out without it. I didn’t want to see what would happen if I stuck around until he lost his patience … from the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice …”

“God, Elizabeth,” he cried as he pulled her into his arms, “I’m so sorry.”

She pulled back and looked at him, “you knew, didn’t you? You knew what sort of man he was.” He looked away, ashamed of himself. “You could have warned me but instead you just gave cryptic hints at some past drama. Then you left me vulnerable to his whims.”

“It wasn’t my story to tell,” he said. “I thought you were too smart to fall for his lies.”

“Ugh, yes, blame the victim, classy move Darcy,” she pushed his arms off of her and stormed into the bathroom to gather her toiletries, “are you going to ask what I was wearing next? You are such an asshole. Me and my family didn’t fit into your elitist view of who you should end up with so you took off without a word. Your actions have consequences and you start pointing the finger everywhere but at yourself. You were too focused on saving face to use your privilege to protect other people – including someone you claim to have feelings for – from a predator, but then it’s *my* fault because I should have somehow known better. You ran away because you needed to prove
that you were different from him, but in the end, you’re just another entitled rich man not used to hearing the word no!”

“And this,” cried Darcy, as he walked with quick steps across the room, “is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for explaining it so fully. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed! But perhaps,” added he, stopping in his walk, and turning towards her, “these offenses might have been overlooked, had not your pride been hurt by my honest confession of the scruples that had long prevented my forming any serious design and sent me back to England. These bitter accusations might have been suppressed, had I, with greater policy, concealed my struggles, and flattered you. But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections?—to congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?”

“You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.”

He fought the mixture of despair, anger, and desperation and looked down at Elizabeth. Her cheeks were red, her eyes held a flame of anger, her breathing was labored. In spite of it all, she was as beautiful as ever. His dreams for the future might be in tatters, but they still had this passion and tension between them. They still had tonight. It wasn’t enough – it had never truly been enough for him – but he’d take whatever he could get. He reached out for her and pulled her in for a brutal kiss. For a moment she gave in to the sensation, but when his hands began to roam she pulled back.

“What the fuck do you think is going to happen here?” She asked, tossing the toiletries bag into her suitcase.

He came up behind her, whispering in her ear, “this is what we do, isn’t it Elizabeth? We fight, then we end up in bed. I may have made a miscalculation, but that doesn’t have to change things for tonight. We can still be …” he tripped a bit on the word, “casual.”

She turned toward him, shaking her head sadly, “it’s not the same. I can’t have casual sex with someone who loves me. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Elizabeth, we may not have admitted it, but that’s what we’ve been doing all along,” he reasoned. “That first time, in the library? I’d been fighting my feelings for you for so long and when I finally gave in it was incredible. I rarely give in to my own wishes and desires, but I couldn’t resist you and the experience was so freeing. It nearly killed me when you pulled back and dropped the phrase ‘hate sex’ … but if that was what I could get from you, I was willing to play along. I still am.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you, it was unconsciously done. If I had known how you felt I never would have let it get this far.” His heart sank at the possibility that she never would have slept with him, he never would have fallen in love.

“Look, Elizabeth, I am a master at suppressing my feelings. There is no need to stop this on my account,” he begged, caressing her cheek and pulling her closer, desperate to cling to whatever time he had left, “please, don’t leave.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. She pulled out of his grasp, grabbed her bags, and headed for the door.
“Elizabeth,” he cried. She turned back anxiously, perhaps afraid that he would press her farther. The last thing he wanted right now was to cause her more pain, so he just said: “take care of yourself.”

“You too, Will.” The door closed silently behind her and he was alone.

Alone … he should be used to it by now. After all, his parents had died, leaving him alone with a world of responsibilities. His best friend had tried to extort money and a job out him, leaving him alone with no support, only to turn up years later and try to take his little sister from him as well. He was used to his solitude, but this time, with Elizabeth walking away from him, the weight of his cares finally crushed him. This was his fault, he had fucked up royally and he’d run out of other people to point fingers at. He would be alone for the rest of his life and he had no one to blame but himself. He crumpled on the bed and sobbed for his loss.

Chapter End Notes

So in a modern setting things aren't quite as black and white as in a Regency setting. Darcy's an ass, Lizzie is still a bit oblivious, but not as much as in canon; Darcy isn't the 'last man in the world..." but, that doesn't mean that Lizzie is going to uproot her whole life for him. I hope it's not too brutal for you all.

Now that I'm back from my travels, I hope to resume regular updates again.
Anne was engrossed in another of Charlotte’s delightful lessons on love bites, riding tantalizing waves of pleasure. Her girlfriend was alternating between teeth and tongue and fanning breath across her left breast as her fingers worked their magic down lower when suddenly the sensations stopped and she opened her eyes. Charlotte was looking rather annoyed at the door, turning back to Anne she sighed, placed one last kiss on Anne’s neck, and said: “Lizzie is at the door.”

Anne fought down a wave of panic. She knew that Lizzie already knew about her and Charlotte, but all of the bullshit rules about propriety that her mother had drilled into her from a young age were difficult to just dismiss. She scrambled to throw on some clothes as Charlotte did the same and headed to the door. Things must have gone very poorly for William if Lizzy was already here banging on the door.

“He loves me!” Lizzie shouted loud enough for even Anne to hear as she entered the room.

“Congratulations,” Charlotte said, pulling in the luggage and closing the door quickly, “why are you here interrupting us when you could be getting laid yourself then?”

“If love was the only feeling he’d expressed tonight I might have broken down and given in. But...” Lizzie turned in her pacing and Anne lost the thread of conversation for a bit. “... low connections. He basically called my family white trash ...” Charlotte rolled her eyes at Anne as Lizzie turned her back again. “... wants me to drop everything and move to London! ... drop out of school ...”

Anne had a feeling if she stayed here she’d just get snippets of the conversation again. She felt like an intruder since she’d only met Lizzie a week ago. She finished getting dressed. “I should go,” she signed to Charlotte with the rudimentary ASL vocabulary they’d learned together, “check on W.I.L.L.I.A.M.”

“Oh,” Charlotte signed back, “I love you.” Anne smiled and signed that she loved her too as she slipped out the door, leaving Lizzie mid-rant.

On the walk over to the Huntsford Inn, Anne thought about the similarities and contrasts between her relationship and her cousin’s. Perhaps brought on by speculation about Lizzie and William, Charlotte had also broached the idea of Anne moving to live with her today as well. She’d argued that Anne was an adult and should start working towards independence. They’d already started learning some basic American Sign Language since Charlotte had already learned the alphabet and some simple phrases in primary school. If she transferred to Longborne, she could study mechanical engineering, be with the woman she loved, and learn how to live a functional life while deaf rather than just hiding it.

Earlier, she’d told Charlotte that she needed time to think about it. It was a big decision, she’d never lived outside of Rosings – with the exception of sleep-overs with Charlotte. Her mother had been telling her her whole life that she’d never be able to live on her own like a ‘normal’ person and somewhere along the line she’d begun to believe her. But looking at the contrast in relationships, she realized that her feelings for Charlotte were simple. Charlotte loved her, trusted her, believed that she could follow her dreams and have a full life. Charlotte was offering her a life while her mother was content with her merely existing.

She turned 21 in February at which point she’d have full control over her inheritance from her father’s family. Fall term might be difficult to manage financially, but if her mother persisted in being difficult she was certain that her uncle or her cousin could help her until she had control of
her own fortune. She pulled out her mobile and messaged Charlotte: *I don’t need any more time to think … I’m going back with you in June.*

**OMG YES! You won’t regret it babe!** Charlotte texted back.

*Let’s get these daft idiots through their crisis, then tomorrow we can begin planning?*

**Good luck! Lizzie’s still ranting over here.**

*I’m going in, if you haven’t heard from me by the morning, send reinforcements … Fitzwilliam should do.* She messaged before she knocked softly at the room where they’d dropped Lizzie’s luggage off earlier in the week. She heard shuffling within before the door opened to reveal her typically dignified cousin with red-rimmed eyes, hair tufted at odd angles, and a hopeful look in his eyes that swiftly faded as he recognized her. “Anne,” he said flatly, “you’ve seen Elizabeth then? How is she?”

“Angry and confused,” she responded as she came in, “how are you?”

He cleared his throat and stiffened his spine, “as well as can be expected. It’s probably for the best, you know.” She saw so much of her mother’s pride and stubbornness in that response that he almost could have fooled her had it not been for the tear stains on his cheeks.

“How is she?”

“None of that now, how are you really?” She asked sternly.

His face fell. “Devastated,” he answered on a shuddering breath. “I’ve driven away the only woman I could ever love.”

“I can’t refute you there,” she said sadly, “did you really tell her to drop out of school?”

“No!” He growled, “well, I may have suggested it as an option, but only because she wouldn’t really need to get a job.”

“Do you hear yourself? If you’d given it half a moment’s thought you would have known that Elizabeth Bennet would never want that.”

“I know,” he sighed, “I just … I wanted her so badly I couldn’t think straight … and now all hope is lost.” He began pacing and ranting out his own version of the argument (again allowing Anne only fragmentary portions of the story). “I could offer her so much if she’d just move here … superior universities … she would absolutely adore Pemberley … high connections …” He stopped by the desk and ran his finger along the petals of a bouquet, remaining still long enough for Anne to understand: “an hour ago she was concerned that the flowers wouldn’t survive the train ride tomorrow.” Then he was moving again and ranting incoherently.

Anne searched the drawers of the desk until she found a stationary pad and a pen. “You know I can’t understand you when you’re moving around like that. You and Lizzie are more alike than you realize,” she grumbled, grabbing him by the shoulders and shoving him down in the chair. He was so much taller than her that their eyes were nearly level when he sat. She looked him in the eye and gestured to the writing materials, “everything that you wanted to say to Elizabeth, or said poorly, or want to explain, write it all down.”

“You want me to read all of my deepest thoughts?” He asked, that haughty aristocratic aversion to emotion peeking through again.

She rolled her eyes – Charlotte’s manners must be rubbing off on her – and clarified: “not to me, to Elizabeth. We both know you’re more eloquent in writing anyway. What harm could it do?” He
nodded and took up the pen. Anne glanced at the flowers and figured her upbringing as a proper lady might as well come in some use. Pressing flowers was one of the few activities that Mummy had approved of that she’d actually enjoyed as a child. She called down to the concierge for some supplies while her daft cousin poured his heart out on paper.

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Elizabeth was numb as they pulled up to the train station the following morning. When she’d arrived a week ago with the prospect of a fresh adventure and a reunion with her best friend she’d been wholly unprepared for the turn the week would take. Sure, she’d thought about the possibility of running into Darcy while she was in London – she’d even halfway convinced herself that she’d track him down and make him reunite Jane and Charlie if need be – but she’d been blindsided by his presence in Kent. That surprise was now surpassed by the events of last night.

Darcy loved her. That was no longer in dispute. His eyes as he plead his case were too sincere to be feigned. He’d loved her this whole time, even. And yet, what type of love could it be? According to him, he’d fallen in love with her before they’d had more than a handful of interactions. Did he really love her or an idea of her he’d constructed? Even now, after they’d spent so much time together, could he really love her if he disdained her family, her way of life, and her career path? Would she even still be herself if she’d gone along with his proposal?

That word bounced around in her lagging brain. She had hardly even processed it at the time but Darcy had proposed to her. He was so in love with her that he wanted to marry her in spite of her ‘trashy family,’ her ‘fairly useless’ field of study, and her tendency to argue with him at every chance. She had to admit that inspiring so much affection in such an otherwise reserved man was flattering.

She finally allowed herself to dwell on the hints that she’d been desperately ignoring all week: his tenderness and care for her comfort, the way he reacted to her calling out his name, the way he repeated her name like prayer or a mantra, the intense focus of his eyes when they followed her across the room. She looked up as they reached the platform and nearly dropped her bag when she found those very eyes materialized in front of her. Anne and Charlotte dropped back to give them a bit of privacy.

“Elizabeth,” he sighed out – like a prayer, her traitorous mind observed – “I know I’m the last person you want to see right now but …” he paused holding out a letter and a book, which she instinctively took, “please read this?” It was a question, not a command. The emotions in his eyes were so prominent that she had to look down to deflect the insecurity, pain, and love evident in them. The book had an ornate hard cover with a William Morris design but no title. “The flowers …” he supplied with a faint blush, “… you were afraid they wouldn’t survive so I pressed them for you. It’s just a journal from the shop at the hotel, but the cover seemed fitting … I prepped them with an iron first, but you probably want to keep them in there until you’re home, so they survive the flight.”

She smiled, “that’s sweet, thank you.”

He gave her a wistful look, began to raise his hand toward her, then seemed to lose his nerve and bowed his head. “Goodbye, Lizzie,” he said then turned to leave.

Elizabeth let out an unsteady breath as she looked down at the book. This was what she’d wanted – space, independence, no strings – so why was her heart cracking at the sight of him walking away? “Will,” she said as she jogged the few steps to catch up to him, “you’ll never be the last person I want to see, okay?” She reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek.
“Perhaps not, but I’ll never be the one either, will I?” He asked mournfully. She couldn’t give him the answer he wanted, so she just let the statement hang in the air. He nodded before turning and walking away from her.

Elizabeth discretely wiped a few stray tears from her eyes as she headed back to where Charlotte and Anne waited by the luggage. The train soon approached, they said their goodbyes, and before long Elizabeth found herself alone in her seat staring wearily at the unopened letter. She took a deep breath before opening the envelope and began reading.

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Dear Elizabeth,

Don’t worry, this is not a love letter or a renewal of any of the offers that upset you so much last night. You were very clear about your own feelings and I have every intention of respecting your decision. As you rather deftly pointed out last evening, my behavior last night and over the course of our relationship has often been suspect and for that I owe you my sincere apologies. I won’t offend your intelligence with justifications but there are three primary points on which I feel I must offer clarification.

Regarding the matter of your sister and Bingley, I cannot deny that I played a part in their separation – though not the principal as you suggested. Distracted as I was during my stay in Massachusetts, even I was able to see Bingley’s attachment to Jane. What I failed to see, despite active observation, was her equal attachment to my friend. I had often seen him in love before and expected this to turn out to be just another example in a long string of ‘angels.’ Charlie has a tendency to slip from one monogamous relationship to another with nothing but a brief period of melancholy between so I initially saw no harm in their relationship. When he began suggesting that he wanted to transfer permanently to the Boston office I began to worry. Jane was unfailingly nice to Charlie, but no more so than to any other person in the room. I believed myself to be impartial in my judgments, but it has become abundantly clear to me that my ability to read the emotions of others is severely lacking. If you are convinced that Jane’s heart was broken, I am forced to admit that I was likely wrong about the scenario.

In the wake of my panic about your age and your family Caroline Bingley approached me about her own fears for her brother and I was, at that moment, particularly susceptible to her arguments. In addition to Jane’s apparent indifference, she argued that Jane’s mother had been vocal about her conquest of a rich man and the benefit it would have to her other daughters. Your own offhand comment about your mother that evening seemed to confirm this argument. Caroline decreed that we needed to separate the two before he made any hasty decisions and I agreed. Our work in the Boston office had just wrapped up that week, and once we'd made our case to Charlie, we all returned home.

One part of this situation that I am ashamed of is that I went along with Caroline’s wish to hide Jane’s presence in London from Bingley. Sharing our own concerns – however incorrect they may have turned out – and allowing him to act on that advice is wholly different than intentionally concealing information from him. When I return to London, I will inform him of her presence so that he and Jane can make their own decisions. I know that is probably not sufficient atonement or reasoning for you to forgive me for my interference, but in all of this I truly thought that I was acting in the best interests of my friend.

I cannot acquit myself as well for my silence on Wickham’s past. Had I, even for a moment, thought that you were in any danger from that man you must know that I would have done anything in my power to protect you. True, the fact that he had leered at you openly that night at
the diner gave me pause but by your own admission he was merely a trifling acquaintance. When you asked for my side of the story I had to weigh the benefits of telling you against the potential costs to others and while in hindsight it is glaringly obvious that I chose poorly, at the time I thought I was protecting my sister.

I’m not sure what all Wickham has told you, so I’ll just tell you about our past history. His father was the estate manager for my family’s property. My father was his godfather and growing up so close, we were almost brothers. Our mothers both passed away around the same time and we became almost inseparable. When his father died my father adopted him and we did become brothers of a sort. We drifted apart in university, I could tell even then that our interests and lifestyles were incompatible. As you can possibly imagine, I was a bit of an over achiever – overly focused on my studies and avoidant of social engagements. Wickham was always more gregarious, a trait that both endeared him to my father and eased his transition into unsavory social groups.

Since George is two years older than me he’d already been working on the estate for two years by the time I graduated Cambridge and had been promoted to estate manager in full by the time I completed my MBA and took my place at Pemberley Auction Houses. My father, at that point, was going through treatment for prostate cancer and died within the year. All through the funeral George was by my side, playing the role of grieving son.

It took another month after my father’s death and managing the transition of leadership in the company before I had time to look over the books for the family estates. George had taken advantage of my father’s illness to embezzle money from the property. Still grieving for a father who had loved George and wishing to save the family from scandal, I did not press charges. I terminated his employment and, I thought, severed all ties with him.

Two years ago Wickham forced himself into my sphere again in a way that I would give anything in my possession to erase. When my father died I was granted custody of my younger sister, Georgiana. One day I came home early to surprise her with tickets to a symphony and I could hear giggling when I walked in the door. I remember thinking it was a good sound – she’d laughed so little since my father died. Then I heard his voice calling her his “good little girl.” When I entered the music room he had his hand up her skirt and was kissing her throat. She was fifteen. I did not handle it well.

As it turned out, Wickham was still friends with several members of my household staff – particularly my sister’s tutor, Mrs. Younge. Since I’d never told them why he was terminated, he gave them some sob story about how I was jealous that my father loved him more than me. Georgiana admitted that she was in love with him, that Mrs. Younge had encouraged and promoted the relationship, and that they’d all decided it was best not to tell me – because of the ‘jealousy.’

When I told Georgiana the real reason why he was terminated she was appalled but insisted that she break it off with him in person. When she told him she couldn’t see him any more, he told her that if she were pregnant I couldn’t prevent them from marrying. She had asked me not to be there, but luckily Fitzwilliam was waiting in the next room to pull him off of her.

Georgiana didn’t want to go through the trauma of a trial – she was devastated to see the man she’d thought loved her turn on her so quickly and couldn’t imagine testifying – so again I found myself not pressing charges against that miscreant. Given the sensitive nature of this disclosure, I’m sure you will respect my wish for privacy and keep this story between us.

I have already let my sister down by leaving her open to the charms of that man, and since that incident all I could do for her was try to comfort her and shield her from the shame of discovery. I can assure you that I will never forgive myself for leaving either of you vulnerable to that predator.
I will conclude with an apology. I know that by insisting you move to London and uproot your life I was being indefensibly selfish. I think I was placing my own career ahead of your own because it is established whereas your career has yet to begin. That was supremely unfair of me. The weight of duty, of protecting my family’s legacy has been forced on me since my father’s death and perhaps I’ve yet to unlearn the hauteur and witticisms inherited by the Lady Catherines in my life. I do, in fact, have a high regard for your field and career path. All that I can say in my defense is that I was too desperate, too emotional last night to be rational. I felt you slipping away and tried to grasp on harder rather than giving you space or making compromises and for that I am sorry. With no hopes of anything further than being useful in atonement, I do have quite a number of contacts in the art world – if you are ever in need of an introduction you need only ask. I hope you attain all of your goals and wish you all the best in life.

~William Darcy

Elizabeth stared at the letter far after she’d finished reading it, occasionally swiping away a tear. She managed to retain her anger through his justifications of his role in breaking Jane’s heart. The tale of Wickham had begun so similar to the story Wickham himself had told that she nearly expected Darcy to deny his father’s wishes and refuse him the job after all. The embezzlement had thrown her for a loop. She’d thought she was prepared for the other half of the Wickham’s story. But that it was his own sister … and only fifteen. She thought of Lydia, poor, pretty, reckless Lydia and how she would react. She had to admit that she would probably do what she could to protect her sister in that situation as well.

In retrospect, it had been so easy to conclude that if Darcy had only been more open with her about Wickham’s character, she never would have been in that position, yet his reasons for silence had their merit as well. Particularly if he thought that she’d ever meet Georgiana herself and didn’t want to taint her impression. That poor girl.

She was torn on the apology at the end. Admitting his selfishness didn’t abolish it. She was glad that he could see her perspective on the matter, but that didn’t take away any of the very real obstacles that remained in their paths. Perhaps she had been too harsh on him, perhaps she did feel more than casual indifference, but that didn’t actually form a future for them.

Her eyes rested on the conclusion, the tilde before his name looked forced, hesitant. She could almost imagine him beginning the letter L, the word ‘Love,’ then shifting gears. After the warning at the beginning that it wasn’t a love letter, he hadn’t said anything directly about his feelings for her and yet his love was laced through the whole. It seemed almost natural for him to sign off such a letter with ‘Love, Will’ but he had stopped and forced himself into the more indifferent ‘~William Darcy.’ He was respecting her wishes, giving her space. Finally … now that she wasn’t sure she still wanted it.
Elizabeth looked up at the impressive facade and fought down the dread that had settled in her stomach yesterday when she’d casually re-read Dr. Gardiner’s email. With the exception of the post-postmodern Chimney Piece, Elizabeth had put off the majority of her makeup assignments while she was in Kent. Her museum studies professor had suggested that she write a brief operational report about a London gallery. Dr. Gardiner had made the assignment more interesting – she’d emailed her while she was in transit to the UK to let her know that she had a friend who was a curator at a collection in London and could set up an appointment for her to have a private tour of the galleries. Elizabeth vaguely remembered sending a jet-lagged reply from Jane’s dorm enthusiastically agreeing to the opportunity. A confirmation to meet a Mrs. Reynolds to tour the Pemberley Collection at 10am on Tuesday March 25 had come in the afternoon she’d renewed her acquaintance with Darcy.

She remembered at the time idly trying to search her brain for where she’d heard that name before but then she’d become increasingly distracted for the remainder of the week and hadn’t given it much more thought. It wasn’t until Monday morning after Jane had left for school and she figured that she ought to do her preliminary research that she remembered she’d first heard it from George Wickham … Pemberley, the Darcy estate, the ‘PR project’ that broke up the private collection … A quick web search had confirmed that it was in fact owned by the Darcy family. She’d been tempted to call the meeting off – she could write her report on any gallery after all – but she might never get an opportunity like this again.

So here she found herself on Tuesday morning, staring up the steps to a gorgeous Regency-era townhouse. “Magnificent building, isn’t it?” Elizabeth startled at the voice and turned to see a kind, professional, older woman looking up at the same building. “If you look at the surrounding townhouses, you’ll notice the bricked up windows to avoid the excessive property taxes. The Darcy family never caved to that pressure though, so all of the windows are intact and many of them still have the original glazing. Mr. Darcy insisted on preserving as much as possible and it is his house after all – though that does cost us a fortune to keep the environmental controls within parameters for the galleries.”

Elizabeth blinked at the woman, trying to hide any outward sign of distress at the confirmation that this was Darcy’s house. “You must be Mrs. Reynolds?” She ventured, holding out her hand.

“Oh, silly me! Yes, I’m Mrs. Reynolds, and I do hope you’re Elizabeth Bennet and I’m not just ranting to random people on the street … again,” the older woman responded, shaking her hand.

“Yes, thank you for meeting me while I’m in town, this is a wonderful opportunity.”

“Oh, silly me! Yes, I’m Mrs. Reynolds, and I do hope you’re Elizabeth Bennet and I’m not just ranting to random people on the street … again,” the older woman responded, shaking her hand.

“Yes, thank you for meeting me while I’m in town, this is a wonderful opportunity.”

“Of course dear, Maddie Gardiner speaks very highly of you,” Mrs. Reynolds said as she unlocked the door and deactivated the alarm system. “And Mr. Darcy’s whole goal was to open up the family’s private collections to the public, I can’t see any better extension of that than to aid a young museum professional in her studies.”

Elizabeth internally cringed at this representation of Darcy’s views in contrast to the man who’d told her her degree was useless – though he had taken that back in his letter. How would Darcy feel if he knew that she was here just days after she’d rejected him? It is his house Mrs. Reynolds’ words echoed through her head again and Elizabeth just had to check. “Does Mr. Darcy play an
active role in the operations?” She asked hesitantly, “I mean, do you expect him here?”

“Goodness, no! The Pemberley Collection was his idea, his passion project, his gift back to the community … but he’s far too busy to manage it himself, that’s my job.” Elizabeth barely had time for a relieved sigh before Mrs. Reynolds continued, “of course, he still lives here – him and Miss Darcy didn’t need all of this room to themselves, so they converted most of the larger rooms to gallery space and blocked off several rooms in the back of the house for their personal use – so we see them walking through sometimes but I believe he’s out of town at the moment and Miss Darcy is off at school.”

He’s out of town, Elizabeth repeated in her head, he’s still in Kent for another week. She tried to calm herself down and try not to think about how wildly inappropriate it was for her to be in his house and refocus on Mrs. Reynolds’ information.

“We’ve got a rather small staff here. I’m the main curator, we’ve got an administrator, a couple of docents to give tours on the weekends and by request, and two security guards – though they’re really more gallery attendants than anything else.”

They spent the next hour and a half going over the history of the collections and the principal artworks with Mrs. Reynolds’ chatter frequently peppered with praise for the Darcy family. Apparently she’d been a long-time friend of the family, and had worked as an appraiser for Pemberley Auction Houses for years before shifting to the curator of the collection. Elizabeth was convinced that Darcy wouldn’t be able to pay someone to speak so highly of him and with such genuine concern.

Elizabeth nearly choked when the older woman followed up a detailed description of Darcy’s charitable contributions to the community with a sigh and: “what that boy really needs is a good woman, he’s always seemed so lonely to me but especially these last months. Then again, I do not know who is good enough for him.”

Elizabeth felt the color flush to her cheeks and buried her face in the collection catalog that they’d been discussing. “With a friend like you as his wing-woman, who could resist him?” Elizabeth said, uncomfortably realizing the truth of her statement as she felt her attachment to Will growing the longer she spent in his house.

“Well, it’s all true!” Mrs. Reynolds continued, “he’s never once raised his voice to me and I have known him ever since he was four years old. I have always observed, that they who are good-natured when children, are good-natured when they grow up; and he was always the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted boy in the world.”

Elizabeth almost stared at her. Can this be Mr. Darcy? She thought.

“Oh my!” Mrs. Reynolds said, glancing at the clock, “I quite forgot that I have a meeting with the conservator, she should be here any minute. Would you mind exploring the galleries on your own for a bit, then we can get lunch?”

“That sounds great!” Elizabeth said cheerily, happy to steer the conversation away from Will’s merits and his bachelor status. As she wandered through the galleries taking notes on the wall text, presentation of artwork, and overall feel of the space, she had the recurring thought that had she answered differently she could live here. In this house, with that paragon of a man … in this gallery even. She’d been obsessed with From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler as a kid and she had to admit that the prospect of living in a gallery, having easy access to all of this splendor and history and material culture was a draw. Why didn’t Will lead with that in his offer?
She’d finished her circuit of the drawing rooms, music room, dining room, and breakfast parlor – each adorned with art, furniture, and objects from a different era – and turned her steps toward the ballroom that had been set up as the main gallery. She’d completed two walls – which contained landscapes and still-life paintings respectively – and was just beginning along the long row of portraits trying to trace Will’s resemblance in the faces of his ancestors when she noticed the man himself seated on a bench halfway down the room.

She momentarily considered turning and running away, but figured she owed him more than that. He looked tired and bleak, his clothing was disheveled, and he apparently hadn’t slept or shaved recently. Elizabeth hated herself a little for what she’d done to him – though he was certainly not blameless himself. He was staring at a portrait and she couldn’t repress a rueful laugh at the name, “Elizabeth Darcy,” she read aloud.

He looked up at her with eyes full of disbelief and grief. “I’ve walked past this painting countless times without notice, but it’s been a favorite refuge since I re-discovered it in December,” he said sheepishly.

She winced. She’d thought that his proposal was spontaneous, a desperate grab when things went downhill, but this suggested he’d been thinking about marrying her for months. She looked at the portrait. There wasn’t much for visual resemblance to herself: Elizabeth Darcy had been a classic English Rose with porcelain skin, rosy cheeks, fair hair, and a demure smile. She was dressed in a white empire waist gown with lace tucked into her bodice to preserve her modesty.

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Was Elizabeth Bennet really here? Darcy still wasn’t convinced that he wasn’t dreaming. The last time he’d slept soundly was when Elizabeth was in his arms on Friday evening. Since Saturday he’d been coasting through his own torment. He wanted to believe that she was here to see him, that she’d had a change of heart, that the past few days had all been some nightmare that would go away. He couldn’t think of any reason she would be here in his townhouse other than to see him but that reason sounded implausible given how they’d left things.

He looked beside him to the other side of the bench where she’d sat down – careful to leave as much space between them as possible. She was studying the painting of his ancestor as intently as he had been moments ago. He’d found the notion that there had once been an Elizabeth Darcy in the world oddly comforting. She wasn’t his Lizzie, but it made him happy to know that her portrait was here nonetheless. And … “Something about her eyes reminds me of you, they’re lively, almost laughing,” he said quietly.

“Ah,” she answered, “because I can find a way to mock anyone if I try, right?”

“Elizabeth,” he sighed wearily, “you know that’s not what I meant. Your eyes are always so bright and expressive that they light up a room.”

“Sorry, force of habit … I suppose I should stop picking fights with you.”

“What are you doing here Elizabeth?” He winced at how accusatory that sounded, but he had to know.

“Mrs. Reynolds is old friends with my advisor, so Dr. Gardiner set up a meeting for me to go over the operations of the Pemberley connection for one of my makeup assignments. It was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up. I had no idea that you lived here until this morning and even then Mrs. Reynolds assured me that you were out of town.” Otherwise I wouldn’t have come, Darcy mentally completed for her. The thought stung.
“As you know, I had intended to be in Kent through this week, but I’d already made arrangements to leave early when … well. As it was, I found I didn’t have the energy to deal with Lady Catherine at the moment, so I came home early.” Elizabeth just nodded. “How’s Jane?”

“She’s … well. Happy that I’m here but still subdued though,” she said pointedly.

“Charlie’s out of town for a couple of days, so I haven’t had a chance to talk to him yet.” She nodded again and Darcy lamented the silence between them. “Where are you staying?”

“with Jane in the dorm … city center near Kings College.”

“Of course,” he bit his tongue to prevent him from offering her a room here. They had plenty of space and it would certainly be more comfortable than sharing a dormitory bed with her sister but he didn’t have that right anymore.

“What you’ve done here with the Pemberley Collection is wonderful Will,” he smiled at both her praise and her use of his name, “the period rooms are charming, the space is delightful …” She cut herself off and blushed. He read her hesitance, she didn’t want to give him false hope.

“As an expert in the field, what is your favorite part?” He asked somewhat more formally, hoping to set her at ease.

“I love the sense of place – that all of this art, all of these artifacts are tied to the family, to the building, to the eras they represent and carried through to today’s audience. It has the character of a small regional collection, but done far more elegantly …” she again cut herself off just when she was regaining her typical level of animation and dropped her eyes. “Not that you need some undergrad from the US to tell you all of that.”

He placed a finger under her chin to tilt her head up at him, “your opinion matters, Elizabeth,” he said in a tone that was both gentle and firm. He couldn’t bear this hesitant, shy version of his Lizzie. He had broken their relationship and now she didn’t know how to act.

“Ms. Bennet?” Mrs. Reynolds’ voice broke into their little bubble and Elizabeth shot up, “there you are, I’ve just got out of my meeting, would you like to pop out for lunch then we can go over some of the budget … Oh, Mr. Darcy! I wasn’t expecting you today.” Her startled eyes looked him up and down and he could tell the old family friend wasn’t impressed by his current appearance.

“I returned early from Kent and was delighted to renew my acquaintance with Elizabeth.”

“You two know each other?” She swiveled her head between the two and Darcy almost felt like a teenager caught with a girl. His surrogate grandmother turned to Elizabeth with a sly smile, “why did you let me go on like that about him so long without telling me you knew him?”

“Mrs. Reynolds, may I have a word with you?” He asked, pulling her few steps away. He had a sudden anxiety that she would somehow ruin any glimmer of hope for a reconciliation if she kept talking to Elizabeth like that. “I want you to give Elizabeth Bennet full access to anything she wants while she is here, records, budget, collections in storage. Anything that could help her.” Anything that might make her want to stay.

The older woman raised her eyebrows and looked between himself and Elizabeth. She was an intelligent woman and he had no doubt that she’d seen right through his motives but she was too proper to call him on it. “Of course,” she replied succinctly. She then gave him another once over, frowning at his rumpled clothing and asked solicitously: “are you quite alright William?”

He sighed, “I’m merely tired. It’s nothing some rest and good company won’t fix.” He looked
wistfully at Elizabeth, “would I be intruding if I joined you and Elizabeth for lunch?”

She looked pointedly again at his current appearance, “I don’t think that’s the wisest choice. You ought to get some sleep and I’ll take care of Ms. Bennet today.” He scowled at that trick Mrs. Reynolds had of ordering him around while still maintaining deference. He knew she was right, but his heart sank at the prospect that Elizabeth would finish her project and disappear again if he let her out of his sight.

Mrs. Reynolds apparently took pity on him, suggesting: “it will take rather a long time to go through the records, budget, and art storage … perhaps you might invite her to return tomorrow and visit the library and archives as they are typically off limits for guests?”

He smiled at her, “that sounds like a fantastic plan.” They returned to Elizabeth, who had continued her perusal of the portraits. “Elizabeth, I must be going. However …” he cleared his throat, embarrassed at his own hesitation, “If you are free to return tomorrow, I would very much like to show you the library.”

Elizabeth laughed and blushed and his unintentional reference to their first time together crashed onto him. “No! … that is …” he took a breath and continued in a rush: “it is a rather large collection and I believe it could be useful for your research. We have a large selection of books relevant to the collections here …”

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She had to admit that rambling Darcy was rather adorable with the blush reaching his ears and awkwardly fumbling with the cuff button on his rumpled suit jacket. “I would love to see the library, Mr. Darcy,” she interrupted him with an embarrassed smile.

He looked at her with a stunned expression that gradually melted to excitement. “Excellent, good,” he stammered as he began walking away. “Oh!” His blush was back as he turned back to her, “I might be pressing my luck here, but will you allow me to introduce my sister to you while you’re here?” The poor man looked like he was holding his breath, but meeting the family of the man she’d just turned down … it seemed a bit too much. “She’d just … really like to meet you,” he added in a pleading tone.

Elizabeth thought of the letter, of what the poor girl had gone through and how she was still probably having trouble dealing with it. She had no parents and clearly social interaction wasn’t her brother’s strong suit. If Elizabeth could claim expertise on anything, it was on knowing how to be a big sister. “Sure, I’d like to meet her.”

He visibly released that breath and nodded, “she doesn’t have piano practice on Wednesdays, so she should be available tomorrow later afternoon, after school.”

“I’ll see you then,” she said. He gave her a last lingering look before walking off toward the restricted side of the house.

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Georgiana Darcy returned home on Wednesday afternoon unsure of the mood she’d find her brother in. He’d spent months brooding after his trip abroad last summer and there was little she could do to cheer him. His annual trips to Rosings were typically enough to depress him on their own, so she’d been worried how he’d handle it this year but then he’d called her on Saturday acting more like Charles Bingley than himself. He’d told her he was returning the following day, that he wouldn’t be alone, and to make sure that a spare bedroom was ready. She’d been certain
he’d met someone in Kent, but for her brother to fall that quick and that hard was wildly uncharacteristic for him. She’d spent Sunday in eager anticipation of his return with his mystery guest only for him to return alone more sullen and broken than she’d ever seen him. He’d spent the next couple of days in shambles, refusing any explanations and eventually avoiding her altogether.

Then yesterday it all changed again. He’d nearly bounded up to her in excitement when she got home, asking excitedly if she was free this afternoon. His face fell when she told him she’d made plans with friends and rose again when she said she could reschedule. At that point she’d had enough and told him she wouldn’t cancel her plans unless he told her what was going on. At that point the whole story finally came out – with some obvious omissions of what Georgiana assumed was a rather active sex life.

William was in love. He was an idiot, but still in love. This was obviously one instance when a brother should talk to his sister about romance. If he’d given her even an abridged version of their history when they’d talked on Saturday she could have prevented much of that evening’s trainwreck. Given her own track record, she knew she wasn’t the most reliable relationship guru, but even she knew that insulting a girl and asking her to drop everything was a bad play.

His non-communication on the matter also upset her more personally. After everything that had happened with George, he had been there for her in so many ways. He had been her rock. After everything had passed and the wounds had mostly healed over, she had comforted herself with the knowledge that it had brought her closer to her brother if nothing else – that they had a solid relationship and they knew they could always count on each other. Now it was painfully clear that while she could count on him, he didn’t have the same confidence in her.

Looking back, she didn’t know why she’d thought he would, she was the one whose poor decisions had brought on the disaster in the first place.

She slipped into the back of the townhouse – what would have been the ‘servant’s entrance’ to her ancestors – and ran up to change before the dreaded meeting. She was certain that Elizabeth was amazing – nobody short of amazing would be able to catch Will’s interest – but Georgiana was never good with introductions. She knew that things were rocky at the moment, but Will wanted to marry this girl. She couldn’t just casually walk in and introduce herself to her (hopefully) future sister-in-law. What if she made a bad impression? What if she couldn’t find anything interesting to say? What if Elizabeth really was just after Will for his money but he was too in love to see it? What if she said the wrong thing and made Elizabeth even angrier at Will? Would he ever forgive her for ruining his life?

_Breathe!_ She commanded herself in the mirror, trying to break out of the cycle of anxiety. She tried the breathing exercises that her therapist had suggested. Once she’d managed to calm her breathing – if not her nerves – she reluctantly made her way downstairs.

Pushing her way silently through one of the side doors of the library, she had a moment to take in the scene. There was a pretty girl sitting at the research table with a stack of books in front of her reading quietly. She was nothing like Georgiana had expected. She pretty, but not a model; fit but curvy; she had a genuine smile on her face rather than a smirk or a simper. She’d known she would see Will today and yet she was dressed casually and she sat with her feet tucked up under her and her head leaning on on one arm. It was clear that she was focused on her own comfort rather than putting on a show for her audience.

That audience consisted of Will, staring at her from a chair near the fireplace with a book in his hands to give the appearance that he was reading. Georgiana had never seen him look at anyone like that, like all of his hopes and fears were condensed into one person and if he looked away the balance would tip against him. Elizabeth checked her watch. “It strikes me that we’re reaching the
half hour mark again Will, remember what happened last time,” she said with an impish smile without looking up from the book in front of her.

“I assure you I will never forget the last time, Elizabeth,” Will smirked. Georgiana was surprised that her brother could banter like this, she’d only ever seen him do that with Fitzwilliam and then only after severe prodding. “Though if I recall, your ‘punishment’ for spending half an hour quietly in a library was rather a reward than a deterrent.”

“Don’t blame your bad behavior on me … I hope you’re not expecting a repeat,” she finally looked up from her book and raised her eyebrow at him.

“Expecting? Never. Merely hoping …”

Something about the way he was looking at Elizabeth suggested to Georgiana that she’d better make her presence known or give them some privacy. She resisted her urge to flee and cleared her throat.

Will jumped at the noise, “Georgiana!” He said with a blush, shifting the book onto his lap. Georgiana resolved to never ask what that conversation was about. “Elizabeth, this is my baby sister Georgiana,” she bristled at the adjective ‘baby,’ but gave Elizabeth a shy smile nonetheless. Georgiana, this is my … This is Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Georgiana,” Elizabeth said with a warm smile, “it’s so nice to meet you! I’ve heard so much about you.”

Georgiana momentarily looked in panic at her brother … what all had he told her? Will gave her an encouraging look and she turned back to Elizabeth and replied “And I about you.” She noticed that Elizabeth gave Will a similarly panicked look and it calmed her somewhat that they were all uncomfortable together.

“I understand that you are fond of music, and play very well,” Elizabeth said disarmingly.

“Oh, no,” she demurred. Complements flustered Georgiana even more than she already was since she never really knew how to respond to them, “I wouldn’t say I play very well. I mean, but I am very fond of music.” Could you sound any more incompetent, Georgiana? You study music! The silence dragged on for a moment before she remembered something Will said last night. “I would love to hear you play and sing. My brother told me he was enchanted by your performance.”

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Elizabeth’s eyes snapped to Will’s at that. “When did you hear me play and sing?”

“That rainy morning at Netherfield, after Caroline had ‘entertained’ us for about an hour she invited you to play.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Caroline had obviously been trying to impress Darcy and only asked Elizabeth to play to embarrass her. Elizabeth had indulged her with a silly performance. “You know that was all a joke, right?”

“What? I really enjoyed it,” he looked so sincere even.

Elizabeth turned to Georgiana, sure that she would get the humor. “As you know, one of the first songs they teach you on piano is Heart and Soul, right?” The girl nodded. “Well, my talent on the piano never progressed much farther than that and all of Caroline’s sheet music was far more advanced than I could play anyway. It was clear she wanted to prove her superiority by asking me
to play and I’d be damned if I just walked away, so I played the tune to *Heart and Soul* and sang Train’s *All Night Long,* as a joke.” Georgiana laughed but Will looked perplexed.

“If that’s what you sound like just messing around, I would love to hear you play seriously,” Will replied with a smile. *That* smile, the one that made her heart beat do funny things.

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Will couldn’t remember a single song that Caroline had played that morning, but Elizabeth’s song stuck out in his memory. The lyrics had been so provocative … making him want to go all night long with her. At the time, he thought she’d been singing to him, flirting, teasing him about his attraction, daring him to do something about it. It wasn’t a coincidence that he had kissed her that afternoon and things had spiraled out of control from there.

He watched Elizabeth’s blush deepen as she apparently also recalled the lyrics and the events of the day. In hindsight, he realized, she hadn’t known about his attraction to her and she herself had hated him at the time. That fact still stung.

“Well, I *seriously* don’t play piano seriously,” she responded, regaining her playful attitude. Turning to Georgiana she elaborated, “my sister Mary is the pianist of the family – along with flute, oboe, and a couple other woodwinds – she’s studying musicology. I did do four years of choir in high school though, so I sing well enough.”

“You should do a duet,” he suggested before he’d really had time to think the suggestion through. Elizabeth and Georgiana looked at him with matching looks of horror. Clearly neither of them wanted to perform. “I mean, you don’t have to …” he tried to backpedal. “It’s just that Georgiana plays so well, but she has trouble singing in front of an audience. And Elizabeth, you have such a lovely voice but if you don’t play too well …” *Christ, man! Stop talking, you’re only making it worse!* He mentally berated himself.

Elizabeth’s phone pinged, drawing all of them out of the moment. “Perhaps another time,” Elizabeth said with a look of relief, “Jane just got out of class and we’ve got plans for the evening.” Darcy’s stomach dropped again at the idea that this was it, that she’d walk away again following yet another of his missteps and he’d never see her again.

“It was lovely meeting you, Elizabeth,” Georgiana said shyly. “Would you …” she looked at him for support and he nodded, “would you and your sister like to join us for dinner tomorrow?” Darcy smiled, his sister hated hosting so he knew she was doing this for him and he loved her for it. He didn’t know if he had the right to ask her at this point, but who could turn down dear, sweet, Georgiana?

Elizabeth looked at him hesitantly. “Please do,” he begged, “we’d love to have you and Jane. If not tomorrow, perhaps another night before you leave?” He added his own assurances.

Elizabeth smiled – *God how he loved that smile!* – and nodded, “I’d love to. As far as I know, we don’t have anything else planned.”

“Excellent!” He tried to maintain his composure, not to sound too excited, but tomorrow night he would see her again!

“I’m so glad,” Georgiana said – and she nearly looked like she meant it even – “Shall we say 7?”

“I’ll see you then!” Elizabeth said as she gathered her purse and made her exit. Once she was out of sight, he turned around and picked up his sister, spinning her around a bit.
“Will!” she squealed, “I’m not a little girl anymore! Put me down!”

“That was brilliant Georgie! Thank you!”

“Well, you looked like someone snatched away your puppy, something had to be done.”

Chapter End Notes

Elizabeth is only in the UK for 2 weeks, so that drastically shortens Darcy's wallow time before the Pemberley arc begins! I didn't see how I could organically have her run into Darcy otherwise.

For those who are unfamiliar: From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler is a children’s book that features two children who run away from home and live at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It is fabulous and worth a read (or a re-read if you haven't read it since you were a kid).

Train's All Night Long is a silly, sappy love song set to the tune of Heart and Soul. It's devious because anyone who has ever taken piano lessons (at least in the US) knows the tune, so it catches in your head faster than most pop songs.
Charlie Bingley adjusted his tie and shrugged into his jacket as he looked into the mirror. He was wary of the night to come. Darcy had called and invited him to a dinner party with ‘a couple of their friends.’ He’d had to drag the Darcy siblings kicking and screaming to most of the social events they’d attended together and he was reasonably sure that Darcy didn’t have any friends outside of himself, family, and colleagues so he wasn’t sure what to expect here. When he further considered that Darcy wasn’t even supposed to be in London this week and that he’d asked him to come early because he had something serious to discuss and Charlie was on his guard.

“Charles!”

He’d almost made it through the flat and to the door when his sister caught him. He wasn’t even sure why Caroline still lived with him. She was a well-educated adult who could very easily support herself off of her own inheritance even without a job, but she’d moved in with Charlie ‘temporarily’ after a breakup three years ago and never left. He had a suspicion that she was just waiting until she wore Darcy down and could move in with him … which is why he hadn’t told her of his plans for the evening. The problem with being the baby of the family is that your older siblings know all of your tells. He could never successfully lie to his sisters.

“You look handsome this evening, do you have a date?”

“No,” he clipped. He still missed Jane. He missed her every day. He hadn’t willingly gone on a date since they’d returned to London. He’d been devastated when Will and Caroline had talked ‘reason’ into him and convinced him to come home. They’d said she was indifferent to him, that she was using him, that he was getting himself into trouble … again. He’d never fully believed them, but he’d faltered just long enough for them to get him on a plane and now it was far too late to repair the damage. Jane deserved better than someone who would just run away like that.

“Where are you off to tonight then?” She continued her interrogation. She’d been far more concerned with his social calendar for the past several months for some reason.

He sighed, she’d know if he tried to lie. “Darcy and Georgiana invited me to dinner.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ve barely got any time to dress!” She bustled into the room that he refused to stop calling the ‘spare bedroom’.

“It wasn’t a general invitation, Caroline. You can’t just show up at other people’s parties uninvited.”

“Please, Charles!” Caroline said as she came out of the room overdressed for a simple dinner party. “We both know that Darcy would have invited me too, but he probably assumed I wouldn’t be available at the last minute.” Charlie knew no such thing but figured there was no stopping her at this point. She tossed an assortment of supplies in her bag and announced that she’d do her hair and touch up her makeup in the car.

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Will jumped when he heard the doorbell, surprised that the time for his confession to Charlie had crept up on him so fast. “Charlie, I’m so glad you could … Caroline,” his stomach dropped as she
slithered her way to his side and gave him a hug.

“William! When Charles told me you were having a dinner party I simply had to come! I was certain that the only reason that dear Georgiana didn’t include me in the invitation was because she assumed I would have plans but really, you should both know that you take precedence over any other social engagements I may have!”

He was unsure he’d succeeded in suppressing the scowl that her response elicited. He wanted Elizabeth and Jane to have a nice evening. He needed Elizabeth to feel welcome in his home. He needed Elizabeth and Georgiana to have some time to get to know each other. Caroline’s presence would undoubtedly impede all of those goals. “Caroline, you weren’t included on the invitation because we didn’t believe you enjoyed the company of our other guests,” he said, refusing to give her more information for the present. “You may wait in the lounge, unfortunately I asked Charlie to come early because I have an urgent matter I must discuss with him before dinner – alone – and Georgiana is still getting things ready.” With that he left his uninvited guest alone in the lounge as he and Charlie continued on to the library.

“Was it necessary to bring her with?” He growled at Charlie as he poured them both a scotch.

“You know Caroline, there’s no shaking her off once she’s caught your scent,” Charlie replied with a repentant shrug.

“You don’t realize how important this evening is for me – for both of us!” Will said as he drowned his drink, nervous to make the disclosure to his friend.

“Is it a business dinner?” Charlie asked, unaware of any other possible implications. “You might have said, I could have probably convinced her that she would be bored with all of the shop talk.”

“No … Charles, I have something I must tell you,” he began pacing. “The other guests tonight … it’s Elizabeth and Jane …” Charlie’s eyes widened and he sat down but didn’t say anything. “… Bennet,” Will helpfully added, just in case he needed the clarification.

“How … why are they in London?” Charlie asked.

Will took a deep breath. “Elizabeth is only here on holiday but Jane … Jane has been studying in London for the semester.”

“What!” Charlie jumped up in a burst of nervous energy. “I’m surprised that she didn’t let me … or at least let Caroline know she was here. I know that I acted unforgivably but she remained friends with Caroline.”

“Caroline knew … they’ve been out for coffee a couple of times.”

“What!” Charlie shouted again, and began pacing himself. “How could she keep that from me … if Jane didn’t want to see me I would understand, but Caroline could have at least told me she was here … warned me.”

“I believe … according to Elizabeth, one of Jane’s primary goals in studying here was to see you. Caroline … we, I suppose … decided not to tell you she was here.”

“You’re telling me now that she’s been in London for months and you concealed it from me?” Charles stopped in front of him, his stance more threatening than any Will had seen from him before. “How was that your decision to make?”

“It wasn’t,” Will admitted, “It was an arrogant presumption, based on a failure to recognize your
true feelings and Miss Bennet’s. I should never have interfered, I’m sorry.”

“Did you just admit that you were wrong?” Bingly asked incredulously.

“Utterly and completely,” Will sank into a chair remembering how much that mistake had cost them all.

“So … if by some miracle Jane forgives me … do I have your support?”

“Do you need my support?” he asked, uncomfortably aware that the root of the problem between Charlie and Jane was that Charlie hadn’t stood up and made his own decisions.

“No,” he responded, breaking out into a grin, “but I’d appreciate it all the same.”

“Good man, we’ve all got our own battles to fight this evening but go for it if you get the chance.”

“What’s changed?” he asked after a moment of reflection. “How did you lure them here for dinner?”

“That’s a rather long story … suffice it to say that I ran into Elizabeth while she was visiting Kent and she forced me to re-evaluate my priorities … and I’m trying desperately to convince her to re-evaluate hers.” He was interrupted by the doorbell before he could get further. “There are our ladies now, we don’t want to leave them waiting with Caroline for too long now, do we?”

Charlie stared at him in shock, “you mean you and Elizabeth? … I thought Caroline was just teasing you.”

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Caroline Bingley was bored. William Darcy had barely even looked at her before he hauled her brother off into the library leaving her all alone. She’d positioned herself in the seat that gave her the best view of the door and gave the door the best view of herself determined to show herself to advantage when William returned. It had been several minutes, however, and the alluring pose she’d struck was starting to strain her back somewhat. Georgiana had yet to make her appearance, and the mysterious other guests weren’t here yet. She was tempted to take out her mobile and snap a selfie – why let all of that posturing go unseen? – but what if Darcy walked back into the room just at that moment?

After several more minutes where she heard nothing but a couple of shouts from her brother in the distance she realized Darcy was unlikely to return soon and pulled out her mobile. She framed herself perfectly in front of the antique fireplace and gave a sultry glare as she snapped the photo from a couple of angles. She’d just managed to craft the perfect tweet to accompany it – Dinner with the Darcys, what a treat! #PemberleyCollection #PrivateTour #LikeFamily #MaybeSomeday #GiveMeTime – when Georgiana walked into the room. “Caroline …” she laughed nervously, “we didn’t expect you this evening.”

Caroline was somewhat hurt that both Darcy siblings had felt the need to point out that she wasn’t invited, but played it off as well as possible. “Georgiana, dearest! It’s so lovely to see you!” She rose to kiss the girl’s cheeks, “I know you probably thought I wouldn’t be available at such short notice, but we’re such close friends that I knew you wouldn’t mind if I tagged along.”

Georgiana’s smile looked forced and Caroline had to prevent herself from rolling her eyes. The girl really was insipid, she was so shy that it was hard to hold a conversation with her. She’d put in years of groundwork with the child and she still looked like she wanted to flee the room whenever Caroline entered it.
“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll just pop out to let the chef know we’ll have another person at dinner.”

And there she goes, running out of the room, Caroline thought bitterly. The things she did in the pursuit of a good marriage. Friendship with Georgiana was a convenient expedient at the moment, but she couldn’t keep up pretenses forever if the girl never even made an effort to be civil back. Luckily she was nearly done with school, so by the time that Caroline married Darcy she would be out of the house and she wouldn’t have to deal with her much.

The doorbell rang and Caroline posed again. She wasn’t sure who these mystery guests could be, but she was determined to prove she was their superior. She heard Georgiana answer the door and have a hushed conversation with the newcomers. What was taking them so long? Why couldn’t they have this conversation in here? Caroline felt truly snubbed.

When she finally heard footsteps approaching she flipped her hair ‘carelessly’ over her shoulder so that it sat just right, smoothed out her dress, and waited to impress or intimidate the others as the situation required. Georgiana appeared at the door, and Caroline had to suppress a scream as she saw Jane and Elizabeth Bennet follow her into the room.

“Jane, Eliza! This is certainly … a surprise!” She said with a syrupy voice even as she began crafting a hasty excuse as to why she and Charlie would have to leave and a plan for getting him out of the house before he saw Jane – she was certain that Darcy would help her out. What were they doing here? Surely Darcy wouldn’t undo all of their good work by intentionally inviting Jane and Charles at the same time, would he? She was moments away from excusing herself to go off and find her brother and remove him from danger when he bounded into the room.

“Jane!” he gushed, “I can’t tell you how delighted I was when Darcy told me you were here!” Caroline sat back down sulkily, realizing that her brother was just as much of a lost cause as he was over the summer.

She turned an accusatory glare on Darcy only to realize that he was anxiously watching Elizabeth watch Jane and Charles. Her stomach dropped as she realized this was all about Elizabeth. Darcy still hadn’t gotten over his silly crush and he was using Charlie to appease her. She’d thought he had more sense than that. No matter, Caroline knew that she hadn’t lost the fight quite yet and nobody got between her and what she wanted.

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Elizabeth smiled indulgently at Jane and Charlie, who were holding up the majority of the conversation in the room. Elizabeth was just trying to allow the love birds to reconnect in peace, Georgiana looked nervous in front of that many people, Caroline was fuming silently for once, Will was his usual stoic self. She glanced over at him and was unsurprised to find him watching her. She smiled and he visibly relaxed a bit.

When they’d first arrived to Georgiana’s profuse apologies about Caroline’s presence, Elizabeth was annoyed that Will hadn’t told her that Charlie would be here. She’d been worried about springing that on Jane, about how Charlie would react to seeing her again, and now about what Caroline would do. The first two fears were mostly calmed by the cautiously cheerful conversation wafting through the room. Caroline was still a wild card – this silent stewing would probably boil over soon enough – but Will hadn’t planned that. He had planned this dinner party to re-introduce Charlie and Jane because it was the right thing to do and, realistically, because it would make her happy.

“Hey Will,” Elizabeth said with a smirk, “can I borrow a couple of books from your library ... it’s
for my assignment.” She really just wanted to get him alone for a minute.

“Of course, take whatever you need,” he responded but didn’t move to get up. Instead Elizabeth rose and nodded towards the door. His eyes lit up and he gladly followed her out. Elizabeth silently triumphed at the murderous look on Caroline’s face.

As they walked into the library he began: “I kept the books you pulled out yesterday where you left...” but Elizabeth cut him off with a kiss. After a moment of surprise he enfolded her in his arms and kissed her back. What was supposed to be just a quick kiss soon escalated and by the time Elizabeth pulled back for air Darcy was seated in one of the chairs by the fireplace and Elizabeth was on his lap. “What was that for?” He asked in wonder.

“That,” she answered with another light peck, “was for inviting Charlie tonight … and this,” she slapped him on the shoulder, “is for not telling me Charlie would be here tonight. Jane had no warning at all!”

“He didn’t get back into town until this morning and I wasn’t sure he’d be able to make it,” he said nervously, “I didn’t want to get your, or Jane’s, hopes up.”

“Fair enough, I guess. Jane seems to be recovering well at least.”

“I said I’d talk to him as soon as possible and I have,” he nuzzled his head against her shoulder.

“I suppose that’s all I can ask for.”

He pulled back his head and looked at her with that wounded look he’d had when she found him that day in the gallery. “I wish that was all you could ask for,” his voice was serious and she knew they weren’t talking about Jane and Charlie any more.

“Will,” she said sadly and he dropped his head, steeling himself against another rejection. “I’m sorry for what I said on Saturday. I was too harsh …”

“No! You were right, I was being heavy handed ...”

“Neither of us were entirely rational that night. But none of that changes our situation. Your life is here and mine is back home. It’s too late to apply for an international transfer for fall semester and no university is going to give me a degree if I only attend for a single semester.”

His arms tightened around her and her heart broke a bit for him. She’d spent the last couple of days thinking about it – with a cooler head she’d come to realize that she would like to give this thing a shot – but she really didn’t see any alternative for the moment. “That can’t be it, Elizabeth. I can’t let you walk out of my life again.”

“I’m not walking out of your life, I’m returning to my life.”

“Can’t we at least have a conversation about it?” His piercing eyes plead his case. He looked so vulnerable and desperate that Elizabeth nodded her head and leaned in to kiss him again. She knew that they should talk first, that kissing could quickly escalate to more and that whatever changes of heart she’d had, she still didn’t love him the way he loved her, but after five days without his kisses she found herself a bit desperate as well.

“Will, Elizabeth, dinner is re.... eep!” Elizabeth looked up to see an extremely embarrassed Georgiana looking anywhere but at them. Will groaned and buried his face in Elizabeth’s shoulder, she couldn’t tell if it was out of embarrassment at being caught by his sister, annoyance that they had to stop, or both. “I’m so sorry … I hate to interrupt … but dinner is ready,” Georgiana
stammered.

“We’ll be there in a moment, Georgiana,” Will said, dismissing his little sister who scurried away.

“Come on,” Elizabeth said, standing up and holding her hand out to him, “now is not the time for serious discussion or … other library activities.” Will grumbled but took her hand and got up. Elizabeth grabbed the top two books from her previously sorted pile. “Maybe we can talk tomorrow? When we’re less likely to be interrupted?”

“Thank you,” he whispered, giving her a last kiss to her temple before leading them to the dining room. The shocked silence that met their arrival confused Elizabeth for a moment before Caroline’s pointed glare reminded her that they were still holding hands.

Everyone else was seated with Jane and Charlie on one side of the table, Georgiana at the foot with an empty chair between her and Caroline who was seated to the right of the head of the table – Will’s seat. Will pointedly looked between Caroline and the empty seat to her right, apparently trying to force her to move via telepathy. Caroline was just as pointedly ignoring the silent command. Jane, ever the mediator, solved the problem by moving next to Caroline and leaving an empty seat to Will’s left. Elizabeth sent Jane an appreciative glance and sat down to a tense meal that left the two couples cautiously optimistic, Georgiana satisfied that she’d made some new friends, and Caroline livid and wishing she hadn’t canceled her plans after all.

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Jane Bennet sighed as they walked back to the dorm. “Now that this first meeting is over, I feel perfectly easy. I know my own strength, it’s a relief to know that we can still be friends.”

“Friends?!” Elizabeth laughed, “were you at the same dinner I was? The one with the cute blond making puppy eyes at you all night?”

“Yes, the dinner where he made pleasant small talk all night but never once mentioned the fact that he left and broke my heart,” Jane countered.

“And when was he supposed to bring up that topic? Caroline chaperoned him all night like a hawk and she was the one who orchestrated the whole thing in the first place.”

“You can’t think I’m so weak that I’d just take him back after all these months?”

“Maybe not immediately, but you’ll at least talk it through with him right?”

Jane sighed, “ok, we’re getting coffee tomorrow, alone. I don’t want to get my hopes u. Anyway, I don’t think I’ll be in too much danger, he’s got a lot of explaining to do.”

“I think you are in very great danger of making him fall as deeply in love with you as ever.” Jane explored her feelings as the made their way down the sidewalk. She was still in love with Charlie, she couldn’t deny the butterflies in her stomach at every smile, the rise in her heart rate as he kissed her cheek goodnight, or the familiar comfort that shrouded them when they talked to each other … but she had to have more self worth than to just take him back without question. She only had a month left in London and she wasn’t sure what could even happen after that.

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Charlie remained silent all through the ride home – an unusual event for him, but these were dire circumstances. As soon as they entered the flat he rounded on his sister. “What the fuck did you do Caroline?”
“What are you talking about?” She feigned innocence.

“You knew that Jane was in London and you didn’t tell me!”

“It never came up!” She said, inspecting her manicure.

“I asked you last week if you’d heard from Jane and you said no!”

“Well I didn’t talk to Jane last week!”

Charles glared at his sister incredulously, “you’ve seen her twice since she’s been here and you didn’t even tell me!”

“Look, I was just trying to protect you! We pulled you out of that disaster of a relationship once and I didn’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“Well guess what? I was hurt again,” He said quietly. She looked triumphant for a moment before he continued with an edge to his voice, “by you, Caroline. Will at least apologized, and when he realized that he was wrong about Jane’s feelings he told me the truth. But you’re still spouting this nonsense!”

“It’s not nonsense, Charles! Will isn’t thinking rationally right now, Elizabeth has him wrapped around her finger and Jane would do the same to you! Just think of what people will say!”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into walking away from Jane in the first place, but cut the crap Caroline, after the last miserable months you can’t possibly think I’m better off without her.”

“You’re too good for Jane Bennet!” She shouted.

“Bugger off Caroline!” He screamed, for once letting the full force of his anger loose on his sister. “I don’t care about what people will say, I care about Jane. I love Jane. If you want what’s best for me then you’ll want me to be happy.” Caroline looked pointedly away and remained silent. “Get out, Caroline.”

“What? You can’t be serious!”

“I’ve allowed you to stay here for years because you’re my sister and I love you, but if you care so little about me or my wishes, I see no need to cater to your whims any longer.”

“Charles, be reasonable, where can I go?”

“Go stay with Louisa, or one of your insipid society friends, or get a hotel, or be a grownup for once in your life and get your own place! You’re an heiress for God’s sake, there’s no need to sponge off of me!”

“I don’t want to be alone,” she whispered.

“Well, perhaps you should think about that next time before you manipulate and belittle the people who care about you.”

“It wasn’t like that Charlie, I was just trying to get you out of another one of your silly little scrapes.”

Charles looked at his sister and shook his head, “I’m a grown man and am capable of making my own decisions. I’m meeting Jane after work tomorrow to beg for forgiveness, I want you out of my home by the time I get back,” he said as he walked into his bedroom and slammed the door.
Georgiana glanced at her brother as he stared dreamily out the window, she was certain that Elizabeth and Jane were long out of view, but he still watched that last spot he’d seen her like a puppy waiting for it’s person to return. After their parents had died, Georgiana used to do the same thing whenever Will left. He’d always been her person … he still was. It was somewhat unsettling to realize that she was no longer his. It was inevitable, it was great even that Will had finally fallen in love but it still stung.

He finally sighed and turned away from the window. Georgiana couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped her. He looked up at her as if just noticing she was in the room. “It’s good to hear you laugh again.”

“Well,” she responded, “it’s good to see you smile again. I think Elizabeth will be good for both of us.”

He smiled and nodded in agreement for a moment before his face dropped and he sighed, “tonight was wonderful, but that doesn’t mean it will all work out. We’ve still got more than our share of obstacles.”

“You’ll make it work,” she said encouragingly. He had to make it work. She wasn’t going to let her brother shrivel back into the husk of a man he’d been this winter.

“You don’t know that Georgie, it’s complicated.”

His dismissal brought back her earlier anger. “I’m not a kid anymore, you know? Little Georgie who must be protected from the truth. I know you don’t trust my judgment on relationship matters, you’ve made that abundantly clear, but you don’t need to dismiss me like I couldn’t possibly understand!”

Will reared back as if he’d been struck, “where is this coming from? of course I trust you.”

Georgiana gave a bitter laugh, “right, that’s why you spent months slowly sinking deeper into depression about Elizabeth without telling me what was wrong, without leaning on me, without trusting me with your burdens.”

“I was … I was protecting you. You were still fragile after what happened with Wickham … I didn’t want to distress you.”

“The mess with George happened two years ago! I’m not some broken vase that you had to reconstruct then put behind glass. I’m a human being, wounds heal! … You didn’t want to distress me, so you slowly decline for months without telling me what was wrong. I didn’t know how to help. I thought it was me! I thought I was a burden … you went off on a grand adventure and finally got to live like you’re in your twenties for a couple of months then had to come back home to your needy little sister and act like a dad again. I thought you resented me …” she trailed off as the anger burned off into sadness.

“Georgie, no! You’ve never been a burden to me!” He sat next to her and pulled her to his chest.

“Sure, it’s every twenty-three year old’s dream to suddenly become a surrogate parent to his kid sister.”

“Georgiana, look at me,” he raised her chin with his finger, “that was an impossible time for both of us. It wasn’t what either of us planned on, but you were all I had left. I could have let Aunt Catherine take custody of you as she insisted,” Georgiana shivered at that possibility, “I could have
sent you off to boarding school like Uncle Fitzwilliam suggested, but then we would’ve both been alone and miserable. It was hard, but you are what kept me human during that time.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly “Thank you for not sending me away, you kept me sane too. You were my world and I needed you. Then when everything happened with George …” she still couldn’t speak about it more directly than that, “… you were my rock. We somehow survived that nightmare and came out even closer, stronger. So when you came back from America and started pulling away I thought …”

“Why didn’t you say anything? It was never you! None of this was your fault!” He said, rubbing her back.

Georgiana gave another bitter laugh, “I suppose suppressing our feelings and assuming that the people we care about understand them anyway is a Darcy family trait.”

“Two peas in a pod,” he grimly agreed.

“Don’t do that with Elizabeth, ok? Not any more at least. She deserves better.”

“Yes, she does.”

“How are you going to fix things?”

He sighed wearily, “I don’t know. She’s coming back tomorrow to talk it over, but … she has a year left of her program and can’t move here any sooner than that. Even then, I don’t know if I can convince her to give up her life in America.”

“Why can’t you go to her?” Georgiana pulled out of his arms and asked the obvious question.

“I … can’t. There’s the business to consider, and you, and Aunt Catherine. I have too many responsibilities to just leave.” He sounded so defeated.

“Not forever, just for the next year. You can work from the Boston office.”

“There are still times I need to be here.”

“What? Every few months for shareholder meetings? It’s too bad that you’re so poor and can’t afford the airfare then,” she said sarcastically.

“I can’t just leave you.”

“Will, I’m nearly eighteen. I’ll be starting University in the autumn. I know you don’t want to face it, but I’m an adult – and Aunt Catherine is perfectly capable of managing on her own … you could even still come back for your annual trip.”

“What if you need me?” He asked with true concern.

“Again, what a shame you can’t afford the airfare,” she rolled her eyes. “I won’t even be living here. Would you honestly rather be alone here waiting for the possibility that I might need you while Elizabeth moves on with her life?” He looked horrified at the suggestion. “I’ll miss you but I’ll survive. It won’t be easy, but you’ve got the means, ability, and motivation to make it work.”

Will was lost deep in thought and they sat in silence for several minutes. “I’m for bed,” she announced. “Please give it some thought though. I’ve never seen you as happy as you were tonight and you deserve that.”
“Goodnight, Georgie,” he gave her a hug, “and thank you. That was some great advice.” Georgiana bristled somewhat at the use of her childhood nickname and the note of surprise in his voice.

“Well, this is what happens when you talk things through instead of concocting Machiavellian schemes in your head. You don’t have to do everything on your own. If you let people in they might just surprise you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to get this out. I feel like a lot of you can probably be sympathetic to my cause though: All of my free time for the last week and a half has been consumed by building a library in my new house.
Elizabeth felt silly as she checked her phone again – 4:25 pm. She tried to return her focus to the artifact in front of her and the sketchbook in her lap. She was sitting in the British Museum, surrounded by some of the finest art and artifacts from around the world that colonialism could acquire. This was her dream. She should be elated, her art historian’s heart should be content, she should be losing herself ambling through display cases. Instead she was counting down the time until she could go off and see a boy like Lydia or Kitty.

She had plans for sightseeing with Jane tomorrow and was headed back on Sunday, so today was really her only chance to explore the massive collection. She’d intended to stay from open through close, but after nearly six and a half hours she’d seen most of the galleries that interested her the most, her feet hurt, and she just wanted to go see Darcy. She put the final touches on her series of sketches of a mummy for her makeup assignment for her Egyptian art history class and began packing up.

Six and a half hours seemed sufficient, she wouldn’t lose her scholarly cred by leaving an hour before the museum closed. She consulted the map again and decided to make her way through the Assyrian rooms on her way out as a compromise. She shot Will a text letting him know her ETA before working her way backwards through the galleries.

A quick tube ride later she was being pulled into the house by an overly eager Will. His lips were on hers before the door even latched and he made his way backwards through the house to the lounge fairly adeptly without ending the kiss. He’d pulled them to the couch by the time Elizabeth’s brain caught up enough for her to pull back and say, “Will!”

He moaned and moved his lips to her throat, “Will,” she tried again.

They needed to talk before this progressed any further, but Will just sighed a contented “Lizzie,” against her skin and continued his attentions.

“Darcy!” She said more forcefully, with a slight push to his shoulder. He grumbled and finally looked up at her. “We were supposed to be talking, remember?”

“I suppose,” he sighed and scooted slightly away from her.

“What’s your middle name?” She asked as a momentary diversion struck her.

“Why?” He asked suspiciously.

“So I know what to call you when I need to get your attention. Given the quantity of chatter from my mother, I typically tune it out, but when she busts out the middle name I know that I need to pay attention.”

“I don’t think it’s in my best interests to tell you then,” he responded playfully – or as playful as Darcy got anyway.

“Really? Never?”

“I suppose you’ll find out at the altar,” he said casually, as if it was a foregone conclusion that she’d eventually marry him. She found she didn’t mind the assumption as much as she had last week.
“Do you really think that’s a good plan? What if I can’t control my surprise or laughter as we stand in front of all our family and friends?”

“Fair point … it’s Fitzwilliam.”

“Oh my God! Your name is William Fitzwilliam Darcy?” She laughed.

“It was my mother’s maiden name, as you’re well aware,” he argued defensively.

“Still, though. They couldn’t have named you … literally any other men’s name that wasn’t already part of your middle name?”

“Sadly, no. ‘William’ is the traditional name for first born sons in my father’s family. I’m William Darcy the fourth.”

“Poor baby, that must have been rough as a kid.”

“Thus why I don’t tell anybody my middle name.” They shared a light laugh over the absurdity of it for a moment before the reality of their situation settled on her again.

“Well, William Fitzwilliam Darcy the fourth, what are we going to do about this mess we’re in?” She asked. Before he could respond, her phone rang. She looked at it briefly, saw that it was her mother, and silenced it. “They know I’ve only got international texting for this trip, I’ll call my mom later from Jane’s phone,” she explained to Will. “So, any ideas?”

“Well,” he began nervously, “I was thinking that maybe I could … Georgiana suggested that I might work …” He was cut off by her phone ringing again.

“Sorry,” she said as she silenced it, “go on.”

“What if, for the time being … I moved to Boston?”

Elizabeth stared at him. Was he serious? On Saturday his job had been too important and now he was willing to move to be with her? Her phone rang again, this time it was her dad’s cell phone. Three calls in quick succession couldn’t be good … “I’m sorry, I think I need to answer this.”

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“Of course,” Will tried to sound nonchalant as he replied, tried to pretend that her mother hadn’t just interrupted a pivotal moment that could shape their future – or determine if they had a future. If her mother could have waited just thirty seconds longer he could have had his answer by now. Given what he knew of the woman, she might have waited if she’d known.

“Hey mom, this call is going to cost me like a bajillion dollars so this better be important,” she said with an eyeroll.

Elizabeth pulled the phone a little away from her ear as her mother talked. He couldn’t blame her from where he sat she sounded like a cross between the adults on the old Peanuts cartoons and a whiny chihuahua. “Calm down mom, who’s gone?” Elizabeth said. He watched her jaw drop and her face pale. He took her free hand in his and she squeezed it tightly.

“Are you sure it’s not just some prank? I mean even Lydia isn’t that stupid.” The wailing from the phone intensified and Elizabeth paled as she repeated, “Wickham? George Wickham? Are you sure? How does she even know him?” Will’s stomach dropped. Lydia was fifteen, the same age that Georgiana had been.
The screeching stopped and Elizabeth said, “Dad, please tell me she’s over reacting. What do we
know for sure?” Elizabeth listened intently as her father no doubt gave her a more rational
explanation of events, but the tear that slipped down Elizabeth’s cheek informed him that the
danger was in fact real. He couldn’t bear the sight of her tears. “Does Jane know? … No, I’m with
a friend,” Will’s heart cracked a bit further at being classified as a ‘friend’ but Elizabeth squeezed
his hand in reassurance. “Of course, I’ll see if I can change my flight, I’ll text you when I have
more details … I love you too, I’ll be home as soon as possible.”

She hung up the phone and deflated into his side. Will pulled her close and rubbed her back, “what
is the matter?” he asked softly.

“My sister Lydia has run away, she left a note for Kitty telling her she was eloping … with
Wickham.”

“Eloping? But she’s fifteen! But is it certain—absolutely certain?”

“My parents haven’t seen her since yesterday but they thought she was staying over at a friend’s
house. They finally got the truth out of Kitty this morning. She told Kitty they were going to
Scotland like in the old novels but I don’t know how they could possibly get there … and she just
turned sixteen.”

Darcy let out a harsh breath, “while you could marry in Scotland at sixteen, I’m not sure that
applies to US citizens. And I don’t see what his motivations are. She has no money, no
connections, nothing that can tempt him to marry her.” Elizabeth looked up at him with an angry
flash in her eyes. “You know I didn’t mean that as an insult sweetheart,” he kissed her forehead and
sighed, “I just know Wickham, he’s not one to do the honorable thing unless there’s something in it
for him.”

“Poor Lydia, she probably thinks he’s in love with her,” Elizabeth sighed against his chest, “she
can’t know what he is. If I had explained some part of it only—some part of what I learnt, to my
own family! Had they known, this could not have happened. But it is all—all too late now,” she
sobbed.

Darcy’s heart broke for her. He’d explicitly asked her not to say anything about it to anyone. Even
in his repentance over not protecting Elizabeth from that predator, he’d still left her family
vulnerable. This was his fault. “And what has been done to recover her?”

“My father called the police, filed a missing persons report. Hopefully they’ll find her soon, but I
need to get home, I need to see if I can change my flight, and call Jane and pack.” She pulled out
her laptop to retrieve her ticket information.

Darcy handed her his mobile, “here, use mine, I don’t want it to cost you a bajillion dollars,” he
stumbled over the word, but he did succeed in making her smile for a brief moment. “I’ll track
down Jane,” he offered. There was little he could do at the moment, but he would damn well do
everything in his power.

“Thank you,” she leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek before calling the airline.

Will checked his watch, Charlie and Jane should still be together. He went to get the land line
telephone in his study to call his friend.

“Will?” Charlie answered, he could hear Jane crying in the background. “This is not a good time.”

“I’m aware. Are you with Jane? Elizabeth is here.”
“So she knows then? God, Darcy, what should we do?”

“Elizabeth is trying to get an earlier flight home now, what are Jane’s plans? It might be best for her to remain here, in case they do make it to Scotland.”

He heard Charlie relay what he said to Jane then she grabbed the phone and asked, “is Lizzie there? Can I talk to her?”

“One moment,” he took the handset back to the lounge and heard Elizabeth’s frustration as she argued with the airline.

He held out the telephone to her, “Jane would like to talk to you, I can take care of the ticket.” They swapped phones and Darcy proceeded to upgrade her seat and get her onto a direct flight that evening. If she had to go through this nightmare, he would do everything he could to make it easier and more comfortable for her. He hated that she had to leave earlier than planned. He hated that Wickham was tearing her family apart the way he’d done to Darcy’s. He hated that their conversation was interrupted and their future was still unresolved … but this was the situation they were in and for now the focus must be on Lydia and recovering and protecting her.

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“Ok, have a good flight, and let me know as soon as you hear something, ok?” Jane said as she hugged her tightly.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I land, ok?” Elizabeth said, hugging Jane back. “And let us know if you hear anything on this end.” Jane needed to finish her study abroad courses if she wanted to graduate this semester and it made sense for one of them to stay here. Elizabeth felt that she was needed at home, but leaving Jane to deal with the fallout here alone if Lydia did somehow make it to the UK was eating away at her.

“I will,” Jane agreed, then looked slyly over at Will, who was watching them from a slight distance waiting for his turn to say goodbye. Jane gave Elizabeth a wink and walked over to Charlie. Perhaps Jane wouldn’t be all alone after all.

Will approached and looked at Elizabeth wearily. She threw her arms around him and hugged him. It felt so surreal that just a couple of hours ago they were making out and making plans. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to finish our conversation.”

“Me too,” he said softly into her shoulder and tightening his arms around her.

“Did you mean it? About moving to Boston?”

He leaned back and gave her an incredulous look, “of course I meant it.”

“But what about your job? Your responsibilities?” She asked, parroting back the excuses he’d given her at the Huntsford Inn.

“I can work from the Boston branch,” he explained, “I might have to accumulate a lot of frequent flier miles by returning to London periodically, but as Georgiana pointed out last night, I have the means to do so.”

She smiled and cupped her hands on the back of his neck, “and this isn’t too much? Too fast?”

He laughed and gave a matching smile, “I would put up with far worse if it meant I had a chance with you.”
Elizabeth leaned in and kissed him, “let’s give this a shot then.”

“Really?” He asked in wonder. She nodded and a look of heartfelt delight spread across his face. “I’m tempted to get a ticket and come along with you now,” he effused, “unfortunately it will probably take some time to sort things out with work and a visa and such.”

“But at least we’ve got a plan,” she said as she leaned in to kiss him again.

After a minute he pulled back, looked at his watch with a sigh, and glanced at the security line. “You ought to be going,” despite his words, his grip tightened around her.

“I really should,” she rested her head on his shoulder and hugged him close.

“I love you,” he whispered into her hair.

Elizabeth hesitated in her response, finally whispering back “I’ll miss you.” She knew it wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but she still wasn’t sure and she didn’t want to say more than she actually felt.

He sighed and pulled back, “I’ll miss you so much sweetheart.” She gave him one last kiss goodbye then went to stand in the security line. She felt him watching her all the way the way through until she’d put her shoes back on, and collected her carry ons. She gave him one last wave goodbye then turned down the hallway toward her terminal. It wasn’t until she looked down at her ticket to find her gate that she realized that he’d upgraded her to first class.

What a snobby, presumptuous, sweet, caring, asshole, Elizabeth thought to herself as she made her way through Heathrow.

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“Is it really necessary to watch her stand in line?” Charlie whined. Jane had walked off to call her parents and let them know Lizzie was on her way home and give them the flight details so they could pick her up.

“Sod off,” Will replied with a grin, “we both know you’d be just as irrational if it had been the other Bennet sister getting on that plane.”

“I don’t think I would have gotten quite as enthusiastic of a sendoff as you did,” Charlie replied sadly.

“Did you not have a chance to talk today?”

“We’d only been there a quarter of an hour before she got that bloody call,” Charlie answered. “I explained Caroline’s … and your … interference and tried to explain myself but she’s still angry.

“Not as angry as Elizabeth was, I imagine … and at least you have some time before the end of term to sort it out.”

“How did you sort things out with Elizabeth? How did she get past her anger?” Charlie asked eagerly. Somehow Will had a hard time picturing Jane getting past her anger by whipping Bingley, that just wasn’t in her nature.

“Trust me, you don’t want to take the route we took. It involved a lot of fighting, flogging, and denial, followed by a massive blowout where I laid my heart bare and she broke it. Then a letter where I exposed every other festering emotional wound I had in an effort to explain. After all of that, I doubt we would have seen each other again if not for a chance meeting.” He frowned as he
relived the horrors of the past weeks. “No, Charlie, if you want my advice – though God knows why you would listen to me after the damage my last advice did – be open with Jane, tell her everything, admit your faults, and remain constant.”

Charlie didn’t respond, merely gazed off toward Jane longingly. Will returned his gaze back to Elizabeth, who was just going through the scanner, smiling and chatting politely with the agent. Her capacity for good humor astounded him. She was in the middle of a family crisis, had just said goodbye for an indeterminate period to her boyfriend – if he could presume such a title at this stage – then stood in a queue for forty minutes and she was still able to smile and laugh with the rude and intrusive lady who may or may not frisk her with only the slightest cause. She was an incredible woman and he was determined to make the most of this second, or even third chance.

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Elizabeth gathered her belongings as they began their decent scarcely able to believe they were already here. It was the first time she’d been able to sleep well on an international flight. The increased leg room, space between her armrest and her neighbor, comfier seat, and a couple of Dramamine had made for a rather comfortable flight.

She turned off airplane mode on her phone as soon as the announcement was made and found four voicemails waiting for her. She quickly deplaned and sat down at the gate to listen to the news. The first two were brief calls from Jane and her Dad to let her know that they’d found Lydia and Wickham, that they had made it to London and were in custody but they didn’t have further information. The third was a detailed description of the situation from Jane:

“Hi Lizzie, Lydia and Wickham have been found. She is safe, though still in a lot of trouble. They are not married, thankfully, and it doesn’t look like he had any intention of marrying her – though she clearly thought that was his plan. Apparently they’ve been dating secretly for about a month now. He apparently told her that he would marry her if only it was legal. She took that as a serious proposal and told him they could get married in two years. He informed her that she could legally marry at sixteen without parental consent in Scotland … if only they had the money for tickets to the UK. She stole Dad’s credit card to pay for two tickets to London and reserve a rental car – they’re unsure whose idea that was, but since they have Wickham on camera using the card to purchase the tickets and he’s the adult in the scenario, he’ll be charged with credit card fraud.

Since Lydia is under age, she stole Mary’s passport to get through the TSA. She even dressed like Mary and found some fake glasses – it was super eerie seeing her dressed like that. She’s being charged with Passport fraud, but since she’s a minor she probably won’t have to face any jail time. They made it onto the plane before the missing person report was filed, so they were able to board but when they arrived, Wickham’s passport was flagged as a person of interest in an abduction and they were taken into custody at Heathrow. He’ll also be charged with international child abduction since Lydia is a minor. He’s trying to claim he didn’t know her age, but he’s also been calling her ‘Lydia’ so that probably won’t hold up since he knew that she was using a false name to travel.

According to Lydia, the plan was to fly into London then drive to Gretna Green to get married, but he’d made no further travel arrangements. From what we can piece together, it seems like he was largely using her for a free ticket back to the UK because he’d borrowed money from some shady people in the US. I don’t see how either thought they’d get away with it.

We’d barely hit the London city limits after dropping you off before I got the call and we had to turn around and meet them at the airport. I’ve got to go, they’re about to release Lydia into my custody until Dad gets here with her passport and can take her home. Love you, bye.”

The next voicemail was from her father:
“Well, Lizzie, I was expecting to pick you up from the airport, but it looks like I’ll be off to London myself to sort this mess out. I trust Jane has already explained everything to you, she said she would do it. I could hardly bear her commiseration for what I’ve endured. I deserve whatever I get from this situation. It’s my fault and I ought to feel the blame, for once in my life. If I’d paid more attention, given her more supervision, disciplined her more, this wouldn’t have happened.

“Anyway, according to the Arrivals board, my gate is only a few down from where you’ll get in. If your flight is on time and you want to meet me at G11, I’ll give you my keys and parking stub so you can drive yourself home. I will warn you that your mother hasn’t left her bed since we found out that Lydia was missing and just lays there wailing and putting up a fuss. Go home at your own peril … though I think they could use some of your good sense at the moment.”

Elizabeth looked down the terminal and spotted G11 just a couple gates down. She quickly made her way over and saw her father staring bleakly ahead, she could tell that the past couple of days had shocked and aged him. “Dad!”

“Lizzie!” He started up and gave her a hug, “I’m glad you’re home.”

“How are holding up, Dad?”

“Not you too? Don’t start with that, I don’t deserve pity.”

“Ok, fine, you suck, I suck, we all suck and we all could have prevented this,” she said flatly, “there, are you happy?”

“It’s not your job to raise your sisters, I don’t see how this is your fault.”

“Well, I knew that Wickham was a creep and I didn’t say anything to the rest of the family because I was embarrassed. I could have prevented this all.” He father looked worriedly at her and she hurried to reassure him. “Wickham was a life model for my figure drawing course. We … went out once and it got weird. I came out unscathed, but it could have gone either way. How did Lydia even meet him?”

“I asked Kitty about it after I talked to you. Apparently they met him at the mall and he told them he recognized them because he knew you … He told Lydia that she was hotter and cooler than you. Which is fucking disturbing coming from a man over thirty to a teenager.”

“Shit, he probably went after her because I got away, if I had …”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence. I wouldn’t trade one of my daughter’s well-being for another. The man is obviously a predator …” He trailed off for a minute. “Your mother is convinced I’m going over there to kill him for what he did to Lydia, but that’s far to violent for me. I’ll take my chances with the legal system. I don’t see how he’d possibly escape this unscathed.”

“I’ll gladly give a statement about what happened between us … and I know someone else who is probably willing to give a statement on his past behavior to establish a pattern.” She doubted if Georgiana could handle testifying, but Will had other examples, he could be a character witness at least.

“If nothing else, I’ve got him for credit card fraud,” her dad nodded. They talked logistics for a few more minutes before his plane began boarding. They said their goodbyes and Elizabeth made her way out of the airport and into the fray back home.
“Sorry I’m late,” Elizabeth said as her face appeared on the video chat screen of Will’s laptop. From the angle he could see, he surmised that her laptop was still perched on the dresser. It had been two weeks since the drama went down and between the time difference, his work schedule, her classes, the gallery, and the rapidly approaching end of the semester they’d barely had time to talk and had resorted to scheduling video chats in.

“It’s quite alright,” he said, suppressing a yawn.

“No, it’s not. I kept you up past your bedtime … again.”

“It’s well worth it if I get to see your face,” he leaned back against the pillows and sighed. He’d been attempting to read while waiting for her call. What is half an hour of missed sleep compared to this? “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” she replied as she settled into the chair with the laptop on her lap, ‘unintentionally’ giving him a closeup of her chest as she moved. He longed to be able to touch her, hold her, make love to her … or at minimum he wished that she was wearing less when the webcam skimmed that close to her breasts. Unfortunately, he knew that early evening at the Bennet household was far too populated to risk that.

“What kept you today?” He asked, forcing his brain to shift back to mundane topics.

She grinned at him, “it was the Pemberley Collection, actually. You remember the report I wrote?”

“How could I forget? Without that report I would probably still be wallowing alone thinking that you hated me.” She raised her eyebrow at him. “What? A man’s allowed to be melodramatic when his heart is broken.”

“Anyway,” she said, rolling her eyes and returning to her story, “the report was only supposed to be a page or two long for the makeup assignment but since Mrs. Reynolds was so accommodating and I kept lingering and spent way longer than intended doing ‘research’ it ended up being about eight pages – and that didn’t even include all of the information I’d gathered.”

“That sounds rather thorough,” he gave her one of those knowing half-smiles.

“Well, I was highly motivated to spend time there,” she gave him a flirtatious smile. “So, Dr. Gardiner asked to see me today after my Museum Studies class and she suggested that I develop that report into my senior thesis. Since it’s half done already, that should make my life easier next year.”

“That’s wonderful Lizzie, I’d be happy to help with anything you may need for that.”

“Just one of the perks of dating you, I suppose.”

“Well, it’s not as if we can enjoy many of the other perks at the moment,” he replied sulkily, glancing over the expanse of empty bed beside him.

“True,” she pulled a face.
“I miss you so much, especially at night.”

“I know, me too. Do you want to see how silly I’ve been?” She asked looking somewhat embarrassed. He nodded and the frame changed as she moved across the room and flopped on her bed. She turned the laptop to her nightstand where a sketchbook was propped up displaying a drawing of him sleeping.

“Did you do that from memory?” He asked, impressed with how well she’d captured him.

“No, I drew it at Netherfield, before I moved on to the Satyr,” she said as she turned the laptop back toward herself. “… I find it comforting sometimes to look over and imagine you’re sleeping beside me.”

“Oh Lizzy,” he sighed, it took his breath away a little that she could be so sentimental after their inauspicious beginning. “Now I must have one of you,” he yawned again and looked at his watch. It really was getting late.

“I’ll work on that,” she replied, “but I should probably let you go to sleep.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” he stated truthfully.

“I tell you what,” she said playfully, setting the laptop beside her, “put the laptop beside you and lay down.”

“I like the direction this is going,” he said as he followed orders. Just then he heard Kitty and Lydia shouting at each other in the background and winced.

“Sadly, we still have to keep it PG for now,” she teased, “but I’ll keep the connection open until you fall asleep.” He smiled as she leaned forward to pull her bag up and got out a book and a notebook.

He turned off the bedside lamp. “I love you Elizabeth, goodnight,” he said softly.

“Goodnight Will,” she blew him a kiss, “sweet dreams.” He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep dreaming about a future where she would say ‘I love you’ back to him instead of falling back on other endearments.

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Roughly five pages of research later Elizabeth glanced down at her computer and saw that he was asleep. She reached down to end the chat but redirected and muted her microphone instead. There was something oddly soothing about having him asleep ‘beside’ her while she studied.

She was such an idiot! She’d wasted so many days she could have been with Will in London, not to mention a perfectly romantic airport farewell, with her indecision. She’d realized that she did in fact love him back almost as soon as she’d reached her gate … when it was too late to say so to his face. There relationship had been so far from conventional thus far, but Elizabeth felt like it would cheapen it to say it for the first time over the phone or chat or text message. No, this was something she had to do in person. Now she had to bite her tongue when he said he loved her.

She kept the connection live until it was time to go down for dinner. After putting away her books, she laid down next to the computer, snapped a couple of shots of herself, and sent them off to Will before her mom bellowed for the second time that dinner was ready.

“I slave over a hot stove to make a nice meal, but does anybody appreciate it? No!” Her mother
was mumbling when Elizabeth entered the kitchen. Ignoring her mother’s daily diatribe Elizabeth began setting the table. “The magazine says that timing and presentation are crucial for this recipe,” her mother told Elizabeth when she noticed her, “but you see you’re the only one in here! I’m on my last nerve and nobody cares!”

“Of course I care, my dear,” her dad said as he left his study and kissed her mom’s cheek, her mother seemed content with that answer before he added: “your ‘last nerve’ and I are good friends, I’ve been ‘on’ it for the last twenty years.”

“Why do I even bother!” Her mother shrieked as Mary and Kitty made their way to the table. Lydia sauntered in a minute later, “I’m sorry I’m late. I was getting dressed. You know in England they dress for dinner,” she said superciliously to her sisters. Elizabeth rolled her eyes, Lydia was in England for all of two days and most of that was in custody for passport fraud. Elizabeth had been in London for two weeks and the only times people had ‘dressed’ for dinner were for dinner parties – the same as they do in the US. Lydia probably just got that idea from the same silly novels that she’d gotten the idea to elope to Gretna Green. Although she was disappointed that she hadn’t come home married, she’d still been lording the trip itself over her sisters heads. That tactic was useless on Elizabeth and Mary since the former who had spent a longer period abroad and the later was pointedly ignoring Lydia when she wasn’t lecturing her on propriety and the wickedness of her behavior – but Kitty was hanging on every word.

Dinner followed the standard format. Her mother vacillated between whining about her misfortunes and indulging Lydia’s delusions. Lydia preened while Kitty parroted everything she said. Mary made trite observations backed up by overused proverbs. Her father subtly attempted to deflect their silliness through sarcasm, unfortunately it was too subtle for any of them to notice. Elizabeth mediated all of these conversations with her thoughts frequently straying to her own trip to the UK and the friends she’d left behind. Life in Meryton was still not the same without Jane and Charlotte and now she had the added weight of missing Will.

She collapsed back on her bed after dinner exhausted. Unfortunately, this time of the semester was crazy. She had two papers and a digital art project due this week alone. She pulled out her notes and opened her laptop to work on her Art History paper. Maybe if she stayed up late enough working and got enough done, she could reward herself before she finally crashed for the night.

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Will woke up to the sight of his blank computer screen that had long-since faded into sleep mode with him. He shifted to turn off his alarm, smiling at the memory of drifting off with Elizabeth’s voice being the last thing he’d heard. He sat up and pulled his laptop over to check his email. His smile broadened when he found one from Elizabeth. There was no text only three images of her laying on the bed. In the first two she had her eyes closed feigning sleep, but in the third she was looking at the camera with her eyes full of mirth and mischief and a hint of a smirk. It was perfect. She was perfect.

The last couple of weeks had been interminable and he had no doubt that the immediate future would pass in the same way. He’d received approval from the board, begun laying the groundwork to shift his primary office to Boston, and submitted his visa application but these things took time … time that he was forced to be away from Elizabeth.

He missed her constantly. He missed her laugh, her teasing, her touch, the way she made him feel. He tore his eyes away from her picture to glance at the clock and determined that there was time for a quick diversion to ease his … loneliness. He shifted the laptop beside him again and had just managed the first stroke when a notification of an incoming call through his video chat client
suddenly popped up obscuring Elizabeth’s picture. He jumped, momentarily panicking that it was a work related call before he realized that it was Elizabeth herself.

“Hello,” he said, answering the call.

“Hi!” She greeted him cheerfully, though she looked rather done in.

“I could get used to seeing you as I drift off to sleep and as I wake up.”

“Me too, but sadly I think that’ll have to wait until you get here, I do have to sleep sometimes.”

“What time is it there?” He asked, too tired himself to do the maths.

“Just after 2am,” she yawned.

“Good God, what’s keeping you awake?”

“Art History paper that’s due tomorrow – or I guess today? – I told myself that if I made enough progress I could reward myself with a call before you left for work.”

“Sweetheart, you need to sleep,” he said in concern.

“I know,” she smiled, “It’s just a fact of life for a college student. Anyway, I just finished writing it so it won’t turn into an all-nighter. I just need to proofread it in the morning to make sure I didn’t put in anything too loopy in my sleep-deprivation.”

“Well, I don’t want to keep you,” he said reluctantly. He wanted her to take care of herself, to get some sleep … but that didn’t mean he wanted to hang up quite yet.

“But what about my reward?” She asked saucily.

He smiled, “I was just about to reward myself when you rang. Thank you for the photos.”

“I’m glad you like them, but I think we can do better this morning,” she said as she slowly peeled off her shirt. *God, I love this woman,* he thought as his hand closed around his shaft again.

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A couple of days later, Elizabeth was hunkered down on her bed again working on her final project for her digital methods class and attempting to drown out the argument between her youngest sisters when Kitty stomped into her room and demanded: “Lizzy, tell Lydia it’s not fair to steal my clothes!”

Lydia ran in after her and defended, “we both know that this skirt looks way better on me than you anyway, so it’s only fair that I should wear it!”

“Lydia, you would think that your recent run-in with the law would have taught you that stealing was wrong,” Elizabeth said without looking up from her computer.

“We were just borrowing the money from Dad for the trip there, just like I’m borrowing this skirt from Kitty. It’s so unfair how they’re treating my poor George!”

“I think ‘poor’ George got just what he deserved,” Elizabeth said under her breath.

“Well, I’m certain that you didn’t ask Dad for his credit card just like you didn’t ask me to borrow my skirt!” Kitty shouted, as if the two offenses were comparable.
“But this skirt matches my shirt!”

Kitty gave a frustrated little scream and Elizabeth rolled her eyes and finally looked up. “That’s not even your shirt, it’s mine!” Elizabeth laughed.

“It is not!” Lydia huffed indignantly, “George gave me this shirt himself!”

Elizabeth looked up again and froze. That was the shirt … her shirt that Wickham had refused to give back. “Listen to me, Lydia,” Elizabeth said in a serious tone, “that is my shirt. There was a torn seam under the right arm that I mended by hand and a stubborn drop of red paint by the hem that I never could get out.”

“God! Lizzy, are you so jealous that I got George and you didn’t that you have to make up stories?” Lydia smirked.

“Look!” Kitty said, pointing to the red spot on the dusty-rose colored shirt. She then lifted Lydia’s right arm, “and here’s the mending! Lizzy never could get her stitches even!”

Lydia looked pale and disoriented, “how … how is that possible? George …” Elizabeth pulled Lydia down to sit on the bed.

“I never told you this, but Wickham and I …”

“No!” Lydia interrupted, “he liked me! He loves me!” For the first time since Lydia strutted home as if nothing had happened, Elizabeth felt truly sorry for her.

“On the last day of my figure drawing class last summer Wickham invited me back to his place,” Elizabeth continued on, Lydia needed to hear it whether she wanted to or not. “Things got really … creepy. He kept saying these things, pretending I was a little girl, and when I asked him to stop he got angry … he wouldn’t give my shirt back and started to get aggressive so I just ran.” Lydia was crying now and Elizabeth put her arm around her, “I’m so sorry I never told you. I never expected that you’d even meet him.”

“He told us not to tell you …” Kitty said to Elizabeth, as she sat on the Lydia’s other side and rubbed her back, “he said it would be our little secret.”

“He said he liked me better than you,” Lydia said softly through her tears, “he said I was cooler and prettier and more fun than you … but then while we were … together … he sometimes called me ‘little Lizzie,’” she sobbed. “I told myself it was just a slip … that Lizzie and Lydie sounded so similar.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Elizabeth pulled her little sister closer, “I’m so sorry.”

“Then when he mentioned marrying me, going to Scotland! It seemed like such a fairytale. The dashing prince who fell madly in love with me and would take me to a far off land and make me his wife! Why shouldn’t I go? After all, you and Jane got to go to England!”

Lydia’s account of what had happened reminded Elizabeth of just how young, silly, and impressionable she was. It was full open jealousy and competition with her sisters alongside misguided dreams and all punctuated by the manipulations of a much older man.

Chapter End Notes
I'm sorry folks, I tried writing you a video chat sex scene but it just wasn't coming out right. It sounded silly and awkward and just got worse the more I worked on it. I've had the rest of the chapter done for days and I figured I could keep trying to get that bit right and delay longer or post what I've got. So you'll just have to use your own imaginations.
Anne DeBurgh arrived in Meryton feeling more free than she ever had. While she had gained the courage to wrest charge of her life away from her mother, she still didn’t have the courage to confront her directly so she’d moved her bags out of the house at night and left a note. Charlotte’s father, a gregarious friendly man who was overly impressed with her noble lineage, had picked them up from the airport and they’d settled into Netherfield. Apparently Charles Bingley had signed a fully year lease on a whim and was too nice to break so he’d been paying rent on Netherfield all year. William was taking over the lease at the end of the month and he hoped to be joining them soon. Both him and her uncle had been supportive of the move and her desire to make her own decisions in life.

It was too late in the year to apply for a transfer to Longbourne, but she’d been able to secure a study abroad there for the autumn and she’d already submitted her application for a full transfer beginning spring semester. She knew that many of her art credits wouldn’t apply to an engineering degree, so she would still require a couple of years to finish. Their exams at Huntsford had concluded a week before Longbourne, so she had some time to settle in before she met most of Charlotte’s friends while they finished their semester.

Anne was unpacking they day after they’d arrived when she saw a limo pull up and her mother storm out of it. Charlotte must have answered the door because her mother’s signature slam of the door was enough to reverberate off of the window pane in her room. She made her way down the stairs.

“Hello Mother, I hope you had a good flight, it is unusual for you to travel this distance.”

“No, Mother, you decided all of that on your own. I’ve voiced my opinions and wishes and you’ve ignored them. I am legally an adult. I can study what I want. I can love whomever I wish,” she held out her hand to Charlotte, who took it with a smirk.

“I never expected such insolence from you, Anne, I raised you better than this. Ask your servants to gather your things, we’re putting an end to this nonsense and returning home!”

After a lifetime of following orders, Anne almost wavered at this command but Charlotte squeezed her hand in support. “No.”

Her mother looked at her in shock, “what do you mean ‘no’?” She asked angrily.

“I mean that you have no control over me.”

Mother rounded on Charlotte, “you! You have turned my own daughter against me! Preyed on a weak, disabled girl and perverted her priorities!”

“All I’ve done is love Anne and support her in her decisions. She may be deaf, but that doesn’t impair her ability to live her life and make her own decisions. Perhaps she chose this location because of me, but she’s been telling you for years what she wanted and you’ve been too busy listening to your own voice to hear her.”

“Are you going to just sit there and let her insult me like that?” Mother asked.
“You storm into our home yelling at us and accuse Charlotte of insulting you?” Anne asked.

Mother looked shocked, nobody ever disputed her proclamations about etiquette, certainly not Anne. She shifted tactics, “we both know that you’re too frail to live on your own! You’ll never be able to take care of yourself!”

Anne nodded toward Charlotte, “I won’t be living on my own.”

“As if that’s any better,” her mother shouted. “If you persist on following this foolish scheme, you will get no support from me, or any of the family!”

“I have no need of your money since I’ll have access to my inheritance when I turn twenty one and that is the only support I’ve ever received from you.”

“And what do you plan to do for the next nine months, pray tell?”

“Uncle Matlock will cover tuition and educational expenses until I am able to repay him and William is covering the cost of this house. Charlotte and I will manage the rest.”

“Your uncle and cousin can’t know what a scheming, artful creature Ms. Lucas is. They will revoke their support once they know all!” The fight raged on for the next half an hour with Lady Catherine brandishing imperious threats, insults, and admonishments and Anne and Charlotte standing their ground. At last, with a resigned sigh, Lady Catherine was grasping at straws and finally made an argument any caring parent would have classed higher on the list of priorities. “But you have no family here for support, if you have an emergency we’ll all be an ocean away.”

“William will be here soon,” Anne replied before she thought of the consequences.

“What? Why would William come here?” Her mother narrowed her eyes at her.

Anne had assumed her mother knew about William and Elizabeth, she was on the board of Pemberley Auction Houses after all, but this seemed to come as a surprise. “He’ll be staying here for the year for Elizabeth,” Anne answered meekly.

“Elizabeth Bennet?” Lady Catherine shrieked. Anne just nodded. “Very well. I shall now know how to act. I am disappointed in you Anne, I always thought you were more reasonable than this. William, however is too rational to fall into the same trap,” she said as she stormed back out of the house and into her waiting car.

“Well that went better than I expected,” Anne said to Charlotte. Charlotte raised her eyebrow at her, “she didn’t try to take me by force, so overall it was a win,” Anne shrugged.

Charlotte let out an exhausted breath and hugged Anne. “Shit!” She said, leaning back with an alarmed look, “should we warn Elizabeth?”

“You text Elizabeth, I’ll text William,” Anne nodded.

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The Bennet sisters were having surprisingly studious afternoon, Elizabeth reflected to herself. She was lounging on the couch quizzing herself for her last final with flashcards. Mary was going over her notes from her music theory class, Kitty was doing her social studies homework, her Father was grading papers in his study, Lydia was working her way through her math homework, and Mrs. Bennet had fallen asleep in the recliner – enabling them all to be productive by being silent with the exception of an occasional snore. The text notification on Elizabeth’s phone broke into this
silence drawing everyone’s attention for a moment before they returned to their respective work.

Charlotte: Warning: There’s a vindictive autocrat on the loose and she was last seen headed in your direction.

Elizabeth: Unless she can help me remember the architectural innovations between the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, I don’t have time to deal with her at the moment.

Charlotte: I don’t think you’ll have much of a choice. Lady Catherine was just here and Anne may have mentioned that Darcy is moving here … to be with you.

Elizabeth: Shit

She tried to return her focus to her flashcards, and succeeded in moving several of them to the ‘memorized’ pile before Kitty shouting: “Wow, there’s a limo coming down our road!”

“That’s a rather impractical vehicle for our hilly terrain,” Mary criticized.

“It’s turning into our driveway!” Lydia said, abandoning her equations to perch at the window beside Kitty.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and released it.

“It’s just some old lady,” Kitty observed.

“Maybe someone died and left me all of their money!” Lydia said.

Elizabeth silently thanked her mother for being a sound sleeper and made her way to the door before Lady Catherine rang the doorbell and alerted either of her parents to her presence.

“Ms. Bennet, I must speak with you!” Lady Catherine called as Elizabeth stepped out onto the porch, silently closing the door behind her. She glanced up at the interested faces waiting at the window and added, “I believe we passed a prettyish little park down the street, will you walk with me?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied, eager to take the conversation far away from the prying ears of her family.

“You know why I’m here, of course,” her Ladyship spat once they’d entered the park and started down the path.

“I’m sure you’re here to help Anne acclimate to her new home, you must be so proud of her,” Elizabeth said, ascribing Lady Catherine the maternal motivations anyone else might have.

“Don’t think I am unaware of your role in convincing Anne into this foolish step,” Lady Catherine said, snatching her glasses off of her face in anger, “you must know that I will never support Anne’s decision to abandon her duty.”

“Your trip to Massachusetts does certainly appear like support for her decision,” Elizabeth goaded.

“I came here to talk sense into my daughter and bring her home. I have found her to be so corrupted by that girl that she refused to obey the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude. Having failed at that point, I hope to find you more reasonable. My daughter seems to be under the impression that my nephew, Mr. Darcy, will soon be moving here to be with you. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible,
I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you.”

“It seems like you know everything then,” Elizabeth scoffed, “what’s the point of pulling me away from my studies when I have a final exam tomorrow?”

“I will happily allow you to return to your studies as soon as you admit that it’s all just a rumor.”

“If such a rumor exists, I’ve never heard it,” Elizabeth retorted, technically true as she’d never heard anyone else talk about it.

“And can you likewise declare, that there is no foundation for it?” She asked, brandishing her glasses as if they could somehow be an effective weapon.

“I don’t owe you any answers,” Elizabeth answered, at this point only extending the conversation out of spite.

“This is not to be borne. Miss Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has my nephew made such selfish plans?”

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible.”

“It ought to be so; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But you may have drawn him in.”

“If I was the kind of femme fatal that would manipulate a man like that, would I really tell you that I’d done it?”

Do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this. I am almost the nearest relation he has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns.”

“Ok, first of all, Will’s a big boy and can make his own decisions without your interference. Second, even if you are entitled to know his business, you are not entitled to know mine; nor will such behavior convince me to comply!”

“Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends?”

“I think some people pay far too much attention to the wishes of their friends. Like I said, Will can make his own decisions. If he chooses me, why shouldn’t I be with him?”

“Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet, interest; do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you wilfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us.”

“While my heart will truly break if a bunch of snobs across an ocean don’t like me without ever having met me, I think that the joy of being with Will would more than make up for that trauma.”

“Obstinate, headstrong girl! I am ashamed of you! Is this your gratitude for my attentions to you when you visited? Is nothing due to me on that score? I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose; nor will I be dissuaded from it. I have not been used to submit to any person's whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment.”

“You poor thing! What a privileged life you must lead, but I have no obligation to indulge your whims.”
“I will not allow my nephew to be dragged down by the upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up.”

“Cut the elitist bullshit, this isn’t the nineteenth century. Your title has no standing here and your antiquated ideas about social class don’t have any significance to me. Will and I are two people with common interests, compatibility, and mutual respect, that’s what matters in a relationship. Not a pedigree like some poodle in a dog show!”

“Don’t be naive Miss Bennet, we both know that social class is not a thing of the past. My nephew holds a certain place in the world and you just don’t measure up.”

“If Will doesn’t care about my social status, why should it bother you?” Elizabeth shot back.

Lady Catherine sighed, “Tell me once for all, are the rumors true? Is Darcy planning on throwing away his life and moving here?”

“Whether he’s ‘throwing his life away’ is debatable, but he is planning on moving here temporarily,” she finally admitted, growing weary of this conversation and wanting to get back to her studying.

“What about his obligations to his family, his company? No, you must promise me that you’ll break it off with him. For his own good.”

“I will do no such thing, I think we’re done here,” Elizabeth said as she turned on her heel to return home.

“Not so hasty, if you please. I have by no means done. To all the objections I have already urged, I have still another to add. I am certain that you were behind the slanderous video uploaded recently to the internet that makes a mockery of my Chimney Piece. Don’t think that I am ignorant of that!”

Elizabeth smiled, thinking of the video she’d posted as soon as the Huntsford semester had ended. “Are you trying to stifle my artistic creativity, Lady Catherine?” Elizabeth asked.

“Artistic creativity is one thing, plagiarism is quite another!” Lady Catherine said menacingly.

“The Chimney Piece is a found art installation in the first place. I made a three dimensional model of a fairly basic chimney design, printed it, and modified it. If you try to make a case of slander, I think you’ll find yourself without a leg to stand on, whether it’s a robotic chicken leg or otherwise!”

“You have no regard, then, for the honour and credit of either my artistic integrity or my nephew! Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?”

“Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say. You know my sentiments.”

“You are then resolved to have him?”

“I have said no such thing. I am only resolved to seek my own happiness without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me.”

“And this is your real opinion! This is your final resolve! Do not imagine, Miss Bennet, that your ambition will ever be gratified. I came to try you. I hoped to find you reasonable; but, depend upon it, I will carry my point. I will not allow my nephew to ruin his career over a woman.”
“Moving to Boston for a year would hardly ruin his career,” Elizabeth scoffed.

“I am on the board of Pemberley Auction Houses I will make sure that its CEO is not allowed to make such a disastrous step. I can assure you that such a disastrous misstep as fighting the board would damage his standing.”

“With all due respect, Lady Catherine, it doesn’t sound like I am the woman intent on ruining Will’s life.” Elizabeth had at that point reached her house so she stomped up the front steps and went in, slamming the door behind her. She glanced out the window and saw Lady Catherine re-entering the limo as the driver held the door open.

At some point her mother must have woken up and noticed the limo in the driveway because when Elizabeth re-entered the living room her mother asked why her ‘friend’ didn’t come inside.

“She did not choose to,” Elizabeth responded shortly and picked back up her flash cards.

She tried to focus, but it was hard not to dwell on her conversation with Lady Catherine. She’d made the point several times that it was Will’s choice, that if Will chose her then she would be happy to take him, but what if Lady Catherine was successful? After all, her arguments mirrored much of what Will had said to her before.

Even if Will could withstand Lady Catherine’s arguments, Elizabeth had recognized the threat in her last proclamation. His aunt would fight this. If she was on the board, she may even be able to stop the transfer whether Will agreed or not.

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Will gathered his belongings as he, Charlie, and Jane de-boarded the plane. It had only been a couple of days since Anne had called him warning him about Lady Catherine followed quickly by a rather long, tedious phone call from his aunt herself. Luckily, he had already received his visa and made all of the other necessary arrangements for the move, including getting approval from a majority of the board members. Nonetheless, his aunt’s tirade had consumed his entire evening then the entire business day yesterday had been eaten up dealing with fallout at work while she tried to turn other members of the board against his plans.

He’d had barely enough time to attempt a video chat with Elizabeth – which she did not answer – before meeting Charlie and Jane at the airport last evening. When Will’s visa came through earlier in the week Jane had suggested that he surprise Elizabeth by arriving with them. At the time he’d just wanted to get to Elizabeth as soon as possible and surprising her seemed like it could be fun and fairly harmless. Now that he’d been unable to contact her since his aunt’s meddling he was fretting about her reactions.

As Will made his way to the rental car counter, Charlie and Jane walked hand-in-hand toward the baggage carousels. He had to smile at how quickly they’d fallen back into their previous state of happiness. Jane had been hesitant to resume a romantic relationship at first but she wasn’t of a resentful temperament. Of course, the fact that Charlie had helped her through the Lydia debacle was a strong mark in his favor. Charlie’s role had been chiefly one of moral support, but it came at a time when Jane was separated from her family in a time of crisis.

Will envied their situation. His role in the aftermath was decidedly more active, yet he didn’t want Elizabeth to know about it. He loved her and he needed to help set things to rights but he was painfully aware that she didn’t love him … yet. He knew that it could help his cause if she knew, but he didn’t want her gratitude. He also knew that part of the reason she’d hated him in the first place was that she viewed him as an entitled rich man, he didn’t want her to think he was trying to
buy her love. He’d coasted for so long in this relationship on the scraps of affection he could get, now he wanted the real thing.

As he waited in line he turned on his American mobile for the first time since he’d left last summer. He instinctively checked the voicemail and instantly regretted it. Nonetheless, he forced himself to listen to dozens of messages Elizabeth had left after the party at Netherfield. In them she was irate and obviously hurt over his abandonment. She was far more eloquent in expressing her hatred of him in those messages than she’d even been at the Huntsford Inn when she rejected him. Her final message trailed off with the sickening line “don’t bother coming back, you are the last man in the world I ever want to see again!”

Suddenly the hint of apprehension he’d felt about seeing Elizabeth after his aunt’s interference blossomed into full anxiety.
With finals behind her, Elizabeth had nowhere to channel her nervous energy other than worrying about Will. She was trying to distract herself by decorating for Jane’s welcome home/graduation party. She’d tried to explain to her mother that a surprise party immediately following a transatlantic flight was not ideal – particularly when Jane’s study abroad program had just ended the day before and she had her graduation ceremony tomorrow morning – but her mother wouldn’t listen to reason. So Jane was going to come home jetlagged and ready to collapse in bed only to find the whole neighborhood there … Surprise!

Charlie was accompanying Jane home and Elizabeth was happy for them. She wasn’t sure how they would work things out, but at least they were together and happy for now. She sighed. Scheduling an internationally long-distance relationship was hard … made harder by sanctimonious interfering relatives. A balloon popped in her face and she realized that she’d clenched her nails into it as she blew it up. She blamed Lady Catherine. Looking up, she realized that she’d already filled more than enough balloons as it was. She pulled out the curling ribbon and began to wrangle them into some semblance of order.

Three balloon casualties and a full roll of ribbon later, Elizabeth wandered into the kitchen to help her mother and her sisters with the food.

“Elizabeth, I hear you’ve chosen a thesis subject,” Mary said as she layered cheese and meat slices onto a platter.

“I have! Dr. Gardiner set me up with an interview at a collection in London and I got enough material out of it to expand on,” Elizabeth said, blushing faintly at the actual cause of her in-depth knowledge of the collection. She hadn’t told her family about her and Will yet just in case it didn’t work out. It wouldn’t feel real until he was here.

“Is there really enough material there to base your thesis on?” Being an obsessive planner, Mary was already shopping around for ideas and information for her own senior thesis even though she’d just completed her sophomore year.

“More than enough, it’s an old family collection curated for public display. The house, the artwork, and the material culture work together seamlessly to give a deeper sense of history, of how the family lived and how the space was used.”

“It’s just a shame that all of the artwork and benches mean they can’t throw any parties in the ballroom,” Lydia said carelessly as she mixed together the punch.

“What?” Elizabeth asked in surprise. She hadn’t told Lydia anything about Pemberley.

“What? You know a good party would be closer to it’s intended purpose.”

“Wha … when were you at the Pemberley collection?”

“When I was in London. We were there forever while Mr. Darcy and Dad …”

“That’s enough, Lydia,” her dad reproached as he appeared at his study door.
“Oh, right! Darcy said it was supposed to be a secret, oops!” Lydia said, though she winked at Elizabeth. Her father gave Lydia one more warning look before returning to his books.

Elizabeth was stunned. She managed to finish haphazardly pouring bags of chips into bowls before she marched into her father’s study and closed the door behind her. The room was mostly taken up by wall-to-ceiling bookshelves on three walls and a single wingback chair with a footstool. There was hardly enough room for two adults, so Elizabeth was looming over her father. “What is she talking about? Why was she at Darcy’s house? Why is it a secret? What did he do?”

“He should have known you would figure it out anyway,” Mr. Bennet said as he slipped a piece of paper between the sheets and closed his book. “For whatever reason, he didn’t want you to know how much he helped with the whole situation.”

“And how much did he help?”

Her father sighed. “He gave a deposition, of course, about Wickham’s past. He hired a law firm to represent Lydia that appointed a barrister for her troubles in the UK as well as a lawyer here. He insists on paying for her legal fees too, he somehow thinks that he’s responsible for that reprobate’s actions.”

Elizabeth sank down to sit on the footrest, “why would he keep this from me?”

“Something about not wanting people to see him as an insufferable, presumptuous, asshole. Something tells me those weren’t his words though,” her father chuckled.

“I think I really messed this up, Dad,” she said softly, regretting that she’d squandered all of her chances. With Lady Catherine parroting back his initial criticisms and Elizabeth’s own family already a strain on his resources she might not get any more chances. “I’ve been so silly about how I’ve gone about this.”

“Ah, I suspected as much. There there, Lizzy. If he’s so squeamish that he’s scared away by a little absurdity he’s not worth the effort.” They heard the guests arriving and Elizabeth let out a weary sigh. “Let your mom and sisters play hostess, why don’t you hide in here with me for a while, it’ll be like old times.” She smiled at her father and nodded, searching out an old, warn, well-loved piece of classic fiction that had practically been her safety blanket as a child and tried to tune out the crowd growing behind the door.

“She’s coming!” Her mother’s shout spread through the house about an hour later. “Everybody get in the living room! Mr. Bennet! Get your butt out of your study this instant, eldest child is coming home!” Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth shared an exasperated eyeroll but got up and joined the crowd.

They remained as silent as thirty people crammed into a room with a maximum occupancy of ten possibly could as the doorknob jiggled when Jane opened it. “Surprise!” The smile froze on Elizabeth’s face as Jane and Charlie made their way into the room revealing a rather awkward Will Darcy standing in the doorway.

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*Too many people!* Will fought back the panic as he took in the overcrowded space. His eyes darted around until he finally found the one person he wanted to see all the way in the back. Their eyes met and he saw a flash of recognition and excitement in her eyes before it turned to anxiety as she looked back at the spectacle in the center of the room.

“Jane! I’m so glad to have you back home!” Mrs. Bennet was shrieking as she hugged Jane tight.
“And Charlie!” the woman released her grip on Jane to latch on to Charles, “we were starting to think you’d never come back, but then Jane’s too good of a catch to let slip, eeh Mr. Bingley!” She said with a vulgar wink and a nudge. She looked up, noticing him for the first time. “You must be Mr. Darcy,” she nearly spat his name. He wasn’t sure what he’d done to receive such venom from the woman, but he had a sinking suspicion that it had something to do with Elizabeth’s early dislike.

“I suppose you can come in too – if he ego can fit through the doorframe, pfft, my daughter … ‘not pretty enough to dance with!’” she said in a stage whisper to the woman beside her, confirming Will’s fears. “– any friend of Charlie’s,” she concluded in a barely civil tone.

He looked back to where he’d last seen Elizabeth but she was gone. The panic began to close in on him again – the crowded room, Mrs. Bennet’s pointed snub, Elizabeth’s sudden disappearance – he had to get out of there. He turned back to the porch, but a fresh batch of guests were just arriving. A girl looked at him with some trace of recognition, “do I know you from somewhere?” She asked, then her eyes went wide and she blushed furiously. “You’re the sa...”

“Hush Lucy!” Elizabeth said as she joined them on the porch, “why don’t you go find Mary?” The girl looked at him with a disapproving shake of the head and followed her friends inside. Elizabeth turned to him, “you wanna take a walk?”

He nodded, nervous. After they’d made it halfway down the block in silence he worked up the courage to ask, “what was that all about?”

“She may have recognized you from one of my drawings,” Elizabeth said with a blush. The drawing of him sleeping was nothing to blush over … oh no!

“You didn’t show her the one …” He blushed at the memory of that satyr.

“I kinda couldn’t help it?” She winced, “I’m sorry … I used my life drawing sketchbook when I drew you and I forgot to remove it before the sketchbook review … my professor loved it and suggested I develop it for my final project and I have a chronic inability to say no to professors …”

“So a roomful of students has seen me …”

“That’s not even the worst part,” she said, looking pointedly at the pavement in front of her.

“Please, for the love of God, don’t tell me it’s on the internet!” He shouted as she pulled him off of the sidewalk and onto a small park trail that led up the mountain and didn’t look like it got much use.

“No! You know I wouldn’t do that. I know how private you are and Professor Phillips has a strict no-photography rule at critiques. It’s just …” she bit her lip. This wasn’t how he’d seen their reunion going, he wanted to be the one biting her lip. “Wickham was there.”

“George Wickham saw a drawing that you made of me in a post-coital daze?”

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry. I don’t even know what he was doing there. Models never show up to those things and it was just supposed to be my class and I didn’t know he’d be there and I had no...”

“Elizabeth,” he cut off her rambling, “when was this critique in relation to … other events?” He asked, his heart beating erratically. She looked down and wrapped her arms around herself. “So Wickham saw evidence that we’d had a sexual relationship, then tried to seduce you, turned violent, and when you got away went after your sister?” A deep wave of guilt hit him, “this is even
more my fault than I’d thought.”

“None of this was your fault!” She said, finally meeting his eyes for a moment.

“He targeted you because of me.”

“That doesn’t make it your fault, that just makes him an even bigger jackass than we’d realized.” She bit her lip again then looked up, “by the way … I have to thank you for what you did for Lydia. We never would have been able to afford …”

“You were never supposed to know about that,” he said, scratching the back of his neck.

“I see …” she said sadly, charging forward down the narrowing path.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her to a stop. “It doesn’t appear that you do see. I didn’t want you to think that I was trying to buy your love.”

“But what about Lady Catherine?” She sounded insecure and that tore at his heartstrings.

He used his other arm to pull her closer to him. “She’s a bitter old windbag who has an inflated sense of self-importance and a minority place on the board of my company. She does not speak for me.”

“So you don’t think I’m a femme fatale who is using you for your money to bail out my broke family?”

“No,” he laughed and pulled her closer. “And I’m not the last man in the world you want to see?” She raised her eyebrow at him. “I turned on my American cell-phone when we landed …”

She buried her face in his chest with a moan, “tell me you didn’t listen to all of that angry voicemail.”

“Unfortunately I can’t tell you that,” he said into her hair.

“Why would you do that to yourself?” She asked, drawing back to see his face.

“Initially it was a force of habit, then it became the train crash of our relationship that I couldn’t turn away from.”

“Please promise me you’ll delete those. You know that’s not how I feel anymore.”

“Good,” he said, holding her tightly. “Can we be done fighting now?”

“Yes,” she whispered. She leaned in to kiss him and his world was set back to rights.

“I love you,” he sighed as they pulled apart.

She smirked and replied, “I love you too.” For a moment he was blissfully happy before the doubt settled back in and he walked a couple of paces away.

“You don’t have to say it back, you know. If you’re not ready.” They’d just gone through a barrage of emotional topics and it was only natural for her to be swept up. He knew he still had a hill to climb.

“Will,” she stepped forward and lightly touched his back, “I wouldn’t say I love you if I didn’t mean it.”
He turned around hesitantly, “really?” She nodded yes. “You love me?” He asked, still unable to wrap his head around it.

“William Fitzwilliam Darcy the fourth,” she said seriously as she took another step closer, “I love you.”

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Apparently his middle name did have some power over him because he finally smiled broadly then charged toward her, cupping her cheek as he kissed her. Keeping his momentum, he walked her backwards until her back hit a tree. She could feel him pressing against her, hard and needy and sadly neglected for over a month. She drew her hand slowly down his chest and grazed it softly over him before fumbling with the button of his pants.

“Lizzy!” He moaned, looking around him, “not here.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” she smirked looking at the surrounding forest. She’d taken them down a deserted path that was no longer maintained and hardly ever used anymore. They were in little danger of being discovered. “Or do I need to wait another six months to drag you down to this level again?” She caressed him through his pants and his breath hitched.

“I don’t think I could wait six hours, let alone six months,” he whispered into her ear and pressing himself into her hand.

She could tell his self-control was paper thin. “If you don’t want to do this now, we could go back to the party, drink some punch, mingle …” she bit his ear, “it could be hours before we get any alone time.”

“You’re such a vixen,” he said, drawing his hands under her sun-dress and lowering her panties.

“You know you love it,” she sighed as he ran his finger over her. He murmured his assent into her neck as she finished unfastening his pants and they dropped to the ground.

“Hoyden,” he whispered as he slipped a finger into her.

“Don’t you know any slang from this century?” She asked as he stimulated her. “You’re still a pretentious asshole,” she said endearingly as he lifted her leg to position himself at her opening, “but I love you anyway.”

“Oh, Lizzie!” He cried as he entered her. She reveled in the varied sensations – having him move inside her again, the sharp bite of the bark against her back, the gentle nips and kisses he was placing on her neck and jawline.

She called out his name and he began to move faster. On a particularly long withdraw he slipped out and they lost their rhythm. As he fumbled to reposition himself, she put her arms around his neck and lifted both legs around his waist. He immediately shifted one of his hands to her ass to support her and his other hand quickly joined it after he’d repositioned. The scrape of the tree bark became more pronounced without the support of her legs, but Elizabeth enjoyed the sting along with the pleasure.

There was something primal and yet soothing about being suspended in his arms. In that moment she was dependent on him and she trusted him not to drop her. “Lizzie, I …” he moaned, she could tell he was close. Since both of his hands were currently occupied, she reached down to stimulate herself. He pressed his weight further into her when he came, trapping her further against the tree. She followed a moment after while he was still releasing into her.
She laughed as her rubbery legs reached for the ground. One of her sandals had fallen off and she was certain that she was a hot mess. “Well, do you think we’re presentable enough to head back to the party?” she teased, pulling some loose bark out of her hair and noting his raw knuckles where they were scraped by the tree.

“Fit for proper company,” he laughed, smoothing down her dress. They did their best to help straighten each other out before they emerged from the path holding hands. After stopping at the rental car – because of course William Darcy remembered to pack cleansing wipes and a comb in his carry-on – they looked passably normal by the time they rejoined civilization.

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Lydia watched in amusement as Lizzie and Darcy walked up to the house hand in hand then tried to slip into the party unseen. She’d never really noticed Darcy when he was here last summer. She’d noticed that he never really relaxed around their family and neighbors and that his employees tensed up when he walked in. For those sins she’d written him off as a buzzkill and a bore.

She’d seen a different side of him in London. He’d been gentle and kind when she was scared and he’d made sure she had lawyers – good ones too, better than Dad could afford. There was some ‘hidden’ reason why he didn’t want ‘the rest of the family’ knowing about how much he’d helped her. She’d heard hushed references between him and his sister about Lizzy and it wasn’t difficult to tell that he had a crush on her. She’d thought it was such a joke at the time because Lizzy obviously hated his guts.

Of course, while she was in London she’d still believed George loved her. Why shouldn’t Darcy pay for their legal expenses since he was the one who ruined George’s life in the first place. The truth was difficult to believe at first, but on reflection made so much more sense. George had just been using her – for sex, to retaliate against Lizzie, to get back at Darcy, to get a free ticket home – and she’d fallen for every line out of his gorgeous mouth.

She’d come to more than one realization that night. As she sat there crying her eyes out over Lizzie’s shoulder she’d seen the drawing of Darcy propped up against a lamp. Lizzie didn’t hate him, at least not completely. She must miss him …

Then it hit her that even her ‘savior’, who came to her rescue from the villain, wasn’t doing it for her. He was doing it for Lizzie. He was doing it for the memory of some horrible tragedy of his sister’s. He was saving her because of what she represented, not for her. It stung.

After that night, her eyes had been opened about a lot of things. She’d always believed her mother that a girl could coast by on her looks. Find a nice boy, get your hooks in him, marry him, and you’re set for life. She realized now how fragile that was. It wasn’t just nice boys that were attracted to pretty girls. They wouldn’t always support you and even when they did it wasn’t always ideal. She’d always let her dad’s teasing slide off her back, because it didn’t matter. Now that her eyes were open, she saw the way her mom winced at his comments – the tears and hollering were for show, but the wince was real pain.

Her mother was a pretty girl. She’d found a nice boy, gotten her hooks in him, married him, and she was set for life … with a man who didn’t respect her. That wasn’t the life she wanted. So she’d quietly started making changes. She studied more – maybe she’d have something to say that would interest guys, if not, maybe she’d be able to make a life for herself.

She watched Lizzie make some witty comment and Darcy laughed, hanging on every word. Lizzy seemed happy, Darcy seemed like a different person. It was nice. Fairytales weren’t real, but maybe good things can happen in this dark cruel world after all.
“Lizzy! Goodness gracious girl, where have you been!” their mother shrieked as she came in through the patio door. Darcy jumped a foot away from Lizzie at the shout. Even Lydia could see how crass her mother was and how uncomfortable it made the poor guy.

“We just went for a walk,” she winked at Darcy then led their mother a couple steps away and said in a stage whisper, “I got him out of your hair so Jane and Charlie could have the spotlight.” Lydia stopped herself from laughing out loud. That must have been some ‘walk’ for them to float back all disheveled.

“Good thinking Lizzie! We wouldn’t want to spoil Jane’s day! You always were a clever one even if you don’t know how to use your assets,” she added as she flipped Lizzie’s hair off of her shoulder. Darcy nearly laughed as he stared at Lizzie. “Good Lord Lizzie! What did you do to your back!” Her mother shoved Lizzie’s hair further away, Lizzie turned beet red, and Lydia was willing to bet that Darcy would have thrown his cape over her to cover her embarrassment if it was a different era – he was a gentleman like that.

“She probably fell out of a tree mama, you know how much of a tomboy Lizzie is!” Lydia chimed in, trying to redirect her mother’s thoughts. She winked at Lizzie.

“In front of a man! Have I taught you nothing! And look how snagged your poor dress is!” She turned to Darcy, “you’ll have to excuse Elizabeth, she was always the only one of my girls who couldn’t wear dresses to church because her knees were scabbed over. What a shame! Lizzy, go upstairs and clean yourself up at once!” Mom steered Elizabeth towards the stairs then went back outside to coo over Charlie and Jane and brag to her neighbors. About halfway up the stairs, when mom was out of sight, Elizabeth cocked her head to Darcy and after a minute he awkwardly made his way after her.

If a smart-ass tomboy like Lizzie could find the perfect dork for her, there was probably still hope for Lydia’s happy ending. She was way cuter, after all.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting close to the end folks. The drama is mostly over. It's all fluff, smut, and happy endings from here on out :)
Domesticity?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“You’re moving to London?” Elizabeth asked, dazed at her sister’s sudden decision. Much to the disappointment of certain inhabitants of Netherfield, Jane and Elizabeth both insisted on sleeping in their own room at their parents house on Jane’s first night home. They’d already caught each other up on the events of the last month and had now moved on to the future.

“I am,” Jane answered serenely.

“Permanently?” Elizabeth clarified.

“I don’t know that it’ll be forever, but for now at least.”

“But you and Charlie just got back together a couple of weeks ago, what if Caroline messes things up again, or Charlie flakes out, or they laugh you out of the country for calling something tea that’s really a tisane?”

“Those some rather specific concerns. And funny coming from a girl whose boyfriend just made a similar move himself,” Jane teased.

“But that’s only temporary, to see if things work out.”

“Uhh Huh,” Jane murmured her disbelief. “Besides, I’m not moving there for Charlie,” at Elizabeth’s raised eyebrow she amended, “or not solely for Charlie. The primary school I was working with for my study abroad offered me a full time teaching position beginning next term. It’s a good opportunity and I missed my window to apply for teaching jobs around here for next year by being away last semester.”

“True,” Elizabeth sighed, “I’m happy for you. I am … but you just got back and now you’ll be leaving again so soon … I’ll just miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too Lizzy,” Jane said, wrapping her in one of her warm ‘big sister’ hugs that Lizzy was sure she could never live up to with their younger sisters. “We’ll still have email and video chat to keep in contact. Besides, I don’t think it’ll be too long until you move to London as well,” she said with a knowing smile.

“We don’t know that … Will and I have never really had a chance to just have a normal relationship. It’s been all fireworks and drama. What if things don’t work out? What if we try this and find that we’re just not compatible? What if he shrinks all of my clothes in the dryer and he can’t stand the way I load the dishwasher?”

“Those are surmountable obstacles, Lizzy. And what if things do work out? What happens next?” Elizabeth opened her mouth to respond but nothing came out. She knew that Will couldn’t live here indefinitely. Realistically they’d have a year to figure things out then their options were either that she move to London or they break up. That didn’t seem fair to Will after he’d invested so much into their relationship already but she also wasn’t sure she’d be ready at twenty-three to commit to this being her last relationship. She knew they wouldn’t be able to keep up the intensity of their first year together … weren’t long-term relationships where great sex went to die?

“He loves you and even though you did your best to ignore it for so long, you love him too,” Jane
said soothingly, “Just give him a chance, ok?”

“I will, I owe him that much at least.”

“Good, he’s a good guy at heart and you’re helping him come out of his shell a bit.”

The sisters silently went through their nighttime rituals like they had countless times for most of their lives, both reflecting on the fact that it may be one of the last times they did so together. After they’d crawled into their beds and turned off the light, Jane whispered, “it would be great, wouldn’t it?”

“What?”

“If we both lived in London. You’d be a rock-star gallerina or curator while I taught. We’d see each other often, obviously, since Charlie and Will are such good friends. We could have a double wedding out in the English countryside.”

“I know you’re graduating college in,” Elizabeth glanced at her alarm clock, “twelve hours but that doesn’t mean you have to plan out your whole life tonight.”

“I know,” Jane yawned, “I’m just happy.”

They lay there in silence for a few more minutes before Elizabeth whispered, “you know what would be the best part of that double wedding you proposed?”

“What?”

“Mom would be on another continent when we planned it, so she couldn’t steamroll over our ideas,” the two dissolved into a fit of giggles. Jane fell asleep quickly after that, twelve hours of travel followed by a party finally caught up to her. Elizabeth, however, laid awake for hours vacillating between visions of that happy future and worrying about all of the ways it could fall apart.

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“You’ve been unusually quiet,” Will said as they got into his car. Jane’s commencement ceremony had gone smoothly, if a touch boring, but the celebration lunch that followed had been … eventful. Jane and Charlie had announced their plans to return to London to her family. Mrs. Bennet immediately shrieked that Jane and Charlie must be engaged and demanded to see the ring. Charlie had choked on his drink and mumbled a vague answer while Jane clarified that she’d been offered a teaching position.

The commotion had nearly died down when Lydia decided to interject that she was sure Lizzy would be moving to London soon too – causing Will to choke on his own drink and freeze. Elizabeth glared at her baby sister over the commotion of questions, but finally admitted that they were in a relationship and that Will would be living here for the next year.

While he disliked the manner in which it was done as well as the discomfort it caused Elizabeth, Will couldn’t be sorry that their relationship was no longer a dirty little secret hidden from the world. He loved her and he didn’t much mind if others knew that. At the end of the meal, Mrs. Bennet had practically forced Jane and Elizabeth to return with ‘their men’ back to Netherfield. Again, he disliked the manner but not the end result. All he wanted was some time alone with Elizabeth.

“I’m sorry,” she said contemplatively as he pulled out of the car park, “I know that scene in there
must have been mortifying.”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” he said, taking her hand and kissing it quickly before returning his eyes to the road.

She slipped back into silence and he racked his brain for something to say to comfort her. He was mentally rehearsing some options when he felt her hand caressing his leg. He enjoyed the casual intimacy of it, enjoyed simply being in her presence again. He moaned when her hand caressed upward, hissing when she cupped the rapidly growing bulge in his trousers. “Elizabeth, what are you doing?” He asked, keeping his eyes on the road while she silently unzipped him and released his shaft.

“Lizzy?” he whimpered, briefly looking down at her. She gave him a mischievous smirk before leaning down and teasing his tip with her tongue. He momentarily closed his eyes in pleasure as she ran her tongue down his length and back up – and frantically swerved back into his own lane when he opened them, luckily there hadn’t been any oncoming traffic.

“Elizabeth, these are rather … ahh … unsafe driving conditions,” he cried out, forcing himself to focus on the winding mountain road as she closed her mouth around him and began bobbing her head. He frantically searched for an exit, a gas station, anywhere that he could pull over and simply enjoy the ecstasy of the moment. After what felt like hours, but realistically was probably only minutes, he found a scenic overlook to pull off on.

Glancing around to see that the space was blissfully uninhabited, he put the car in park – a trial in itself as Elizabeth’s body was draped over the gear shifter. Once the car was secured, he moved one hand from the gear shifter to fondle Elizabeth’s breasts and plunged the other into her hair. She moaned her approval, increasing his pleasure.

Blindly groping with her left hand as she continued to suck him, she released her seatbelt and shifted to a more comfortable position that allowed her to take him deeper into her throat. “Lizzy, I’m so close …” he cried, trying to lift her head, but she stubbornly kept at it merely increasing her suction and pace. He came hard, his hips involuntarily lifting up as he spilled into her throat. He collapsed back into his seat, panting. Elizabeth sat up and looked around, “pretty view.”

Will laughed, “you nearly ran us off the road with your feminine wiles, then shatter me into a million pieces and all you have to say is pretty view?!?”

“Well,” she said with that damn saucy look of hers, “what are handsome young men compared to rocks and mountains? I could spend hours here in transports gazing across the wilderness.”

“Right then,” he said, accepting her challenge. He unfastened his seatbelt and pressed her back against her seat, reclining it with only a brief delay while fumbling with the controls. “You focus on the rocks and mountains then,” he whispered against her shoulder as his hand grazed up her thigh under her dress. She moaned as he began caressing and nibbling on her shoulder. Mindful of the marks he’d left before and uncomfortable with the certainty that her parents would now know where they came from if she arrived home with more, he kept his nips light and focused instead on tracing his tongue across every inch of exposed skin.

“Will,” she moaned, threading her fingers through his hair as he slipped a finger into her, then two. He set a fast pace, slightly rougher than usual. If she’d intentionally pushed him to lose control he figured it was only polite to return the favor. She was already panting heavily by the time she yanked his head up by the hair and kissed him hungrily. He therefore had the pleasure, minutes later, of swallowing her cries as she came.
He gave her a moment to catch her breath before confronting her. “Would you mind telling me what the bloody hell that was all about?”

“You didn’t enjoy it?” she asked, looking up at him with a mock pout.

“You know bloody well that I enjoyed it, you little vixen, but that was dangerous. What if I had crashed the car? You could have been hurt, killed even.”

“Isn’t the danger part of the thrill?” She asked.

“No thrill is worth your life,” he shot back, confounded that this was even a discussion. He couldn’t even bear to think of his bleak existence if she had died in an accident while he was driving, of having to live on without her haunted by guilt and pain. She sighed and looked out over the horizon. “What is going on?” He asked.

“I just … are we going to become domestic now? Fall into routines? Have the same boring sex at the same times scheduled into our week for the rest of our lives?” Will smothered a smile. Despite her fears, she’d just admitted that she envisioned them together forever.

“Lizzy, just yesterday we had sex against a tree on a public path, then slipped off for a handjob in your childhood bedroom with your parents and thirty guests milling about the house. I can’t envision a world where we have boring sex.”

“But yesterday was unique, we hadn’t seen each other in a month and it was the first time I’d said ‘I love you’ and it was the resolution to all of the drama and uncertainty of our relationship so far … how are we ever going to top that intensity? How can we maintain that spark?”

“While I can’t guarantee another day just like yesterday,” he quirked a smile at her, “I will still have to travel for work, so there will be other times we’re separated and consequent reunion sex. And living on the same continent, in the same house even will only give us more opportunities to have wild, passionate sex at odd hours of the day and night.”

“Same house?” She quirked her eyebrow at him, “isn’t that a bit fast?”

“Sweetheart, I just moved across an ocean to be with you, I think we’re past worrying whether things are too fast. I’ll still have a place in Boston since I’ll have to work there for most of the work week, but I’ll be at Netherfield for the weekends … it is a rather large house. I’ve taken over the lease from Charles … and Anne and Charlotte will be living there as well so you won’t be lonely during the week.”

He held his breath while Elizabeth bit her lip in thought, he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. He wanted to have the option to be spontaneous and surprise her by coming out on a Tuesday evening. He didn’t want to pick her up for dates at her parents house and drop her off at the end of the evening. Finally a slow smile spread across her face, “I suppose if you’re willing to move over three thousand miles to be with me, I can manage moving three miles up the mountain.”

“Excellent!” He leaned in and kissed her out of joy. When they pulled apart he picked the thread of their previous conversation back up, “I can’t guarantee you that our lives will always be exciting, though I personally can’t see us losing our spark, but there are only so many boundaries we can push, do you really want to cross all of them in our first year?”

“I suppose not,” she conceded.

“How about we promise each other now that we’ll leave ourselves open to experiment without forcing it.”
“That sounds like a reasonable solution,” she said, holding her pinky out expectantly. He looked askance at it, unsure what she expected him to do. “It’s a pinky swear, you hold your pinky out like so, and we link pinkies for a promise that can’t be broken. It’s the standard contract between American children.”

“So to be clear, you want me to link little fingers with you to make an eternally binding promise – which is redundant since ‘promise’ implies the same – in a fashion favored by school children that I will continue to fuck you senseless and explore new levels of debauchery?”

“Yes,” she answered with a chipper voice.

He linked pinkies with her and said, “you are absurd.”

“Yes, but you love me anyway.”

“Always,” he leaned in and kissed her deeply.

Chapter End Notes

This scene is the result of a comment on another site who pointed out that we've only had one extremely brief blowjob for this story so far. To be honest, I often find blowjob scenes kind of cringe-worthy in their male-gaziness, so I decided to ramp it up to the point where Elizabeth had all of the agency and Will was just holding on for dear life.
Elizabeth moaned as she turned off the alarm. Will shifted and spooned behind her, clamping his arm around her before she could even settle back onto the pillow. “Too early,” he mumbled into her hair.

She giggled as she lazily stroked his arm. “In Boston and London you’re always up with the sun.”

“In Boston and London I don’t usually have as strong an inducement to remain in bed,” he grumbled, trailing kisses along her shoulder, “nor do I usually have such strenuous activities keeping me awake at night.”

She turned her head, hiding her smile in the pillow. “I’m sorry I’m such a distraction. I’ll try to stay out of your hair from now on.”

“Don’t you dare,” he said, rolling her onto her back and leaning in to kiss her deeply. “I want you right where you are,” he whispered against her throat, “in my arms every morning looking sleepy and rumpled and perfect.”

As she was familiar with her own reflection in the mirror every morning, Elizabeth thought Will may be somewhat biased in his interpretation of ‘perfect’ but she let it slide as his lips found hers again. She allowed herself to be pleasantly diverted for several minutes before she groaned, remembering the day they had before them. “Will,” she said pushing him slightly.

“Lizzy?” He replied with a sinful smirk as his hand trailed slowly down her side.

“We have to get up,” she sighed.

“We have time,” he said as he began lightly teasing her opening. She threw her head back in a moan as one finger entered her. He’d hardly had time to establish a rhythm before the second alarm went off on his nightstand – the one they set in case they fell back to sleep or got ‘distracted’ after the first.

“Bollocks!” he growled into her shoulder before rolling over to silence the alarm.

Elizabeth pressed a kiss into his back, “why don’t you hop in the shower, I’ll start the coffee.”

“You know, we do have a full house today, you could join me and conserve hot water,” he turned and pulled her close again.

“Ha! We both know that would conserve nothing, you’ll just have to manage your own … shower this morning,” she laughed as she pulled away and dragged herself out of bed.

He pouted, but slowly made his way to their en-suite bathroom. Elizabeth slipped on a robe and sleepily headed down to the kitchen. She waited while it brewed, since she could hear Anne getting ready upstairs, she filled three travel mugs: one black, one with a dash of cream, and the third with cream and sugar. She’d just finished starting the second pot brewing when a sleepy Anne walked in already dressed for school and work.

“Is that coffee?” She signed.
Elizabeth handed her a mug and signed, “cream and enough sugar to rot your teeth.” Anne, Charlotte, Elizabeth and Will had all taken a sign language course together over the summer and their vocabulary had grown quite a bit over the ensuing months.

“Bless you!” Anne signed and sighed into her first sip. “Anybody else up?”

“Will, in the shower,” Elizabeth signed as she held up the two remaining mugs and motioned upstairs.

“Good luck today,” Anne signed.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth responded out-loud since her hands were engaged and headed back upstairs.

Will was still in the shower when she returned so she knocked on the door and entered the bathroom at his response. Setting the mugs on the vanity, she began brushing her teeth. She handed him his towel when he turned off the water. He kissed her nape when he emerged from the steam with the towel wrapped loosely around his waist. He grabbed his usual mug and took a sip of coffee. “Thank you, sweetheart,” he said, kissing her quickly on the cheek before moving back into the bedroom to get dressed. While she showered he re-entered the bathroom and shaved and blow dried his hair.

It was like a choreographed dance that they indulged in whenever they were in the same town and Elizabeth couldn’t wait until they lived together full time and could just get on with their life together. She sighed into the jetstreams. It was January and Elizabeth’s final semester was starting up. She’d already submitted and passed her senior thesis last semester so that with the help of Dr. Gardiner she’d be able to apply to jobs in the spring. Most of them would be in London, but Elizabeth wasn’t naïve enough to put all of her eggs in one basket. She hoped she’d get a job in London so that their relationship could progress, but if she didn’t get any of those positions and she was offered a great job here … she wasn’t prepared to give up on her dreams or to just coast by living off of Will until she found something suitable. In a few months their relationship purgatory would end and they would either move on with their lives together, or …

It would be devastating to have to break up at this point. She’d loved Will last June when they moved into Netherfield, but as cliché as it sounded, that love just grew deeper every day. But she’d also seen the strain on Will these last six months had caused – commuting to and from Boston every week, four international business trips, and conference calls at odd hours of the day – she couldn’t ask him to keep that up forever. Sometimes she worried that she wasn’t worth all of the effort he put in.

She sighed once more, letting the warmth of the water seep into her bones, then shut the water off. When she pulled back the shower curtain Will was standing there with her towel. The look on his face soothed her fears. Rather than merely hand it to her, he held it in both hands and wrapped it around her in a hug. “You’ll get your shirt wet,” she giggled at him.

“It’s just water,” he kissed her, “and it’s absolutely worth it.” He stepped back and let her take over the arrangement of her own towel. It was true that he’d been worn out with all of the travel, but he’d also become more playful during these last months as well. She gave him an endearing smile and moved toward the bedroom to dress. He slapped her playfully on the butt as she passed.

“How dare you,” she said in mock affront.

“How indeed?” he asked with a smile.
She heard him turn the hair dryer back on while she started dressing – presumably for the wet splotches on his dress shirt. “Shall I go start breakfast?” He asked when his shirt was dried and his tie and jacket in place.

“Yes please,” she answered as she moved into the bathroom to dry her hair.

The coffee pot was full when Will entered the kitchen, but he put the kettle on as well. He set the porridge going in the rice cooker and was pulling the eggs and bacon out of the fridge when Georgiana entered.

“Good morning, did you sleep well?” He asked his sister without thinking.

“If I’m being honest … not really,” she answered nervously.

“No, of course not,” he mentally kicked himself for being so thoughtless. How could she sleep before … “Are you certain you want to do this?” He asked as he pulled her into a hug, “It’s not too late, we’ll do fine without you.”

“Thanks Will,” she said into his chest and at that moment he felt like she was a scared thirteen-year old again. Then she pulled back and straightened her spine with a look of determination – transforming again into a remarkable woman – “But this is something I have to do. If I’d just pressed charges in the first place maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Georgiana, what happened with Lydia wasn’t your fault, neither was what happened to you,” Will said firmly, the familiar guilt over the situation cloaked over him in layers. “If I had taken action sooner – pressed charges after the embezzlement or told you what he was like – this would have been sorted long before either of you were hurt.”

“And if Georgiana and the housekeeper hadn’t pulled me off of him, George Wickham would be dead and we’d all still be asleep at this ungodly hour,” Fitzwilliam said as he yawned his way to the coffee pot.

“How well do you think you’d be sleeping in a jail cell?” Elizabeth asked as she walked in with her eyebrow raised.

“I think I’d sleep alright knowing I’d taken a predator off of the street.”

“Don’t talk like that!” Georgiana cried.

“We all need to stop blaming ourselves,” Elizabeth said. Looking at Will with an apology in her eyes she added, “and each other.” He hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “Georgiana could have pressed charges, Fitzwilliam could have beaten him senseless, Will could have told me about Wickham’s past, I could have actually talked to my sisters about what he did to me, Lydia could have shown a better judgment … but the blame still comes down to the actions of one hateful man. Today we’re going to kick his ass in court, then starting tomorrow we’ll think only of the past as its remembrance gives us pleasure.”

“Hear, hear,” Fitzwilliam raised his coffee mug in agreement, “that’s a fine philosophy to follow!”

Ann returned home and collapsed onto the sofa in the lounge. Wednesdays were impossible days for her. It started with a 7:00 lecture with a professor whose voice was pitched perfectly to put
students to sleep. Then she went straight to work from 8:30 through 14:00. She had barely time to grab something quick to eat before her 14:30 lab. At least on Wednesdays she arrived home by dinner, even if she was too drained to do anything other than lay about.

She’d officially transferred to Longbourne now and declared an engineering major. She was finally doing what she wanted and she loved her life … but sometimes it sucked. She still had a little over a month before she turned twenty-one and had access to her fortune, so for the time being she had to work to help pay for food. The terms of her student visa limited her to working on campus and she was still too nervous about her disability to work in any customer service roles just yet, so that left her sorting through returned books in the library. She’d never thought of books as terribly heavy until she’d been forced to move high volumes of them for hours at a time. It was labor she wasn’t accustomed to and her muscles still protested loudly at their mistreatment.

She’d been raised in a household with more servants than members of the family and a mother and nurse who never allowed anything to remotely overtax her. The concept of manual labor was still foreign to her. It’s not that she never wanted to work – what’s the point of an engineering degree if you can’t build amazing things at the end of it? – but working at a menial job that held no interest merely for the sake of making money had never even been something she’d considered. Her mother would be horrified if she knew.

She grabbed a few more pillows from the other side of the sofa and repositioned herself, trying to alleviate her sore muscles. She was living her life on her own terms … so why did she feel so nostalgic for the days when Mrs. Jenkinson would have fetched the pillows from the other side of the sofa for her before she’d even thought to ask? When a maid would fetch her a cup of tea at the nod of a head? She looked at her phone and realized there was still another half hour minimum before Charlotte came home. As she contemplated working on some homework in the interim she faded off into a nap.

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Charlotte came home to a dark and seemingly empty house, apparently Lizzy and the others hadn’t gotten back from court yet. She discovered Anne sprawled out on the couch and felt a surge of affection for her. She dropped her bag in the front hall and quietly made her way to the kitchen to make some tea. It was too early for Anne to go to bed entirely, but she also knew how rough Wednesdays were for her. She made her a strong cup from the new reserves of her favorite tea that her cousins had just brought her from England and made her way back to the living room.

It was almost a shame to wake her, she looked so adorable. Despite her current financial limitations, she’d gradually begun replacing her wardrobe from the froofy garbage her mother picked out for her and was cobbling out her own style between new selections and salvage from her old clothes. Today she was wearing a new pair of jeans, with a blouse and an embroidered cashmere sweater from the old regime.

Charlotte set their tea on the coffee table and gently ran a hand through Anne’s hair, “wake up, sleeping beauty.” She knew that if she’d been able to read her lips, Anne’s nose would have wrinkled at the cheesy endearment, but as it was she just stretched and mumbled a sleepy greeting.

“You look like you could use this,” Charlotte grinned as she handed her a cup.

Anne inhaled the aroma deeply before taking a contented sip. “I was just getting nostalgic for the days when I had someone to bring me tea,” Anne signed. Charlotte tensed up, she was always a bit nervous when Anne got nostalgic for home. She knew that her life here wasn’t as easy as it had been at Rosings and a part of Charlotte still worried that she wasn’t enough to keep Anne content. “But then you bring me tea just the way I like it and remind me how much better my life is now,”
Anne concluded. She shoved her mountain of pillows aside and pulled Charlotte down next to her so she could kiss her. Charlotte smiled against her lips at this affirmation.

Leaning back, she asked Anne how her day was and listened to the various minutiae of a typical Wednesday. When Anne had concluded, Charlotte gave an account of her own day.

“It seems odd, somehow, that it was such a normal day for us when Lizzie and Will and the others had such a big day.”

“Your right, of course,” Anne answered with a furrowed brow, “I somehow even forgot it was going on in the bustle of my day. Have we heard anything yet?”

“No, though I expect they’ll be home soon,” Charlotte looked at her watch, debating whether she should start dinner or not. They might go out afterwards to celebrate or commiserate depending on which way it went. She pulled out her phone and texted Lizzy: ETA on when you’ll all be home?

“Oh, just about nowish!” Lizzie yelled out as she opened the front door.

“How’d it go?” Charlotte yelled back, still facing Anne so she could read her lips.

Elizabeth walked into the living room smiling even through her evident exhaustion. “Guilty on all counts!” She said as she sank into the loveseat.

“As nauseating as they were to hear, we were fortunate that the bounder had sent some rather explicit ‘sexts’ to Lydia referring to previous times they’d been together … intimately …” Will cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable discussing the matter but finding it necessary, “they were sent before she turned sixteen. His lawyer was trying to argue that she’d been sixteen when they were apprehended and they couldn’t prove statutory.” He sat down beside Elizabeth and took her hand.

“Of course, they had him on camera for the credit card fraud, but we needed to prove statutory to get to international child abduction.”

“How long is he going away for?” Anne asked.

“They haven’t had the sentencing hearing yet, but it will be a good long time,” Elizabeth both spoke and signed most of her reply (sentencing hearing wasn’t in her ASL vocabulary yet).

“The good news is, he’ll have to be registered as sex offender whenever he does get out,” Fitzwilliam chimed in.

Charlotte was relieved that it was all over now for the people she cared about at least. Noticing Georgiana still hovering near the doorway looking haunted, she realized sadly that would never fully be true. Noting that the girl was doing her best to blend in to the wallpaper, Charlotte decided it was best not to call attention to her, so instead she asked the group about dinner plans.

“Ohhh Mate!” Fitzwilliam said through a yawn, “I’m knackered, I don’t want to move from this chair tonight until I’m off to bed!”

“Take-away?” Anne suggested.

“Pizza,” Elizabeth confirmed, “can you order while I change out of these clothes? We can have a pajama party and watch a movie.”

Half an hour later, they reassembled in the living room. Most wore their pjs though Fitzwilliam had
refused to leave his chair and Charlotte suspected that Will had required some persuading from Lizzie to comply. They’d tried to pick a movie but were unable to agree on anything so they’d decided to just eat and talk – with a moratorium on any subject involving George Wickham.

“It feels rather odd eating in my night clothes on a sofa,” Georgiana mused quietly, eying her paper plate suspiciously as if it too were a novelty in her life.

“You’ve never had a pajama party?” Lizzy cried.

“Never,” Georgiana said.

“Nor I,” Anne added.

Lizzie looked at the two men. Will shook his head no. “Does boarding school count?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“That depends,” Charlotte mused, “are we talking about sneaking out into the common room to eat junk food after hours or just laying in your beds talking?”

“The later,” he admitted.

“Then no.”

“Wow, Charlotte, look at all of these experiences we get to introduce our aristocratic friends to,” turning to Georgiana she added, “later we can braid each other’s hair.”

“Oh! I’d love that, it’d be almost like having sisters!” Georgiana seemed inordinately pleased at the idea. Anne gave Charlotte a smirk referencing other times that they’d played with each other’s hair that were best not mentioned in public. The guys seemed uncomfortable and out of place.

“We did miss out on quite a bit, I suppose,” Anne added contemplatively. “How old were you when you had your first job, Lizzy?”

“Does babysitting count?”

“It does if you were paid,” Fitzwilliam chipped in.

“Thirteen, then. Though I’d been babysitting for my younger sisters for years by then.”

“Good God, who would trust an eleven year old with the care of children?”

“Francie Bennet,” Charlotte supplied with a smirk, “if it meant she could have ‘a moment of quiet to calm her poor nerves,’” Charlotte answered in the impersonation of Mrs. Bennet she’d long-since perfected. Will rolled his eyes and everyone else laughed.

“How about you, Charlotte?”

“Babysitting around the same age, paper rout at fourteen, and retail starting at sixteen.”

“Georgiana?”

“Um … I’ve never had a job …”

“Never?” Charlotte asked before she caught herself. Georgiana shook her head in embarrassment.

“I hadn’t either until August. Fitzwilliam?”
“I had an internship at nineteen, though as it was unpaid I suppose it doesn’t count. I was twenty-two when I entered the workforce, after I finished university.”

“William?”

“I’d been groomed to take over Pemberley Auction Houses my whole life and thankfully began learning the ropes and lending a hand now and then around age sixteen, though I wasn’t a paid employee until twenty-two.”

“Where is all of this coming from?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“Oh, I was contemplating the plight of doing menial labor that held absolute interest to me while being bombarded with an ever-growing stack of books to sort today and it wasn’t something I’d ever contemplated or expected I’d have to do. I was feeling sorry for myself I guess.”

“But look how far you’ve come,” Fitzwilliam said. “A year ago you would be knackered after three hours of class and a walk around the gardens at Rosings and now you have this whole life!”

“True, I wonder what else we missed without even realizing it.”

Will laughed cynically, “what could we possibly miss by not working mindless jobs?”

Charlotte looked at Lizzy with a laugh and the two entertained the others for the next hour with crazy tales of hi-jinx in babysitting, retail, and foodservice.

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Will looked down at Lizzy snuggled into his chest dozing and sighed in contentment. Georgiana had been the first to go up to bed, followed swiftly by Fitzwilliam. The two couples had remained up initially so they could fill Anne and Charlotte in on more details of the trial without fear of upsetting Georgiana. They’d then fallen into more tales of Lizzy and Charlotte’s childhood, but the conversation had died down.

Lizzy seemed so peaceful after the tense day and he was reluctant to wake her, so he shifted and managed to lift her without her waking.

“Why don’t I get someone to carry me off to bed?” Anne sleepily whined.

“Babe, you weigh like 80 pounds,” Charlotte smirked, “I can make this happen.” Will watched her scoop Anne up before they all headed toward the stairs. “See all of life-long skills I aquired from babysitting?”

“Hey! I’m over six and a half stone now that I’m off of mummy’s crazy enforced diet!” Anne defended.

“Oh, you’re right, you’re so heavy,” Charlotte pretended to drop her as they walked down the hall. Anne squealed and Lizzy woke up disoriented.

“You’re alright, we’re almost to bed,” Will whispered to her as he pushed backward into their bedroom.

“I can walk you know,” Lizzy said as he laid her down on the bed.

“Where’s the fun in that?” He asked.

He moved off to brush his teeth and when he re-entered the bedroom Lizzy was completing a
night-time ritual of her own – reading a short piece of fanfiction with a happily ever after. She said it helped her ease into sleep to have plot resolution just before bed.

He crawled in beside her and cuddled into her side, draping one arm across her lap. She ran her hand through his hair and asked, “do you have to drive in to Boston tomorrow morning?”

“No, I took today and tomorrow off as personal days. I’ll work from home on Friday, but you’ll have to put up with me until Monday morning,” he said as he kissed her arm. He was grateful for the extra time with her this week, but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough and it was a fraction harder every time he had to drive off to Boston.

“How shall I ever bear it?” she asked dramatically. “I’ll be done in a little bit,” she said as he settled in to sleep.

“I know, goodnight sweetheart,” he whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said before she turned her attention back to her tablet. It was all part of a familiar pattern that he adored. When they’d first moved in to Netherfield, she’d read in the lounge or in the chair in their bedroom so she wouldn’t disturb him when he went to sleep before her. They’d soon discovered that they both preferred if he could cuddle her while he drifted off to sleep and she read about men in cravats acting out of character.

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Lizzy sighed in delight as Mr. Knightly came to her rescue and led her in to the dance after the Eltons had snubbed her. He was such a gallant gentleman, she didn’t understand why Emma was always such a brat to him, he deserved better. The dance started as a quadrille, but morphed into a waltz. His hand on the small of her back began to move, first in gentle circles but then it started to wander. Eventually it migrated down to grasp her ass and the ballroom and crowd were gone. They were in a lavish bedchamber with a four-post bed. His mouth descended to her lips and engulfed her in a passionate kiss. It was most improper and entirely scintillating. His other hand cupped her mound, stimulating her as her hand strayed to the fall of his breeches, finding him hard and ready.

“Lizzy,” he whispered.

Her eyes shot open, “Will,” she whispered back, becoming aware of her surroundings. Will tucked his hand into her pajama pants and he began to rub her. She moaned into his mouth as she kissed him hard, her own hand resuming its exploration of his erection. The hand on her ass gave her a smack and she ground her hips into him.

Apparently growing frustrated with the elastic waistband and her panties impeding his progress, he ineffectually tried to inch them down. She rolled off of him and took them off herself as he likewise shed his pajamas. He rolled over her and kissed her neck as he guided himself into her. He closed his eyes in pleasure as he entered her before opening them and locking onto her gaze. They drifted there forever and a moment hovering in that liminal stage between sleep and consciousness as he moved within her. The familiar comfort and spark of her and Will mingled with Mr. Knightly and his forbidden passions. Eventually she shattered and quaked as he quickened his pace and came quickly after her.

Laying there in the dark panting Lizzy laughed, “did you start that or did I?”

“I haven’t a clue,” he chuckled and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

“You may have started out as Mr. Knightly there in my mind,” she admitted.
He laughed, “I’m in good company then, at least I’m not that ponce Mr. Churchill.” He handed her some tissues to clean up and meandered into the bathroom.

She sighed, checking the time. “It’s two in the morning,” she said when he re-emerged, “it might take me a while to fall back to sleep and I’ve got class in the morning.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely.

“It’s not your fault … not consciously at least,” she said with a kiss as she passed him on her own way to the bathroom.

When she came out he was rummaging through a bag on the dresser. She turned on the lamp to find where she’d flung her pajamas. “Here,” he said holding his hand out to her as he returned to the bed, “have a melatonin, it should help.”

She looked down at the red bear in her hand and giggled, “I’m sorry … does William Fitzwilliam Darcy the fourth carry around melatonin gummy bears?”

“I’ve had some difficulties sleeping since I moved to Boston, the pharmacist suggested I try these.”

Elizabeth looked at him with concern, "I was joking this morning when I said I'd get out of your way, but if I'm really affecting your sleep I could move to another bedroom."

"Don't be absurd," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand, "the problem has been sleeping when you aren't in my arms so you moving rooms would do more harm than good."

“I’m sorry,” she said softly but looking up she saw the exasperation in his eyes and she shifted back to her teasing spirit, "for exposing you to such indignity as gummy supplements," she laughed.

“I offer you assistance and all you do is mock me!” He said as they settled back into bed.

“You love it when I mock you, it’s part of my charm,” she said as she reached up to turn off the lamp, "you were tired of fawning airheads and fell for my impertinence in contrast."

“For the liveliness of your mind, perhaps,” he said as he spooned behind her and settled into his pillow.

They laid quietly for several minutes before Elizabeth whispered, “Will?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.” She felt his arm tighten around her.

“I love you too,” he responded with a kiss to her shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so the end of this chapter maybe got a bit meta. For real though, this happens to me all the damn time. It's great ... but it messes with your sleep schedule.

I'd also just like to say that I don't know ASL, so the phrasing and vocabulary probably isn't perfect for people who have been learning sign language for less than a year, but I
wanted to show progress and that they were all supporting Anne in her bid for independence.

A reader just pointed out to me that melatonin is not available over the counter in England, so I had to reshuffle that last conversation a bit. I am American and though I'm trying to make my British characters seem British, these things can easily slip through the cracks. If anyone notices any other glaring mistakes that pop out at you I'd always appreciate the feedback.
Elizabeth was anxious as she pushed through the door. She felt a wave of nostalgia as she realized that though she’d crossed that threshold countless times over the previous four years, this was likely one of the last times she’d do so. She’d completed and passed her senior thesis project, she’d taken her final final exam, she’d picked up her cap & gown, and graduation was tomorrow. She knew that she was in the home stretch, but an ominous summons for one final meeting with her advisor still had her breaking out in cold sweats. What if there was some requirement she hadn’t finished? What if she’d failed one of her finals and they were taking away her honors? What if there was a required course that she’d overlooked and she didn’t meet the requirements to graduate after all?

She shook her head and calmed herself as she waited for the elevator. She’d compulsively checked all of those factors that she could – and even if she’d somehow failed a final, she had no lower than a 95% in any of her courses, so she’d still pass – this was probably just a goodbye meeting.

She toyed with the bag holding her cap and graduation robe to remind herself that it was real. She’d have this meeting with Dr. Gardiner then have time to go home and get ready. Tonight Will had a private celebration planned for just the two of them since they both had a fairly good idea of how tomorrow would go down with her family based on Jane’s graduation the previous year. She planned out her wardrobe for the evening in her head on the elevator ride and was fairly calm by the time she hit the floor with the Art History Faculty offices.

She knocked on the familiar door with a fading postcard of a May Morris embroidery design. She opened the door when Dr. Gardiner told her to come in, but stopped when she saw that she was video chatting with someone.

“I can wait until you’re done,” she said as she made a reverse step toward the door.

“No, Elizabeth you’re just on time,” Dr. Gardiner said with a wave.

“We were just catching up,” a familiar British accent said from the computer.

Sitting in the indicated chair, Elizabeth cast a quizzical glance at the screen, “Mrs. Reynolds?”

“Hello Elizabeth,” Mrs. Reynolds said cheerily.

“What’s going on?” Elizabeth asked Dr. Gardiner.

“Do you remember a couple of months ago I asked you if I could share your thesis with Mrs. Reynolds?” Elizabeth nodded.

“I thought it was such a phenomenal representation of the Pemberley Collection’s history and goals that I shared it with the board.”

“Th … Thank you,” Elizabeth stammered, somewhat overwhelmed by having her thesis so widely read by industry professionals.

“The thing is, Elizabeth, I am scheduled to retire in two years. As you know, I’ve been the only curator for the collection thus far, so the board asked me to appoint an assistant curator with the
intention that, should they be a good fit, they would take my place when I retire. Yours was the first name I proposed to the board, and after reading your report they’ve agreed.” Elizabeth held her breath, convinced that this couldn’t be what it sounded like. “We’d like to offer you the position beginning mid–August, would that give you sufficient time to sort your affairs and move?”

“I don’t know …” Elizabeth started, “I mean, yes, that should be enough time, but are you sure? You haven’t even posted the job, or interviewed for it. I can’t be the most qualified person for the job.”

Dr. Gardiner gave her a quelling glare, indicating that she shouldn’t say such things to potential employers. “Aside from Mrs. Reynolds, nobody knows that collection as well as you, Lizzy.”

“I’ve worked far closer with you during the course of your thesis and while you were visiting than I would in any interview, and what with a museum studies certificate, two years of experience as a student curator, and graduating with honors, you’re more than qualified for the entry level position. I’ll have two years to train you before you take over, and in the interim you’ll have a say in the direction we take with new endeavors,” Mrs. Reynolds concluded.

Elizabeth was blissfully happy for a moment before she realized why she was really being offered this position. “Did Mr. Darcy have a hand in this decision?” She asked suspiciously.

“Goodness no!” Mrs. Reynolds laughed, “Mr. Darcy doesn’t concern himself with who I hire and you should expect the same level of autonomy when you are in my position.” She seemed genuine, but it just seemed so convenient that as soon as she hit the job market she was offered her dream job at his company thus freeing her up to move to London with him.

Dr. Gardiner handed Elizabeth a sheaf of paperwork that Mrs. Reynolds had sent over and they spent the next half hour discussing compensation and logistics. At the end of the meeting Elizabeth requested some time to think it over.

She loved the Pemberley Collection, it would be her dream job, but she didn’t want to get her first job out of college because of nepotism. Even if Will hadn’t explicitly told Mrs. Reynolds to hire her, the woman was obviously smart enough to read the room. She worked at his primary address so she had to be aware that he’d been away most of the previous year and why.

What was really eating away at her now, though, was the suspicion that Will wasn’t as innocent in this situation as Mrs. Reynolds implied. He’d made no secret of the fact that he had to return to his life in London eventually and he wanted her to come with him. This was the kind of power move that she would have expected of Darcy a year ago, but she’d thought he’d gotten past his tendency to control her life. Granted, offering her an amazing job was a far cry better than telling her to give up on her dreams and be a stay at home wife, but still …

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Will groaned as the radio informed him that an accident ahead was the cause for the crawling traffic. He’d wanted tonight to be perfect. He’d wanted to leave the office early and miss the commuter traffic. He’d wanted to go home and change and drive to dinner together, he’d even brought a blindfold so he could surprise her with their location. These plans, however, had shifted. At the rate they were moving, they’d miss their reservation if he went home to pick her up.

He sighed as he fished his mobile out of his pocket and sent her a text: There’s a wreck on the motorway and I’m running behind, could you meet me at the restaurant?
Elizabeth: *I would, but you never told me where we were going ...*

Will: *We’ve got a reservation at Ashworth at 7:30*

Elizabeth: *Ashworth? You better be buying the drinks ;)*

He smiled at the echo of their previous conversation and how different their relationship was now. The first time they’d gone to Ashworth he’d practically had to trick Elizabeth into having a civil conversation with him. Now, they talked daily, spent four glorious nights together every week, and if tonight went well …

He knew better, however, than to predict Elizabeth’s reactions. He was confident that she loved him now, but she was also stubborn, and independent, and proud – all aspects about her that he loved in certain settings, but in the midst of this vast indecision of their future he just wished that she’d trust that they could sort it all out.

Two dull hours later, he handed his keys to the valet and patted his pockets to ensure that everything was still in its proper place before striding into the restaurant. Elizabeth was already seated at a cozy little table for two in a quiet corner of the room. His pulse increased when he saw her sat there in the same black dress looking every bit as stunning and perfect as that first time.

He waved off the hostess and weaved his way to their table, coming up behind her and whispering in her ear, “you look incredible this evening, sweetheart.” She smiled and he leaned in to kiss her cheek. “I’m sorry I was late.”

“Well, you can’t *control* the traffic, even if you want to,” she replied with a tight smile as he sat down across from her.

“True, if I could, I would be home with you much more frequently my dear.” She raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “What? You know I would be with you every night if it weren’t for the horrid rush-hour traffic into Boston in the morning.”

“If you had your way, I’d be hidden in an ivory tower and never leave the premises,” she said as she sipped her water.

“What?!” He had no clue where this hostility was coming from but before she could answer they were interrupted by the waiter. Will glanced over the list and ordered a bottle of wine after a few relevant questions to the server.

“You always have to have things just the way you like them don’t you?” She sniped at him.

“May I ask what my current crimes were or have you already tried me and moved on to punishment?” He asked once they were again alone.

“I had a rather interesting meeting with Dr. Gardiner today,” she said and looked at him expectantly, as if he should know what she was referring to.

“Oh?”

“Yes, she had Mrs. Reynolds on video chat.”

Will had no idea what Mrs. Reynolds would have to do with this hostility, but he guessed at a likely explanation, “was it something to do with your thesis?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” she said as she leaned over and grabbed some paperwork from her
bag, tossing it in front of him. “She shared my thesis with the board and ‘they’ decided to offer me a job that I’m barely qualified for.”

He looked over the contract – a standard for for all of the Pemberley employees – and a smile spread over his face. “This is brilliant! I’m surprised I never thought of it myself.”

“Right,” Elizabeth said caustically, “I’m supposed to believe that you had nothing to do with this?”

He furrowed his brow at her. She was angry that she was offered a job? “I had no part in it,” he replied truthfully.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this Will! I know you want me to move to London, you know I won’t do that unless I have a job. Then magically, just as I’m graduating, a perfect job materializes for me at one of your companies. I don’t want a job out of nepotism or a cushy title and salary because I’m sleeping with the boss!”

“I swear, Elizabeth, I didn’t know anything about this. You know that I have no hand in the daily operations of the collection and I couldn’t even tell you the names of any of my employees there other than Mrs. Reynolds.”

Elizabeth crossed her arms, “you expect me to believe that? Why else would they offer me this position?”

“Perhaps because you’ve written a twenty-page report on the collection complete with potential avenues of growth? Perhaps because you’re bloody brilliant? Perhaps because you’ve impressed Mrs. Reynolds and share her vision of the future of the collection?”

“Perhaps you’re a bit biased about my merits,” Elizabeth rolled her eyes and countered.

“Perhaps I am, but that doesn’t mean that I had any role in securing you this position. Am I relieved that you found a job, in your field, in London? Yes. Do I want you to move to London? More than anything.” He reached out over the table and took her hand. “But I’ve learned my lesson about trying to force you into anything, this is your decision.”

“I don’t want to start my career with people assuming I’m just there because of you.”

“The best way to prove them wrong is to succeed.”

“I don’t know if I’m really qualified to do that.”

“Lizzy, you know more about that house and it’s collections than I do and I was raised there. You are well qualified for this position and I don’t know of anyone who would bring as much heart to the place as you could,” he tugged her hand up and kissed it, “though I am rather biased about your heart.”

“Maybe I jumped to conclusions, I’m sorry.” Elizabeth sighed and the tension in her shoulders softened, “I appreciate your confidence in me, Will. I love you.”

“I love you too, Elizabeth,” he smiled and squeezed her hand, his other hand gripped around the small box in his trousers pocket, debating whether now was the time. He’d made a plan and improvisation had never been his strong suit, though it might be the perfect capstone to this conversation.

“I promise I’ll think about the job,” Elizabeth said with a smile and turned her attention to the menu. Will’s heart ached. He’d considered the matter settled, at this point he couldn’t see any
reason for turning the job down unless she honestly didn’t want to move to London. His hand abandoned the box and he made a show of looking at the menu as well. After all of this time, after all they’d gone through, after he’d taken her criticisms to heart and strove to be a better man … if she still wouldn’t move to London that meant that he still wasn’t enough for her.

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Elizabeth looked pensively at her boyfriend. She’d admitted that she’d over-reacted about the job at the Pemberley Collections and apologized. They’d ordered their food and the conversation had moved on. They’d toasted to Elizabeth’s graduation, talked about Will’s week, made plans for what to do with Jane and Charlie on Sunday. It had been a nice dinner, but Elizabeth could tell that something was … off. He seemed subdued, closer to the Darcy she had met initially than the Will he’d relaxed in to after she got to know him.

He was pushing around the remnants of his food with his fork when the waiter came around and asked about desert. Will curtly said no and asked for the check. He still rarely ate desert himself, but he always asked if she wanted any.

“Ok, what’s wrong?” She asked after the waiter retreated.

“Why would anything be wrong?” He asked, staring sullenly at a crumb of food on the tablecloth. She revised her assessment, he was acting more like the scruffy broken Will staring dejectedly at Elizabeth Darcy’s portrait than his haughty public persona.

“I don’t know if you don’t tell me.”

He gave a dramatic sigh and looked up at her with sad eyes – he could never hide the emotions in his eyes now that she knew what to look for – “will you ever be ready, Elizabeth?”

“Ready for what?”

“I know I was an asshole the first time I asked and you had every right to turn me down … but then you gave me hope. You had to finish school, so I uprooted my life and followed you here. It’s been hard, but it’s also been the best year of my life. Now that your degree is completed, you say that you can’t make a decision until you find a job and I’ve respected your career and haven’t pushed. But now you’ve been offered a wonderful job, at a collection you love, and you can’t beat the commute … At the risk of sounding utterly cliché, you complete me, you make my life better. Maybe I’m still selfish, but I want that feeling all the time, I want to come home to the office and see you every night. I want to wake up with you in my arms every day. I want to marry you, and have babies, and grow old with you … but it seems I’m still not enough for you.”

“Will …” she whispered, her voice breaking with her heart. She tried to voice her concerns but her brain was muddled. “It’s not you, you’re enough, you’re everything … it’s me.”

His eyes widened and he let out a despairing, “no,” before she realized what that sounded like.

“No, not like that,” she said in exasperation. “I’m afraid I’ll fuck everything up. I’m afraid I won’t fit into your world. I’m afraid I’m not qualified for that job and I’ll mess up your project, your family legacy.”

“Sweetheart, you know you can do this job. You’ve applied to other comparable assistant curator positions without this doubt. Just because the Darcy name is connected to this one doesn’t make you less capable. There is no one I could possibly trust more to protect my – hopefully our – family
Elizabeth felt the tears stinging her eyes and she tried to laugh them away. “Why is it that you only bring up marriage when we’re fighting?”

He reached into his pocket and placed a small black jewelry box on the table. Elizabeth went still and struggled to catch her breath. “I had the whole evening planned out,” he said flatly, “I would pick you up at home and blindfold you so I could surprise you. We’d come here to the location of our first date. Over the course of dinner I would explain that I’d never had any particular fantasy about pulling a stranger at a bar. I just wanted one evening with you where we didn’t fight or bicker, where I could pretend that the future was still full of possibilities. After dinner I would take you up to our room, the same room where I first fell asleep with you in my arms. You would gasp and turn around in awe the same way you did then, but this time it would be when you saw the roses and candlelight – they still have some of the original candelabras in storage, you see, but don’t typically put them in the guest rooms for fire safety purposes – then when you’d completed your circle of the room you’d turn around to find me kneeling on the ground with my mother’s ring, begging you to marry me because I need you in my life.” Elizabeth was stunned into silence.

It was perfect, he was perfect.

Before she’d collected herself enough to reply, the server returned with the check. “Charge it to our room,” Elizabeth said, finally finding her voice and smiling, “you have plans, after all.” She watched Will’s smile grow hopeful as he swiftly signed the bill.

They walked hand in hand to the elevator and entered it quietly. “So about this blindfold …” Elizabeth said saucily.

Will pulled it out of his inner jacket pocket with a smirk, “are you certain?” She nodded and turned so he could put it on her. When it was secured, he trailed his hands down her arms lightly and wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing her shoulder.

She heard the elevator ping and stop and Will led her with his hands on her hips down the hall. One hand remained caressing her hipbone when they stopped while the other presumably fumbled for the key. He led her inside and pressed himself against her back, trailing his fingers over her collar bone. The blindfold somehow heightened the sensations more than a mere dark room ever had. After a brief exploration, he lifted his hands and raised the blindfold revealing the familiar opulent room glowing in candlelight and a fire in the hearth.

“There are no electric lights at the moment, so you’re experiencing the room as a Victorian visitor might have,” Will said as Elizabeth did indeed break away to circle the room, there were four elaborate candelabra around the room interspersed by large bouquets of roses. Elizabeth was entranced by the sight and delighted by the lengths Will went to impress her. When she completed the circle, Will was there, kneeling, trembling slightly.

“Elizabeth Bennet, I love you. For the past two years you’ve invaded my thoughts whether you were invited to or not and I can no longer imagine my life without you. I know I’ve tried this before with disastrous results, but since then I’ve striven every day to be the kind of man that was worthy of your love. Only you can be the judge of my success, but I have no doubt you’ll tell me if I slip. In spite of the many material changes you’ve blessed my life with over the past year my affections and wishes are unchanged. Will you marry me?”

He held up the box, revealing an ornate antique ring. Elizabeth took one look at the ring, another look at his nervous face, and sunk to her knees straddling his. She placed a hand on either side of his face and whispered, “yes,” against his lips before kissing him.
Will felt like his heart might explode from the combination of relief and love at her response. He was too impatient to see his mother’s ring on her finger to be distracted for too long even by Lizzy’s kisses, so he pulled back and grabbed her left hand, slipping the heirloom sapphire onto her finger. She looked at it contemplatively and Will couldn’t read her expression.

“It’s been in my family for generations, but if it’s too much for daily use, we can get another one…” he offered nervously.

“Don’t be silly, I love it!” She said, pulling her hand to her chest as if he was likely to take it back. “But if it’s an heirloom, won’t Georgiana want it?”

“She thought you might say that, so I have a prepared statement from her welcoming you to the family,” he said, pulling a sealed white envelope out of his pocket.

“What if I’d said no?” Elizabeth laughed after she’d read Georgiana’s no-doubt effusive note about how happy they would be together and how excited she was to finally have a sister.

“Georgiana, ever practical, prepared a statement for that contingency as well,” Will said as he pulled a black sealed envelope out of his other pocket.

“OOOhh! Can I read that one too?” Lizzy said as she reached for the envelope.

“Perhaps later,” Will said as he snatched it away from her grasping fingers and tossed it behind him. He wrapped his arms around his fiancée, elated that he had the right to call her that even in his mind. “At the moment, I think we have some celebrating to do.” They stayed in that position, entwined on the plush Persian rug kissing until Will’s legs began to grown numb from the position and he gently guided Lizzy onto her back and sprawled out over her.

“Will,” Elizabeth said with a mischievous glint in her eyes, “where did that blindfold go?”

“Really?” He asked skeptically. He didn’t like the idea of covering her eyes but he’d promised her that he’d explore, so at her enthusiastic nod he retrieved the blindfold and helped her to her feet. He put the blindfold on her and slowly proceeded to remove her dress, allowing his hands to linger.

Her dress pooled just as elegantly as the last time and he divested her of her bra and nickers before leading her to the bed. He grabbed a rose from one of the arrangements and ran it over her smooth skin. He enjoyed the way her body started, then pushed into the contact. It was nice to be the one teasing her for a change.

“It would be a shame to waste all of these candles too,” Lizzy said expectantly. He loved how bossy she was, even in a submissive role, he would never have tried half of what they’d done together if not for her gentle prodding. He looked askance at the nearest candelabra. He knew that he enjoyed mild pain as an added stimulus to foreplay and had Lizzy told him repeatedly that she enjoyed it as well … but he was always wary the first time. He hadn’t had any time to research, and he had no idea the melting point of this particular wax.

He grabbed a taper and lifted Lizzy’s hand to run the flame under it and she moaned. “Are you certain about this?” He asked.

“Positive.”

“You’ll tell me if it’s too much?” He verified again.
“I promissssss...” she cut off into a hiss as she felt the first drop to fall on her abdomen. “Green!” She cried as her right hand moved to explore the hardening wax. She knew that he was a light touch when it came to hurting her, but she still liked the sting along with her pleasure. He trailed one hand down her leg to the knee, then back up and began to stimulate her as he allowed more wax to drip onto her. Between the blindfold enhancing her sense of touch to begin with and the pain contrasting with the pleasure, Elizabeth moaned in contentment at the overpowering sensations.

His drips became gradually more exploratory. As his first finger slipped into her, wax dribbled onto her left breast and eventually strayed to her hips as well. “Will,” she moaned, blindly reaching her hand out to the arm that was fingering her and following it up to his neck so she could pull him down to her for a kiss. She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt and was about to slide it off of him when he pulled away.

“Let me put down the fire first, sweetheart,” he chuckled. She felt him withdraw and heard the rustling of fabric as he presumably shed the rest of his clothes. “Can I take the blindfold off now? I miss your eyes.”

She lifted a hand up to remove the blindfold and found his eyes immediately. “Thank you for indulging me,” she said as she rolled him over and straddled him.

“Of course, any time,” he groaned as she sunk down onto his length.

“Any time will be more frequent now that we’ll be living together full time,” she suggested.

“Good, bed in Boston won’t feel nearly so empty with you there,” he said as he ran a hand across her cheek.

“And the one in London?” She asked somewhat nervously.

He stilled beneath her and looked up at her in awe, “are you coming to London then?”

“Of course I’m moving to London, I’m not proposing a long-distance marriage,” she quipped, assuming that much had been obvious. His smile broadened and she realized the importance of this revelation. “You proposed to me unsure whether I’d move to London? You were willing to stay here if I dug my heels in?”

“I was willing to wait it out at least. Whatever it took not to lose you.”

“God Will,” she said as she began moving again, “why are you so perfect?”

He smirked and rolled them so he was on top, “because you deserve my patience, and you will always be worth it.”

Elizabeth decided not to make an announcement about the engagement, electing instead to just wear the ring to graduation and count the minutes it took for her mother to notice – three minutes into family hugs after the ceremony. Before the celebratory lunch began, Jane pulled Elizabeth off to the side to share her news with her favorite sister and returned sporting her own rather impressive diamond – it took Mrs. Bennet until the shared appetizers arrived and Jane reached for a piece of pita bread to notice since Jane wasn’t the center of attention that day. Their mother’s celebration was somewhat dimmed when Elizabeth announced that she would be moving to
London – and both weddings would therefore be out of her planning radius – though Mr. Bennet was rather proud of the job offer Elizabeth had received.

For the rest of the summer, Elizabeth and Darcy spent their weeks in Boston and returned to Meryton on weekends so she could pack and spend time with her family and friends. They moved to London on schedule for mid August. To nobody's surprise but her own, Elizabeth flourished at the Pemberley Collection.

Jane and Elizabeth Bennet married Charles Bingley and William Fitzwilliam Darcy the fourth the following July in Derbyshire on the ancestral grounds of the Pemberley estate. Due to financial constraints – which her future sons-in-law were not generous enough to remedy – Mrs. Bennet’s involvement in the planning and execution of the wedding was limited to contradicting the event coordinator’s instructions the day-of the wedding. She would have succeeded in throwing the proceedings into a state of chaos if the brides hadn’t given all of the staff explicit orders to ignore any demands from their mother.

Charlotte and Anne Lucas – Lady Catherine had protested her noble name being attached to such a marriage, so Anne had happily taken the name of the family that had instantly accepted her for who she was – married the summer after Anne completed her engineering degree. Anne became a successful engineer and an advocate for accessibility and diversity within the field. Charlotte’s art career was never as successful as her mother-in-law’s – partially due to that lady’s interference – but she managed to sell enough pieces every year to cover the cost of supplies. When she wasn’t creating art, she cared for their four adopted children.

Mary graduated the following year and continued on to get her PhD at Boston University. She returned home and joined the faculty of Longbourne in the Music Department. Kitty went to fashion school and became a buyer for a department store – she did have a knack for selecting clothing that would look better on others. Lydia surprised them all by majoring in pre-law and continuing on to law school, passing the bar and becoming a human rights lawyer. Georgiana completed her music degree, but her social anxiety prevented her from performing live. Instead, she made her career composing music from the comforts of her own home. They all had their own loves and adventures, but those are stories in their own right.

Elizabeth did indeed meet with some social resistance in London – particularly with their circle prepared for her arrival by viscous reports from Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine DeBurgh – but with time, people began seeing the vast improvement in Darcy’s behavior from Elizabeth’s influence. It didn’t take long for society to form opinions of Elizabeth on her own merits as well. While there was always the contingent of old-fashioned matrons who could never quite forgive Elizabeth for her refusal to fit into their mold, she found her own friends easily enough.

Will and Elizabeth Darcy lived happily ever after – if that phrase can truly be applied to any real human lives. They faced their fair share of adversity and hardships, but they weathered the storms together. Two such stubborn characters would always have their fights and misunderstandings, nevertheless, they loved each other deeply, made love fiercely, and always remained open to new experiences … but those are stories for another day.

Chapter End Notes

Well, folks, this is the last chapter of the main plot arch, though I will add an epilogue soon. In the meantime, I will also be editing the story for consistency and continuity.
and clean it up for publication on Smashwords *Even after publication, this story will remain in full on this site.

I've had requests on this story to just keep writing it forever with scenes for the rest of their lives ... but I don't think I have the creativity or stamina for that. This story is already over 30,000 words longer than my next longest story. Furthermore, the smut in this story has been heavily plot-driven and while I can think of other sexy scenarios for our favorite couple, they would work better as vignettes rather than a continuation -- so I may write those as they come to me as a series of stand-alone short stories.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

This is it for now folks! I'll be uploading some smutty fluff stories in the In Want of a Vice Extended series as I think them up. I already have some Ideas ;)

Now that the main story arc is complete, I've uploaded the book for sale at Smashwords (you can search for it there as In Want of a Vice by Morgan A Wyndham). If you enjoyed this story and want to help support the author, feel free to check it out. Otherwise, this story will remain up here in full as long as the platform exists and you can continue to enjoy it through Ao3.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten years later.

The tap of Elizabeth’s heels reverberated through the large deserted space as she walked confidently across the marble floor of the large office building. She exchanged greetings with Geoff, the security guard, entered the elevator, and keyed herself up to the executive level. At this time of night, the floor is deserted, though she does hear the whir of a vacuum somewhere off in the distance.

She quietly makes her way toward the one office with a sliver of light still shining under the door and knocks.

“Enter,” he shouts imperiously. She slips into the office, closing and locking the door behind her. “Stephens, could you please pull the inventory list from the Geneva facility for me?” He asked without looking up.

“Stephens went home over an hour ago,” Elizabeth said.

She appreciated the double take her husband gave her when he finally looked up, “Elizabeth?”

“She texted me on her way out to inform me that you’re being stubborn again.”

“I’ll have to have a word with her, that’s highly unprofessional.”

“That’s unacceptable, but expecting your employees to be here at this time of night the Friday before the holiday break is completely rational, Mr. Scrooge?”

“We have a large auction scheduled early in January and we just have to get things squared away before everyone goes on holiday,” he sighed and took his reading glasses off.

“I’m aware,” she said, perching herself on the edge of his desk.

“You didn’t have to come all the way down here, I did message you that I’d be home by 22:00.”

Elizabeth held her phone’s display up to him so he could read the glowing digits: 11:30 – even after a decade in London, she still had to have am/pm displays in order to make any rational sense of her schedule – he slumped back in his chair. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how late it was.”
“Thus why Stephens messaged me. You promised you wouldn’t do this anymore Will.”

“I know, I’m sorry Sweetheart,” he rubbed a hand over his face then looked up at her with concern, “who is with the children?”

She smirked, “It’s Friday, Will.”

His brow furrowed in confusion before realization dawned on him: “Georgiana arrived today, didn’t she?”

“Yep! Three months in France and her big brother wasn’t even there to pick her up at the airport.”

“Blast, I forgot. Just give me a moment to pack up and we’ll be on our way.”

“Will, Georgiana’s in bed. The kids are in bed. I wish we were in bed, but someone’s been naughty … again.”

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Will looked up at Elizabeth, just in time to see her pull something literally out of the sleeve of her raincoat. “Was that up there for the whole trip here?” He asked with a chuckle, eying the now well-worn riding crop.

“You’d be surprised how much I can fit in the pockets of this thing,” she said, pulling out her harness and dildo and placing them on his desk.

He grinned in anticipation as he stood up and placed a hand on either side of her on the desk. Leaning in to kiss her he whispered: “I’m sorry, Elizabeth, I’ve been thoughtless.”

“You certainly have,” she murmured back against his lips. “Now drop your pants – and your trousers – and prepare for your punishment!”

He stood upright and moved to the window to close the drapes. “Leave them open,” she commanded.

“Really … Elizabeth, is that the wisest …”

“Darcy!” she cut him off, “you’re in no position to question me. Leave. Them. Open.” He sighed, if he called red, she would allow him to close them, but he didn’t want to break the scene so soon. He’d promised to remain open, and they were twenty floors up. He turned around and dropped his trousers, already hard and longing for his wife.

“Good boy,” she smiled as she slowly untied the belt to her raincoat. He was somewhat surprised when it fell to the floor and she was wearing the same outfit she’d dressed in that morning. His surprise must have shown on his face because she self-consciously asked, “what?”

“Nothing, I just … after that setup I was expecting … I don’t know, Mrs. Clause lingerie or something.”

“Oh, fuck right off, Darcy,” she said playfully and shoved his nameplate and some other items from the front of his desk and motioned for him to lean over it.

“I was surprised, not disappointed,” he clarified as he sprawled out over his desk facing the window.

He saw her grab the riding crop in the reflection. “You’re not the only one who had to work today,
you know,” She said, hitting him across both cheeks with the blunt side of the crop. “I woke up just as early as you,” another slap, “worked a full day,” another on his thigh. “Then I cam home and sent the nanny off to enjoy her holiday before you texted me and I realized that you wouldn’t be home to pick Georgiana up. So I had to pack up two toddlers and make my way to Heathrow in pre-holiday traffic.” The last of her rant was accompanied by a series of swift swats.

“I’m sorry!”

“Look at that big wide world out there,” she gestured to the window, “look at all you miss when you sit her with your back to it, tuning it out in favor of your spreadsheets.”

“I’m so sorry Elizabeth,” he cried, watching her work herself up in the reflection.

“You better be, mister bigshot,” she said, slapping his ass with her open palm then running it over the sore welts. “You always think your time is more valuable than everyone else around you,” smack. “Your employees, your assistant, your damn wife!”

“No! Elizabeth, I just ...” her assault paused and she met his eyes in the reflection: both her eyebrow and the riding crop were raised, waiting to see if he had an acceptable end to that sentence. “You are wonderful, you make my life work and I wouldn’t be able to do it all without you. I’m sorry time got away from me today, I just needed one more evening and then I’ll be all yours for the next week.”

“Right answer,” she said, running the crop up his inner thigh. “You still owe me though.”

She put the riding crop down and fished a small bottle of lube out of her – actually astoundingly large – coat pocket. He moaned in pleasure as she ran her slicked finger down his crease and continued through to the tip of his throbbing shaft and back up. She slid the her finger in gradually and began working him open, slowly thrusting in further on each pass.

“God! Elizabeth!” he shouted when she put in a second finger.

“That’s right, I expect begging!”

“Lizzy, Please!”

“Please what?” She asked as she spread her fingers slightly, stretching him. He knew that this was her favorite part of pegging, hearing him beg for it. He never disappointed her.

“Please fuck me!”

“That’s more like it!” She said as she pulled her fingers out and walked around the desk, making a show of stripping off her skirt. He started to ease himself up to join her, but she tsked at him: “did I say you could move?” She said as she pulled on the harness and slicked lube on her phallus, “I only want to see the one set of handprints on that desk mister!”

She circled back around the desk, trailing her fingers along his arm, driving him mad. She pressed up behind him and he could feel the silicone shaft against his arse. “I won’t start until you say the magic words,” she whispered into his ear.

“Lizzy,” he whimpered, growing desperate, “I love you … I need you Aaahh ...” he cried out as she pushed in. She started slowly at first, inching in. After several agonizing minutes, she’d finally set a steady pace and he was panting and moaning her name. The reflection of her dominating him from behind in the window was quite possibly one of the most erotic things he’d ever seen. His erection was so stiff it was growing almost painful. He needed to relieve himself, but Lizzy had
told him not to move his hands. “Lizzy, please!”

“Have you learned your lesson?” She asked, giving him a resounding slap to the backside.

“Yes!”

“And you’ll be a good boy from now on?”

“Yes!” He panted.

“Liar, this won’t be the last time you’re late at the office,” she spanked him again, “but I know you’ll try.” She bit his shoulder-blade through his shirt and he let out a strangled cry. Their eyes met in the reflection and she trailed her left hand down his arm and lightly grabbed his wrist, pulling it down and finally giving him permission to stimulate himself. He didn’t last long, a few strokes in time with Lizzy’s thrusts and he was hurtling over the edge and making a mess all over the front of his mahogany desk.

He collapsed forward, resting his forehead on the desk and watching the puffs of condensation form and recede on the polished surface as he calmed his breathing. Lizzy leaned over him and slipped her arms around his waist. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you so much, Elizabeth,” he answered, lazily reaching back and stroking her thigh, “every day you take my breath away.”

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“Am I that heavy that I’m restricting your breathing?” she asked, lifting herself off of him. She knew that she’d gained some weight in her second pregnancy and she hadn’t quite been able to shake it since giving birth to their daughter eighteen months ago.

“That’s nonsense,” he said lifting himself up and turning toward her, “you’ve always been the most beautiful woman in the room.” He looked so earnest when he said these things, but she still worried nonetheless. She caught sight of herself in the window, still wearing her blouse from work and naked from the waist down with a massive erection, she looked like the counterpart to Darcy’s satyr from all of those years ago.

“Now, my darling wife,” Will said as he wrapped his arms around her, “I believe it’s your turn.” He leaned in for a passionate kiss and she realized that in all of her wrath it was the first time they’d kissed since she charged into his office. She enjoyed playing the dominatrix every once in a while, but she much preferred this simmering, mutual heat that had never cooled between them. He cupped her ass to pick her up and she obligingly wrapped her legs around him. She felt the dildo pressing between them and against her core and moaned.

He walked around the the and sat her down on top of it facing the window. She giggled as he fastidiously spread a handkerchief over his chair before sitting down and rolling himself toward her. He slowly unfastened the harness and slid it off of her, his hands lingering along the length of her legs. He then lifted her right leg, positioning her foot on the armrest and trailing kisses from her knee to her thigh, stopping just before it got interesting. He repeated the procedure with her left leg, then dove in. He started with teasing licks, slow and methodical, that succeeded only in making her squirm.

“Will,” she whimpered. Even after a decade he still moaned every time she cried his name in passion. His finger joined his mouth and began pumping in and out as he alternated between sucking and licking her. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer. Glancing
up she saw her reflection in the window. He was completely obscured by the back of the chair, but her legs were sprawled on either side of the chair and her head and shoulders rose above it. She looked so debauched and wanton. They were too high up to be observed from the ground to see her, but if anyone was in their office in the building across the street they’d be getting quite the show.

The thought excited her. That faceless observer would probably assume that it was just another executive fucking his secretary, but Elizabeth knew this was way better. She was no shrinking violet sitting at home wondering whether her husband would come home smelling like someone else’s perfume tonight. At the moment she wasn’t even the mom who worried over play groups and diapers. She was the girl who fucked a near stranger in a library, who kept fucking him even though he was an asshole and who took far too long to realize that maybe he wasn’t such an ass after all. She was the woman who broke down William Darcy’s defenses so thoroughly that he went running scared across an ocean because his attraction was too strong only to have him chase her back over that ocean a year later. She was the woman whom he had loved and cherished for twelve years.

At that moment Will’s finger arched inside of her in just that perfect way and pushed her over the edge. She came screaming his name, idly hoping in the back of her mind that the whir of the vacuum cleaner was loud enough that the cleaning crew didn’t hear her in the distant corner of the executive floor. After the stars in her eyes subsided somewhat, she looked at Will, who was watching her intently. “Have I ever told you how wonderful you are at that?”

“You have,” he said with a smirk, “it’s quite the skill, I’d put it on my CV, but, well ...”

“I think I’m entitled to keep that skill of yours for myself,” she smirked, “except for that one time at Netherfield ...” he grimaced at the memory, “or that time ...”

“Yes, yes, no need to dwell,” he cut her off. They’d kept their word on their pinky-promise at BJ point – as Elizabeth had lovingly dubbed the scenic overlook that they always stopped at when they visited her family – but though Will had enjoyed those experiments, he preferred to keep her all to himself.

Elizabeth stretched out like a cat, very proud of her evening’s work. Sure, she’d been angry at Will for staying late tonight of all nights, but what she’d really needed after that day was some alone time with her husband. A commodity that was increasingly hard to get at home now that Ben – William Bennet Darcy the fifth – was in a big-boy bed and old enough to walk around on his own.

Will opened a drawer of his desk and retrieved a package of cleansing wipes so they could clean up. “How convenient,” she giggled as she took the one he offered her.

“Well, this isn’t the first time they’ve been put to good use,” he said as he contorted to clean himself off.

Elizabeth scrunched her face, “yeah, I’m glad the glass desk didn’t stick around long, it wasn’t very sturdy at all.”

Will laughed, “no, it was no match for the ‘strenuous labor’ we put it through. I don’t think it survived your first visit.” After a moment of quiet reflection he added, “that was not a fun requisition order to explain.”

Elizabeth hopped down and they both put their clothes on. Elizabeth smirked when her husband winced as he sat down. “Have you learned your lesson?”

“That my beautiful wife will come and seduce me if I remain dutifully at work too late?” He joked.
“I was thinking more along the lines of: you’ll have to sit through a car ride and a long dinner with
Lady Catherine tomorrow with welts on your ass and legs because you couldn’t be bothered to
check the clock or the calendar.”

“When you put it like that …”

“And to cap it off, I’m making you drive to Heathrow in the morning to pick up Anne and
Charlotte.”

“You’re so cruel!” He said in mock indignation.

“Yes,” she agreed as she sat on his knee and put her arms around his neck, “but you love me
anyway.”

“Always,” he whispered as he slid his arms around her waist and leaned in to kiss her.

The End

Chapter End Notes

There it is! I wanted to end by showing that long-term relationships are not where
good sex goes to die! Things aren't perfect, there are still insecurities and arguments
etc, but they're still Elizabeth and Darcy and that's why we love them.

I want to take a moment to thank all of you for sticking with me this long. This
initially was just a one-shot of the library scene as an experiment to see if I was any
good a writing smut. After a conversation with my husband I realized I could flesh it
out into a whole story and outlined it at 6 chapters. It just kept growing from there,
partially because of the amount of input and feedback I got from reviews.

To everyone who has left a review or kudos -- particularly those of you who regularly
commented on every chapter -- I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I know I
haven't always responded to each review, but every single one of them made my day.
The positive feedback from this story has been overwhelming and kept me going on
this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!