Luck Changes the Game

by LaCorelli

Summary

Bad luck, good luck. Sometimes it's just a matter of perspective. George Wickham has a bad day and his entrance into Meryton changes the course of events.

Notes

I'm finally starting to crosspost some of my FFN stories here to AO3. This story was the result of my taking two of my P&P stories, Luck is Not Always a Lady and Luck Sometimes Stacks the Deck (which were companion pieces), and both combining and expanding them into a slightly larger story (well the original intention was for it to be only slightly longer, the actual execution is more than twice as long as the original and it could have been three times if there hadn't been other stories that needed more attention).

I have to thank my husband who acted as sounding board and beta even when his schedule made things difficult for him to do little more than work his magic on my scene endings and this one called for a little more help than usual. I really couldn't have done this without him. Well, I could, but it wouldn't be as good. However, all mistakes are still mine, as I tinkered all the way up to the time of uploading.
Luck is Not Always a Lady

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luck is known to be a fickle creature appearing and disappearing at a whim, though there are those so-called fortune's favorites who seem permanently in her favor while others seem just as equally misfortune's favorites cursed with bad luck. But perception is a tricky thing; what may at first appear to be misfortune may in fact be just the luck someone needs and what may appear to be a lucky step may in fact be bad luck in deed. But that is luck, chaos personified.

Take the example of one George Wickham. The night before luck had been with him at cards, and he had celebrated quite liberally. So liberally, in fact, that he woke with his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and a pounding headache made worse by the sunlight streaming into his room. It took him some time to get the nerve to sit up, and even then he had a struggle to pour out a cup of water from the pitcher at his bedside to try to remove at least the dry and fuzzy feeling. What time was it? It seemed awfully bright in his room. Lord, he hoped he had not missed the post coach. Surely, Denny would get him if it was getting late. He could not resent his losses at the card table that much.

Forcing himself to stand, he slowly moved to the window. God, it was bright outside. It took some time for him to be able to focus on anything, and he started cursing when the one thing he saw was the rear of the post coach as it disappeared from sight. Damn. That miserable cur had left him behind. Bloody poor loser. But why did not the maid fetch him? He was sure he told the saucy piece he was leaving on the coach. However, he had a sudden flash of memory from the previous evening—a fumbling attempt at a kiss and a sudden hard slap across the face. He wondered if it left a mark. Yet even if he had offended the wench, surely she would still see that he was informed if only to rid the inn of his company. Urgh, thinking was making his head hurt more, but he had to get moving if he was going to find his way to Mar... Mert... Meryton?—whatever the village was. It was important to get there today, especially since Denny had already promised to introduce him to the Colonel. He needed to make a decent impression in the beginning if he was going to smooth his way along.

By the time he made it downstairs, his head had managed to settle down to a dull throb. As it was quite late in the morning, all he could get for breakfast was some bread and cheese which took a good deal of chewing and did his head no favors. Then he had to negotiate for the rental of a nag of a horse in order to get on his way.

The road was miserable, and George Wickham's head pounded worse and worse with each step the nag took on the road, and the contents of the flask he carried did little to assuage the pain. How much further was it to the miserable village? Blast Denny! He convinced him to join the militia by raving about the opportunities a man in a red coat had, then abandoned him to make his way on his own. Wickham almost wanted to turn back and return to London; however, he still figured a uniform would improve his chances of charming his way into a fortune or at least into a long line of credit.

Lost in thoughts of what he would do once in the militia, he neglected to notice the flock of geese near the road way until they suddenly startled his horse throwing him off onto the muddy lane. Still half drunk and stunned by his fall into the mud, Wickham could only stare dumbly as his borrowed horse took off running.

"Damn, damn, damn," he muttered as the beast disappeared. A cacophony of honking assaulted
his ears and before he could react, he was suddenly assaulted by the flock of geese who seemed offended by his presence. One particularly big bird went for his face biting his nose and cheeks before he could get his hand up. Scrambling to his feet, he struck wildly at the birds that attacked him with such ferocity, nipping at his legs and making him fear for his manhood if not his life. It was all he could do to get away from the angry birds, running until he was out of sight before vomiting at the side of the road while he tried to catch his breath, not a good combination.

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Darcy stood outside the smithy feeling somewhat impatient. Bingley had been in such a rush to call on the Bennets, and then his horse threw a shoe just as they entered into Meryton. Fortunately, it was not far to the smith, though they had to wait a short time for the man to be free. Staring out at the village, Darcy was surprised to see the Bennet sisters emerging from a house not too far distant. They were accompanied by a tall heavyset man in black who seemed to be dividing his attention between Miss Elizabeth and Miss Mary.

"Well, that's that."

Darcy turned to where Bingley had emerged from the smithy.

"The smith is attending to my horse now," Bingley continued, "He tells me that he will be about an hour."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed." A smile spread across Bingley's face as he caught sight of the Bennets. "I dare say we shall have to find a way to divert ourselves until my horse is ready." He cast a meaningful glance at Darcy, leaving no doubt of his intention.

Darcy had been telling himself that he was indifferent to Miss Elizabeth but when Bingley insisted on going to greet the group, Darcy chose to not protest. "By all means, let us," he said and motioned for his friend to lead the way.

"Good, good," Bingley chirped.

As they started across the way, Darcy couldn't help keeping his gaze fixed on Miss Elizabeth.

Indeed.

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Normally a great walker, Elizabeth Bennet had found the walk into Meryton tedious at best. The tedium had been only slightly lessened when she had managed to convince Mary to join them. Already having had enough of Mr. Collins' civilities and starting to become wary of an increased number of them being directed specifically towards her, she had pressed her sister after noticing that Mary seemed less annoyed with Mr. Collins than anyone else. It had not been too difficult to do so, which allayed Elizabeth's conscience just a little, as she felt somewhat selfish in her desire to escape dealing with her cousin, especially when Mary managed to turn Mr. Collins conversation away from her and seemed genuinely interested in the exercise. She managed to distance herself even more once they entered Aunt Philips' house.

The visit did not last long as both Lydia and Kitty were wild to see if Denny had returned as they had not spotted him on the way into Meryton. Reluctantly Elizabeth followed, if only to try to keep her sisters from behaving too badly in their search for redcoats. She did not know whether to be pleased or resigned that they spotted Denny almost immediately as he was walking up the street.
As they stood there exchanging commonplace pleasantries, Elizabeth was surprised to see Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy approaching from the direction of the blacksmith. For Jane's sake she was pleased, though it gave her little pleasure to meet the dark and disapproving stare of Mr. Darcy. Nor did it give her any greater pleasure to introduce her cousin to the man and witness Mr. Collins' voluble effusions when he realized that Mr. Darcy was the nephew of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. After having been inundated with descriptions of the great lady since her cousin's arrival, Elizabeth felt that she should have realized the relationship from reports of her character alone.

There was some relief in the fact that Mr. Darcy while haughty was being reasonably polite in the face Mr. Collins' sycophantic behavior, and she endeavored in her own way to try to extract him from the conversation when something caught her eye. Turning her head she saw with some surprise a riderless horse walking casually into the village, stopping idly by one of the first buildings it reached.

"How strange, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, as she noticed his eye also caught by the sight.

"Very," he said impassively.

"Whatever do you suppose happened to its rider?" Elizabeth asked almost absently as she looked at the rather relaxed creature.

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Battered, bruised, and muddy, Wickham continued his journey on foot. When would he get to a blasted town? As he trudged along, he saw a small brown dog ahead of him. Not another animal! He threw some rocks at the beast, who growled but ran off. Feeling a sense of triumph at that, Wickham continued along for a little before discovering to his relief that he was near the outskirts of a village. He must have been nearer to Meryton than he realized.

For a few moments, he tried brushing the mud off his clothes before giving up and continuing to limp the rest of the way. Perhaps he could say he had been attacked by highwaymen. That would be a good tale, especially once he could get into uniform. He had started working out the details of his bravery in the face of overwhelming odds wondering whether or not to include a damsel in distress, when he spotted his hired nag standing peacefully as if it had not a care in the world. Stupid animal. He started heading toward the beast when he was stopped by the sight of a small crowd down the street wherein his erstwhile friend Denny was laughing and talking with a couple of young ladies who seemed to be hanging on his every word.

No wonder he was in such a hurry to get back, Wickham thought bitterly. It took him a moment to look beyond Denny and notice the gentlemen on the outer edges of the group. Two were unfamiliar, but the third he knew all too well. Darcy! Damn and blast, what is he doing here? Wickham wondered if he could slip out of sight before the man spotted him. He had no idea what Darcy might do if they met, but he had no intention of letting Darcy see him in his bedraggled state.

He started to slink towards a nearby building when out of nowhere he heard a fierce yapping and a furry object launched itself at him. As he twisted, he could feel something grab at his breeches and heard a ripping sound. That damned dog again. Lashing out at the animal that attacked him, he lost his balance and managed to fall face first into a pile of fresh horse droppings, deposited by the ungrateful rented nag. Angrily he got to his feet, a stream of profanities pouring from his lips. He could see Denny openly laughing at him along with the two girls he had been speaking with, while Darcy regarded him with open derision.
George Wickham was a gambler who liked to take chances; the few times they paid off were enough to keep him going, but he was also a man who believed in luck, good and bad. And the bad luck that plagued him that day, most especially the bad luck of Darcy seeing him in such a state, was enough to convince him that Meryton was not the place for him. He grabbed the reins of his wayward horse and with a futile attempt at dignity struggled into the saddle and turned to head back the way he came. Now that he had his saddle bags back, he would try cleaning himself up if he could find a convenient stream. He remembered Lucy Younge telling him of a rich widow with no family who might be susceptible to the charms of the right young man. Once his bruises healed, he might just try his hand, since vulnerable young heiresses were harder to come by. Yes, that was a better plan. Meryton could go to blazes, and Darcy was welcome to it. He was probably miserable there anyway.

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"Mr. Darcy, are you smiling?" Elizabeth Bennet asked in astonishment. She had moved nearer to him almost involuntarily, as Mr. Collins was in the midst of a harangue on the ungentlemanly language of the man who had been the center of the recent spectacle. Only Mary was paying attention, but Mr. Bingley and Mr. Denny were unfortunately too close to actively ignore him.

"I really could not say, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said, as he attempted to control his urge to laugh at the image of George Wickham, covered in horse leavings, his torn breeches exposing his undergarments to the world (though he was grateful the man had some on so that the ladies would not be exposed to the man's bared buttocks). "But it seems if I am, I am not the only one." She had been repressing a laugh herself; he could tell. He was finding himself more entranced with her with every moment he spent in her company.

"I have already admitted that follies do divert me, though it seems rather cruel to laugh at such a spectacle," Elizabeth said.

"But not to be amused," Darcy said. "I would say _that_ gentleman does not require much sympathy."

"I would say that I agree, especially since I have never known that dog to attack anyone unprovoked, but if I did, that would be shockingly unladylike, would it not?" Elizabeth said with just the slightest sly smile. "And I think we have all received enough shocks today."

He studied her expression for a moment. He thought about how she became more fascinating with every encounter and found himself looking forward to their next meeting and what she might say or do to intrigue him further.

"Indeed," Darcy replied. "Enough shocks."

_For today._

Chapter End Notes

Mrs. Younge gets her first name from Lucy Steele, as I see a few characteristics in common between them—at least in this telling of the story, even if she's more a catalyst than a character (honestly, there's so much backstory that I develop that never
gets a mention in any of my stories but it's there to draw on when needed).
A week later, on the morning of the day of the Netherfield Ball, Darcy rose from his bed. It seemed pointless to continue to try to sleep when all he had was restless dreams involving the entrancing Elizabeth Bennet. Confused and jumbled dreams where there had been moments of him married to her and happy as well as married to her and scorned and ridiculed, mixed with images of her hair down blowing in the wind, surrounding them, enmeshing them, as he kissed her, leaving him frustrated and miserably entangled in his sheets when he awoke.

All his attempts to put her from his mind seemed doomed to failure. Not even reflecting on the unsuitability of her family connections did more than make him reflect on her own personal virtues. No, he would soon need to either flee or surrender, and flight seemed like abject cowardice and surrender seemed...

In actuality he could not determine if surrender would be more pleasurable or painful. Or rather if in the long term he would not have regrets, as he could hardly know if this... feeling was infatuation or something more. He hoped it was infatuation, something he could easily dismiss, but he feared it was not.

He could feel her hold when she smiled at him, when she teased him, when she argued with him, when... Everything about her seemed to call to him. Their recent encounters seemed only to ensnare him further. The walk from Meryton, the card party at her aunt's (why had he allowed Bingley to convince him to go?), their meeting between Netherfield and Longbourn. He had only just been able to resist asking her for the first set of dances at Bingley's ball. It was a distinction that he never extended to any woman, and if he had, he might as well declare himself and be done with it. If only her family were just a little more... anything really. The lack of decorum might be compensated for by fortune or connections, or the lack of fortune or connections might be overcome by a greater degree of decorum. Or perhaps if the youngest two daughters were sent to a proper school and taught to behave like ladies, their mother's improprieties might be more easily ignored.

When he found himself mentally going over a list of ladies' seminaries that might be suggested to Mr. Bennet, he knew he had to stop. This was the way to madness. And yet would it be so very mad? Darcy groaned at his uncharacteristic indecisiveness and wished the time would pass more quickly.

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At Longbourn, Elizabeth Bennet who had spent yet another restless night now sat staring out the window into the yard, hoping for something, though she knew not what. She had a most foreboding feeling about this evening, mostly due to her fears of the behavior of her mother and her youngest sisters, and she rather disliked that feeling. She wished she could blame Mr. Darcy for it, but that would not do. Four days of rain had left her with far too much time to think about that puzzling, infuriating man.

For years she had prided herself on her ability to sketch a character quickly and accurately. And so she thought she had done with him. Only he had suddenly surprised her, showing a sense of humor not unlike her own, and he had an unexpectedly charming smile. It had taken her quite aback and made her wonder if she had not been mistaken in her initial assessment, especially since on the
walk back to Longbourn he continued to be anything but the overly imposing, disdainful man she had hitherto thought of him as being. She hated to be wrong, but she also found complex personalities intriguing.

She had felt some measure of relief and annoyance when after they arrived back at Longbourn to see the more distant and prideful side reemerge in the face of the over exuberance of Kitty and Lydia as they told their mother of the incident in Meryton while Mr. Collins was trying to talk over them about the disgraceful behavior of that man in the presence of the fairer sex. During all of this Mr. Darcy quietly withdrew to the window where Elizabeth was not overly inclined to let him retreat alone. Happily, there was too much activity for anyone to notice her as she went and stood at the opposite side of the window, far enough from him so that there was no appearance of inappropriate closeness and mirrored his pose, staring outside. She said nothing, allowing him the opportunity to ignore her if he so chose to, but he did not.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said.

"Oh, do not mind me, Mr. Darcy," she said. "I was merely curious to discover the attraction of the window." She stared out. "I cannot say that the view is particularly inspiring. Perhaps it is the ability to get out of the fray." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "As a lady, I find that I tend to be limited to concentrating on my embroidery. But today no one seems inclined to notice."

He glanced backwards. The rest of the room was still divided in paying attention to the two youngest Bennets and Mr. Collins; no one was looking in their direction. "You are quite perspicacious, Miss Elizabeth," he said.

"Not always, Mr. Darcy," she said, considering her sudden reassessment of her opinion of him. "But I do hope I am willing to admit errors when they occur."

"Do you?" he asked.

She smiled. "On occasion. And you, Mr. Darcy? I recall you said you have an implacable nature. Are your opinions immovable once formed?"

He looked thoughtful. "Not always, Miss Elizabeth. I have also on occasion found myself forced to reassess previous hasty decisions."

Elizabeth would have inquired further, but unfortunately at that moment her youngest sisters turned to her to have her agree with their account of the happenings in Meryton, and any further discourse between them was at an end, leaving her with much to ponder that evening.

While she now found him far less disagreeable, she was not inclined to overthrow all her previous opinions most specifically that he was far too proud for her tastes, quickly pushing away the unwelcome thought that it was more that he would not stoop to admire her that kept her wanting to enumerate his every fault.

The next evening they were engaged to go to their aunt Phillips', where she expected to be perfectly free of the puzzling gentleman. To her shock, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were in attendance, though none of the rest of the Netherfield party were. It seemed that her uncle had extended the invitation, and Mr. Bingley had quickly accepted on both his and Mr. Darcy's part without committing any of the others.

Seeing how uncomfortable Mr. Darcy was, Elizabeth had to wonder why he had agreed to come. While she knew he might feel compelled to agree to other invitations, she could see no reason why he would accept this one even if he was with Bingley when the invitation was proffered. That the
reason was a wish to see her again, she preferred not to consider, or at least not to consider seriously, even if his manner was slightly less reserved than usual when he greeted her. And seeing him, she wondered if he was indeed overly proud and above his company or just overly reserved and disinclined to be social. Whichever was the case, she was disinclined to see him stalk about the corners of the room and determined to point him in the direction of a couple of sensible gentlemen whose conversation she felt he could appreciate, and there was the hope that his reaction to her suggestions would show her which interpretation of his behavior was more correct. But as she spoke to him some mischievous spirit entered and wanted to provoke him just a little.

"Mr. Darcy, it will not do for you to stand about in such... solitude. I believe if you look around you might find some whose conversations are tolerable enough to tempt you," she said brightly, while watching him carefully.

His expression was hard to read as always, though she thought she saw a slight smile followed by a vaguely puzzled expression. "Is there anyone in particular you feel would be of particular interest?" he asked, the almost smile returning.

_Is he flirting with me?_ she wondered, followed immediately by, _Am I flirting with him?_ Believing that he expected her to answer by naming herself, she took pleasure in saying instead. "I do not know if you have met Mr. Peter Goulding, who is standing in a corner of his own just there." She indicated with a glance. "He too is of a quiet disposition, but he has a love of books and delights in discussing them, as interested in hearing disagreeing as much as agreeing opinions. You might find that engaging." She looked over in another part of the room. "However, if not, over there is Mr. Jonathan Martin, who has been learning to manage his family's estate and would be interested in discussing the latest farming methods, if you are interested there. Though as both are sensible gentlemen, I imagine that they could converse on other matters of mutual interest, provided you are willing."

"Who am I to refuse the request of a lady? However, I must warn you that I have not the talent which some people possess of conversing easily with those I have never seen before."

"And I do not play the piano as well as I ought, but I believe that it is because I do not take the trouble to practice."

"So you believe I should practice, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy said.

"If you wish to improve, Mr. Darcy," she said.

"Then, I believe I would also require a master or perhaps mistress of the art to help me in the endeavor."

"I would not call myself either, but as I am the one who has pressed you, I am willing to do my part," she said, leading the way to Mr. Martin who was standing with his sister, Henrietta, who Elizabeth knew was happily betrothed and shy, thus unlikely to test Mr. Darcy's forbearance.

He had made an effort and ended up speaking with both Mr. Martin and Mr. Goulding. She slipped away once the conversation had started in earnest, not willing to draw too much of her aunt's attention nor wanting to seem too eager for Mr. Darcy's company. However, as chance would take it, she and Mr. Darcy somehow ended up partnered at one of the whist tables, while Mary who had realized Mr. Collins was no more a card player than she was contrived to have them at the table with Lydia to play lottery. Mr. Darcy played very well and between the two of them they won rather easily. However, as Mr. Darcy was rather more reserved while playing cards than he had been earlier, Elizabeth felt more unsure than before and ended the evening more confused than ever, troubled by dreams of Mr. Darcy disappearing whenever she drew close to him.
The next morning, Elizabeth was feeling unaccountably cross and resolved to think no more of Mr. Darcy. That did not stop her from feeling unreasonably disappointed that he did not accompany Mr. Bingley and his sisters when they arrived to deliver the invitation to their ball at Netherfield. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were all charm and delight to Jane and superficial politeness to Elizabeth, while ignoring the rest of the family as much as possible. They did not stay long as the sisters were quick to make their excuses, leaving the Bennet family to the pleasure of contemplating a ball. Even Mary showed an uncharacteristic enthusiasm which was raised even more when Mr. Collins after a long-winded speech in which he threatened to dance with all his cousins asked Mary for the first two dances while apologizing to Jane and Elizabeth for not giving them the precedence due them as elder sisters.

Elizabeth who had no great hope that Mr. Collins was even an adequate dancer was relieved to be able to leave the house for a walk without having to commit to a dance with him. As she walked, Elizabeth's thoughts were in some confusion. While Elizabeth always enjoyed the opportunity to dance, she was still feeling a bit unsettled about Mr. Darcy and for once did not feel comfortable discussing her changing opinion with either Jane or Charlotte. She tried convincing herself that there was no reason to bother as there was no chance that an improved opinion of the man would matter as it was unlikely that anything would come of it, other than they could meet amicably if Mr. Bingley and her sister were wed.

Having no particular purpose to her walk, she had not particularly paid heed to her direction which was generally towards Netherfield. She told herself that the reason was that she was unlikely to meet anyone on this path, which was true, and she did want to be alone. The weather was cool but not unpleasant, and it did not take long for her to lose herself in the pleasure of nature. It became quite easy to push away unpleasant thoughts, but after a time, she noticed that the weather was beginning to change for the worse and turned back towards home. She had not made it far before she heard someone call her name and turning was surprised to see Mr. Darcy riding behind her. He stopped and dismounted before approaching her.

Their greetings had been somewhat awkward. Mr. Darcy seemed unusually hesitant with his words, and Elizabeth was not sure how to respond to that hesitation, but when he asked if he could accompany her on the walk back, she agreed. She asked about his morning, saying that she had seen Mr. Bingley and his sisters when they visited and understood that he was occupied with business. This last with a slight smile as it was Miss Bingley who felt the need (oh, so casually) to explain how very busy Mr. Darcy was, as if she were somehow in his confidence. That she had not taken seriously though she had been somewhat concerned with Miss Bingley's hints that the ball would be the magnificent end of their stay in Hertfordshire. While she believed that Miss Bingley wished it more than was certain, it had not escaped her notice that only Mr. Bingley was completely comfortable with the local society. She would not be surprised if Mr. Darcy was planning to leave soon, but she would not ask him.

"I finished some time ago and wished for a ride," he said. "I rather enjoy the solitude."

"I am sorry to have interrupted it then," Elizabeth said, hating the feeling of disappointment that welled up against her will. "I am not much of a rider, but I can understand the pleasures of a solitary ramble."

"I am not sorry for the interruption," he said, then added, "but perhaps I should apologize for imposing on your walk."

"No, I had enough solitude to restore my spirits. Company is not unwelcome," she said and then wondered if she had said too much, considering the pleasure she felt.
He did not seem affronted or annoyed, but instead asked, "Were you out of spirits, Miss Elizabeth?"

She forced a laugh. "Not particularly, but sometimes I feel a compelling need to be out of doors." She would not for the world say that sometimes she needed to be away from her family and alone with her thoughts.

"I can understand the compulsion, Miss Elizabeth," he said. "There is sometimes a peace to be found in nature that cannot be found in even the most elegant of rooms."

"I imagine it is a much greater pleasure for you in Derbyshire, as my Aunt Gardiner has extolled the beauties of that particular county, and I know that this landscape is quite tame in comparison." That was as close as she would get to inquiring about his movements.

"It is different," he acknowledged. "But that does not mean it lacks its own beauties."

Elizabeth was silenced for a moment as she felt as if he were not referring merely to the landscape, and then as Longbourn came into view there was no more time but for pleasantries before he left to resume his ride, leaving Elizabeth back in her confusion, as while he seemed to enjoy her company, he was still reserved and she felt disappointed that he had not taken the opportunity to ask her for a dance.

That evening it began to rain, a rain that lasted for several days, leaving her trapped inside without even the relief of a walk in the garden. Tempers became somewhat fractious, as Kitty and Lydia bemoaned their inability to walk into Meryton. Elizabeth was sure that Mr. Collins would become unbearable, except that unaccountably the more time he spent with Mary, the less time he spent making unnecessary speeches to the rest of them. Somehow with Mary he was just a little less tedious. Elizabeth did not understand it, but as Mary seemed content, she would not be one to complain.

Now the day of the ball had finally arrived and Elizabeth looked out pleased at last to see a clear sky. She sighed as she realized that she was still giving too much thought to Mr. Darcy, especially as she had become more convinced that while Mr. Darcy did not dislike her, he would never offer for her, which would explain his tendency to retreat and while he had unbent to a degree around her, she could still see his unease around her family. She hated the rain and the equally dampening thoughts they inspired. And she hated that she could no longer dislike the man entirely, as it would make it so simple to not care whether he came or went or whether he asked her to dance or not, and she could have spent the past days more agreeably engaged in thoughts of dancing in general rather than worrying about a specific unlikely partner.

She shook her head to try to clear it and considered it should not be too much longer before her mother was up and bustling about trying to get everyone overexcited and prepared hours before they need be. She heard a door slam and rushing movements and expected any moment to hear her mother calling for them to get up.

However the expected shouts did not happen, and curious she slipped into the hall to see Mrs. Hill hurrying past.

"Mrs. Hill, is there anything amiss?" Elizabeth asked, struck by the expression on her face.

"Oh, Miss Elizabeth, I can hardly say until Mr. Jones gets here," Mrs. Hill said. "It seems Mrs. Bennet has lost her voice."
So for this sort of cliffhanger, the Mrs. Bennet with laryngitis thing came about when I originally had a thought about how pleasant it would be if Lady Catherine lost her voice, but then thought that while the characters might be relieved it wouldn't change the story much, but if Mrs. Bennet lost her voice especially at the time of the Netherfield Ball, now that might change a few more things.
Mr. Jones came and went after informing them that Mrs. Bennet did not seem ill beyond a strained larynx and that she should try refraining from speaking for at least a day or two to give it time to heal. It was welcome news in more way than one to Elizabeth though she would never say out loud that it would be a pleasure to not fear her mother's tendency to indiscreet pronouncements to wreck Jane's chances with Mr. Bingley. If she had thoughts of Mr. Darcy, she quickly repressed them; there was no point on dwelling on the man. If she could not retain her dislike, she would at least strive for indifference.

Having expressed her relief that her mother was not seriously ill, Elizabeth was unpleasantly surprised to hear that she still intended to go to the ball.

"But, mother, would it not be better to rest and recuperate?" Elizabeth asked.

Mrs. Bennet shook her head vigorously and made it clear by gestures and a hoarse whisper that she could not depend on anyone else to watch out for her daughters' interests, especially not their father. Elizabeth repressed a sigh as she left the room. It would probably have been better if she had gotten Jane to speak to her mother, but Jane was down waiting to bring up the special tea for their mother, and now it probably would not do any good at all as once her mother got an idea in her head it was very difficult to turn her from it. But still when she went down to the kitchen she mentioned it to Jane, who said she would try.

Elizabeth left the kitchen only to see a laughing Lydia rushing by, ribbon in her hand followed by Kitty demanding to have it back.

"La, it suits me better, and you know the officers all prefer me anyway," Lydia said.

"No, they do not! You just flirt with them more," Kitty said as she tried to get her ribbon. "Denny says I am ever so much more agreeable."

"Agreeable is just another word for dull," Lydia said. "You know he does not look at you nearly as much as me." She stuck her tongue out. "And neither does Saunderson, so there."

_Probably because she does not act as wild as you_, Elizabeth thought with great irritation. _While we may be spared our mother's loud voice this evening, I would wish even more that we could be spared Lydia's unrestrained flirtations. Perhaps if mother could not be convinced to stay home, she could be convinced to keep Lydia by her side... to deliver messages._ However it seemed improbable that her mother could see any reason to restrain Lydia when she never restrained herself.

Elizabeth entered the music room, trying to shake herself out of her disagreeable mood. Mary was at the piano looking through the music, and Elizabeth was hoping against hope that she was not picking out something that was too elaborate or long.

Mary turned as Elizabeth approached. "How is mother?"

"Well enough to attend the ball, according to her," Elizabeth said. "Apparently, she cannot trust our father to look after our interests. I cannot imagine what she believes she needs to do; however, it is a small mercy that whatever it is will have to be done in silence." She looked around. "Speaking of silence. Has Mr. Collins not come down yet?"

"It seems not," Mary said. "I believe that he was not feeling too well last night and is probably resting so as to be ready for the ball."
Elizabeth waited a moment then said, "Mr. Collins has been singling you out for attention the past few days. While I know we have been glad to let you bear the brunt of his notice, I hope it has not been wearing on you."

"No, it has not," Mary said. "I know he is not the most clever of men, but he can be interesting when he is not trying too hard." She looked at the music on the piano. "It is something I can sympathize with as I think sometimes I try too hard as well."

"I am glad that you are not feeling importuned," Elizabeth said, having felt a sudden guilt at being so pleased to let Mary deal with their cousin, as he was so much more subdued when speaking with her than any other member of the household.

"And what of Mr. Darcy?" Mary asked. "Do you have any expectations of him?"

"Expectations? Of Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth affected a note of incredulity. "No. I have none. I will admit that I have come to think better of him over the past week and hope that if what we hope of his friend comes to pass to be able to get on tolerably with him. But there is nothing more to expect really. He still is not a man who would stoop so far beneath him. Especially not one who would overlook the improprieties of potential in-laws. So, no. Definitely not." She tried not to let on that the thought both hurt and annoyed.

Mary was not fooled by Elizabeth's statement. Being the quiet one, the awkward one, she observed much more than people thought. Even though it never helped her be less awkward in company (she never knew how to respond to people properly), the fact that she was often ignored allowed her to see things other people did not. She had noticed that Mr. Darcy watched Elizabeth quite often and not with the disdain that Elizabeth claimed that it was. She did see the pride, but she did not think it particularly problematic for a man of his position. He seemed a man who took both his position and his responsibilities very seriously, an attitude of which Mary could only approve, and he seemed drawn to Elizabeth's outspoken nature and lively mind, something that was often considered a flaw in her.

While Mary was content to accept the rules and expectations of society however ill she managed to conform to them, she knew that Elizabeth chafed under some of the expectations of what a young woman was supposed to be, and it seemed to Mary that Mr. Darcy despite his pride and aloofness might be a man who could appreciate Elizabeth's stubborn independent temperament. However, she also understood why Elizabeth would not allow herself to hope, as she too was not unaware how their mother's blatant matchmaking and their two youngest sisters' wild unrestrained behavior reflected poorly on them all.

A woman's reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful. How well she understood that, and how little did Lydia or Kitty. Nor did they seem to understand that their behavior also reflected on their sisters' good breeding and made what was a poor situation for matrimony even worse. Mary had believed it was unlikely that she would ever marry and spent her time trying to prepare herself for the day when she would be forced to become a governess. However, it seemed that she had now found a man who by his future expectation was willing to compensate his family by marrying one of its daughters, and by great good fortune, she found herself not adverse to his company nor he hers.

The fact that he had first been interested in her two eldest sisters did not greatly disturb her as she felt he had started with the idea of seniority without having the least notion of whether they had anything in common. He had tried too hard at the beginning as she told her sister, but after the walk to Meryton and back, once they had truly started talking to one another, he seemed to develop a definite preference for her, one that her mother was quick to agree to once it came to her
attention. The mixture of mortification and pleasure that ensued did allow Mary to understand more of Elizabeth's own frustrations, though as a dutiful daughter she tried not to let it appear.

However, now that it appeared that she would have a future as a wife and eventual mistress of Longbourn, she wondered if there were not some way to assist her sisters in their own matches, though naturally without behaving in an unseemly manner. Jane and Mr. Bingley seemed to be doing well enough in a very proper way, but she agreed that Mr. Darcy was in fact most likely to be put off by the behavior of some of their family, and having seen how Mr. Bingley deferred to Mr. Darcy in many ways, though not in sociable ones, she wondered if Mr. Darcy could influence his friend's felicity for good or ill. An idea was forming in Mary's head; this evening, their mother would by the nature of her infirmity not be able to exclaim over any potential matches. Perhaps there could be a way of getting her to keep Lydia by her side.

As Mary had been thinking, Elizabeth had been going through the music on the piano and broke into Mary's thoughts by saying, "If you are concerned about trying too hard, I think you should play this piece. It is not so long as to take time from other young ladies who wish to perform, and you play it by far the best."

"Should I not have more than one song ready?" Mary asked.

"Not for the ball tonight. I am not sure how much time there will be for performing, and it is best to leave your audience pleased and desiring more."

"Are you not planning to perform?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not if I can help it. I am optimistic that there will be more than enough music from others."

Mary looked at the song Elizabeth had chosen and remembered that Mr. Darcy had seemed quite interested the last time Elizabeth sang. It certainly could not hurt if Elizabeth sang again. "You have a much better singing voice than I do. Perhaps we could perform together."

Elizabeth looked hesitant. "I..."

"Surely it would be the best way to display our family's talents without imposing on others' time," Mary insisted.

Finally, Elizabeth nodded. "If you really wish, though I believe you would do more than well enough on your own."

"Perhaps, but I would prefer it if we performed together," Mary said.

"All right," Elizabeth said.

At that moment, Jane entered the room. Mary and Elizabeth looked at her expectantly.

"Mother drank her tea," Jane said. "Also she is still determined to go with us to the ball."

"We expected no less," Elizabeth said. "But I hope you reminded her of Mr. Jones's strictures."

"Of course, Lizzy," Jane said. "I said we could not possibly enjoy the evening if she took the slightest risk with her voice. She seemed to take it to heart."

"Very clever," Elizabeth said. "She would not want anything to get in the way of you and Mr. Bingley spending time together."
"Or you and Mr. Darcy, if she knew," Mary said.

"There is nothing between me and Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said with frustration. "He is merely Mr. Bingley's friend, and there is nothing more to it. I need to go and..." Her voice trailed off as she tried to think of an excuse but then decided to leave anyway.

Once she was out the door, Jane turned to Mary with a confused air. "Mary, do you really think that Mr. Darcy might be harboring a tender regard for our sister?" Jane asked.

"I would not be so bold, but he has shown an interest in her conversation and has stared at her when he believed no one was watching. And they certainly were quite absorbed in their own conversation on the walk from Meryton and at Longbourn as well as our aunt's party. Did you not notice or were you too absorbed in your own conversation with Mr. Bingley?"

Jane blushed and felt embarrassed to realize that two sisters may have gained suitors practically before her eyes and she missed it due to her own absorption. "I am afraid I have missed too much. But Lizzy seems sure that he can have no intentions."

Mary looked reflective. "It is true that he is above us in wealth. But it is also said that a virtuous woman's price is far above rubies, and our sister's worth cannot be measured in material wealth, if he has wisdom enough to see it. However, his pride might indeed revolt at what he might see as ill-bred behavior, even if his affections are engaged." She sighed. "I would wish us all to be at our best advantage and not lose an opportunity for felicity due to influences beyond our control. Perhaps, if we could find a way to keep Lydia and Kitty in check this evening and perhaps find a way to aid Lizzy with Mr. Darcy. All within the realms of propriety, of course."

"Of course," Jane said. Both sisters sat in silence for a moment. Then Jane spoke, slowly and hesitantly, "I know Mother is going to have a hard time having to be so quiet this evening, and as Lydia is her favorite, perhaps we could encourage Mother to keep Lydia close for much of the evening. I know Lydia will be wild to dance, but even she would have to be somewhat restrained near our mother, would she not?"

"Or her partners, at least," Mary said. "After all they should be gentlemen. It would be difficult I think, but as I do not expect to dance much perhaps I could stay near them both and find some ways to encourage any bit of decorum. But I would wish that mother would see the need herself."

Jane looked thoughtful. "Mr. Darcy is Mr. Bingley's dear friend, and he has a sister close to Lydia's age who is not yet out. If she were to think that Mr. Darcy's disapproval meant something to Mr. Bingley..."

"That would be a challenge as she seems quite set against the gentleman," Mary said. "I believe the only thing that would turn her opinion is if she believed that one of her daughters had a chance with Mr. Darcy, and I do not think that Lizzy would approve of that." She paused. "But you are correct that if she believed that Mr. Bingley might be affected by Mr. Darcy's disdain. She would not risk scaring away Mr. Bingley. But how do we do that?" Mary asked, then stopped as another thought popped in. "Perhaps it is best if we simply encourage her to consider keeping Lydia close as both a comfort and to show her own good breeding to Mr. Bingley and his sisters by having her keep her company."

"I suppose that might work, and Lizzy would be mortified if she believed we spoke to mother about Mr. Darcy and her, especially since she insists there is nothing to tell," Jane said.

"True," Mary said. "And there is not much more we can or possibly should do, but I do hope that this evening ends up memorable in the best possible ways for all of us."
"As do I," Jane said, with a slight smile.

When it was finally of an hour for him to be able to break his fast, Darcy descended the stairs to find himself the first to enter the breakfast room, and he was rather relieved by that fact, as he feared that with all the ball preparations taking place that he would find himself in company with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, something he would rather not be faced with after a restless night's sleep. As it was, Darcy was trying to determine the best way to stay out of the way without retiring to his room entirely. He had the thought which he almost immediately repressed of taking a ride in the general direction of Longbourn in the vague hope of "accidentally" meeting with Elizabeth. Of course, what managed to repress the thought was that with the roads still wet and muddy from the rain as well as the ball being that evening that it would be highly unlikely that she would be permitted to take her usual walk. Nevertheless the temptation was still there.

All things considered, he decided that for the nonce retreating to his room and tending to his correspondence would be the best use of his time. After finishing with that, he could revisit the notion of finding something unobtrusive to do. He disliked balls in general, and he even more disliked them when he was a guest in the house in which they were being held, at least when the unofficial hostess was a single young woman determined to draw his attention to every detail of the planning in order to impress him.

His correspondence did not take that long, and he spent some time reading before once again emerging from his room, a vague notion of going to the billiard room where he should be safe from ball preparations as well as Miss Bingley. This actually required some maneuvering as just as he reached the stairs, he heard the voice of Miss Bingley as she harangued the staff.

"No, no, not like that. Everything must be perfect; I intend to show these country people how a proper ball is conducted."

"Caroline, I hardly think that it needs so much attention," he heard Mrs. Hurst say.

"Louisa, there will be those here who are used to only the best, and I certainly intend that this ball will be the epitome of refinement and luxury. Not that I expect that the natives will properly appreciate it, but I will not be shamed by anything less than perfection. My reputation will not stand for it."

"Oh, Caroline..."

Having frozen for a moment after hearing the voices, Darcy finally managed to recall himself and retreated from the scene. Once out of hearing, he paused, a troubling thought trying to fight its way to the surface, but he quickly suppressed it as he finished backtracking to find another route to his destination. It was quite fortunate that he had previously explored the house quite thoroughly so that this proved to be minimally challenging.

When he reached the room, he discovered that his friend was there before him.

"Eager to hide out as well?" Bingley asked as he shut the door on all the activity outside.

"I would not say that," Darcy said.

"Of course, I am not particularly hiding, as my sisters told me to get out of their way," Bingley said as he racked the balls on the table. "I suspect that at least one of them would not say the same to you."
Darcy refused to reply though he felt it was true enough; after all that was the primary reason he was trying to keep out of the way. Even the best of women tended to get to be a bit much to take when a ball is being organized, and despite what they seemed to think of themselves, the Bingley sisters were not the best of women. Especially when he found himself comparing them to Elizabeth, as he did all too often, and he found that Miss Bingley in particular fell further with each comparison.

Once he had found Miss Bingley tolerable enough a companion, her biting wit encouraging his own, but of late she had become a cloying nuisance, her barbs no longer amusing, her insults of Elizabeth intolerable, and her increasing attentions irritating at best, as he had thought that she understood that she was in no way considered a potential candidate to become Mrs. Darcy of Pemberley, friendship with her brother notwithstanding. After all, in London, he was rarely the sole object of her attention; in point of fact, she tended to focus far more on other bachelors of a far more likely caliber than himself. Was it that she considered him the only bachelor of worth in the immediate vicinity and thus made him her object of prey? Or was it merely the fact that he openly admired another woman that made her suddenly seek to capture his attention with perceived competition bringing out her latent ambitions? He supposed it did not matter, as the important point was that he had allowed himself to become careless and complacent and more and more disliked the way he seemed to become his worst self in Miss Bingley's presence.

Darcy leaned down over the table with his stick. He took a deep breath and struck the cue ball, sending the racked balls scattering across the green and a few dropping into the pockets. As he walked around the table, easily sinking one shot after another, thoughts of Miss Bingley evaporated from his mind. He could not be discourteous to his hostess but he could minimize his time in her presence. It should be a simple enough matter, almost as simple as a game of billiards.
Once past the receiving line at Netherfield, Elizabeth looked around for Charlotte Lucas, whom she had not seen for a week. That she also might be looking to see Mr. Darcy, who was tall enough that it should have been easy enough to spot him, as well, she would most firmly deny. As it was, the familiar company meant her progress through the room was slow as she was greeted by many of her neighbors, among the first being Jonathan Martin who asked her for the first dance as his sister was engaged with her betrothed. She had to repress a smile at his method of asking, but she was pleased to find a partner for the first dance so quickly.

After a few more encounters and another dance invitation, Elizabeth spotted Charlotte and was surprised to see her talking with Mary who somehow had maneuvered through the crowd ahead of her. She was equally surprised not to see Mr. Collins by her side, as it had seemed as if he planned to be glued to her side for the evening.

Charlotte greeted her warmly then said, "Mary was just telling me about your mother's infirmity." There was a hint of a smile as she added, "It must vex her greatly."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said. "It took all our persuasion to get her to agree to the least of Mr. Jones's strictures by reminding her of the dire prognostications if she did not."

"No, she has never believed that silence is a virtue," Mary said. "I should find her, as I am sure she is feeling this trial greatly." With that she immediately left leaving Elizabeth slightly puzzled as Mary and Charlotte had never been particularly close.

"So is it true that it seems likely that your cousin will be making an offer to Mary?" Charlotte asked. "Reports are that he was quite attentive to her at your aunt Phillips' party last week."

Elizabeth smiled wryly. "It certainly seems so, and both Mary and my mother seem pleased by the notion."

"And you? I understand you have had a change of opinion lately."

Confused, Elizabeth said, "My cousin is perhaps not my favorite person, but I am pleased that Mary is pleased."

"No, I was referring to a certain gentleman from Derbyshire," Charlotte said.

"There is nothing I can really say, except that yes, my opinion of him has improved a bit. He is not so disagreeable even if he is quite proud," Elizabeth said.

"He has reason to be," Charlotte said. "Nevertheless, I am sure you could secure him if you put your mind to it."

"I very much doubt that, Charlotte," Elizabeth said. "Mr. Darcy seems a man who is immune to being 'secured,' and I have no intention of making a fool of myself in any such attempt."

Charlotte looked as if she might press her point, but there was not time enough as the dancing was about to start. Mr. Martin approached, and Elizabeth was glad to push away the topic of Mr. Darcy, as she was getting quite frustrated with people suggesting unbelievable possibilities. The
first dance with Mr. Martin was pleasant enough. He was not an inspired dancer, but he rarely moved incorrectly and catching glimpses of Mary's dances with Mr. Collins, who rarely moved correctly, Elizabeth was quite content with her partner.

After that first set Elizabeth checked to see how her mother was faring. While she was obviously not happy about having to remain silent, she was enjoying her role as brave invalid, a contrast to her usual flutterings, and while she was incapable of indulging in her desire to boast of what she considered to be the inevitable good matches of her daughters, she was receiving her second favorite occupation of hearing the gossip of the past week from her cronies. And beyond that she seemed to be enjoying the number of young men approaching to ask her daughters to dance.

Nearby, Mary sat on a chair, Mr. Collins hovering by her side. "Oh, Cousin Elizabeth," he said. "Cousin Mary seems to have hurt her ankle, and I feel I should see to her comfort—as well as your good mother's," he added as an after thought.

Elizabeth looked at Mary who had a slight smile on her face, and Elizabeth realized that she was doing her part to spare other people's feet, and possibly help keep their mother and sister in line. "That is very... kind of you, Mr. Collins," she said. "Mary, I hope your ankle is not too bad."

"Not very," Mary replied. "I believe with a little rest it will be well."

"I am glad to hear it," Elizabeth replied, before moving off a little to leave Mary and Collins together.

"Cousin Mary," Mr. Collins said, "is there anything I may get for your relief."

"No, thank you," Mary said. "But perhaps you might see if my mother would like some punch."

"Of course, how remiss of me. I should see to it at once. But are you sure there is nothing that I can get for you, dear cousin," he persisted.

"I am quite sure for the moment, but perhaps later," Mary replied. "I think my mother is in more need just now."

Finally seeming to realize that he was helping no one by simply standing there, Mr. Collins bobbed his head slightly and hurried over to Mrs. Bennet. Mary watched as he then scurried towards the refreshment table. He was no great dancer, and he would never be the world's best speaker, but she could not help but like him for his good intentions however ill he managed to express them. She glanced over at Elizabeth who was near Charlotte again and wondered if the small conspiracy they had entered to see that Elizabeth would have partners enough to see her up to just before the supper set would work. It helped that Charlotte's brother John was a lively young man who would not bother to ask too many questions about why they wanted that; he'd simply think it was some kind of joke between the three of them, and he and his friends did like Elizabeth enough to think it no hardship. However, so much depended on Mr. Darcy wishing to dance with Elizabeth and not being put off by that being her first free set. Both Mary and Charlotte did hope that he would be encouraged by the fact that she was not being "slighted by other men"; they both understood that most men found a woman more enticing when other men also noticed them. Of course, they both understood this as the women that no men really noticed.

At that moment, Mr. Collins returned bearing two glasses of punch, one of which he handed to her mother before returning to her side.

Holding the cup a little awkwardly, he said, "I know that you said that you did not wish a cup, but then when I was there I thought you might have changed your mind, and I would not wish you to
have to wait if you had, but if you still did not, I might give this to another of my cousins if they are thirsty, or..."

Mary interrupted him. "Thank you, Mr. Collins; I believe I am thirsty after all. It was very thoughtful of you."

He beamed at her as he handed her the glass. "It is my pleasure, Miss Mary."

Darcy entered the ballroom quietly, determined not to draw attention to himself. Indeed for some time, he had been standing in an upstairs room watching the arriving carriages. After his billiards games with Bingley, he had spent a trying day avoiding Miss Bingley who once she had discovered his presence downstairs, seemed determined to seek his approval of all her plans, not that there would be any time to make any change of note. Once he had retreated to his rooms, he had no intention of returning downstairs until the dancing was about to start. It was one advantage of being a guest of the host rather than the host himself. If he had been looking for the arrival of a particular party, he had not admitted that to himself, at least until he saw Elizabeth Bennet step out of her family's carriage. She looked beautiful, and yet he could not help but imagine how much more brightly she might shine in richer materials with some of the Darcy jewels around her neck. He shook his head, trying to clear that image from his head.

He had waited until he was sure she would be well inside before venturing downstairs. Now, he hovered around the edges, not sure if he was trying to hide from his hostess or the object of his fascination. He was determined to steer clear of both at least until after the first dance ended. He was successful in avoiding the latter but not the former who managed to spot him half way through the first set, and Miss Bingley also managed to spy Miss Elizabeth at the same time.

"I see Miss Eliza has found herself a partner in Mr. Martin," she said, pausing long enough for Darcy to respond if he wished. He did not, so she continued, "I believe he is an old friend of the Bennet family. It would be quite a fitting match, as surely he would be quite used to her impertinent ways."

Darcy refused to respond and merely continued watching the dance. He saw no partiality on either's part, just as he had seen none when he had met Mr. Martin the previous week, but that did not mean that he felt any sense of complacency in observing them. Also, while he knew he would need to ask Miss Bingley to dance at some point during the evening, he absolutely refused to ask her at this moment while she was trying to force some reaction from him about Elizabeth—Miss Elizabeth.

"Pray do not allow me to detain you from speaking with your other guests, Miss Bingley," he said. "It would not do for me to distract the hostess from her duties." He kept his voice as flat as possible.

Miss Bingley blinked at him for a moment before putting on a rather insincere smile and saying, "I would never dare call you a distraction, Mr. Darcy, though you are all thoughtfulness, sir."

"Not at all," he said, seeing that she did not intend to quit his side. "If you would excuse me, madam." Having seen one of the guests approaching, he took the opportunity to move away before she could come up with a reason to detain him, and while it was bordering on discourtesy, he could not regret escaping her and leaving her to others, as he moved to find a better place in which to observe Elizabeth while waiting for the opportunity to ask her for a dance of his own.

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Elizabeth's second dance was with an officer who was a good dancer and a pleasant conversationalist; it was not quite as difficult to be distracted from wondering where Mr. Darcy was as she had not yet seen him that evening. After that she returned to Charlotte, who wisely refrained from bringing up the subject of Mr. Darcy. However, the gentleman himself soon appeared and after an exchange of greetings, asked her for the next set.

"Mr. Darcy, I am afraid that my next open set is the supper set," she said, both disappointed that she had not an earlier one open and convinced he would rather not dance that particular set with her.

"Then I will look forward to it," he said. "You seem quite in demand this evening, Miss Elizabeth."

"I rarely sit out save when gentlemen are scarce. It is of no consequence to me, as I rarely feel slighted." This was the closest she would come again to directly reminding him of his initial insult to her after his missing her last reference. She wondered if he often insulted people so casually that he would forget so easily. Of course, she knew of her own tendency to judge instantly and unfairly, but wondered whether his insult was a reflection on his character or his manners.

Mr. Darcy frowned slightly as if trying to comprehend why her words sounded familiar and then his eyes widened as he recollected.

"It seems, Miss Elizabeth, that I owe you an apology as well as a dance," he said after a moment.

"Do you?" she asked with an all too innocent smile.

"As you know very well," he said, a slight smile of his own appearing. "I spoke poorly about matters that I both knew nothing of and insulted a very handsome young woman in the process."

"Oh, am I now handsome enough to tempt you, Mr. Darcy?" she asked, part of her wondering if this was saying too much, but if he was going to withdraw, then better it be now.

"I believe you know the answer to that well enough," he replied seriously. "Will you forgive me for my most inaccurate and foolish words?"

She tilted her head as she looked up at him. "For the moment, I believe I will," she said.

"So I have but a temporary stay," he said. "You intend to make me work for a full pardon, I perceive."

"Do you believe you deserve one?"

"No, but I would still wish it," he said.

"Then it is entirely possible," Elizabeth said. "I am learning that first impressions are not necessarily the best or at least final indicators of character."

"And I am learning that some times it would be better to be silent than speak."

"Or perhaps that there are better ways of indicating a refusal than insulting a third party," Elizabeth indicated with a smile, "as I believe that you have too well embraced the concept of silence at times when it would be well if you spoke."

"That is too true, Miss Elizabeth."
At that moment, Elizabeth's partner for the next set appeared, and their conversation ended, with great reluctance on both sides. During those dances, Elizabeth became very aware of Mr. Darcy's gaze as he watched her. She knew now that those stares were not meant to display disdain but something else entirely.

He did not approach her after that set, but in the next he stood very close as he danced that one with Miss Bingley while she danced with Mr. Lucas. As they were old friends and the dance a familiar one, it left Elizabeth with leisure enough to overhear the conversation if such it could be called.

"How elegantly you dance, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley said. He barely acknowledged the compliment nor did he return it, though she did not seem to notice as she continued on. "I always believe that this dance requires true proficiency." She batted her lashes at Mr. Darcy who seemed to be looking past her shoulder. As he merely nodded, she continued, "And we are so fortunate as to have just the right amount of couples on the floor. None of the crowding you would get at a public assembly."

Elizabeth wondered at Miss Bingley's conversation fitting so much into the bland mold of polite dancing conversation. Was there nothing more personal she could say beyond that first compliment on Mr. Darcy's dancing? She certainly was not garnering any more than the barest attention that courtesy required. In fact, Elizabeth had the oddest feeling that wherever he seemed to be looking, Mr. Darcy's attention was directed not towards his partner but to her. And every time the dance moved them together, Elizabeth felt all the force of his attention for the moments that they were together, always smoothly with never a misstep, the same of which could not be said about her turns with her own partner, as she found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on him rather the man next to him, though she did her best to avoid discourtesy to Mr. Lucas.

Of course, it was made rather more challenging when she had to ignore Miss Bingley's increasingly overblown compliments. Apparently, there was nothing that was not infinitely superior in Mr. Darcy as compared to the common man, and while she did not directly insult anyone, her implication that the rest of her guests were inferior beings in comparison as well as the underlying apology for inflicting them upon him was not lost on Elizabeth, no matter how subtle the lady in question believed she was being. When the set finally ended, Elizabeth was feeling oddly disquieted, not only by Mr. Darcy but her own changing reactions to him. It was almost a relief to get away from him for a little time to recover.

However, when it came time for their own dance, Elizabeth was again discomposed and somewhat unnerved by Mr. Darcy's attention. Now that her dislike had all but dissipated, she was not quite sure what had taken its place nor was she sure what Mr. Darcy's intentions were. He still seemed a man too certain of his own consequence, and yet even she could not mistake his earlier conversation as a lack of interest, and whatever else she had thought of him, she had no reason to believe him a dishonorable man who would play with a woman for his own amusement.

In consequence of the discomposure of her feelings, the first part of their dance was conducted in silence, until Elizabeth drew on her courage. "Tell me, Mr. Darcy. Are you always such a taciturn dancer?"

"I must confess that I do rarely speak," he replied. "It is a flaw that I am not certain how to rectify."

"Well, I believe that the easiest way would be to converse," she said with a smile. "However, if you are at a loss for a topic, perhaps I should speak of the dance and you could comment on the size of the room or the number of couples." *Rather like the obsequious Miss Bingley*, she reflected.

"Do you mean to talk by rule then?"
"If it will ease your difficulties. Or would you rather we not speak unless we can amaze the whole room."

"Is that what you think of me— of the two of us?"

"I must not comment on my own performance, but I have not yet completely sketched your character. There appear to be such different aspects as to puzzle me exceedingly."

"You once said that intricate characters are the most amusing."

"I am no longer so sure if amusing is the proper term."

"So do you have another term?" he asked.

She looked at him with a curious expression. "I am not sure. Perhaps intriguing would be better."

He said, "Intriguing does seem a better word; I would prefer not to be the only one to be studying an intriguing character."

"And how is your study coming along?" Elizabeth asked. "I will not be so bold as to inquire as to the name of the object of your study."

"That is because I believe you may be all too aware of it yourself."

"If I am, it would not be proper to admit it," she said.

He smiled at her just as Sir William Lucas paused in his walk across the room to address him. "I have been most highly gratified indeed, my dear sir. Such very superior dancing is not often seen. It is evident that you belong to the first circles. Allow me to say, however, that your fair partner does not disgrace you, and that I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event, my dear Eliza, " he said as he looked at Jane and Mr. Bingley together, "shall take place. What congratulations will then flow in! And perhaps that might encourage a certain reserved gentleman..." Sir William glanced towards Mr. Martin who was standing nearby talking quietly with his sister's betrothed. Then noticing Mr. Darcy's expression, he suddenly said, "But let me not interrupt you, sir. You will not thank me for detaining you from the bewitching converse of that young lady, whose bright eyes are also upbraiding me."

Mr. Darcy's eyes focused on Mr. Martin for a long moment before returning to Elizabeth. "Sir William's interruption has made me forget what we were talking of."

Elizabeth found she could not decipher Mr. Darcy's expression, but she was feeling a certain amount of irritation with Sir William and his well meaning gossip. "I believe we were discussing character study. However, at the moment, I am contemplating the dividing line between observing characters and transmitting gossip, as well as how frustrating it can be to be the object of others' observations."

"It can be frustrating indeed," Mr. Darcy said with the conviction of a man used to being the subject of speculation.

"So I have observed," Elizabeth said with a wry smile. "At the moment, I feel it would be better for those who wish to pass on good wishes to wait until there is confirmation that there is something on which to anticipate."

"Is it the accuracy or the inaccuracy of speculations that troubles you?" Darcy asked.
Elizabeth was not sure which bit of Sir William's speech he was referring to. She had hopes of Mr. Bingley and Jane but felt that any anticipation of their marriage was premature. "Can we ever be certain how accurate an outside appraisal is of a situation? I know I have prided myself on my discernment only to realize that my impression was not so correct as I believed it to be. Have you not had any similar experience of your own?"

He appeared to deliberate. "Yes, I have," he said, "and it has been a humbling experience." He fell silent and seemed to look past her at nothing in particular but brought his eyes back to her after a brief moment. "Perhaps that is the point."

"I am forced to agree with you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth replied before the dance put the end to their exchange.

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Darcy was losing the war. Every moment with Elizabeth Bennet weakened his defenses. He had never been so open with any woman as he was with her. He never flirted; he never encouraged women, but with her it was a battle to not offer her his hand and heart. He had watched her dancing with other men and envied every smile they received.

He had been more than annoyed with Miss Bingley's insinuating remarks about Elizabeth's first partner, though he had seen no specific interest on either's part either this night or the night of the Phillips' party. But then his tolerance for Miss Bingley's attentions had become almost nonexistent. Since politeness dictated he ask her to dance, he did so, but the only pleasure he had had was in his proximity to Elizabeth. He was amazed that he did not misstep as he hardly noticed anything but her. In point of fact, if anyone had asked him what Miss Bingley had said during the dance, he would have been unable to answer as he certainly did not retain a word of it.

That was not the case with Elizabeth. Every word she spoke seemed to etch itself into his mind, and he was most pleased that their dance had been the supper set as he wanted nothing more than to spend as much time with her as possible, even as he told himself that it was not wise to do so.

Much as he enjoyed the dance, he had been disturbed by Sir William's implication that he might have a rival for her. It had been easier to dismiss Miss Bingley's earlier assertion as she was unfamiliar with Mr. Martin, but Sir William knew them both. In all his previous deliberations on Miss Elizabeth, Darcy had not taken into consideration the possibility of another claiming her if he did not, and the distaste— no, more accurately revulsion— he felt at the prospect of her marrying any other man was forcing him to reevaluate any notion of leaving her behind.

At supper, luck seemed to be with him as he and Elizabeth found themselves sitting far from Miss Bingley and the younger Miss Bennets who were sitting near the still quiet Mrs. Bennet. While they were all far more subdued than he ever seen them, he could not but be glad to have Elizabeth to himself out of their immediate purview. He had wished to return to the conversation they had broken off during the dance, but it seemed too serious a subject to continue at the moment. However, there was no shortage of conversation as Elizabeth proved quite adept at drawing him out when he found himself beginning to retreat to taciturnity. She was not shy about engaging others in conversation as well, and while he selfishly would prefer to monopolize her attention, he could not but see how Elizabeth's ease with others would translate well to his sphere.

After supper, there was some talk of singing, and Darcy was pleasantly surprised to see Elizabeth and her younger sister Miss Mary perform a duet together. He had always been captivated by Elizabeth's performances, and this night was no exception. While perhaps not the most practiced
of performers, she had a way of capturing the emotion of the piece that more than compensated for any errors that crept in. However, what most caught him at this moment were the lyrics of the song she was singing, "Love Will Find Out the Way," most especially the verse:

You may esteem him
   A child for his might
Or you may deem him
   A coward for his flight;
But if she whom Love doth honour
   Be conceal'd from the day—
Set a thousand guards upon her,
   Love will find out the way.

He wondered if he were a coward trying to fight this feeling as aside from her lack of fortune and connections, Elizabeth Bennet was proving to be everything he could wish for in a wife, and he wondered if such cold calculations were more of a way to hide from the unaccountably strong feelings she elicited from him. He had every reason to be proud of his position and ancestry, but was Elizabeth really so far beneath him?

She was the daughter of a gentleman, and would he not be a hypocrite to hold her ties to trade against her when he was close friends with Bingley whose fortune was made from trade? Perhaps, some of her family did not behave as they should, but did he not know people of higher rank who behaved far worse? His aunt Catherine was as much the grasping mother as Mrs. Bennet, with the addition of being overbearing and dictatorial; he had often overlooked her poor behavior because of their relationship and her rank, but really did that justify her? Then there was his uncle Oliver, so bitter about being the second son of an Earl and such an utter snob he had barely spoken to Darcy's own father because he had no title of his own. Even his uncle Matlock could be embarrassing with his hearty bluntness. Then there was... Darcy forced himself to stop as he realized the list of less than properly behaved relatives was longer than he would have previously have admitted to.

His father had taught him to be proud but it had always been in conjunction with the notion that of those to whom much was given much was expected and that birth alone did not a gentleman make. Somewhere along the line, he had allowed those principles to be warped out of their proper perspective until he did put too much value on rank and judged others more harshly if they were not of his circle, while excusing equally poor behaviors if performed by those of rank or consequence.

Elizabeth, lovely Elizabeth, never treated him with undue deference; she was willing to point out his less than polite behavior but with such a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner that he could not take offense. With her, he felt that neither his rank nor his fortune mattered to her, but his behavior as a man did. It was a novel feeling and one he found increasingly irresistible.

His thoughts were interrupted by the snide voice of Miss Bingley. "What a provincial choice. No style. No sophistication. But what else could be expected from that family?"

Darcy grimaced. "I thought it was charmingly done." He watched as Elizabeth and Miss Mary left the piano.

Miss Bingley made a scoffing noise. "I think you are mistaking 'fine eyes' for a fine voice."

"Unlikely," he said, moving away from her towards Elizabeth. When he reached her, he said, "That was a lovely performance."
"Thank you, sir," Elizabeth said. "I believe it owes much to my sister's playing."

"Do not underestimate the charm of the singer," he replied.

Elizabeth blushed slightly. However, any reply was lost in the sudden loud cry behind them. They turned to see Miss Bingley sprawled out on the floor near the pianoforte. It seemed that on her way to the instrument she had somehow tripped and fallen against a table, knocking over a full glass of wine onto herself. Turning as red as the wine on her dress, Miss Bingley struggled up with the help of a footman and then calling to her sister left the room as quickly as possible.

The moment she was gone, Darcy turned his attention back to Elizabeth, while trying to ignore the buzz of conversation around them, though he could not help hearing some speculation that Miss Bingley had been imbibing too freely during the evening and how they were shocked that such a lady would overindulge. Though he knew he should, he could not feel overly sympathetic to Miss Bingley as she was reaping what she had sowed, much as he had. His consolation was that he seemed to be on the way to redeeming his previous disdainful behavior, and looking into Elizabeth's fine eyes, he finally surrendered to the knowledge that the only proper redemption would be to convince her to marry him.

As a first step, he asked, "Miss Elizabeth, would you do me the honor of dancing the last set with me?"

She looked up at him with a bright smile. "Mr. Darcy, it would be a pleasure."

When Mary returned to Mr. Collins side, he was gushing in his praise.

"Allow me to congratulate you, dear cousin, on a lovely performance, highlighting as it does your sisterly devotion and modesty," he said. "For I consider music as a very innocent diversion, and perfectly compatible with the profession of a clergymen. Not that I am at all proficient in the art, but I hope I can properly appreciate the artistry of others and the uplifting manner in which they perform." He ran out of breath there, while Mrs. Bennet merely nodded vigorously in agreement.

"I thank you, Mr. Collins," Mary said. "It is good to know that you find pleasure in simple entertainments as well as your calling."

"Lord, how dull this is!" Lydia exclaimed. "I cannot wait until the dancing starts again." She then snorted in laughter. "Though Miss Bingley was not so dull."

"Lydia, that is uncharitable," Mary said immediately. "We should be compassionate on those who suffer misfortune."

"You are most correct, cousin Mary," Mr. Collins said.

Rolling her eyes, Lydia turned to stare around the room. She caught sight of Elizabeth as she approached where Mr. Collins and her sisters stood. "Lizzy! Lizzy! You will bear me out. Wasn't Miss Bingley a frightful diversion? I'm sure you saw."

"Indeed, as did everyone," she replied with only the slightest hint of exasperation in her voice. "I also heard what Mary said, and she is quite right. We should have compassion in the face of someone's misfortune."

Clearly unamused, Lydia strode off in search of company she would find more agreeable.
The scene with Miss Bingley played over and over in Elizabeth's mind. She brought a hand up to her mouth to conceal the smile she was fighting to suppress. "Yes," she said thoughtfully as she watched Lydia go, "we should."

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To Darcy it seemed far too long until the last dance, but at last it came. He was vaguely aware of the notice they drew as he led her to the floor, but he ignored it in favor of focusing on the lovely woman before him.

As they stood waiting, he was determined to speak and show Elizabeth his admiration, though his experience in that area was nonexistent, as it had always been ladies trying to garner his attention not the other way around. "Miss Elizabeth," Darcy started, "May I enquire as to whether you have been continuing your study?"

"Of what study do you speak, sir?" she asked.

"Of character."

"Character, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth smiled wryly. "May I ask to what this portends?"

Darcy hesitated for a moment before speaking again; this was difficult yet exhilarating. "To the state of my pardon."

"Indeed? Are you still working on that?" she asked nonchalantly but with an undercurrent of mischievousness.

"Am I?" he replied with a hint of lightness in his voice but an undertone that was serious.

"As I recall, I granted you a pardon."

"A temporary one." He looked at her intently. I know your forgiveness may be given, but I very much doubt you will ever let me forget such a thoughtless untruth.

"Ah, I see. And you are hoping for something more permanent." Her eyes were bright and sparkled in the light.

I most certainly am, my lovely Elizabeth. He could spend a lifetime gazing into those eyes and never weary. "Yes. I remember your telling me that first impressions are not necessarily the best indicators." I hope to not only have improved but to have the opportunity to capture you as you have captured me.

"So it appears," she said with a laugh.

"I have..." he faltered uncharacteristically as he struggled to find the right words for her, "My manner is what one might consider reserved, some might say resentful. However, knowing you to be a student of human behavior, I am hoping you have been judicious in your final sketch of my character."

"You think I have made one?"

"Not necessarily. Only that when you do, that you will forgive my earlier words," he said.

Elizabeth smiled more broadly. "I think I can find a way."

Darcy smiled in return. With any luck, love will find out the way.
Chapter End Notes

The first time through with "Luck is Not Always A Lady" I was asked by reviewers to have Miss Bingley suffer her share of misfortune rather like Wickham, and I was initially planning something rather more. However, as I was writing some of Darcy's self reflections, I came to the realization that at this point in the novel, both Darcy and Miss Bingley behaved about equally badly, and if I was cutting him and to a lesser degree Elizabeth some (or perhaps a lot of) slack, I shouldn't go overboard punishing Miss Bingley. Darcy's and her motivations may have been dissimilar, but still they both behaved poorly.

Also, I always do like it when Darcy has more than one relative equally as badly behaved as the Bennets, even though Lady Catherine is pretty much equal to the entire Bennet family in her condescension, controlling, obnoxious behavior. In the initial story and even this one until near the end of writing it, Lady Catherine was the only relative Darcy reflected on. But as this story kept expanding, some of Darcy's other relatives made an appearance later on, and once their personalities developed, I felt a compelling need to have Darcy expand his reflections back here.

And okay, I do have Elizabeth being a little hypocritical about enjoying Miss Bingley's mishap while chastising Lydia for speaking of it, but she does at least keep it to herself. However, she's not a perfect person, and I like that about her even when I want her to avoid her worst mistakes.

About Darcy's apology for his insult at the Assembly, I know this is the second time Elizabeth makes reference to it, though it's this time that Darcy actually picks up on it and remembers. I must admit that I believe Darcy completely forgot that he insulted Elizabeth; after all, he hadn't really met her yet and was in a bad mood and really I think at this point his being insulting wouldn't even really register with him. But here I have it just take a couple of reminders and he's got that oops moment going on.
The day after the Netherfield Ball found Mr. Collins solidly determined to come to the point of proposing after what he saw as a very successful evening, though he did feel some concern about Mrs. Bennet's indisposition, but considering that it had not kept her from attending the ball the previous evening felt that it should be no impediment to his cause. He felt it most fortunate to find Mr. Bennet along with Mary and Elizabeth together shortly after breakfast.

"May I hope, sir, for your interest with your fair daughter Mary, when I solicit for the honor of a private audience with her in the course of this morning?" Then thinking that that might not be the proper way to go about this added. "Or perhaps I should speak with you first, sir, in order to reassure you as to my honorable intentions and reasons for requesting such an interview."

Mr. Bennet quirked an eyebrow at the man. "I think I can safely infer the topic and reserve the option of a private interview only after you have obtained the consent of my daughter for both the privacy and the ensuing question which you seem eager to ask." He looked over at Mary. "What say you, daughter? Is this agreeable to you or no? I do not press you either way."

Mary did not seem to know where to look as her cheeks flushed, but finally she said, "I believe I am agreeable, father."

"Then there is nothing more to be said." Mr. Bennet rose from his seat. "Elizabeth, if you will be willing to sit outside the door, I will be in my book room pending the successful conclusion of your inquiry." He then left the room followed by Elizabeth who gave Mary an encouraging smile as she left to sit on the chair just to the right of the half opened door, too far to hear but close enough to provide the comfort of propriety.

Once they were alone, Mr. Collins seemed somewhat unsure of what to do with himself, looking around the room before suddenly coming to sit next to Mary on the sofa. He carefully took her hand in his before speaking.

"My dear Miss Mary, I find myself at a loss in the presence of such modest perfection..." He paused as he seemed to realize the words gave off another meaning than the one he wished. "...Such perfect modesty and amiability. If I stumble, it can only be because I find myself desiring only to please in this most important of addresses, though you can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse, after the plain speaking of your father. Almost as soon as I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying —and, moreover, for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife, as I certainly did."

"I do not believe that is necessary, sir," Mary interrupted. "A clergyman should marry and set the example of matrimony in his parish, and with the entail it is no great mystery why you might visit this house for such a purpose."

"Once again, you show me why of all my cousins it is you with whom I have had the most pleasant of conversations. You seem to understand so well what it is I seek to say, much like the very noble lady whom I have the honor of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject..." He paused again. "She said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. —Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for my sake; and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. This is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.' Allow me, by the way, to observe, my fair cousin, that I do not
reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will find her manners beyond anything I can describe; and your learning and piety, I think, will show that you to be a woman most suited to the role of clergyman's wife.

"And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the four per cents, which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married...." He stumbled again as if he had somehow missed an important part of his speech, then with a sudden rush continued. "For as it is written in Proverbs: 'Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.'" Mr. Collins then suddenly went down on one knee before Mary. "For all these reasons but most especially that I believe this will add greatly to the happiness of us both, I ask that you make me the happiest of men and accept this humble offer of matrimony."

Mary found herself strangely moved by this proposal, more romantic than she had expected, and was moreover profoundly struck by his using the same reference as she had the day before, though she had made it in reference to her sister rather than herself. It seemed a sign of the rightness of her decision to accept him, a promise of future felicity.

Thus it was with a light heart that Mary said, "I thank you for your proposal, and I would be most pleased to accept and become your wife."

Mr. Collins beamed at her. "You have made me the happiest of men," he said. "Now I must immediately go to your father and ask him to give his blessing for our most felicitous union, so that we may soon be joined in matrimony. Hopefully at the beginning of the new year."

"So soon, Mr. Collins?" Mary asked.

"But of course," he said. "For I wish to bring my bride to my parish as expeditiously as possible. As Lady Catherine has said, every vicar needs a wife," He looked at her for a moment and then seemed to realize something. "Of course, this all depends on your own wishes, my dear. After all, you are the bride and..." He floundered about for a moment.

"January is fine," Mary said. "I know you cannot be away from your parish too long, and I have no wish for any excessive delay."

"Excellent, excellent," he said. "Now I must speak to your father, so that all things can proceed as they ought." He practically bounced to his feet before heading out the door, leaving Mary sitting on the sofa a little stunned by all that had just happened.

She could hear him humming to himself as he hastened down the hall, and she couldn't help smiling at his happiness and her own. "Oh yes, a felicitous union indeed."

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Two days after the Netherfield Ball, Darcy managed to chance across Miss Elizabeth while walking between Netherfield and Longbourn. The day after the ball, Bingley had gone to Town on some business, and Darcy found himself importuned by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst who desired to close the house and follow him in the hopes of discouraging him from Miss Bennet. Having spent most of his time at the ball focusing on Miss Elizabeth, he had formed no particular opinion
on Miss Bennet; she was well bred and pleasant enough and far superior to most of the other women Bingley had been infatuated with, and as he had finally decided to pursue his Bennet sister (a fact he would not mention to two people so wholly unconnected to him), he could hardly act to dissuade his friend without feeling too much the hypocrite. As it was, all he could say was that he had no intention of leaving for Town at this moment and that Bingley was a man old enough to make his decisions, and while Miss Bennet was perhaps not the most prudent choice, she was hardly so objectionable as to make him change his plans. Having had enough of them, Darcy ended up spending most of the day ensconced in the library, taking care of his correspondence and reading.

The next day, he left on an early morning walk, taking the same path that had led to him meeting with Elizabeth before the ball. Not that he truly expected to come across her, but he hoped he might. Fortune was with him that morning as he encountered her as she was walking out, and he trusted that he did not mislead himself when she indicated that she was pleased to see him or accepted his offer to accompany her on her walk.

"What brings you out so early, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

"A need for fresh air. I was too closely confined yesterday," he said. "And you?"

"The same, sir," she said with a slight smile. "Also feeling an excess of jubilation." After a pause seeing the interrogation in his eyes, she added, "Mr. Collins proposed to my sister Mary, and she accepted. There was much rejoicing."

"Too much?" he asked.

"It rather depends on your point of view, sir, but I certainly missed my walk."

"So you make up for it today," he said. "In that case, I thank you for allowing me to intrude upon your time."

He was sure he did not mistake the slight blush on her face when she replied, "It is no intrusion, sir."

Their conversation had been mostly inconsequential. Her mother was improving and thrilled over the engagement of her middle daughter. Bingley was expected to return within the next day or two. She had made a subtle inquiry about how long he intended to stay, which pleased him greatly, though the answer that he would be returning to Town in a couple of weeks in order to see his sister was not one he was happy to give, and from her expression it was not one that pleased her either. But then she smiled and turned the subject to books, and from thence to Shakespeare was a small step wherein they ended up in a lively debate over Much Ado About Nothing and the irony that it was the romantic Claudio who believed a trumped up story, while the cynical Benedick suspected duplicity and whether Hero deserved to be married to such an easily deceived young man who publicly humiliated her.

Before they parted he had asked her if this walk were a particular favorite of hers, and with a charming smile and a blush, she had said it was indeed and the particular path was a favorite as well, especially at this time of year. He could not stop smiling all the way back to Netherfield park, though his smile was wiped away once he entered and was faced the renewal of complaining from the Bingley sisters, for which he had even less patience than before. Once again asserting that he had no intention of either leaving before he had planned or trying to convince their brother to remain away, he made his way to his room, emerging only as much as politeness dictated.

Bingley had returned the next day, and eager as he was to return to Longbourn, they were soon on
their way there, though unfortunately not escaping the accompaniment of Bingley's sisters which made the visit a nearly useless one to Darcy, as Miss Bingley made sure he had no opportunity for any even remotely private discourse with Elizabeth during the whole of the visit. However, he was pleased to discover that Elizabeth could manage to convey her interest even while trapped in a conversation that seemed doomed to be directed by Miss Bingley regardless of the wishes of either of the other parties.

Poor weather and the demands of Bingley's sisters made it impossible for them to visit Longbourn for the next couple of days. Darcy particular regretted the weather as it meant he could not even contrive to come upon Elizabeth during her walk. He was able to see her at church, but he was unable to do more than greet her politely.

On Monday morning, the weather was improved and he set out on a walk hoping to meet up with Elizabeth. Luck was again with him, and he came across her at the midway point between Netherfield and Longbourn, only to his surprise she was not alone, a strangely familiar looking small, brown dog was with her, running after a small stick she was throwing for it.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," he said, just as the dog deposited the stick at her feet. "I see you have a friend with you. Is that the dog we saw..." he trailed off as the dog started looking at him suspiciously.

"Oh, yes, this is Galahad," she said with a smile. "He belongs to Miss Lane. I am not sure if you have seen her, but she has gone on a visit to her sister's house, and her brother in law does not get along with Galahad, so he is being looked out for by her friends near by, and for some reason whenever he stays with them, he almost always manages to join me on my walks." She looked up at Darcy. "Despite what you saw, he really is a friendly fellow, a bit protective perhaps, but I truly have never seen him attack someone unprovoked." She paused for a second, considering, "Well there was that one gentleman, who turned out to be a complete reprobate with designs on Miss Lane's fortune, small though it is."

"Galahad seems quite the perceptive canine," Darcy said, "with a talent for spotting reprobates."

"Was the gentleman we saw a reprobate?" Elizabeth asked, with a slight smile. "You seemed rather familiar with him."

Darcy was taken aback for a moment though he felt that he should not have been.

At his silence Elizabeth quickly spoke again. "Forgive me. I sometimes speak out of turn. I would not pry into your private business."

If there was any woman in the world that he would gladly let into at least a portion of his private business, it was Elizabeth Bennet, and thus though he did not like to speak of Wickham, he would not discourage her interest entirely.

"No, I can understand your curiosity," he said. "After all, I am the one who brought up the subject." He took a moment more to consider. "I cannot share all of our history as some of it would affect the reputations of others and some of it is unfit for a maiden's ears, and I truly regret the fact I am aware of it."

"I am hardly a shrinking violet, prone to fits of fainting," Elizabeth said, "but naturally I will not press for more than you wish to share."

"Thank you," he said, before beginning his tale. "The gentleman, little though he deserves the term, is named George Wickham, and he was the son of my father's steward, who was an excellent man,
and my father was his godfather, so as you might presume we practically grew up together which makes me far more familiar with his vices than I would wish." He sighed. "He has always had a significant amount of charm and used it to blind his elders to his misdeeds, starting with the relatively harmless ones of youth and proceeding to more..."

"Dissipated ones," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, to put it mildly. While I disassociated myself as much as possible from him, unfortunately I never felt I could expose him to my father, who provided him an education and intended him for a family living; however, my father died before Wickham took orders and Wickham asked for three thousand pounds in addition to his thousand pound inheritance in lieu of the living so that he could study law instead."

"That is quite a sum of money," Elizabeth said.

"It is indeed," Darcy said. "And yet within three years, he had spent it and suddenly desired the living he had given up."

"Which you naturally refused."

"Naturally," he said. "Though that has not stopped him spreading tales that I with malice denied him the living or otherwise impugning my character. He is quite skilled at weaving plausible tales which paint himself the victim of a jealous son."

"Now I feel even less guilty for finding amusement in the sight, and I understand your reaction as well."

"Well, I know Wickham to be very fastidious of his person, and to see him thus overset by the... elements..." Darcy could not help the smile that returned to his face at the thought.

Elizabeth bent down to pet Galahad. "You really are an excellent judge of character, you perfect, not so gentle knight."

After that Elizabeth turned the topic of conversation to other more mundane things, yet still Darcy was enchanted and looking forward to their next meeting. While the two of them spoke, Galahad moved nearer to Darcy, looking up at him curiously with his head cocked to one side. Darcy glanced down at the dog, up to Elizabeth and back down. He extended a hand and patted the animal’s head a few times. In response, Galahad spun excitedly in a circle a couple of times then sat, looking at Darcy, happily wagging his tail.

"An excellent judge of character, you say?" Darcy asked, half smiling.

Elizabeth returned the smile. "Indubitably."
George Wickham lay low for nearly two weeks until all his obvious bruises healed, though he had spoken with Mrs. Younge soon after he arrived in town. She had assured him that Maria Montcraven was still free and looking for a handsome young husband. She even assured him that she could procure him an invitation to a ball that Mrs. Montcraven intended to attend in three weeks time. Happily, he had enough funds (probably because he had been too busy hiding to gamble it away) to procure a truly fine suit of clothes for the evening as his preferred tailor would no longer extend him credit. However, he knew that he needed to make a good impression and as he could not cut a dash in a red uniform, he would be assured that what he did wear would be well-tailored and striking.

The night of the ball he went over all the information Mrs. Younge had given him on the widow, her likes and dislikes, her appearance, how to best impress her on introduction. To his surprise (confident though he was) it went exactly as smoothly as he had hoped it would. He and Mrs. Younge arrived together, but she quickly left him once the all important introduction to Maria Montcraven happened. He knew well enough that she would find her own entertainment and her own way home.

When Mrs. Younge first pointed his quarry out to him, Wickham was pleased to note that Maria Montcraven was indeed as handsome a woman as described, though more angular and slender than his tastes generally ran to, not that it would have changed anything but his approach, as her fortune and position were the primary draws; however, he was pleased to note that it would be no hardship to consider wooing or even bedding her. On the other hand the very fact that she was not unattractive meant that he would likely have plenty of competition for her attention, even with her reputation as a rather fastidious and aloof woman, so he would have to be at his most ingratiating.

It was fortunate that Mrs. Younge had provided him with enough information on Mrs. Montcraven's particular tastes to allow him to determine his best approach. He knew she was extraordinarily vain of her appearance and convinced she looked much younger than her 32 years, which explained in part her determination to don pale colors now that her mourning was complete. Tonight it was a lavender dress in the latest fashion, simple yet elegant, but more suited to a younger woman. Nevertheless, he still acted exactly as he planned.

Although Mrs. Younge had a prior acquaintance with the lady, Wickham first circulated the edges of the room, sending admiring glances her way whenever he thought he could catch her eye. Once he was certain that he had sufficiently captured her attention, he then let Mrs. Younge know he was ready for an introduction. He had his most charming smile on display.

Mrs. Younge spoke first. "Mrs. Montcraven, how good it is to see you here," she said. "It has been such a time."

"Indeed," Mrs. Montcraven said, her voice rich with condescension as if she were granting a privilege to a lesser being. "I hardly knew whether we would meet again so soon." She then turned a rather more appraising glance on Wickham. "Will you introduce me to your companion?"

"Of course," Mrs. Younge said, as if that were not the entire reason why they had come in the first place. "This is George Wickham. Mr. Wickham, Mrs. Montcraven."
"Enchanted," Wickham said, taking the hand Mrs. Montcraven regally extended and giving it a slightly longer than proper kiss. "I have been most eager to meet the loveliest lady here."

"You are quite the flatterer," Mrs. Montcraven said, though her slight smile indicated her pleasure in the compliment.

"Not at all, madam," Wickham said, "merely stating the obvious. Surely there can be no two opinions on the matter."

Mrs. Montcraven smiled, and at this point, her job done, Mrs. Younge took the opportunity to excuse herself saying she had spotted another old acquaintance that she simply must speak with.

As soon as she left, Mrs. Montcraven looked up at Wickham and said, "Mr. Wickham, I must inform you that your reputation has proceeded you."

Wickham managed to keep his face neutral, while fervently hoping it was his better reputation that she heard. "Might I hope that it was all to the good," he said in a low tone.

"It rather depends on your definition of good," she replied with a flirtatious snap of her fan.

That was not particularly helpful, but he ploughed forward gamely. "For the purposes of a ball, I am known as quite a good dancer," he said. "I would find it a great pleasure to demonstrate if you would be willing to grant me a dance."

"It would please me to see you demonstrate your skills on the dance floor, and I trust you do not exaggerate as I cannot abide dancing with a poor partner, and it would be a pity to end our acquaintance so quickly."

"Mrs Montcraven, that would be a pity indeed," Wickham said, relief allowing him to speak in his most seductive tones. "But I believe I can safely promise not to disappoint."

~o~O~o~

It was two weeks after the Netherfield Ball, and Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were both calling at Longbourn. Darcy having made his decision had found himself somewhat unsure of the progress of his courtship with Elizabeth, as his only experience was in fending off the attentions of others rather than expressing any intentions of his own. He had never really given any thought as to what the proper length of a courtship would be, probably because until he met Elizabeth, he had never really considered that a courtship would be necessary on his side. Even now he was eager to skip to a proposal as he had certainly made up his mind, yet there was something exhilarating in his pursuit of Elizabeth's good opinion, of being free to indulge in flirtation, knowing that he was sincere in his intentions.

He had managed some more moments with her during the past week, privately rejoicing that even with the absence of Miss Mary's betrothed, Mrs Bennet was still too distracted by the wedding preparations and the thoughts of Bingley and Jane to pay too much heed to his and Elizabeth's conversations, which allowed them more time to get to know one another and take pleasure in one another's company.

However, the reason for his visit today was less of a pleasure than usual, as he was taking his leave before returning to town to see his sister. He disliked the thought of leaving Elizabeth, but he took comfort that the separation would be short as he had just the day before accepted Bingley's invitation for both him and Georgiana to spend Christmas at Netherfield, and thus he would soon be given the pleasure of introducing his sister to the woman he fully intended to marry.
Darcy was not a man in general who made impulsive decisions, but once they were made he disliked any delay in implementing them. However, much though he wished to declare himself immediately, he had discovered that there were pleasures in the process of courtship that it would have been a pity to forego. There was something irresistible in the thought of truly winning Elizabeth's approval and affection for himself alone, something he had never really considered before, since he had known since his youth that his circumstances made it incredibly improbable that any woman would refuse his suit. However, Elizabeth made him realize how precious a genuine regard could be.

He felt it was fortunate that the day was mild enough that Bingley could suggest taking a turn in the garden. Mrs. Bennet eager to put Jane with Bingley gave her permission, barely waiting to hear that Elizabeth and Darcy would accompany them. Mary was claimed by Mrs. Bennet, and the other two sisters claimed it was too cold. Mr. Bennet, determined to avoid the flurry of wedding talk, was safely ensconced in his bookroom, a fact that Darcy rather rejoiced in as he suspected that Mr. Bennet would notice far too much too soon. Not that Darcy had any particular desire to hide his attachment to Elizabeth, but he wished to remain out of the center of attention for as long as possible.

In any event, once outside the two couples put distance between them in order to indulge in more private conversations.

"So you are for town, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, not hiding her unhappiness nearly as well as he believed she thought she was.

"Yes," he said. "I cannot put it off anymore. However..." He noticed a brightening of her expression at the word. "However, I will soon be returning as Bingley has invited both my sister and me to spend Christmas here with him."

He definitely was not mistaken at the way she suddenly beamed at him. "Are you indeed, sir? I thought you had other plans."

"None that could not be easily altered," he said. "The country is more pleasant than town in the winter, and I could not ask for more pleasant company."

Elizabeth's mouth twisted in a mischievous grin. "I am sure Miss Bingley will greatly appreciate the sentiment."

"I think not, Miss Elizabeth," he said, with a slight smile of his own. "Not when the company I am referring to is not hers."

"Ah, well, you and Mr. Bingley are old friends..."

"Will you always wilfully misunderstand me?" he asked.

"When I find it useful or amusing, it is highly likely, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said.

"Or if you want to divert my attention from something as well, I suspect," he said. "I am sure you are quite aware of the company I find most pleasant, and I am hoping that I might have the honor of introducing my sister to you."

"I would very much like to meet your sister," she said sincerely. "Though perhaps I should be worried if she is at all as intimidating as her brother can be."

"Hardly," Darcy said. "She's a rather shy girl, more easily intimidated than intimidating. She is rather uncomfortable in unfamiliar environments."
Then I shall do my best not to make her uncomfortable. What are her favorite pursuits?" Elizabeth asked, having dropped her teasing.

"She is particularly fond of the pianoforte," he said. "I think if she had her way, it would be her sole object of study. However, she also draws rather well."

"And like her brother is she fond of reading?" Elizabeth asked.

"She is rather fonder of novels than I would wish," he said. "But, yes, she enjoys reading."

"As to other accomplishments, is it safe for me to assume that she is one of the half dozen ladies you would deem truly accomplished?"

"I believe she is well on her way," he said, and then added, "and I am sure she would enjoy meeting another of the women I truly esteem accomplished."

"As would I," Elizabeth said, the teasing glint back in her eye. "Such a formidable creature must be seen to be believed."

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, "you may not have all the fashionable accomplishments, but the ones you have are remarkable."

"You are all politeness, sir," she said with a slight degree of unease, realizing what he was saying.

"It is not politeness but honesty," he said. "I would not have you doubt me."

He had managed to silence her as a sudden blush suffused her cheeks and she looked away as if abashed. Finally, as the silence stretched out between them, she said quietly, "I do not doubt you, sir."

What he would have said next would have to wait as they were rejoined by Bingley and Miss Bennet, who was feeling chilled. He supposed it was for the best, since it would hardly do for him to say more and then be forced to leave for town immediately thereafter. As it was he could bask in the warmth of her farewell.

"And I pray, Miss Elizabeth, to never give you cause to do so."

~o~O~o~

George Wickham made his way carefully and discreetly to Mrs. Montcraven's town house that evening hoping that her invitation to a private dinner would lead to the realization of his greater ambitions. He had been showering attention on her for a week and had been invited to escort her to an exclusive dinner party when the gentleman who had been due to accompany her had to bow out because of an indisposition. Of course, she had taken pains to explain that without him the hostess would be seating thirteen at the table, something that could not be tolerable. While it was slightly vexing to be issued the invitation so entirely at the last moment under the clear assumption not that he was eager to spend time with her but that he had nothing of any import to do, he was not unaccustomed to that particular attitude in the very rich, and he flattered himself that she wished his company in order to see how he conducted himself among those of her circle. It was a good sign that she was considering him as something more than a potential lover.

While he suspected that he could obtain some valuable gifts from her if he pleased her well enough, he kept his eyes on the greater prize. After all, he knew that she had been Sir Richard Montcraven's only child, and with no other relatives of any consequence nor any entail upon the estates, she had inherited the whole of the Montcraven fortune, which made Georgiana's dowry...
seem like pocket money, especially considering that he would have had to fight Darcy to acquire it as he had discovered only after the failed elopement that her dowry was in trust so that he could not touch it even as her husband without the consent of Darcy, and he knew that Darcy would have made it as difficult as possible for him. No, this was a much better opportunity.

After all, what could be better than to marry a widow in sole control of her own fortune? That much he had managed to ascertain through a number of contacts. If he played his cards correctly, it would soon be in his hands to do with as he willed. Mrs. Montcraven was somewhat demanding and imperious, as was evidenced in the fact that her first husband had taken on the Montcraven name rather than she taking on his, but Wickham had practice enough in dealing with the overly particular. Had he not charmed the elder Mr. Darcy for years? If only he had not died when he did, Wickham was certain that he would have done much better than being left a pittance and a living. Damn Darcy for being such a fastidious, moralizing prig. If he had half the opportunities of pleasure that man had just by luck of birth, he certainly would not have wasted them as Darcy did.

He also felt confident that he was closer to his goal with this invitation issued after the dinner party where he felt he acquitted himself particularly well, listening when required, flattering when necessary, and always deferring to the opinions of Mrs. Montcraven. She had seemed pleased, or at least as pleased as she ever seemed to allow herself to be in public. Now all he had to do was convince her that he would be the perfect husband.

Almost immediately after he knocked, the door was opened and he was led to what was clearly Mrs. Montcraven's private sitting room. The room was very fine, opulent even, and some refreshments were set out on a small table. While he was tempted, it would not do to make a move until his hostess arrived. He suspected that this was yet another test, one more way for her to judge his character. While he had understood what she had been looking for during the dinner party and even during their first meeting, at the moment, he was unsure what it was that would serve him best here, so he settled for looking around the room, at the paintings on the wall, the small statuary, the bookshelf filled with a small but select number of volumes. He was still perusing them, when the door opened behind him.

Immediately turning, he saw Mrs. Montcraven. She was wearing an evening dress in light blue, low cut in the front, but not so much as to make it obvious that she was planning for seduction, though he could not but be certain that that was her intention as her hair was in a far more relaxed style than he had seen her wear before, and she was not wearing her usual amount of jewelry beyond the pins in her hair nor was she wearing gloves. He gazed at her a moment, letting his mouth drop open slightly as if entranced, before crossing the room and taking the hand that she held out imperiously.

"Mrs. Montcraven, you are indeed a vision. I have never seen anything lovelier," he said, before he gave her hand a lingering kiss.

"I should hardly like to be considered a thing," she said, "but I will accept the compliment for the moment in the spirit I am sure you intended it."

There was a slight feeling of unease, as Wickham realized that this test might be more of a trial than he thought. But he did his best to recover. "I apologize for the lack of creativity, as I find myself dumbstruck in the contemplation of your loveliness every time I see you."

"Slightly better," she said. She made her way over to a chair near the table with the food and sat down regally. "Do be seated, Mr. Wickham. Or perhaps you would care for refreshments now."

"It all does look delicious," he said, keeping his eyes on her, "perhaps I could prepare a plate for you."

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"It all does look delicious," he said, keeping his eyes on her, "perhaps I could prepare a plate for you."
"Thank you," she said, and then proceeded to tell him exactly what she wished and asked that he pour out the wine, which he did with as much style and flair as he could muster before he prepared a plate for himself and seated himself as close to her as he could.

He watched as she nibbled at her food and tried to convey as much desire as he could while they ate and he asked questions about her preferences, how she had spent her day, anything he could think of to make her think of him as desiring to know all about her. As she was an avid horsewoman who devoted quite a bit of time to seeing that her stables had some of the finest horses in the country, most of the conversation revolved around her latest acquisitions and her determination that even the farm horses show superior form.

Once she exhausted the topic to her satisfaction, she then turned them around. "You are very curious, Mr. Wickham, but should I not also hear about you?"

Wickham stiffened slightly. "There is nothing of particular interest to say. When I am away from you, it seems as if I merely exist until we meet again."

"Very pretty words," she said, putting aside her now empty plate. "Not that I believe in their sincerity."

"Madam, I assure you..."

She interrupted him. "No, I have no need of false assurances. You are very practiced with flattery. Now I would like to see just how well you can match pretty words with deeds." She leaned forwards a bit, her voice suddenly turned seductive.

"Mrs. Montcraven," Wickham said with a show of reluctance. "I have too great a respect for you to wish to treat you so casually. Simply being able to spend time with you has had charms all of its own."

The lady raised a brow. "I am not asking to be treated casually, but you can hardly expect me to wish a continuance of this... friendship without knowing how well I would be treated. I have no intention of entering any other state without being fully acquainted with the gentleman's particular charms. It would be too rash."

Her words both gave him hope and worried him, as it seemed that she was indeed entertaining the notion of matrimony but not without knowing his skills as a lover. While he had every confidence in his prowess, it was rather daunting to know how much might rest on his ability to please her. Nevertheless, he was willing to risk it for the chance at a fortune.

"I understand," Wickham said, coming to kneel at Mrs. Montcraven's feet. "It would be unfortunate to discover that the man you have chosen, no matter how devoted, would not make your pleasure his duty. And you are too beautiful to have to settle for anything less than full and complete adoration." He took her hand in his and began to kiss it passionately.

Mrs. Montcraven smiled at him from under heavy lidded eyes. "I do love being adored," she said.

Chapter End Notes
And Wickham finally returns, in a chapter I found very difficult to write, as while I have a great deal of fun writing a miserable Wickham (think, rubbing my hands together and cackling gleefully over his misery like a villain from an old melodrama), I have a lot of trouble writing a charming one, as I loathe the character so much. I have to keep reminding myself that he's a guppy going after a shark. Or maybe a lamprey, since he's really a parasitic organism.

Also, I had to include some Darcy and Elizabeth as honestly, there is only so much of Wickham that I can take at a time, especially when he's not actively suffering and is smarming about. And it was fun writing a Darcy who isn't entirely sure of what he is doing as he's never expected to have to try to win a woman's good opinion, and as I'm not really as witty as Elizabeth, I hope her teasing of him came off well enough.
Elizabeth was determined not to be maudlin during the absence of Mr. Darcy. After all, two months ago, she did not even know of his existence and not even a month ago, she thought him the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world. Simply because she found herself changing her opinions rather completely on the gentleman, that was no reason for her to feel so listless without him near. Nor was there any need for her to retreat to windows when she could not escape to the outside. Nor count the days until his likely reappearance. No, she was a rational girl. She always had been and had no desire to become overcome with sensibility for so pitiful a reason.

And there was no reason for her to overly dwell upon either the letter she had written immediately after the Netherfield Ball to Mrs. Gardiner asking her to if she knew anything about Mr. Darcy and his reputation in either Lambton or London or the reply she had just received from Mrs. Gardiner in which she found that Mr. Darcy (whose mother was the youngest sister of the Earl of Matlock) had a reputation for being a good landlord and master, scrupulous in attention to his duties, and that in London he had a reputation for being reserved and fastidious, no indications of any disreputable or dissolute behavior.

There were no scandals attached to his name, though there were rumors involving the son of the family's late steward, who apparently had grown a bit wild and with whom Mr. Darcy had thoroughly disassociated himself. Since that was all in line with what he had told her himself, it was good to know that her changed opinion was confirmed. She had been rather shaken to realize that her initial opinion was so inaccurate, and thus to have another trusted opinion that Mr. Darcy was as honest and honorable as he now seemed made her regain a little of her old confidence. That really was all. A perfectly understandable reaction to recent upheavals.

Still, she found life was missing something. Of course, Jane was preoccupied with Mr. Bingley and to a lesser extent his sisters. Mary's time was occupied by their mother as her nuptials were so near and Mr. Collins was as voluble a correspondent as he was a speaker, taking advantage of the rights of an engaged man, though he had been thoughtful enough to leave with Mr. Bennet a suitable sum to pay the postage for his letters. That showed a thoughtfulness she had not thought him capable of, but then Mary seemed to bring out the best in their cousin. But still, Mary had not much free time to spare. And as for Kitty and Lydia, their minds were occupied with ribbons and officers and had not any room nor interest in their sisters.

Unfortunately, the lack of Mr. Darcy's presence did lead to her being forced to listen to too much about lace as Mrs. Bennet required an extra set of hands for some of the preparations and she would not call upon Jane since that might keep her out of Mr. Bingley's company and neither Kitty or Lydia would sit still enough to be at all useful despite their greater interest in the topic. Nevertheless, she could not in all honesty cry off and leave Mary to face her mother's fussing alone. As she and Mary had found more common ground of late, it would be unkind to desert her now. It was a pity that it only highlighted how much more welcome was the company of Mr. Darcy by comparison.

This morning she had managed to escape the bustle of wedding planning for the nonce and found herself staring out the window, wishing she could go out for a walk. Yesterday, Mr. Bingley had indicated that Mr. Darcy was expected to arrive from London with his sister and his cousin, Col. Fitzwilliam, and she was too agitated to be of any use to her mother, who was excited by the new
addition to the Netherfield party. She was in a dither on whether he would be best for either Kitty or Lydia, and then she considered how much was still left to accomplish for Mary's wedding and Bingley's continual attentions to Jane which had not yet resulted in a proposal, and she was off in a dozen different directions. Elizabeth felt it was safest to stay out of the way. That she ended up at the window which would give her the best view of any approaching visitor was something she preferred not to dwell on.

However, her vigil soon bore results as she saw a carriage pulling down the drive. It took all her force of will to not move from the spot, until called by her mother once she realized that visitors had arrived. Elizabeth told herself that her heart was beating more rapidly because of her mother's agitation, not because she was eager to see Mr. Darcy again as well as nervous about meeting his relatives though she did doubt that he would bring Miss Darcy with him on this visit. While she no longer held a firm conviction on the validity of first impressions, she did feel concerned about the impressions she and her family would make on his. As she braced herself for their meeting, she tried telling herself that if he were going to be put off by her family, it would have happened already, and if he could be influenced by his own, then he would not be worth regretting. It did not particularly soothe her.

Mr. Bingley was the first to appear in the room. Elizabeth could not help but hear her mother's excited voice which indicated that Mr. Darcy's cousin was with him. Elizabeth's gaze however went immediately to Mr. Darcy when he entered the room. Neither could she help the smile that appeared nor that it widened when met with an answering smile from Mr. Darcy. She paid bare attention during the introductions to Col. Fitzwilliam who was almost immediately surrounded by Kitty and Lydia who both inundated him with questions. He seemed pleasant and gentlemanlike and more than capable of dealing with her sisters' attentions in a reasonably polite manner.

However, she was best pleased when Mr. Darcy sat with her on the sofa near the window out of the way of the other conversations. She asked about his journey and his sister. He indicated that she was somewhat fatigued from the journey having just recovered from a cold, and that he hoped to be able to introduce her on the next day as Bingley had brought an invitation for Jane and her to come to tea at Netherfield. There was a part of Elizabeth that wondered if Mr. Darcy was not simply trying to be diplomatic in his reluctance to make an introduction between Miss Darcy and her in the somewhat overwhelming presence of her family. If he was, Elizabeth could hardly blame him, as she herself would not particularly want her first meeting with the reputedly shy girl to be around her mother, but as she would never say such a thing and would take offense at being told such a thing, she could appreciate Mr. Darcy giving a perfectly good and polite reason for their meeting to take place at Netherfield, and of course, for all she knew, it could very well be the complete truth, as he did seem honest to a fault.

"I look forward to meeting Miss Darcy," she said.

"And she looks forward to it as well," Mr. Darcy said. "In fact, if she had had her way, either you would have been invited today, or she would have come if able."

"Instead you brought your cousin," Elizabeth said in a light and teasing voice. "I wonder you had not mentioned him as being part of your party when you left."

"He was a last minute addition," Darcy said. "He was to have spent time with his parents, only he does not get on with some of the guests, and as he shares guardianship of my sister with me, with Bingley's permission, I brought him along."

"He seems to be getting on quite well with my sisters," she said.
Mr. Darcy looked over with a slight frown. "He is easy among company, and does enjoy conversing with young ladies, but there is no harm in him."

"I did not suppose there was," Elizabeth said. "Though considering his profession, I might hope that if there is no harm there is a strong spirit of self defense."

He smiled. "Yes, well, in matters of his profession, I will have to admit he is not harmless and does have a rather strong spirit of self-preservation along with his bravery."

"Then it is good to know that England's defense is in good hands," Elizabeth said. She paused for a moment wondering if there was any way to determine if Col. Fitzwilliam had another reason for coming other than Miss Darcy. "I suppose you and the colonel must be close, sharing guardianship of your sister as you do."

"Yes, quite close, as he was also my father's godson," he said. "He shares the family tendency towards forthrightness though it is tempered a bit more than some of us. He is honest in his opinions and almost incapable of deceit, which perhaps is not the best characteristic of a soldier." There was a trace of humor in his voice.

"Well, I imagine that battles can be rather straightforward, and that is where he serves best," she said. "And as to forthrightness, I have found that yours seems capable of being channeled in more pleasant ways when you put your mind to it." Feeling slightly uncertain, she wondered if Mr. Darcy was hinting that Col. Fitzwilliam was there as a family judge on her suitability or if she was reading too much into his presence.

"I am afraid that it is only recently that I have discovered the value of pleasing honesty," he said. "It required a rather particular motivation."

"Did it indeed?" Elizabeth asked somewhat less steadily than she hoped, but in an effort to disguise it she said more brightly than she felt. "Well, I have only recently learned that first impressions are not necessarily as infallible as I previously believed, and that required perhaps not a particular motivation but a particular stimulus, which I suppose makes things somewhat equal between us, would you not agree?"

His smile broadened slightly. "Yes, I would. In point of fact, I consider a great..."

"What would you consider, cousin?" came the voice of Col. Fitzwilliam much to Elizabeth's displeasure, as the conversation had just gotten interesting.

"It hardly matters, cousin," Mr. Darcy replied somewhat acerbically, apparently as little pleased as Elizabeth to be interrupted.

"Oh, I am sure it does," the Colonel replied, as he sat down on the chair nearest Elizabeth's end of the sofa. "But no matter, since I am come to keep you from monopolizing this charming young lady's company. I would not leave her to become bored."

"Mr. Darcy is hardly dull, Col. Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth said. "I find his conversation more than entertaining enough unaided; certainly there is no need to pull yourself away from other company for such a purpose."

The colonel grinned a bit. "Perhaps I merely wish to speak with all the ladies of the household today?"

"There is my eldest sister just over there with Mr. Bingley. Perhaps she would have well served your purpose next."
"But it is not nearly so entertaining as teasing my cousin," he said.

"I find that hard to believe, Fitzwilliam," Darcy said. "You seem to find entertainment in any society."

"And you in very select, so naturally I must indulge my curiosity on the subject."

"I hardly see anything to be curious about," Elizabeth said.

"You know, Miss Elizabeth, it is very fitting that you should find my cousin's conversation entertaining. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that you have enjoyed far more of it than any other charming young lady ever has. I found that very curious."

"Indeed? Then you must not be acquainted with Miss Bingley, who seems quite enraptured by Mr. Darcy's conversations as well as his skill with a pen," Elizabeth said, deliberately misconstruing Col. Fitzwilliam's statement. "In fact it is quite my impression that there are many young women eager to enjoy his conversation given the opportunity. I do believe that it hardly makes me stand out at all. A pity since I do hate to be commonplace."

"That you could never be, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said.

"I heartily agree," Col. Fitzwilliam said warmly as he rose to stand in front of Elizabeth. "And as much as I enjoy conversation as entertaining as Darcy's and as charming as yours, I believe I should return to my original purpose. After all as you suggested, my afternoon would not be complete without making the acquaintance of your elder sister. If you will excuse me, Miss Elizabeth." Col Fitzwilliam bowed and then turned toward Darcy.

"If she does not, I certainly do," Darcy said quietly.

"We certainly will not keep you from the pleasure of speaking with Jane and Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Col Fitzwilliam smiled wryly at the couple before starting to leave. But before he did, he eased in a little closer to his cousin. "Most definitely not commonplace," he whispered, though loud enough for Elizabeth to hear, and without another word, made his way to the other side of the room, where he seemed to take pleasure in interrupting Bingley and Jane's conversation.

Observing Darcy's sly grin, Elizabeth thought. Thank goodness, he isn't either.

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Wickham once again made his way to the Montcraven townhouse, but as it was during regular visiting hours, he had no need for additional discretion. He was feeling confident that everything was going his way. Aside from his nightly visits which she seemed pleased with though she was far more demanding than any of his usual lovers, he had also been her escort to a few more social functions where he believed he carried off his role to perfection. Now he need only find a proper way to indicate that he wished to be more than a simple gentleman friend. Perhaps today would be the day.

He was admitted, taken to the morning room and told to wait a moment as Mrs. Montcraven was seeing to a matter of business. After several minutes, Wickham wandered to the window and looked out into the street with the hope of getting an idea of who her business was with if he was not able to see them while they were within. Hearing movements in the hallway, he stayed in position long enough to see two nondescript men exiting the house and walking off in separate directions. Not very useful at all, though one looked like he might be a solicitor. In another minute,
the door opened, he was directed to the mistress's study.

Mrs. Montcraven, looking very business like in a dark blue morning dress, was seated at the desk when he entered, but after tidying a small pile of papers in front of her, she rose and moved to one of the chairs on the other side of the desk, though as it was a rather imposing looking seat, it did not make her seem any less formidable, and he was rather concerned that she had chosen it rather than the more companionable sofa near it. The small chair she gestured him to also added to his sense of unease.

"Is there anything amiss, dearest?" he said as he tried not to squirm under her gaze.

"No, there is not," she said. "I merely felt that as there is some business to be discussed between us that this would be the most appropriate location."

Wickham had to fight not to break out into a broad grin at her words. Business was a good sign. However, he kept his voice even as he spoke. "What kind of business would that be?"

Resting her arms regally on the chair arms, Mrs. Montcraven said, "After consideration of your character and talents and having a good idea of how you can perform in public and private, I have come to the decision that you would make an acceptable husband, and I wished to have you here so that we could discuss all the ramifications and conditions of such a union."

Wickham was speechless. He had known that it would not be a simple matter to propose to her, but to have her take the lead so thoroughly flummoxed him. However, he knew that he needed to respond, so he left his chair and got on his knees before Mrs. Montcraven and kissed her hand. "Dearest, I am so delighted to hear this. I had wanted so much to propose but had not the temerity..."

"Please leave off the protestations for the nonce. There is time enough for it later. I would rather get to the business at hand, and while I have no doubt of your acceptance of the terms of this arrangement, I want to discuss them thoroughly so that you have no cause to complain that you were unaware of what you are to expect and receive once we are married."

"Of course, there is no cause to doubt me, dearest," Wickham said. "I live to make you happy, and nothing would make me happier than being your husband."

"Then that shall make this discussion easy," she said. "Do sit down. I do not require you to look like a puppy while we speak."

He moved back to the chair, more than a little concerned with what he was going to hear.

"Now, I will expect you to hear me out without interruption, as I do not wish to lose the train of my thoughts," she said, and once he nodded his head she began. "As you may or may not know, my father Sir Richard Montcraven left me the entirety of the family fortune and made certain that I would always be able to control it regardless of my marital state. I will not trouble you with all the technical details as they do not concern you; simply understand that when we are married, my fortune continues to be my own. You will be given an appropriate allowance commensurate with your position, and your clothes will be made at the same tailor who served both my father and the first Mr. Montcraven. Which leads me to the next point, that you will be expected to take on the Montcraven name rather than I take on yours. The Montcravens are an old and very well respected family. As you know, the Wickhams are not."

Wickham was not happy with the information he was being given. No control, an allowance that he was sure would be inadequate to his needs, a name change, though he felt he should not have been
surprised about that last as he had known that her first husband had changed his name from
Windermere to Montcraven when they had married.

"Dearest, surely you trust me better than this," he started.

"George Wickham," she interrupted, as she rose from her chair and moved back to her desk, "do
not for the moment believe that I am ignorant of your past conduct and behavior. You were
thoroughly investigated before I allowed Mrs. Younge to arrange our introduction."

*What the deuce?* He thought Lucy had been working for his benefit.

"You have an unfortunate habit of leaving gaming and tradesmen's debts behind you. I know in
fact that there are a number of gentlemen seeking you for either money or retribution for your
behavior with the women of their families. Of course, I will settle up any outstanding debts before
the marriage. Any other claims, I will deal with as I see best, though you might consider that your
change of name may aid you there. In any event, you will no longer have any need to run up debt
as I will be paying all the bills, and any gambling will be done at your club under the auspices of a
gentleman of my choosing, and it will come from your allowance. Also, while I have no interest in
your past dalliances except insofar as they might affect me in the future, I will expect that all your
favors belong to me. Any infidelity on your part will be grounds for cutting your allowance and
luxuries. What is mine is mine alone. I trust you understand."

Wickham was appalled. This was not what he expected at all, yet there were his debts, some of
which were becoming quite pressing and would not be covered by the funds he had left. And he
suspected Mrs. Montcraven knew that very well indeed. How had she learned all this? Then there
was the matter of other women. While Mrs. Montcraven certainly had a healthy enough appetite,
the very thought of being confined to one woman... yet surely after a certain amount of time
married, she'd relax her vigilance enough for him to find some discreet pleasure elsewhere.

He still had not spoken, and she did not seem to expect a reply as yet, since she simply picked up
some papers from her desk and slid them towards him.

"Here are the various documents that lay down the conditions of our marriage as well as my
current information regarding the debts that need to be paid; if anything has been left off please feel
free to add it, as I want an accurate accounting before we wed as anything you reveal after the
wedding will come from your own funds. I am sure you will want your own solicitor to look them
over for their legality and to explain them. If you have any questions about the nature of the trust or
how my money will be distributed in the event of my demise— I have some distant cousins in
Scotland who will receive the bulk of my estate, the remainder is divided among various servants
— I will perhaps reconsider my will after ten years of marriage; Godfrey only lasted eight. Be very
assured that I do know what I want and what to do with my property."

Wickham understood very well what she meant. He would have to follow her wishes or be left
wanting, and if anything happened to her (and he was not a violent man at heart), he would be left
with whatever small provision she left for him. However, much as he disliked being caged in in
this manner, he liked poverty even less, and he was sure that with his charm he could certainly gain
more than he was being offered at this moment.

"Dearest, all this is so very unnecessary," he said. "I merely wish to be the husband of the most
entrancing woman I have ever met."

"Still I would not have you sign blind. Take this to your solicitor or mine. Mr. Thatcher is
scrupulously honest and would not mislead you." She looked at him coolly. "Once you agree I will
have him see to the application for a special license that we may be married from this house
without any particular delay."

Glancing at the papers, Wickham could make little sense of anything other than his allowance provision which seemed quite generous at the moment. "Well, dearest, while I do not believe I need this, since you insist, I will speak to Mr. Thatcher. That you trust him is enough for me." He did not add that he knew no lawyers of his own; at least none that he would trust to explain this. Mrs. Montcraven might be many things but he trusted her to mean exactly what she said, so having her solicitor explain his work seemed the best option he had.

~o~O~o~

Elizabeth looked out of the window of the same guest room she had resided in during her last stay at Netherfield, noting the heavy rain and was torn between sighing and smiling. Once again her mother had gotten her way. Elizabeth had not liked the look of the weather as she and Jane prepared for their visit, but when she tentatively suggested to her mother that the visit should perhaps be canceled, Mrs. Bennet was most vociferous in her refusal. After all, while he was still showing all the signs of infatuation, Mr. Bingley had not yet proposed to Jane, and Mrs. Bennet would not allow anything to prevent any opportunity for Jane to be in his company.

Under the circumstances, Elizabeth had been glad that Mr. Darcy had arranged for his carriage to come and fetch them, as she certainly did not want a repeat of Jane's fateful first visit to Netherfield Park, not that the notion of spending more time in Mr. Darcy's company particularly vexed her, but she certainly would not wish for Jane to suffer again because of her mother's judgement. However, the planned visit had gone very well, even with the heavens opening up and sending down an icy rain, leaving Mr. Bingley no choice but to invite them to stay the night.

Elizabeth had been quite pleased to meet Miss Darcy who indeed was not nearly so formidable as her brother, rather quite shy and very sweet and apparently eager to approve of her. Even Miss Bingley was tolerable enough, once Col. Fitzwilliam made it a point to engage her in conversation and encourage her to play for the group thus leaving the others to their own devices, though beforehand she had shown quite a determination to draw every bit of the Darcys' attention to herself. Of course, Elizabeth felt all the irony of her having the exact same desire as Miss Bingley but consoled herself that in her case it was reciprocal rather than one-sided. At least she hoped she did not delude herself on the matter.

However, now at the end of a mostly wonderful day, Elizabeth knew she was too excited to sleep and regretted that she had come upstairs without checking the library for something to read. It had a poor selection, but there were definitely books that would be dull enough to lull her into a sense of sleep, and she recalled a novel that was intriguing enough that if tedium were not enough to soothe her would be enough to distract her from her thoughts of Mr. Darcy which were becoming alarmingly overwhelming. It was not that she thought she was in love with him, though having no real experience with love she was not entirely sure what it should feel like. Yet she could no longer doubt his interest in her and that it seemed genuine and honorable.

Elizabeth shook her head. It would do no good to continue to dwell on this, as it was getting quite late, and if she were going to get a book, it would be better to go down now before she finally changed into her borrowed nightgown. Not wanting to draw any attention at this hour, she first peeked out to see that the hall was empty and then crept as quietly as she could down to the library by the light of her candle. There was still a glow from the fire to aid it in somewhat dispelling the darkness. Relieved to have successfully reached her goal without incident, she immediately crossed to the shelf that she recalled held the books she was looking for.

Setting her candle on a nearby table, she started to reach for the books, when she heard a small
cough behind her. Whirling around, she was startled to see Mr. Darcy standing behind her, and she wondered how she could not have noticed the light from his own candle which he set down next to hers. She noted he too was fully dressed, though his neckcloth was loosely tied.

"I see you too have come looking for reading material," he said after what seemed like several minutes of their staring at one another in silence.

"It was too difficult to sleep," she stammered out. He seemed far too close at the moment and his expression far too intent.

"We are very similar indeed, Miss Elizabeth. I left a book down here and thought it might help." A slight smile played on his lips. "I did not expect to meet anyone else, but I cannot say that I am displeased to see you."

Elizabeth felt as if her wits had melted away. It was rather improper for them to be together like this, but she hardly wanted to move. "Nor am I displeased to see you," she finally said, before hurrying to add, "I was very glad to meet your sister today." Finding her courage returning, she said, "I find that you were correct that she is not nearly so formidable as her brother. She is very sweet."

"And I am not... sweet?" he teased.

"Would you truly wish to be considered sweet, sir?" she asked.

She was surprised by the thoughtful expression that appeared on his face. "I suppose it would rather depend on the context," he said. "But you are correct that in this one I would not like to be considered sweet. But I also would not wish you to find me formidable, Miss Elizabeth."

Somehow the atmosphere seemed to be getting thicker, and Elizabeth knew that she really should grab her books and leave and yet she found herself speaking what would perhaps be safer unsaid. "What would you wish me to find you, Mr. Darcy?"

"Irresistible," he said huskily.

At this Elizabeth blushed and began to turn with the notion of leaving the library, but Mr. Darcy quickly grabbed her hands to keep her from moving.

"No, please, forgive me," he said, his face suffused with a blush of its own. "That was too forward. However, I find I cannot..." He paused for a moment still keeping her hands in his. Elizabeth found herself once again caught by his gaze, as he began speaking again. "I know I should be more patient, that it was not that long ago when I still required a pardon for my rude and disagreeable behavior. And while I know that you may require more time, I find I cannot leave you in any doubt of my intentions..." He stopped again, this time closing his eyes and swallowing before looking back into her eyes. "You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

While not entirely unexpected Elizabeth was still stunned by the sentiment and stood speechless as he continued.

"As I said, I know I have not been on my best behavior while here nor have I truly courted you as much as you deserve, but as you are aware, I am not the most loquacious of suitors. However, I do know that you are the only woman who has thus touched my heart and despite every bit of foolishness in our time together, every time I sought to judge your worth not on your own merit but on the more shallow standards of society, I found your power over me growing stronger, and I have realized that there is nothing I want more than for you to be my wife, if you will have me."
Elizabeth had to close her eyes, as she was overwhelmed by his words. She knew she quite liked him, that she felt a greater contentment in his presence of late, that she had come to admire him, and certainly in a material sense it was more than improbable that she could ever find a better suitor. However, marriage was a very great step, not one that should be decided at the spur of the moment. And yet...

She could feel his grip tighten on her hands and she opened her eyes to see genuine anxiety in his own.

"I hardly know what to say, sir," Elizabeth said. "I am honored by your proposal, and so very, very tempted to say yes right now. However..." She saw how his expression changed from anxiety to happiness to uncertainty, and she hated to see that but she pressed on, "However, marriage is the most important decision a woman can make. It is putting her very life into a man's hands, and if he ends up regretting..."

"Elizabeth," he said urgently, "the only thing I would regret is losing the chance to gain your affections. I understand that you are not quite ready to answer the question, but I did not want to leave you in any suspense about the sincerity of my wishes. I am not a man given to flights of fancy or even infatuation. My affections are not easily given and even less easily dissolved, and any vow I make I keep." He looked at her intensely. "I know I am a rather dull fellow, truly a country gentleman at heart. My life has been and will be about duty, honor, and responsibility, and truly there is no greater duty than marrying the woman I have come to both love and respect."

"You are not dull at all," Elizabeth said, somewhat breathlessly. "I admire a man who takes his responsibilities seriously." A strange warmth seemed to envelop her, and in a burst of honesty, she said, "When you were away, everything else seemed dull."

His sudden smile threatened to undo her. "Did it?"

Elizabeth nodded slightly before looking away in sudden embarrassment.

His hand gently touched her cheek, turning her back to face him. "I felt very much the same while I was gone. To know you missed me as well, there is but one thing that could make me happier at this moment and that is to know your heart is mine as mine is yours, but I can wait."

"I do not think that you will have to wait long," she whispered.

He caught up her hand and impulsively kissed it. Then he said softly, "We should retire while I can still remain something of a gentleman."

"I believe perhaps you are correct," she said, as her hand almost felt as if it burned from his kiss. Almost reluctantly she turned back to the shelf to pick up her books, though she did not particularly pay attention to see if she grabbed the correct ones. Mr. Darcy's presence seemed to fill the room. "Good night." She almost stumbled as she made to leave.

"Wait... Your candle." He picked up from the table.

"Of course," she said, taking it from him.

"Good night, Elizabeth," he said.

Elizabeth was unsure how she managed to make it back to her room, but clearly she did and somehow managed to change into her borrowed night dress, but she found it impossible to concentrate on a book or anything else other than Mr. Darcy and his proposal. Could she really trust this change of feelings on her part? Could she really have fallen in love so quickly, and if she
had could she trust that feeling, especially since she had not been truly correct in her first judgement of him? Yes, he was proud, very proud, but he was not the deeply unpleasant person she had assumed him to be, and having known him better, she thought better of him and in fact now more than liked him. Was this love?

She tried imagining saying no to him and sending him away and was taken aback by the sudden wave of pain. She then tried imagining marrying him and moving into his far more elevated circles and while there was a part of her made uneasy with the thought of dealing with people who would most likely resent her for marrying him, possibly even some of his family as Mr. Collins, despite his intentions, had made Mr. Darcy's aunt sound a formidable and unpleasant lady who would probable disapprove of any one less than the daughter of a peer for her nephew. And she was unaware of the opinions of his uncle the earl. But somehow the thought of facing those issues with Mr. Darcy at her side made them seem less consequential than letting him go. She was no coward after all.

But would he regret her? That was far more important to her. Somehow she felt that even if he had regrets he would still treat her with respect. No, she didn't just feel it, she knew he would. But that was only part of it. She wanted more than just the show of respect. She wanted it in truth.

Still, she knew what she was feeling for him and couldn't help thinking that all her apprehensions and worries were surely exaggerated or of no ultimate consequence. That is... so long as he was feeling the same.

Chapter End Notes

As I was expanding the story, I once again was wondering why Col. Fitzwilliam was Georgiana's co-guardian. I know there are a lot of explanations bandied about including dissolute elder brothers and uncles, but here I decided to go with the elder Darcy being the Colonel's godfather and having a closer relationship with him that led him to choosing him for the responsibility. But whatever the reason it is certainly not for his ability to keep a secret.

In other matters, I had a lot of fun writing Mrs. Montcraven's proposal to Wickham (this was in fact so much easier to write than their courtship that it practically flowed from my fingertips). She was particularly designed to be the perfect woman to keep him in line for the rest of his life, and I feel I'm being quite kind to him, giving him a gilded cage to dwell in (he might not agree after all, but that's his problem). She knows what he is, and she knows what she has, and she’s giving him the opportunity to take her offer or leave it. In any event, I definitely was intending to reverse the usual gender roles in this particular circumstance, as by every measure of law, Mrs. Montcraven's fortune is protected against usurpation by anyone especially a husband.

Also, I am aware that a special license was not as easy to acquire as it seems to be in many fanfictions requiring both money and connections, and because of that I was initially going to have her simply get a common license (as she would have no desire to have the banns read nor to wish to go to the trouble of heading to Scotland).
However, I considered the fact that Mrs. Montcraven does have both and as well as no desire to have anyone not of her choosing bearing witness to her nuptials. She knows who and what she's marrying and this is her second marriage, so she has no desire for a public show which means she would need the license to be able to marry when and where she chooses, which would of course not be possible with the common license, hence special license. She does like to be in control as Wickham has now learned.

I suppose I should also mention now that Maria Montcraven was in part inspired by (and got her first name from) the character of Maria Wislack from the film On Approval (1944). She really is a selfish harridan and combined with the equally insufferably self-absorbed Duke of Bristol, whose first name happens to be George, they manage to make the two people who think they are in love with them wake up and realize how lucky they are not to be married to them. Her last name comes from the fact I wanted her name to have Craven in it and I added the Mont to soften it, and well, I do like alliteration. However, Maria isn't purely based on any one fictional harridan. She was basically meant to be a woman who would keep Wickham on a short leash for the rest of his life, and thus free Darcy from ever having to worry about him again. I know I shouldn't like Mrs. Montcraven, as she really is a horribly cold, narcissistic person, and I don't like her as a person, but as a character, I do enjoy writing her.
Elizabeth had been almost relieved to return home the next day, as after a restless night, she found herself rather discomposed around Darcy. Everything about him seemed so much sharper in contrast. Even the smallest smile seemed to make her want to blush. She wanted just a little distance to be able to regain some equanimity in her dealings with him. However, while when she was with him she found it hard to think rationally, when she was away from him it seemed almost impossible to think about anything other than him.

Of course, coming home to more of her mother's flutterings about Mary's wedding, did nothing to turn her thoughts away from Mr. Darcy and his proposal, and as she considered her answer, she was struck with a sudden concern about how Mary might be affected by another of her sisters getting engaged so close to her own wedding. Mary had been too often overlooked by her family, and right now with her engagement to the heir presumptive of Longbourn she was firmly at the center of attention. Would she want to remain there or would she welcome a diffusion of focus?

Well, the only way to find out would be to ask, so after breakfast on the morning after Jane and Elizabeth's return from Netherfield, Elizabeth spoke with Mary as she went into the music room for her morning practice on the pianoforte.

"Mary, there is something that I would like to ask you, though it is rather awkward."

"I am used to awkward," Mary said, with a slight trace of humor which surprised Elizabeth.

"Well, then I will be blunt, which is another trait I believe the entire family is used to to one degree or another," Elizabeth said, with a smile. "I wonder would it trouble you if another of your sisters were to become engaged before your wedding."

Mary looked at her shrewdly. "You and Mr. Darcy, perhaps?"

Elizabeth blushed. "I could be referring to Jane and Mr. Bingley."

"You could, but I do not believe you are," Mary said. "In either or both events, I can hardly say that not only would I not mind, nothing could please me more. I have thought that Mr. Darcy admired you for some time, and you seem to admire him, and I do not think you could find a more suitable match, and I do not refer to the mere material advantages. Also, I would be more than pleased to have my mother's attention focused on more than myself. With no disrespect meant, the wedding preparations seem more elaborate than needed."

"I see, and you believe that a distraction would be in order," Elizabeth said slyly.

"I would not have you agree to wed to serve as a distraction, but if he makes you an offer, and you wish to accept it, then yes, I would be delighted. How could I not wish to share my sisters' joy as they share mine?"

Elizabeth felt a bit ashamed of her lack of consideration for Mary. "I am very happy for you, Mary," she said. "It seems I have not seen you as you are for far too long, and soon you will be married and away from here."

"I have not been easy to know," Mary said. "But I must know, do you expect Mr. Darcy to make you an offer soon?" Elizabeth's face flushed, and Mary with sudden insight said, "Or has he already made one?"
Not willing to say too much, Elizabeth said, "He has made his intentions clear; I believe that he is only waiting for me to be sure of my own." That was not particularly duplicitous.

"And are you sure yet?" Mary asked.

"I think so," Elizabeth said, with the realization that she actually was entirely sure despite the speed of the change in her feelings. "Or as certain as a woman should be on such a large issue. Now I have only to make him aware. Whenever that time may come."

"I hope it is soon," Mary said.

"So do I."

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George Wickham stood in the tailor's shop being measured to within an inch of his life. After consulting with Mrs. Montcraven's solicitor (he knew of no other that he could either trust or afford), while he was not entirely satisfied (how could he be when he would be depending on her generosity for any expansion of his funds?), he realized that it was unlikely he would find a better offer before his finances became overly strained, and despite the restrictions, he would be living the life of a leisured gentleman, mingling with the classes he knew he always should have belonged to. Perhaps it was not ideal, but it was currently the best deal he could get, and once married she would be required to care for him all her days; that much he had made absolutely certain of. And who knows he might convince her sooner than that ten years she mentioned to make sure he was cared for all his days.

So he had gone from the solicitor's to Mrs. Montcraven's and made his acceptance with all the charm and grace he could manage, whereupon she had almost immediately introduced him to Drake, his new valet who had been valet to the first Mr. Montcraven and who had apparently in the interim served the late Mr. Montcraven's uncle who had recently died, just in time for Mrs. Montcraven to regain his services for her next husband.

"It is most fortunate," she had said, "as Drake already knows precisely what I require of a husband. I would hate the bother of training a new man for the position." She had looked George up and down and added, "And the first thing he will have to do is get you fitted with a proper wardrobe. What you have was adequate for your prior station, but you will require superior clothes as my husband."

So accompanied by his new valet, George was directed to the very exclusive tailor that had served Mrs. Montcraven's father and husband. He had expected them to be quite staid because of this, but apparently they managed by dressing both the conservative and the dandies, and Drake was obviously directed to make sure that his wardrobe fit Mrs. Montcraven's own standards.

"Mrs. Montcraven believes that a gentleman should be as brightly colored as the peacock," Drake had said as the selections were placed before them. "She dislikes black except when it is absolutely required."

His opinion ignored, all he had to do was be measured and examined and told what items of clothing he would be getting, and the same happened with his haberdasher and bootmaker. He was allowed to make no selections on his own, and in fact, he stopped trying to make any opinions known when it seemed that Drake would dismiss any deviation from his list even if it was in the same spirit as some other choice. His valet was all that was polite and apparently deferential, but he made it most clear that it was Mrs. Montcraven who was his employer rather than George. Of course, as the wardrobe he was acquiring was really very fine, the finest he would ever had
possessed, he really had no cause for complaint, which was vexing. Nothing his valet did could be called into question, but he was starting to dislike the man.

In any event having had a full day, he still had to go to his betrothed and express his gratitude for the great gift she was bestowing. Unfortunately, when shown into her study, he was faced not just by his betrothed but also her solicitor and his clerk.

"I am pleased to see that Drake managed to get you at least one proper outfit immediately," she said, "as well as getting you back in good time to for you to be able to sign a few papers in relation to the wedding. It's important to have everything in order."

Sighing, he glanced through them not really making much sense of all the legal vocabulary, but as he already understood exactly what he would and would not be receiving, he saw no difficulty in signing everything, the sooner he was legally bound to Maria Montcraven the better.

Once everything was properly signed and witnessed and they were alone, George did his best to show his gratitude to Mrs. Montcraven. It took him some time, as she apparently felt her generosity had shown no bounds, and it was quite late when he returned to his temporary new lodgings, as Mrs. Montcraven had insisted he needed to be in a better neighborhood until they were wed.

The ubiquitous Drake went with him, ostensibly to begin his duties and prepare him for his role as Mr. Montcraven, but Wickham suspected that his job was to see that he did not get up to anything that Mrs. Montcraven disapproved of. Not that Wickham planned to do any such thing; not when he was so close to getting everything he wanted. All he needed was a little patience. Just a little. He was going to be perfectly behaved. For now.

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Not unexpectedly, Elizabeth soon found herself in the company of Mr. and Miss Darcy as they came to visit with Mr. Bingley and Col. Fitzwilliam. It was, unfortunately, not really an atmosphere conducive to a private talk, which she found quite vexing as having made her decision, she was not in the humor to defer delivering her answer. However, neither would she neglect Miss Darcy's comfort on her first visit to Longbourn, knowing how overwhelming her family could be.

It was with relief that some fifteen minutes into the visit that Miss Darcy managed to become comfortable enough with Mary to get into an intense discussion of their favorite composers and music. Mrs. Bennet was mostly focused on Mr. Bingley and Col. Fitzwilliam as were the rest of her sisters, and Elizabeth wanted to take advantage of the opportunity given.

"Mr. Darcy," she said, gathering her courage and her wits in order to say what she needed to say in a room where there was only a minimal amount of privacy.

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth," he said, a slight smile of pleasure on his face.

"There is something I would like to say," she started, then hesitate, "but it is hard to know how to say it."

"You have never struck me as one who has difficulty expressing her opinions," he said.

"Yes, but this is one thing I would rather be able to say in private rather than public, but I do not know when I might get that opportunity."

His expression barely changed, but she noticed a brightening in his eyes as he seemed to take her meaning about the topic she would speak of. He looked around the room.
"Perhaps you could show me the view from that window," Mr. Darcy said, indicating the one farthest from the rest of the room's inhabitants. "I believe the weather may be changing."

"We should check," Elizabeth said, thinking that it was unlikely to change in any direction that would do her any good for the near future, but she would take the opportunity he was giving them to try to get the words out.

They both moved to the window, unnoted by the rest of the room.

"I think we may speak without being overheard," Mr. Darcy said quietly as he looked at her from the corner of his eyes while ostensibly staring out the window.

Elizabeth watched his reflection in the glass and finally drew up her courage to speak. "Sir, I was considering the question you posed to me recently in the Netherfield library."

"Yes..." There was a hesitation in his voice and expression that gave her pause. "I believe you wanted time to consider it."

"Apparently, I needed very little time, sir," Elizabeth said, looking down at her hands which she had clasped in front of her.

"Indeed?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean if you have not reconsidered the question, my answer to it is 'yes.'" She took a deep breath to try to calm herself as she waited for his response which seemed to be an age in coming.

"There is no possibility of my reconsidering the question, Elizabeth," he whispered, repressed passion in his voice. "The only thing I could wish for is that we were in private so I could properly express the joy that answer brings me."

"I wish it as well," she said softly. "But having made my decision I did not wish to wait for an opportunity that might not come for some time."

"It is true then," he said, looking around to be sure that they were still unheard, "you do agree to marry me?"

"Yes," she answered. "I do, very much."

"May I go to your father today?" he asked. "Now?"

"Yes," she said.

"The loveliest word I have heard in quite some time," Darcy said. "I assume he is in his book room."

"Yes, we can see if he will see you."

As casually as possible, they made their excuses, and Elizabeth managed not to smile until they were safely out of the room and partially down the hall. Once they were alone, Darcy stopped and turned towards her.

"Elizabeth, this seems almost unreal. You do wish to marry me?" he asked, taking her hands in his.

"I do," she said. "I found the thought of not marrying you too inexpressibly painful to give you any other answer. My heart has quite overthrown any concerns my head may have posed."
"I hope you know that you will never have cause to regret this choice. You can trust me."

"I know," she said. "I find it incredible yet I do trust you." She looked up into his eyes trying to let him see what she could not yet say. However, she knew that they could not stay in the hall indefinitely and she was suddenly feeling slightly abashed at the intensity of his stare. "Unfortunately— no, that is not quite right— rather I believe it is time to face my father."

"You are correct," Darcy said, looking around as to be sure that they were still unobserved. "However, before we do... would you permit a kiss?"

Elizabeth barely nodded as she lifted her face to his. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. It was a brief kiss; Elizabeth barely returned the pressure she felt before he drew back, yet she could not imagine a first kiss more sweet.

"Now, I believe I am ready to speak to your father," Mr. Darcy said softly.

Elizabeth breathed dreamily. "I know I'm ready for you to."
"I still cannot believe you proposed so soon, Darcy," Bingley said.

"So you have said, Bingley," Darcy said, wearily. "Multiple times. I do not see why you are still harping on it, nor why you have not yet proposed to Miss Bennet if you are still so determined."

"She will not let me!" Bingley exclaimed.

"Why ever not?" Darcy asked. "Moreover how could you know if she would or would not if you have not posed the question?"

"I asked!" Bingley said, before his expression changed and he qualified his statement "Well, hinted. It was after your engagement was announced— one of those days when you were off walking with Miss Elizabeth; frankly I have no idea how you two can enjoy walking in the cold the way you do..."

Darcy could feel himself flush as he knew the primary draw of those cold walks was the opportunity to be alone with his betrothed, and during which they had also shared several kisses that generated enough warmth to dissipate any cold, not to mention the way Elizabeth would slip her arms under his coat to keep warm; he only wished he could do the same with her pelisse. But that was not something he would share with anyone other than Elizabeth. "And I cannot understand why you find this weather so intolerable, since you also grew up in the north as well as I."

"It is because I did that I dislike the cold so much," Bingley said. "And now I cannot believe you've distracted me from my point."

"I believe you were the one who became distracted," Darcy said. "So before you can go off on another tangent, what did you hint to Miss Bennet that elicited such a reply as to keep you so vexed on the subject of my engagement?"

"Fine," Bingley said. "We were in the parlor, not alone, mind you but in that corner that you and Miss Elizabeth seem to keep for yourselves whenever you actually remain indoors..."

Darcy managed not to roll his eyes at Bingley's commentary but wished he would simply get to his point, not that anything he would say would cause Darcy the least bit of regret that he had taken steps to gain the hand of his Miss Bennet. He simply hoped to find a way to get Bingley to stop harping on the topic and in fact believed that he did have a plan to suggest thanks to his own betrothed.

"... and I asked her feelings on having two sisters engaged, and if perhaps she felt rather inclined to join them in the state of matrimony..."

"That is hardly a subtle hint, Bingley."

"Well, it was not meant to be!" he huffed. "But in any event, she said that while she has no disinclination in joining that noble estate provided it was with the right gentleman..." Bingley drew himself up a bit proudly before slumping again. "... that she could not possibly consider it so close to her sister Mary's wedding, especially in light of Elizabeth's engagement. She could not be so unkind..." Bingley glared at Darcy.
"My Miss Bennet asked Miss Mary her opinion on whether she would feel slighted or otherwise put out if another of her sisters were to become engaged, and Miss Mary indicated that nothing could please her more. I wonder that your Miss Bennet did not do the same."

"Oh, she would not," Bingley said. "She said she would not put Miss Mary nor Mr. Collins in such a spot. Nor Miss Elizabeth either. She is all that is sweet and generous, but you see, this means I cannot propose until at least the day after Miss Mary is wed."

"And do you intend to complain to me all this while?"

"Well, if you had waited, then I could have proposed at Christmas as I intended."

"She would have put you off then as well," Darcy said.

"Perhaps not with only one sister engaged," Bingley said.

"Alas, we will not know, and I can hardly be held responsible when I had no awareness of your plans," he said, deciding now was the perfect time to bring up Elizabeth's idea. "In any event it is not that much longer until Miss Mary's wedding day, and if you propose soon afterwards, there is every possibility of your being able to be wed at the same time as Elizabeth and I."

Bingley brightened. "Really?"

"Yes, after all none of the preparations for my and Elizabeth's wedding can begin until after Miss Mary's, and if Miss Bennet is also engaged, I am sure Mr. and Mrs. Bennet will see the sense in the combining of the ceremonies."

"And do you believe Miss Elizabeth would not mind?"

"It was her idea," Darcy said. "At least, once I reassured her that your intentions toward her sister were honorable."

"She asked about my intentions?"

"Yes, she had wondered about your sudden diffidence, and apparently Miss Bennet was unwilling to confide in her, probably because she did not wish to make Elizabeth feel guilty about our engagement or Miss Mary be bothered by another sister's romantic issues."

"She really is all that is thoughtful," Bingley said with a besotted expression on his face.

Darcy said nothing as his opinion was that Miss Bennet was perhaps overly considerate and complying beyond necessity. He most definitely preferred Elizabeth who while considerate of others' feelings was also bold enough to act on her decisions. Of course, the fact that she was also of a rather passionate disposition, though fettered a bit by propriety, well....

"I have said it over and over again, she is an angel," Bingley said, apparently no longer dwelling on Darcy's perceived impetuosity.

While he was a man who had spent his life keeping himself in good regulation, sometimes at the cost of much pain, Darcy really could not see any advantage in marrying an angel; he was looking forward to marrying a woman of flesh and blood, and Elizabeth certainly appeared to be of a more earthly disposition than her sister, though by no stretch of the imagination could she be considered wanton or unladylike. She knew well what lines they could not cross until they were wed, much as he did, but those were lines to which she was willing to venture closely, and at the moment April seemed quite far away. It was fortunate that they would need to be separate for a part of the time
for the necessary preparations, as he suspected that the limits of his self control might be severely tested in the interim. He had not calculated how much more difficult good behavior would be when there was a date in which it would no longer be necessary at all. Still he would not change the pleasurable torture of the engagement period for anything other than marriage, and he could spare a bit of pity for Bingley for his not being able to enjoy even the small liberties he and Elizabeth shared.

"... and she loves the color blue just as I do, and her eyes are the prettiest shade..."

However, listening to his friend's besotted words and recalling how often he had seen such an expression, though not to such a degree, Darcy could not feel overly sorry for him, as he had seen him blow through infatuation after infatuation, always puzzling how each woman could be a perfect angel until superseded by the next beauty. As Miss Bennet was to be his sister, he was glad that Bingley would be forced to wait and learn whether this was love rather than a passing whim or fancy. Miss Bennet deserved more than to be tied to a man whose love was fleeting. Darcy at least had confidence in his friend behaving properly to a wife no matter how his emotions may ebb and flow.

"... she always listens so kindly to everything, and even my sisters think she is lovely..."

Darcy let Bingley's words flow past him. His sisters, really? But that was Bingley always thinking the best of people. It was a characteristic that allowed him to make social occasions easier to bear, yet Darcy had never really understood how Bingley could so easily seem to give his heart away only to reclaim it just as easily when either he or the lady moved on. Darcy was not a man who fell in love with every pretty face. His emotions were under stricter control, not to be blown with every wind, which might explain why he felt knocked from his feet when love did come to him. Elizabeth was the love of a lifetime, and he was grateful for her.

"A spring wedding would be so perfect. She would look so angelic in a white dress. Such a perfect match to her sweetness of character," Bingley nattered on.

Darcy got to his feet and determinedly broke into Bingley's reveries and pointed out that they should actually be heading to Longbourn where he could do better by addressing those compliments to the lady in question, and he would far rather be walking with his own lady of choice.

Bingley enthusiastically agreed, and Darcy was glad to escape from repining and back to the presence of the lady who had captured his own heart and to whom he could not wait to be wed. However, as he listened to Bingley extol at length on the virtues of Jane Bennet, he longed for that day not only for the sake of his heart but in no small measure for his sanity.

~o~O~o~

Mr. Collins had finally returned in preparation of the final days before the wedding, and Mrs. Bennet who had become slightly distracted by the news of Elizabeth's engagement was now thrown fully back into the details of Mary's wedding and the final social gatherings before it as well as the wedding breakfast.

Mary had been thankful for the brief respite and was more pleased that now she could share the attention with her betrothed. Mr. Collins was as effusive as ever and was quick to congratulate Mr. Darcy and his cousin Elizabeth on their engagement, though privately he expressed a bit of confusion to Mary on the topic.

"It is clear that Mr. Darcy recognizes the obvious superior qualities of the ladies of the Bennet
family," he said with a smile at his betrothed. "Just as Lady Catherine herself has expressed the opinion of how well I have done by choosing a lady of gentility and learning to be my bride. However, I had thought that she indicated that Miss De Bourgh was destined for one of her cousins. Obviously, it cannot be Mr. Darcy, or he would not have engaged himself to my future sister, but...

"But it is not any of our concern or worry, as we could hardly be aware of all Lady Catherine's illustrious relations."

"That is true, though I was surprised that she had not mentioned Mr. Darcy's engagement before I left to return. Of course, I know we have used all our correspondence to prepare for our future so it is no surprise that I was not informed until I arrived."

"I believe that Mr. Darcy intends to inform her in person, but has not had time due to the holiday season and our upcoming nuptials."

"Oh, yes, he is doing us great honor by attending, even as our future brother. And naturally he would wish to inform his noble aunt in person as a sign of respect."

"That is true," Mary said, though she suspected from a few hints that Elizabeth had let drop that the reason Mr. Darcy was waiting to speak to Lady Catherine was that she would not be pleased, and he wanted to give her and Mr. Collins at least two weeks without a displeased Lady Catherine before she received the news. "Thus we should not let a hint of the engagement escape our lips lest we usurp Mr. Darcy's prerogative and upset Lady Catherine."

"You are correct. I would not wish to prevent Mr. Darcy from being the one to inform his august aunt of his intentions. Now have I told you about the new shelves in the closets of our guest room at the parsonage?"

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Finally, Mary's wedding day arrived, and while Elizabeth still found her cousin rather ridiculous she could not help but be pleased with the rather adoring expression he had on his face when he looked at her. Because of seniority, Jane was Mary's bridesmaid and because Mr. Collins had no one available to come act as his best man and through Mrs. Bennet's maneuvering once she found out, Mr. Bingley was pressed into the office, though Elizabeth rather suspected that Mr. Collins would have preferred Mr. Darcy to serve instead, not that it mattered. The service went along smoothly without a miss even if Mr. Bingley spent most of his time staring at Jane.

Elizabeth was happy to be sitting next to Mr. Darcy—now Fitzwilliam in her thoughts and when they were private—and surreptitiously grasped his hand as Mary and Mr. Collins exchanged vows. She loved the small smile she saw on his face as he glanced at her. She took his arm as they left the church to return to Longbourn for the wedding breakfast.

The house was soon quite overwhelmed by guests, as Mrs. Bennet had been determined to make the celebration memorable as the first of her daughters was marrying the heir of Longbourn. If she also had great pleasure in speaking of her second daughter's engagement with Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, well no one could truly blame her.

With all the people, it was easy to snatch some moments at one of the windows with Fitzwilliam, who while he was trying, was clearly uncomfortable with the crowds.

"I have been meaning to thank you," she said as they stood side by side apparently peering out the window rather than at each other's reflections.
"For what?" he asked, taking another moment to grasp her hand out of sight of anyone else.

"When not talking about Mary's wedding over the last couple of days, my mother has been talking to my father about a proper school for Kitty and Lydia now that their sisters are going to be so well married."

"I do not..."

"I am sure you do," Elizabeth interrupted, "since she credits you with mentioning a ladies' seminary that would be perfect to get them properly prepared for the society of town."

"Ah..." he said, looking slightly abashed.

"I had wondered what had occurred the few times you arrived when I was otherwise occupied."

"I did not mean to suggest..."

"I am sure you did, but I am grateful for it," she said. "They do need some proper schooling, and if it is possible, I will not say nay."

He smiled in relief before looking back at the crowd.

"Soon it will be our turn," Elizabeth said.

"Not soon enough," he replied. "Three months."

"There are a lot of preparations to consider," she said.

"I know," he said. "That does not make the wait any more tolerable."

"Well, I will take comfort in the fact that your definition of tolerable is somewhat flexible."

He smiled wryly. "Will I ever be fully forgiven for that foolishness?"

"You have already been forgiven," she said, "but surely you do not expect me to forget it so easily?"

"Obviously that would be additional foolishness on my part," he said.

"I am glad that you understand," she said. "Now I am afraid we must face the crowds again. After all, it is Mary's wedding day, and it would not do to neglect the bride and groom on this day."

"Of course not," he said, somewhat flatly.

Elizabeth recognized both his reluctance and his determination to behavior in a proper manner and smiled brightly at him as they reentered the fray. Unfortunately they soon found themselves separated in the crowd soon after they spoke with Mary and Mr. Collins. Elizabeth was drawn aside by Charlotte with whom she had not had much time to speak of late.

"This will be you soon," Charlotte said indicating the newly married couple.

"Indeed," Elizabeth said.

"May I say that I suspected that it would be so though perhaps not this soon?"

"You may, though allow me to have my doubts. It came as a complete surprise to me. I was not
expecting to fall in love nor so quickly," she said. "Nor did I expect it of Mr. Darcy."

"And yet here you are," Charlotte said with a smile. "And I do hope you will be generous enough to invite your friends to visit, especially if your husband has any unattached or widowed friends available."

Elizabeth raised a brow. "I am sure that my husband will not mind my having friends or sisters visiting. As to the other, I can make no promises, as I know of none of Mr. Darcy's friends beyond Mr. Bingley."

"All I ask is that you not forget your old friends in your new life," Charlotte said.

"That is hardly likely; I am nothing if not loyal to my friends," Elizabeth said. "But remember I am no matchmaker. I could hardly have predicted my own match after all."

"That is quite all right. I can make the match myself," Charlotte smiled a little, "given the right incentive."

~o~O~o~

Darcy, having been waylaid by Sir William as his Elizabeth was drawn away by her friend Miss Lucas, found himself somewhat adrift in the crowd, unable to spot his lady, and forced to practice his courtesy on people whose names he could barely recall. It was with some pleasure when he found his cousin standing at the side of the room, happily unencumbered by the youngest Bennet sisters.

"You look lost, Darcy," Fitzwilliam said as Darcy approached.

"Hardly," Darcy replied, "though it would not be surprising in this crush."

"True," Fitzwilliam said. "I would hardly have thought that the Bennets would have known so many people to invite to a wedding. However, I am not sure how they plan to accommodate the guests for your own wedding. I can think of any number who would be willing to pay for the privilege of being at Fitzwilliam Darcy's wedding, though I believe the price would be higher if they were to be allowed to choose the bride."

"Very amusing," Darcy said, flatly. "I hardly intend to invite all and sundry to my wedding, and as the only members of my family that know of my engagement at the moment are you and Georgiana, I cannot speak as to which ones will be willing to travel to celebrate my nuptials."

Fitzwilliam managed to look a little abashed which raised Darcy's suspicions. "Well, you know my parents will be so pleased you are marrying that they would be willing to travel much farther than here to attend."

Darcy narrowed his eyes. "You have not told them, have you, cousin? I intended to tell them in person before traveling to tell Lady Catherine."

"Of course not," Fitzwilliam said almost too quickly, then under the weight of Darcy's glare, he added, "Though after the way you were speaking of Miss Elizabeth in London before we left, I might perhaps have indicated that they could expect some news of some importance before many weeks had passed."

Lifting his eyes to the ceiling, Darcy said, dryly, "Well, with a statement like that I am sure your mother believes that you are almost ready to declare yourself to some young lady, and that is why you refused to visit for Christmas."
Fitzwilliam nearly choked before saying, "Now, be fair, my mother knows full well that I did not visit in part because of Uncle Oliver and his family somehow managed to impose themselves on my parents for the holiday. For some ungodly reason they now seem to want to marry me off to their youngest, the one who is practically a perfect copy of her mother, and my mother was the one who encouraged me to spend some time with you and Georgiana. She would have avoided them herself if she could. This is a far more pleasant party in all respects, even if I will miss dear Aunt Prudence's battles with Aunt Cordelia. But then spending time at Rosings Park would be a far more pleasant prospect, and you know it."

Darcy could not help but agree. Unlike his cousin, he had no reason to avoid that particularly unpleasant branch of the family as they tended to avoid him as they had looked down on his father and mother's marriage because the Darcys were untitled though with an equal history and consequence. Even his aunt Catherine had acknowledged that, though he could have done without her insistence that he and his cousin Anne were formed for one another and proven deaf to his demurrals, though admittedly he could perhaps have been more direct and final in his speech to her, as now he knew he was due for perhaps one of the most unpleasant conversations in his life, one that was long in coming.

As he saw his two youngest future sisters pass him giggling together, he was suddenly struck that despite their and their mother's less than appropriate manners, they were hardly worse than some of his Fitzwilliam relations. In point of fact even at their most malicious, they could hardly match the condescension or the spite of those parts of his family. He felt an unaccountable chill at that thought. He had at one time thought only about his superior connections in relation to Elizabeth's but the truth is while he did have more highly placed relations, he could hardly say that he had better behaved ones, especially considering some of the barely hushed up scandals involving his uncle Oliver's eldest daughter Cordelia, with whom he would never allow Georgiana to associate save for the barest passing courtesy if they were ever to meet in a public place and that was only out of a sense of family loyalty. Fortunately Cordelia had been married to a Scottish peer and spent little to no time in England. As well, there had been no reason for them to be in company with the Oliver Fitzwilliams for some years, and frankly he had no desire to change that.

Suddenly his Elizabeth's voice penetrated the fog of his thoughts. "You look rather troubled, Mr. Darcy."

Her smile made him feel lighter. "Troubled. Not particularly, Miss Elizabeth." He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "Though I did miss your company."

She blushed and looking somewhat discomposed, turned to his cousin. "And you, Colonel, you seem uncharacteristically somber. Is it the solemnity of the occasion that has overcome you?"

"Not at all," Fitzwilliam said. "I was merely contemplating an event I was not attending and reflecting how much more delightful this one is, though I imagine it will pale in comparison to the one to come. Do you not agree, Darcy?"

"It is not an aspect that I have given much thought to as of yet," Darcy said.

"And it is generally not something that gentlemen concern themselves with from what I have observed," Elizabeth said.

"That is true," Colonel Fitzwilliam said. "We merely enjoy the celebration without overly worrying about the preparation involved. Your mother has excelled here." He looked at Darcy who glared back at him and seemed about to make his excuses when Kitty and Lydia returned giggling.
"Oh, Colonel," Lydia said. "What ever are you doing standing here? It has to be so dull. We're going to have some dancing, and you must dance with us both. Though me first."

"I'm the oldest," Kitty insisted. "You could dance with Denny. But really, Colonel, you must come with us. We need an extra man."

"Kitty, Lydia, please," Elizabeth tried admonishing them.

"Oh, la, Lizzy, don't be dull. You and Mr. Darcy could come with us. This is supposed to be a celebration. Come along Colonel; you'll have so much more fun with us." Lydia grabbed one of the Colonel's arms and Kitty the other, and they nearly dragged the Colonel away, though Darcy believed that Fitzwilliam wanted to escape from his displeasure.

He looked at Elizabeth who was staring at her sisters and muttering something about school not happening soon enough, before she looked up at Darcy with a lighter expression. "To get back to the question I meant to ask, whatever did your cousin do to make you glare so fiercely at him?"

"Nothing of note," Darcy said, the irritation that had again arisen with her question dissipating at the affection in her expression. "However, if there is any news you wish to keep absolutely confidential, I beg you do not reveal it in his vicinity. He is a man incapable of keeping a secret."

"That is a pity considering he is a soldier," Elizabeth said. "I trust his superiors are aware of this failing."

"I would hope so. Perhaps they take advantage of this and give him misinformation to disseminate to the enemy," Darcy said with a smile.

Elizabeth laughed. "That would be useful. And I will not be distracted by your humor, good sir. What has he revealed that vexes you?"

"Not as much as he could have," Darcy said, "which is a relief as I would be vexed if he had taken it upon himself to inform his parents of our engagement before I have had the opportunity."

"Ah, yes, the subject of your journeying next week," Elizabeth said. "I hope it will be not be a trial."

Recalling where they were and not wishing to go into detail where others might overhear, Darcy whispered, "I believe the greatest trial will be leaving you again."

"It is possible that we will not need to be separated so long as my mother believes that I need to go to London for my wedding clothes."

He smiled, as he truly was not looking forward to being away from her. "That would please me very much."

Elizabeth smiled at him again, and it was all he could do to not try to encourage her to steal away with him. As if she sensed it, she looked around and then asked, "Can you tell me, Mr. Darcy, why your friend Mr. Bingley seems so..." she tilted her head to the side as if searching for the words.

Darcy looked to where Bingley was standing near the Collins, practically bouncing on his toes, looking rather like he would love to shove them out the door with all speed, when he was not staring at Miss Bennet like a love sick pup. "Energetic?" Darcy asked, at a loss for a better word.

Elizabeth nodded.
"I would say he is desperately eager for an opportunity to ask your sister a particular question that he feels she will not be receptive to until after these festivities are concluded."

"Oh," Elizabeth said quietly, the light of comprehension overspreading her face. "That explains so much."

"Indeed," Darcy said. "But I believe very soon, it will no longer be a matter to be concerned about."

Elizabeth looked over at Bingley who was now talking with Miss Bennet. "I am certainly not so selfless as my sister," she said.

"A fact for which I am quite grateful, as I am not particularly unselfish myself," he replied.

"Indeed, I do not think I would wish you to be too amiable," Elizabeth said. "Civil when civility is called for, of course, but I enjoy debating you too well for you to make yourself universally agreeable."

"I cannot help but agree on this point," Darcy said. "Complete deference bores me; I definitely prefer a woman who holds her own opinions."

"You and I are too wise to woo peaceably, I think," Elizabeth said.

"Beatrice to my Benedick," he said, recognizing the line from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

"Far better that than Kate to your Petruchio," she said. "That I believe did go too far. How fortunate it was a play within a play."

"Also, you are hardly a shrew, nor would I wish to tame you," he said. There were far more pleasant things that he wished to do with her, but unfortunately they would have to wait until they were married. He glanced around, his eye gliding past Miss Bingley who had a pinched expression. "I have had far too much experience with genuine shrews and termagants to ever so misjudge you. Beatrice rarely drew blood with her wit."

"Save perhaps at one point," Elizabeth said. "I do believe she did offend Benedick during the masque."

"Well, that was his fault entirely as he started the combat with his own insults," Darcy replied, thinking of his own poor showing at the assembly, even if at the time he had no idea how important Elizabeth would become to him.

"But still it did not prevent them from falling in love or acknowledging it once their friends stepped in with their little game," Elizabeth said.

"So you believe that they were in love all along?" he asked. This had not been part of their previous discussion of the play.

"Of course, do not you?"

"Yes, I do indeed," he said. "He could not have made such a fool of himself if he were not." He leaned closer and in a much softer tone said, "Nor could I."

She looked up at him. "You hardly did; at least no more than I," she said softly. "Love can make the wisest men fools."
"And the biggest fools wise," Darcy said. "I am not sure which I am, but...I am most definitely in love."

She surreptitiously took his hand. "As am I."

Chapter End Notes

While writing this story, I used a timeline of P&P that I found on-line though I can't remember where I found it, and though things have played out differently, Mary and Mr. Collins' wedding is meant to take place when his and Charlotte's took place, and the April wedding is set to take place on the same day as Darcy's failed proposal at Hunsford.

Also, while I know it's a popular trope in fanfiction for Mr. Collins to know all about the supposed betrothal of Darcy to Anne de Bourgh, in the novel, he really doesn't give any indications of being aware of anything other than the familial relationship this early on, to the point that it's only overhearing Darcy mention Lady Catherine that he realizes that he's a relation. And while Lady Catherine does strongly hint at a future attachment during Elizabeth's visit in April, that is months later, and I don't believe Lady Catherine ever comes right out and says anything directly until her confrontation with Elizabeth near the end of the book. Hence Mr. Collins' confusion here rather than any insistence on Mr. Darcy being engaged to his cousin.

And here is another Much Ado About Nothing reference. I think Beatrice and Benedick are my favorite Shakespearean couple, and well the comparisons are obvious, save for the fact that Darcy is rather oblivious to the fact that Elizabeth dislikes him. But anyway, I could not resist using them here.

There is also something of a minor P.G. Wodehouse allusion here as well, as I see a wee bit of resemblance between Charles Bingley and a certain Bingo Little.

And a little more information on the extended Fitzwilliam clan.
Fitzwilliam Darcy, husband for a mere two weeks, reluctantly left his currently quite delightfully disheveled wife in order to let her begin her preparations for the ball they would be attending that evening, the first social engagement where they would appear as man and wife. While he hardly wished to emerge from the blissful haven of their home as yet, he did unfortunately recognize that he could no longer ignore the outside world, especially Lord and Lady Gordon who had been close friends to his own parents and who had made such a point of inviting him and Elizabeth to their ball. Of course he realized that he and Elizabeth were currently of high interest because of either the perceived disparity of the match or the fact that while the *ton* were familiar enough with the Darcys of Pemberley, they had never heard of the Bennets of Longbourn, thus making the former Elizabeth Bennet very much an unknown quality.

Howsoever it was, he did know that there was no better opportunity or place to introduce his bride than the Gordons' Ball as they had such a large guest list that the two of them would mostly be lost among the more notorious guests, and they would have a number of natural allies, the host and hostess being the most important of them all. And he had no fear of Elizabeth not doing well. She was far more at ease in social situations than he, and she never let matters of rank or position intimidate her.

She had shone so very brightly in her visit to London in February, especially when meeting his relations. He had been somewhat unnecessarily worried about how that would turn out in light of his very unhappy interview with his aunt Catherine in Kent. She had ranted and threatened to ruin them both in the eyes of society, but in the end he believed he had convinced her of the pointlessness of any such schemes, though he soon discovered that she was so determined that she went directly to her brother to enlist his support.

Unfortunately for her, he had already made his aunt and uncle Matlock fully aware of his engagement including those matters that others might consider detriments but which mattered not in the least to him, and his uncle knowing his stubborn nature and his aunt being quite happy to have her nephew engaged to a woman of apparently good character, ended up sending Lady Catherine back to Kent with a flea in her ear and a determination to treat Elizabeth with all that was due to their nephew's intended. Their determination was perhaps helped by the fact that Lord and Lady Matlock had never gotten on with Lady Catherine while Darcy's mother had been a favorite with both of them, so it was an easy choice to support their favorite nephew over Matlock's shrewish sister.

Darcy regretted that Lady Catherine had continued to behave in such a way as to make the breech between them likely to be permanent unless she could bring herself to make a sincere apology, which seemed highly unlikely as he had never known her to admit herself to be wrong. He could only be grateful that his uncle had made it clear that she was not to approach his intended as apparently was her original intention, and he could only wonder at the pressure his uncle had brought to bear on her as she tended to be very single-minded and determined in her aims. He most greatly regretted that he had not been able to delay the trip long enough for Mr. and Mrs. Collins to get properly settled into their new home before his aunt learned the news.

Of course, while he was grateful for his relatives' support, he could wish that they had done so with a bit more restraint, at least in the family party which followed Elizabeth's initial introduction to his
uncle and aunt. They had behaved with all decorum then, so he was rather taken aback at the rather brash and overly enthusiastic welcome she received at the dinner. While he intellectually understood it was a sign of their embracing her into the family fold, he was somewhat embarrassed to remember his former opinions on the Bennets' behavior when his own family could be just as unrestrained (though admittedly they were mostly well behaved in public).

There was good fortune in that because Jane had become engaged to Bingley the day after the Collins' wedding and they had agreed to a double wedding in April, Mrs. Bennet believed or was convinced that she had too much to do to go to London with Miss Bennet and Elizabeth and left them to the capable hands of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, though according to Elizabeth she had sent quite a long list of instructions on the best warehouses to shop for materials for the girls' wedding clothes amongst many other requirements. However, it did mean that he had to see his family's worst traits on display before Elizabeth's most sensible relations.

It was not so bad as it could have been, after all they could have shown dislike or indifference, and to be honest, most of them were reasonably well behaved. It was his uncle and his aunt's sister whose behavior he found the most trying, though his cousin John had his own moments. At dinner, Darcy could have done without his uncle telling Elizabeth about his younger brother Oliver, especially with his too oft told joke that Oliver was so enamored with titles and so bitter about being a younger son that Lord Matlock felt that he would have preferred to be borne a woman so he could be Lady Olive all of his life. Darcy was thankful that the worst of his excesses were kept to the separation of the sexes so that only Elizabeth's uncle was a possible witness, and he had been kept well distracted by Viscount Rivers and Col. Fitzwilliam during the most trying time. Lord Matlock did praise Elizabeth, but he could certainly have been more diplomatic.

His praise of her spirit and wit was decent enough, but Darcy wanted to groan or call his uncle out when he said, "Your Miss Elizabeth may not be the fashionable beauty her sister is, but she has a fire to go with those eyes and that figure that makes her far more appealing to a man with passion of his own. I have to say you surprised me. I always thought that once you settled down to marry, it would be someone as perfectly coifed and proper as Henry's Barbara. Lord, you would think with a name like that she would have more spirit. God knows how he managed to sire an heir off her; they are both so in love with propriety I expect he knocks three times before entering and then stumbles about in the dark before reaching her."

Darcy kept his expression as impassive as possible at this, wishing himself away and especially back with his intended.

"I do not think it is so surprising," his cousin John chimed in. "It is not like he ever took advantage of his opportunities for willing feminine company before he married; no wonder that once he spoke those vows he would get to business, though I doubt he ever properly cuts loose even there." He looked at Darcy with a slight leer. "You seem to have chosen a far livelier bride for yourself, so perhaps you are not quite so dull a soul as Henry. I can imagine..."

"I would thank you not to apply your imagination towards anything considering my intended," Darcy said, icily. "She is not like the women you tend to consort with."

John just grinned as his uncle still had his own opinion to deliver.

"John is still too young for matrimony," he said, basically waving away any insult on either's part. "In any event, I hope you know what you are doing. With a lady like that, if you are not properly prepared, she will wear you down good and proper. I wager she has a natural aptitude for a wife's duties and will be a very quick study." He accompanied the statement with a wag of the eyebrows.

"Uncle, I would have you remember that the lady's uncle is here and that I do not appreciate either
of you speculating on Elizabeth's... wifely aptitude," was all that Darcy could vouchsafe to say before walking over to Rivers who was in conversation with Mr. Gardiner and Richard, discussing, of all things, fishing.

His eldest cousin had few interests beyond the estate, and he looked at his time in town as a necessary burden to cultivate proper contacts for the future. He and his father were polar opposites in nearly everything but in accepting the responsibilities of their birth. Where his father was bold and boisterous, the viscount was serious and somber and his wife shared those characteristics. Father and son got on reasonably well most of the time, but Darcy found that they tended to revert to arguing their differing positions on estate matters or legislative issues more often than not, which while not entirely unwelcome could become tedious, since they were both men used to getting their own ways. Unlike his cousin, Darcy found himself more drawn to personalities that contrasted with his own rather than those that were as reserved. In any event, he was pleased that the Viscount was treating the Bennets and Gardiners with the civility that they were due, not that he truly had expected anything less of him. Rivers might look down on them from his superior position, but he would never be less than scrupulously polite, especially considering that there would soon be a connection (however, little he might care for it) via matrimony, and Darcy knew that Rivers' wife would behave the same, though perhaps with a little more warmth.

There was little more mortification as his uncle allowed himself to be drawn into the discussion of fishing, one of the other few things he and his son had in common though as usual they had different opinions on the best ways to go about it. Nonetheless Darcy was relieved when they could finally join the ladies in the drawing room as he was concerned with what was happening with Elizabeth when he was not there to shield her. He had no real concerns about his aunt Matlock as she in some respects rather resembled Miss Bennet in her rather serene outward comportment, though she had a soul of steel cultivated through years of dealing with the ton. He wondered if Miss Bennet had that capacity as she seemed rather too inclined to think well of everyone whereas his aunt only appeared to do so.

Unfortunately, his aunt's sister, Miss Prudence Graves, had a personality rather more closely matched that of her brother-in-law than Lady Matlock. She had her own oft told aphorisms of being meant to go to her "grave a Graves" as well as being "Prudence by name, prudent by nature,” and her absolute favorite trotted out on every possible occasion, that "a lady in possession of a good fortune is not in want of a husband." All of which were brought out either before or during dinner.

However, worn out sayings were not nearly as trying as his hearing her ask Elizabeth if she was truly certain she wanted to marry, even if he (Darcy) was a good sort of man, as she seemed a sensible woman who could do quite well standing on her own. If Elizabeth were thinking of matters of fortune, Aunt Graves said that she was looking for a like-minded woman to make her heir since obviously she was not going to have any children of her own. Nevertheless, he took great comfort in Elizabeth's response that she was indeed certain that she wanted to marry him, that in fact he was perhaps the only man who could have turned her mind seriously to the subject, but she did have a friend who seemed to think of marriage as a more of a means of security than a particularly happy estate, and that perhaps Elizabeth could introduce her friend to Miss Graves some time in the future that they may discuss their philosophies on the best recourse for a single woman.

Not so bad was the end of the conversation that he heard as he entered the drawing room, though he did feel a momentary dread when he saw that Elizabeth was ensconced between his two aunts. Surely Aunt Graves would not have continued importuning Elizabeth on the subject of matrimony or rather the avoidance of it even if it was her hobby horse. However, it soon became clear it was another topic on her mind.
"Penelope," she was saying. "You are quite fortunate that you never had daughters, lest your old bear insist on them being named Nausicaa or Calypso, or even heaven forbid, Scylla or Charybdis. As it was you did not even notice what he was up to with your sons' names until after he had named John."

"They are hardly unusual names, Prudence," his Aunt Matlock had replied. "Nor could he be guaranteed enough sons to fit. Also it has certainly not harmed them, nor have they taken on the worst traits of their namesakes."

Ah, yes, his uncle's insistence on naming his sons after the sons of Henry II, so particular to his kind of humor, and in particular not something so easily noted until pointed out as he had clearly skipped Henry's eldest offspring. However, Darcy would fain to point out that Henry was diligent in his duties as befitted a young king; Richard was a soldier, though not so in love with war, while Geoffrey bore a more slight resemblance to Henry's first illegitimate son of that name than his namesake by choosing the church as his profession, and John was a barrister, which perhaps linked up a bit to Magna Carta. Loose ties all told really and no more peculiar than the Graves' father whose offsprings' names all started with the same letter.

Thankfully, by this point, it seemed his relatives had made the worst of their excesses and there was little left to be endured. Even more thankfully, Elizabeth had found his relatives' eccentricities more amusing than trying, only saying that it was pleasing to know that they seemed somewhat equitable in the matter of... exuberant relations.

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George Wickham— well, he was not Wickham any more, was he?— looked at himself in the mirror. He was dressed in the height of fashion, rivaling any man in the brilliant cut of his clothes. His ruffles and cravat were gleaming white, his coat the bluest of blues with the shiniest of buttons, and his sapphire tiepin and cufflinks glittered in the candlelight, as did the signet ring that Maria had presented him with as a token of their marriage. The fact that he felt like a stiff-backed peacock, meant little. After all, he had been well-informed of his wife's preferences, and he could hardly complain when he knew he would outshine many a more well bred man. After all, is this not what he desired most in life, a comfortable and secure living as a gentleman of leisure. Staring in the mirror, he wondered if his waistcoat was not a bit more snug than when he first tried it on. Surely not; he could hardly have put on weight so quickly, even if they had a rather fine chef.

"Mr. Montcraven, sir," the voice of Drake, whom George had grown to loathe despite his skill at his work, interrupted his thoughts. "The mistress wished me to remind you that she expects you downstairs in ten minutes time."

"Always so precise, my wife, George thought, no wonder she presented me with a watch just after she gave me the signet ring. "Thank you, Drake," he said with asperity. "That is all."

"Yes, sir," Drake said, with that disdain disguised as deference that drove George mad.

Oh, his manner was always correct, even punctilious, but George knew well enough the low opinion Drake had of him, having become quite familiar with how a well-bred servant could convey disapproval with a slight change in tone or expression as well as their manner in discharging their duties. Any suggestion or even order of his was often met with, "I believe the mistress prefers it this way," or "madam believes this suits you better." Or he would merely say, "yes, sir," and simply do as he had done before as if that is what George told him to begin with. The worst of it was that he could do nothing as his wife continued to insist that Drake was ideal and would hear no opinion to the contrary.
For some time George had begun silently cursing the death of the first Mr. Montcraven's uncle for making Drake so readily available to his wife, as he felt he would have had more sway with a new valet. Not since old Mr. Darcy had died before giving him the reward he was sure he would have received had he ever regretted a death more. But unfortunately there was nothing he could do to change the situation. It was especially regrettable that he could not trust Drake to aid him in any little maneuvers to get around his wife's strictures as he knew the man would report any suspected infraction to her.

Four months of marriage. Four months and he felt as if it were four years. Oh, in some ways it was quite comfortable. Regular meals of the finest caliber. Mixing with members of the ton; though that was not quite the delightful experience he anticipated, as he was very much treated as if he were Maria's favorite lap dog rather than her husband. Too many knew he was the son of the Darcys' former steward and made it clear that he was accepted on sufferance and expected to be amusing to justify their efforts. Maria had somehow managed to maneuver his acceptance into her first husband's club, not one of the highest order, but higher than his former status would easily allow. He wished he could have made it into one of the clubs with proper gaming as there were only low stakes games and a rather determined settling of scores at the end of them.

However, he did know that his wife was of a rather conservative bent when it came to finances, and he supposed it was just as well that he could not play high as his wife had proven quite serious about not supplementing his allowance, and his one attempt at pawning his snuff box had led to the humiliation of him finding it on his dressing room table with a note saying that the cost would be taken out of his next quarter's allowance. She never bothered to confront him directly, but she certainly made him pay for it in her demands in the bedroom.

Drawn from his reverie by the not quite silent closing of the servant's door (George knew Drake did that on purpose as he could be silent as the grave when it came to entering unexpectedly), George let himself wonder again why his wife made such a fuss about getting ready for the evening. However, he had already learned that it was his head in the noose if he did anything so crass as actually enter her room during her preparations. He had done so once early on only to receive a vicious tongue lashing on a gentleman's place when evening preparations were being made.

No, his role was to stand at the foot of the stairs and heap adulation on her appearance. She was a most particular woman indeed, and as a new husband it behooved him to remain in her good graces, most especially if he wanted her to increase his allowance any time in the near future. He was optimistic despite the discouragement he had already received from her. He had to be, as he had already run through the amount she had given him and felt how little amusement apart from her he would have until the next quarter unless he could get some form of advancement. It really was not fair that she took his attentions as her due rather than the flattery and cajolery they were meant to be; it made things far more challenging than they should be.

It also did not help that she was absolutely particular about her appearance and did not welcome anything that might muss or otherwise disarrange her careful preparations. Her hair, her gown, her face, her jewels. The most he could manage was a kiss to the hand and even that could sometimes be rejected. Nevertheless, he did what was required and went downstairs in order to feign admiration at the proper time.

"Dearest, you are a vision," he said, as she started down the stairs. "A veritable queen." Cold and controlling, and that shade of blue makes you look like an ice statue; it really is perfect.

When he reached out to take her hand for a kiss, she stepped back from him, and he sighed. No touching then. That would make things more challenging.
"Mind the gown," she said. "It is too early in the evening for wrinkles."

"Of course, dearest," George said. "I would not dare disturb such perfection." Not if I want to get something from you tonight. I hope the Gordons' ball is everything you want or I really am in difficulties.

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Elizabeth Darcy looked in the mirror, astonished at her own transformation. Her new ball gown was the loveliest she ever owned and her hairstyle more elaborate than any she had ever had, though she had to laugh at the thought of how much work it was to make it seem so loosely held together. She felt as if she looked very much the part of Mrs. Darcy and hoped that she would make her husband proud this evening. All that remained was the necklace her husband had presented her with earlier in the day. She turned to speak to her maid only to see her slipping out the door.

"If you will permit me..." Her husband's voice was suddenly in her ear.

Elizabeth wondered how she could have been so lost in thought as to miss his entrance. But his presence was most welcome.

"You are enchanting tonight, Mrs. Darcy," Darcy said as he lifted and fastened the emerald necklace around his wife's neck. "Not that you are not always." He leaned forward to kiss her neck, letting his arms slide around his wife. "However, the green suits you particularly well." His expression was warm and very appreciative.

"It matches your own green coat quite nicely," she said as she turned in his embrace. "And you are handsome as always, Mr. Darcy." She felt very fortunate to have such an attractive and attentive husband.

"Can we not remain at home, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth?" he asked, nuzzling her ear, his hands sliding up her waist. "I prefer not to share you yet."

"If I recall aright, Lord and Lady Gordon are old friends of your family. Do you really wish to offend them by not attending?" she asked, though she too would far rather remain at home. She had never suspected how very wanton marriage would make her, though he had certainly stirred rather warm feelings in her during their engagement. But the truth was that even after their activities earlier in the day, she could feel herself melting in his embrace yet again.

"If I say yes..."

"I'd say you were being disingenuous," Elizabeth interrupted, before nipping at his earlobe. He tried to repress a small groan, which pleased her. "Not so much disingenuous but distracted by your charms," he said, before kissing her.

As his kisses began moving down her throat, Elizabeth managed to say, "Your own charms are far too distracting, but I would be a poor wife if I did not insist we keep our engagements." She grasped his face in her hands, trying to regulate her feelings. One of them had to remain sensible. "We must go, but once we return home..." She kissed him.

"Then may we leave early, my love?" Darcy said with a small sigh of resignation. "Surely, there is nothing that requires we remain until the end." He nuzzled her throat a bit more.

"Well, perhaps," Elizabeth said, her arms slipping around him. "But you will have to do your duty
very well." Though as his kisses were distracting her and her hands almost unconsciously drifting downwards, she thought, *Well, perhaps just adequately, but I cannot say that right now.*

"I intend to, though I far prefer the thought of a husband's duty to his wife. Now that is a duty that I truly delight in performing." His own hands had started roaming, distracting her further.

"And you do it quite well, sir, and I look forward to our return home so that we can increase our proficiency," she said, enjoying his caresses a little longer. However, when she found herself contemplating just how late they could be, she pulled herself together before reluctantly pushing him back. "Nevertheless," she said, forcing determination into her voice as she recalled herself, "we cannot neglect the less enjoyable duties for the more pleasant ones, and as this is my first proper entrance into your world, I will require your support as you require mine."

That did seem to make him recollect himself. He looked at her rather intently. "You know that you can depend upon me for whatever you require. I will not let you down."

"I know you will not," she said with a smile. "Shall we take our turn at astonishing society with our utter felicity and perfect harmony?"

"Madam, I most look forward to it," he said, offering her his arm.

Chapter End Notes

I tend to mostly stick with fanon wherein Col. Fitzwilliam is almost inevitably Richard, and his father is often Henry, so while writing I was rather struck with the notion of giving that naming a somewhat quirky reason.

Also, the references to Nausicaa, Calypso, Scylla, and Charybdis all come from the Odyssey, which has Odysseus' long-suffering and faithful wife, Penelope, fending off suitors at home while he takes the long way home. Nausicaa was the daughter of King Alcinous who ends up providing Odysseus with safe passage back to Ithaca. Calypso was a nymph who fell in love with Odysseus and kept him prisoner for seven years until Hermes got her to let him go. I might have used Circe the witch who turns his crew into pigs, but I liked using the more obscure Nausicaa rather than giving in to my general love of alliteration. And of course, Scylla and Charybdis are the classic rock and a hard place. Scylla being the rock or rather technically a six-headed sea monster who devoured whatever was within reach, and Charybdis being a whirlpool which drank down and spat up water three times a day.

And I've just realized that it might be a good idea to explain Lord Matlock's joke about his brother Oliver's obsession with titles. Probably it isn't, but I'm going ahead anyway. So basically, the daughters of earls all get the courtesy title of Lady that they can keep all their lives unless they marry up and then they take their husband's rank. So we have Lady Anne Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh (as the wife of either a baronet or a knight, whichever Sir Lewis was — most likely baronet as I think she's too much of a snob to go lower than a baronet— without her courtesy title, she would simply have been Lady de Bourgh). However, while the eldest son would usually have a courtesy title, in this story it being Viscount Rivers, the younger sons would basically be plain Misters (unless like the Colonel they had some other title) except in written address,
when they would be the Honorable. So Oliver being the younger brother has always been just plain Mister, and being a man (and having four nephews between him and the earldom), unless he received a knighthood or some such thing (and he's too snooty and useless for a knighthood — he's lucky he was left a minor, unentailed estate of his own), he will not be getting a title of his own save by the most extraordinary of circumstances.
Taking the Trouble to Practice

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Having made his way past the hosts and a good many of Maria's "close" friends, George found himself looking longingly at the punch bowl and then at the reason why he both wanted to be at the bowl and was not allowed. He glanced around at the assembled throng attending Lord and Lady Gordon's ball, wishing he could feel a thrill at being among such illustrious personages; at one time he would have seen it as a great opportunity, but now it was rather losing its luster.

"Do not slouch, George," Maria's superior tone made him flinch.

"No, dearest," he said dutifully.

"Remember, you are now my husband and a Montcraven; use your charms wisely."

"Yes, dearest," he muttered agreeably, while inwardly cursing Lucy Younge for putting him in the path of Maria Montcraven. He could not believe that she had still been angry about Ramsgate. It had been sheer bad luck that Darcy had arrived the day before the elopement; why she blamed him for that, he could not fathom.

However, he remembered with crystal clarity their last meeting, when he asked her why Maria Montcraven. She had laughed and said, "Do you really believe that there are so many unprotected wealthy women in the world? No, you wanted wealth; she wanted a man willing to do anything for it, and I knew you were perfect." Then with an added measure of contempt, she had said, "Do you really wish to know what I received for arranging your meeting, George? Five pounds and a new evening dress and accessories." She looked him up and down as if cataloging his points. "And trust me, it was more than you were worth."

Apparently his attention had drifted too much as Maria suddenly tapped his arm with her fan. "Now, George, I see Honoria Stewart with Mr. Darcy and his bride. I absolutely must meet the nobody who snatched that matrimonial prize." She looked at the couple reflectively. "I had considered him a possibility for one of my nieces—Godfrey did so dote on them and that sister of his. Pity, the eldest is only coming out this year. I might have arranged something otherwise."

_I very much doubt that_, George thought. _That prig likes his own way too much, otherwise I might now be married to Georgiana rather than you._ Looking around the crowds, George could just make out Darcy's profile in the crowd. Trepidatious at the thought of facing him, he tried demurring. "Dearest, I do not think..."

"Nonsense, George," Maria interrupted, "Mr. Darcy is hardly going to give you the cut direct at Lady Gordon's ball, especially not while with his country bride. It might give people the impression that his offense was brought on by the notion that you might have gotten under her skirts before he did." She paused and looked him in the eye, placing the tip of her fan under his chin. "So, George dear, with that in mind, be polite, but reserve your charm for me."

George swallowed and then forced a smile. "Always, dearest."

"Good now, come along," she said, putting her arm through his, though she was most certainly the one guiding them through the crowd.

As they moved, George would admit that he had a certain amount of curiosity about the woman
who had managed to trap Darcy into matrimony. Because that was what the majority of the rumors were since as far as anyone knew she had no wealth and no consequence to speak of. Though she would have to be quite the clever girl (or have quite the clever family) to have caught Darcy, who had been raised at his father's knee to be more than wary of every stratagem of those hoping to trick or trap him into matrimony, and George had seen him dodge more than a few tricky maneuvers over the years.

It was puzzling. While he had often been quite gleeful in using Lady Catherine's hopes for a union between Darcy and her daughter as a way of making Darcy more coldly unattainable and himself more sympathetic, George had never seriously believed that Darcy would actually marry his cousin, as he knew the man was too proud and concerned with his heritage to even consider risking it marrying someone so obviously sickly and unlikely to be able to carry an heir to term. However, he had always thought it would be someone of the same background, some titled heiress with a pedigree as long and dull as Darcy's whom he would offer for after a long and complicated negotiation with her father.

And as for the notion that this might be a love match, George found that even more unlikely than Darcy had managed for once to have a lapse of attention and been ensnared in someone else's design. But then George had no real idea of what kind of woman would draw Darcy's attention, as Darcy had always been so very fastidious in his personal behavior, looking down on George for what he called his "licentious ways" from the time George had first noticed what girls were hiding under their clothes, so if Darcy had ever indulged his own appetites—if he even had them (which George was inclined to doubt, as he believed the man had ice in his veins)—he had been so discreet that George had never even heard a whisper, and he had looked for any chink in that prig's armor of self-righteousness, just one good vice he could have thrown back in his face. So he doubted the man would even know what to do with a woman much less be overcome with passion in the wilds of Hertfordshire.

They had finally neared the group, and George put on his most unconcerned expression.

"Sir Nicholas, Lady Stewart," Maria's voice rang out. "I thought I would never find you in this crush."

"Oh, I never doubted your ability, Mrs. Montcraven," Sir Nicholas said, cynically.

"Pay no notice to my husband, Mrs. Montcraven," Lady Stewart said. "He's been in a poor mood all day. I've been looking for you myself; I have no notion what Helen was thinking to invite so many people. Have you met the Darcys yet? Do come along."

George could feel his wife's fingers digging into his arm as a reminder to be on his best behavior, but he was equally determined that if anyone would be said to behave badly it would not be him. He was sure he appeared perfectly cool when he actually stood face to face with Darcy and his new wife, who fulfilled none of his possible expectations. A small brunette with a light though not too slender figure, she neither was a classic beauty nor overtly sensual in appearance. There appeared to be nothing out of the common way about her, though George certainly would not have minded an opportunity to find out what treasures she might be hiding under that dress. A further tightening of his wife's fingers brought his attention back, and by Darcy's glower, he knew his slight appraisal had not gone unnoticed.

Lady Stewart was speaking, "...And it is so intriguing to see so many newly wed couples together this evening. Mr. and Mrs. Montcraven, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, Mr. and Mrs. Montcraven."

Maria and Mrs. Darcy curtsied slightly while the men bowed, Darcy's bow being so slight as to be
nearly nonexistent.

"Mr.... Montcraven and I have met before," Darcy said coolly.

"That would be before he became Mr. Montcraven, would it not?" Lady Stewart said. "Such a reversal of the usual circumstances."

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs. Darcy interjected, in apparent surprise.

George tried not to react at Maria's supercilious voice as she answered. "The Montcraven name is a much older and more illustrious name, Mrs. Darcy, and it was a condition of the marriage contract. My husband understands well the importance of a name, is not that so?"

"Absolutely, Mrs. Montcraven, and I am the most fortunate of men to have found you," he said with he hoped was a creditable attempt at sincerity.

"I wonder if John Wickham would share those sentiments," Darcy said quietly.

George felt himself redden as he took in the double meaning as his father had been both proud of his own accomplishments and ashamed of his son's near the end of his life. Pompous ass.

"Mr. Montcraven, forgive me," Mrs. Darcy interjected, "but I feel as if we may have met before, but I am afraid I cannot recall the details."

George was surprised to see a sudden trace of a smile appear on Darcy's face. "If you would cast your mind back to last November and a certain horse and dog."

Bloody hell, Darcy's bit of fluff was there, George thought, casting back trying to recall. Other than Darcy and Denny, he could not remember anything other than a couple of giggling girls, and he was sure that Mrs. Darcy had not been one of them.

"Oh, that was the day I first truly appreciated the... charm of your smile," Mrs. Darcy said, looking at her husband, and George could swear he saw a flash of passion pass between them. "I almost feel as if I should thank you, Mr. Montcraven, as that day marked the beginning of our courtship."

She looked at him with a bright smile and a sparkle in her eyes, and he knew then that she knew everything, and what was worse, she was a sanctimonious tease, a bloody perfect counterpoint to Darcy. Hopefully she would drive him mad.

Damn it all to hell. Well, he would still play the game. "It is my pleasure to bring two such well suited souls together," he said.

"I shall probably never be more grateful to you," Darcy said, his dry tone conveying little emotion. He glanced around. "Now if you could excuse us, there is someone with whom I should speak."

He nodded to the group, while putting his hand over his wife's on his arm and walked off.

Maria watched them depart with a spiteful little smile on her lips. "So that is the country bride. I must admit I was expecting something... more. After all, Fitzwilliam Darcy was so elusive. Not that they stayed long enough to let us speak to her. He was probably afraid her country manners would show too much. But I would love to know how she managed to catch him."

"Probably through the same miserable sense of humor," George muttered, but was ignored, as Lady Stewart spoke.

"Oh, Mrs. Montcraven, Fitzwilliam Darcy has ever been his own man; like you, he has always known what he wanted. He simply has a different set of standards. Which reminds me, I have not
yet asked you about your latest acquisition."

Maria raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean to my stables?" she asked.

Lady Stewart smiled disingenuously. "Of course. It was a stud, was it not?"

Maria frowned. "No, a gelding."

George watched as Lady Stewart's gaze slid over to him with a slight smirk. "Oh, what a pity," she replied.

George looked desperately around for the punch bowl.

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As Darcy maneuvered the pair of them towards a quiet corner of the room, a small smile played over his lips. When Elizabeth quietly inquired as to the reason, Darcy replied, "The sight of George Wickham married to Maria Montcraven has almost made our appearance here worthwhile."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Almost, sir?" she asked.

Leaning close to his wife's ear, he whispered. "I still say that we would have found more pleasure remaining at home in our rooms exploring the mysteries of God's creation."

Flushing slightly, Elizabeth replied, just as quietly, "There is no reason why we cannot do that when we return, sir." Then in a more normal tone continued, "Besides, Mr. Darcy, if we did not attend, how could you practice your conversational skills and how could I improve my impressions? Have we learned nothing over the past few months, sir?"

His smile took on a slightly wicked aspect as he replied, "We have learned many things, madam, but forgive me if I prefer some of my more recent lessons in pleasing a woman worthy of being pleased."

"Well, Mr. Darcy, this woman will be most willing to please you later, if you will do your duty now," Elizabeth said easily. "Now, was there a particular party you were seeking out or simply an escape?"

"Both, for if I must be forced to converse I would prefer it to be with more congenial companions, and I cannot imagine that you wished to linger. I also prefer having you to myself if only for a moment."

"I might have enjoyed conversing further with Sir Nicholas and Lady Stewart, perhaps, but not Mr. and Mrs. Montcraven. However, I am afraid I am not tall enough to peer over this crowd nor is this my circle of acquaintance, so I will have to rely upon you to be my guide."

Darcy was glancing around with an air of indifference that Elizabeth knew all too well. She also recognized when his expression suddenly froze tighter, though that she admitted that it had taken more familiarity with him to be able to see the change.

"Whom do you see?" she asked.

"My uncle and aunt Fitzwilliam," he said. "Apparently they have finally made it to Town."

"And I am sure they are suffering acute pangs of curiosity," Elizabeth said.

"Of course," Darcy replied tightly. "It is not as if they would deign do us the courtesy of visiting us
much less take the trouble to see us wed to assuage it."

"Shall we get this over with then?" Elizabeth asked.

Darcy nodded and tightened his grip on her arm as they approached the Fitzwilliams. Elizabeth was struck with how the two resembled one another, light hair and watery blue eyes, both looking dried up and sallow like squeezed lemons, and the expressions on their faces were equally sour. Their appearance was not helped by their clothes, however correctly they were styled. He seemed swallowed by the collar of his coat which made him look more shrunken than perhaps he was, and she was served ill by the color of her dress and turban which were both a rather bright yellow that completed her resemblance to a lemon.

Elizabeth had to compose herself as she found their matching expressions of discontent quite amusing, though she knew that Darcy was taking little pleasure in the meeting. However, he did relax as she squeezed his arm and looked up at him with a reassuring smile. Once they reached them, Darcy with a cool civility greeted his uncle and aunt who returned his salutation with even cooler regard with his aunt immediately saying, "Will you not introduce us to this... lady, nephew?" in a voice as sour as the rest of her look.

Elizabeth found herself rather wishing for a glass of good lemonade and hoped she would be able to get her husband to laugh about this later, as at the moment she knew he was holding his temper.

"Of course, aunt," he said flatly. "Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam, this is my wife, the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Mrs. Darcy, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Fitzwilliam."

"A pleasure," Elizabeth said, truthfully, as she was finding amusement, however improper in the meeting.

"Quite," Mr. Fitzwilliam said, clipped out, as his wife took her time examining Elizabeth from head to foot.

"That is an unusually dark shade of green for one so young," she finally said with a sniff.

"And it becomes my wife exceptionally well," Darcy replied coldly, then turning to his uncle. "I trust your trip to Town was easy this year."

"When is it ever easy?" Mr. Fitzwilliam snapped out. "Not when our estate might as well be in Scotland as far north as it is. And nothing to do but listen to the gossip about who has gone to Gretna Green."

"My aunt and uncle reside north of Carlisle," Darcy murmured to his wife, who nodded.

Ignoring the byplay between the Darcys, Oliver Fitzwilliam continued speaking. "It was too bad that my brother would not loan us the house in Bath. But that is him all over. Inconsiderate of family, as I am sure you are familiar with," the last was delivered with a significant look that Elizabeth supposed was to convey a double insult instead of a single one.

"I am somewhat familiar with the notion," Darcy said evenly, Elizabeth understanding his own insult. "Now if you would excuse us, I do hope you have a pleasant evening."

"As well as can be expected in such a crush; what are the Gordons thinking inviting so many undesirables," Mrs. Fitzwilliam muttered, as her husband nodded agreement which Darcy took as enough of a dismissal as to lead Elizabeth away.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Elizabeth said, "That was brief."
"Mercifully," Darcy replied. "Otherwise their complaints might more specifically have turned towards us, and I would hardly wished to cause a scene by calling out my uncle here."

"Well, now that they have had the opportunity to look me over," Elizabeth said, "I rather expect we shan't be disturbed by having to speak to them again this evening."

"Indeed," he said, then huffed. "Undesirables. I know who I would put in that category."

"But then those seem to be the ones that have a certain entertainment value," Elizabeth said. Darcy stopped and looked at her closely before smiling. "You can find amusement in practically anything, my dear, can you not?"

"I would rather laugh than cry, sir," she replied. "Now can you spot anyone that would prove to be congenial company for you?"

Relaxing a bit, Darcy looked around them room and then smiled when he spotted a familiar figure. "Mrs. Darcy, I believe I have found some truly congenial companions, though they are not strangers to you. However, I think I may be forgiven since it is in fact Mr. Bingley and your sister."

Elizabeth smiled brightly. "Oh, I was sure they would never make it into town in time. Jane was reluctant to leave Mary as the only other married daughter near Mama just now."

"Was that in the letter from Mrs. Collins you received today?" he asked. "I did not like to inquire."

"I thought it was because you had other plans for me that did not involve conversation," Elizabeth said with a reminiscent smile. "Are you still concerned that their extending their visit is somehow connected to your relative? It is not. Mama misses Kitty and Lydia now that they have gone away to school and is taking solace in the daughter she can currently keep at hand, and Mr. Collins is apparently quite eager to begin learning the rudiments of estate management from Papa. Apparently he wants to be prepared for his and Mary's future whenever it may come to pass, though he is careful to say that he expects it only many years down the line. Perhaps my father might be inclined to extend some blame, but I am pleased to see him stirring from his bookroom. Who knew that Mary would be such a good influence on our cousin? Now where is Jane?"

Taking her husband's arm, Elizabeth urged him to lead them to their sister and brother. They had hardly made it a few steps when Bingley spotted them and hurried over with all the enthusiasm of a terrier pup. "Darcy, I am pleased to see you. I had half thought you had managed to send your regrets after all."

Jane and Elizabeth merely clasped hands while their husbands spoke.

"I am afraid not," Darcy said solemnly, with only a hint of a smile at his wife. "I had a promise to honor. We rather expected it would be you that would not make an appearance."

"Oh, well, we had a late start. Caroline was determined to shine tonight, as she is determined to capture some elusive heart or other," Bingley said one hand waving vaguely.

"And where is Miss Bingley?" Darcy inquired, clearly noting her absence.

"She had a slight mishap when we entered," Jane said softly with a glance at her husband, more towards Elizabeth. "Someone trod on the hem of her dress. Louisa is helping her with the repairs."

"We were charged with the office of finding you," Bingley added. "She is eager to pay her
respects to you and Mrs. Darcy."

What Elizabeth was sure was being left unsaid was that Miss Bingley wanted to be sure to make the most of her current connection little though she had relished losing out the prize of Pemberley to what she still obviously thought of as a country upstart. After all, Miss Bingley was still a single woman in possession of a good dowry in want of a well connected and even more wealthy husband; she was one to count herself a failure if she could not obtain her ambitions in marriage unlike Fitzwilliam's Aunt Graves. Elizabeth would put no impediments in her path, for the sooner Miss Bingley found a husband of her own, the sooner her sister would have her own home to herself, with the added inducement that it would be easier to not invite a married Caroline to visit at Pemberley, as Miss Bingley's tardy pleasantries hardly made up for her previous spitefulness.

With a polite smile, Elizabeth said, "Is there any of her particular acquaintance here tonight?"

"I believe she is hoping to see a Miss Crawford and her brother," Jane said.

"Henry Crawford of Everingham," Bingley said, and in a low voice added, "Louisa thinks he might be quite suitable for Caroline." Then looking around. "Oh, I think the dancing is about to begin. Well, it is Caroline's misfortune if she has not found us yet, as I believe our wives owe us a dance, do they not?"

Darcy smiled. "Indeed they do." He looked at Elizabeth. "Will you do me the honor, Mrs. Darcy?"

"But, of course, Mr. Darcy. It is my pleasure," she said, as she took his arm again.

As they walked towards the dance floor, Darcy leaned down to whisper. "Actually, the pleasure is entirely mine."

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It was a few hours later when Darcy hoped to finally convince his wife that he had sufficiently fulfilled his promise, and they could make their excuses to leave for home. He had conversed with more people than he cared to, but it had been made simpler by his wife's ease and liveliness. No one seemed to intimidate her and attempted snubs seemed merely to amuse her. But what pleased him most were the times he could steal her away to a quiet corner for a moment's flirtation. But now he was trying to steal her away from the event itself. Unfortunately as they made their way across the room, they were accosted by an all too familiar figure: Miss Bingley. They had, of course, seen and spoken with her earlier in the evening, a brief encounter during which he managed to escape having to ask her to dance as her next partner, a young man with whom Darcy had only a passing acquaintance, came to claim her before the conversation progressed far enough to make that a necessity.

After that meeting, it had been easy enough to avoid her, as it seemed she was throwing herself whole-heartedly into the evening, focusing her attentions on the eligible men, though he noticed her looking around for someone in particular. He assumed it was Mr. Crawford, though he felt she was wasting her time in that pursuit as he knew the man by reputation, and if there was any man determined to avoid matrimonial entanglements he was certainly one. From what he understood Mr. Crawford was more interested in a challenge than having any honorable intention, and frankly he felt that Miss Bingley would hardly qualify as a suitable challenge for which she should be thankful.

Unfortunately it seemed their reprieve from her company was over, and she was determined to use them to impress someone, he assumed.
"Dear Mrs. Darcy, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley said with cloying tones as she practically pounced on the two of them as they passed by. "I have so been longing to introduce you to my dear friend Miss Crawford and her brother."

Glancing at his wife with a resigned expression, they both consented to the introduction. Darcy reminded himself that Miss Bingley was at least treating Elizabeth with an equal deference as himself, however little either of them liked her manner or the fact that it only truly began once they had spoken their vows at the wedding. He wondered at her own lack of discernment in realizing that neither of them were in the least fooled by her sudden about face in her treatment of Elizabeth.

He remembered quite clearly her behavior immediately after he and Elizabeth had become engaged. Knowing that however little reason she had to feel disappointment in his engagement but wishing that she be given some consideration in how she learned of it, Darcy had asked Bingley to share the news with Miss Bingley in private. How she reacted, he did not know, but that evening she remained in her room with a headache. By the next day, she was subdued yet civil to both him and Georgiana, much to his relief, as he had grown to despise her overly familiar manner. However, he was less pleased with her behavior towards Elisabeth, as she alternated between icy politeness and trying to ignore her entirely, right up until the wedding breakfast, when she suddenly seemed to recall that to antagonize Elizabeth would be to antagonize him, and her old cloying manner returned to be divided equally between the two of them, as she suddenly behaved as if she and Elizabeth were the oldest and dearest of friends. Darcy was determined that for the sake of Bingley and his wife that he would not cut the acquaintance of Miss Bingley, but she was vastly mistaken if she thought that would garner her any particular attentions or possible influence from either him or Elizabeth.

Turning his attention back to the group, he noted that Miss Crawford seemed pleasant enough, which was unexpected considering from the little that he knew of her was that she was an intimate friend of Lady Stornaway and her sister Mrs. Fraser, two determined social climbers whose marriages were everything he despised and whose husbands he tended to avoid. However, it was no surprise that she would be exactly the kind of woman Miss Bingley would most want to befriend, one with social connections and a single brother. As to Mr. Crawford, unfortunately, he seemed very liable to live up to his less than reputable name, and Darcy could not like the way his attention became fixed on Elizabeth the moment they were introduced. He had heard too much of the games Mr. Crawford tended to play with women's hearts to want him anywhere near any woman of his family. Not that he feared for Elizabeth's heart, he knew it was entirely his own; he merely wished to spare her the discomfort of the man's attentions and to be certain that Mr. Crawford could have no excuse to extend their acquaintance as such as to be able to impose his presence on his sister.

"Mrs. Darcy, what a pleasure to meet you," Crawford said. "All London has been wanting to meet the woman who has captured the elusive Mr. Darcy."

"I am afraid they will be quite disappointed as I believe it would be more accurate to state that it was Mr. Darcy who captivated me with his manifold virtues," Elizabeth replied, smiling at her husband.

"Perhaps, you could tell us, Miss Bingley," Miss Crawford interjected. "After all, you were present during much of their courtship, were you not?"

Elizabeth could see Miss Bingley struggling with her natural disinclination to say anything kind about her with her equal desire to remain in her husband's good graces. After a long moment, she said, "It is not for me to say, though I do remember Mr. Darcy expressing his admiration of Mrs. Darcy's eyes early in their acquaintance, and Mrs. Darcy seemed quite pleased to converse with
him on a number of occasions." She looked mostly at Mr. Crawford as she spoke, while the man kept his eyes fixed on Elizabeth.

Disliking having any details of his and Elizabeth's relationship bandied about, Darcy was at least somewhat mollified by Miss Bingley's circumspection, though more annoyed by Crawford's slightly overfamiliar manner towards his wife, though she seemed oblivious to it.

"It was a mutual appeal then," Elizabeth said with a slight laugh, looking up at Darcy.

"You are too modest, madam," Crawford replied. "It is easily apparent that you have charms enough to capture any man's attention."

"How fortunate that I captured the right man's attention," Elizabeth said, again turning towards Darcy. Perhaps she was not so oblivious after all.

"I am the fortunate one, Mrs. Darcy," Darcy replied with a glare at Crawford. "If you will please excuse us." He took his wife's arm, as she curtseyed politely to the trio.

Once they were sufficiently distant from the trio, Elizabeth turned back to look at them. "I am afraid that Miss Bingley will once again be doomed to disappointment."

Darcy looked at the group where Miss Bingley was standing close to Mr. Crawford, speaking determinedly while the man's gaze drifted out over the crowd until it rested on the two of them and a most annoying smirk appeared on his face. Darcy led Elizabeth further away until they were out of sight.

"Yes, he seems far more interested in paying attention to a married woman than her," he said.

"Pity the poor married woman as she found him not at all to her tastes," Elizabeth said.

"Oh," Darcy said in a low voice. "May I ask what she finds to her tastes?"

With a flirtatious smile, Elizabeth leaned closer and said quietly, "She prefers an honorable, passionate gentleman who despises deceit, whose stare makes her weak, and whom she can trust with everything."

Darcy closed his eyes a moment. "May we please leave, Elizabeth? Your words deserve a proper thanks that I cannot give here."

"I believe that I am quite fatigued with the company, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said. "And I think I would prefer a quite improper thanks, if you so please."

He smiled at her. "I do so please. Let us return home."

As he and Elizabeth were awaiting their carriage, Darcy saw George Wick... Montcraven standing across the room. The man was standing next to a column, leaning upright against it a glazed look in his eyes and a fixed smile on his face, listening to his wife who spoke without particularly noting if he were listening or not. Curiously, as Darcy looked at him, he felt none of his old sense of anger and contempt but instead a strange sense of relief in realizing that Wickham—he would never get used to the new name no matter how appropriate—had married the one woman whose selfishness rivaled Wickham's own and whose control of the purse strings would guarantee his good behavior for life. It was almost as if the fates had designed them for one another.

Still, if Wickham had not made such a fool of himself in Meryton, Darcy would likely have never have ended up conversing with Elizabeth as he had. They might have parted ways, each returning
to their respective circles. Perhaps he would not have walked with her to Longbourn. The ball at Netherfield might have turned out very differently. He took Elizabeth's hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked up at him, smiled warmly, and leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment. In a sense, it could be said that he owed some of his current good fortune to Mr. Montcraven.

Darcy looked from his wife back across the room. Mrs. Montcraven had not stopped talking, while Wickham looked tired, and for a fleeting moment, Darcy felt a bit of pity for the man.

A very little bit.

But then their carriage was at the door, and he forgot all about George Wickham as Elizabeth drew his attention back to her, and he was lost in thoughts of the mutual pleasures in store for them at home.

Looking into Elizabeth's eyes, Darcy thought back on how everything in his life, good and bad, had worked together to bring him here to this moment, to her. He had always believed that a man made his own fortune but having a woman as wonderful as Elizabeth sharing his life made him think that maybe, just maybe there was such a thing as luck. And if so, it had treated him better than any other man in the world.

Chapter End Notes

I do realize that Darcy was being a bit unreasonable in his criticism about the Oliver Fitzwilliams attending the wedding, as it would be highly unusual for relatives settled so far to travel to a wedding, much less estranged ones, and also having been married only two weeks, they certainly were not be receiving visitors, and this is the Darcys' first public appearance since the wedding. But then Darcy really does not like this set of relatives (and it is not so inaccurate in that this particular couple would certainly be curious but would refuse to do anything so mundane as actually visiting Darcy or inviting him to visit in order to meet his bride; they really are unpleasant people), so I figured being unreasonable was in fact reasonable.

The scene with Henry Crawford was originally written as a bonus outtake for the original version of "Luck is Not Always a Lady." This is pre-Mansfield Park so he hasn't caused a scandal by running off with a married woman, but he still has a reputation as a confirmed bachelor. I chose Crawford because I wanted Miss Bingley to be pursuing another eligible bachelor that wouldn't be interested in her but for an entirely different reason than Darcy, and he seemed to fit the bill best. But in this case I think Miss Bingley is quite fortunate that Crawford wouldn't be interested in her as he's a rake and a manipulator who toys with women as a challenge and then dumps them once he's succeeded in capturing their hearts. And in case it isn't obvious I have always despised Henry Crawford and absolutely believe he would have made Fanny Price miserable.
Epilogue: Ten Years Later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was yet another ball of the Gordons, this one in honor of the engagement of one of their nieces. George never could remember their names, and it seemed too much of a bother to. He would make his bow and escape to the punch bowl and the card room soon enough, as his dancing days seemed done, what with the gout he tended to suffer. Not that the ladies were clamoring for his attentions any more. Time had expanded his waistline and receded his hair line to the point that he wished that wigs were still in fashion. Prosperity had its drawbacks as well its blessings.

He just wanted to get past the receiving line so he could go his own way, and let Maria, who for some time had been bored enough with him to not care whether he spent his time in his club or a brothel (not that he had enough libidinous interest at the moment to even bother with the latter), pick over the latest bunch of young libertines to find a companion for the evening and possible later. Not that he cared. Ten years with her had pretty much drained away his interest in anything but food and wine, and with the loss of his best looks he never really got the pretty young things to look at him the way they used to, and he was not so unfond of life as to dare try anything with the servants of the household. Maria had very few hard and fast rules, but she was adamant that the servants were off limits for anything outside of their normal range of duties. She would never dally with the footmen or stableboys and he would have lost an appendage if he had tried anything with the maids. Not that she ever hired any pretty young things.

George's function now was to be Maria's official escort, to run her unpleasant errands, and gather all the gentlemen's gossip as she did the ladies. In other words his function was to be at her beck and call, a task he could now practically do in his sleep or more precisely while in his cups. He was not inclined to let anything get in the way of his appetite for good food and drink. There had been times over the years where he had fantasized about taking a ship to parts unknown and starting a new and exciting life, but then he never had been good about saving his funds, and he got sea sick simply standing on a boat at dock. His other favorite fantasy was that Maria would pass on before him, leaving him all of her money, but she had shown no signs of being willing to change the provisions she had set up at the time of their marriage, and he very much enjoyed the level of personal luxury he enjoyed even if it meant having to put up with his wife at the same time.

Maria prodded him, and he realized they had reached Lord and Lady Gordon and pulling his decomposed thoughts together, he exchanged greetings and moved on. Yes, there was the punch bowl, calling him like a siren. The Gordons did always provide a nice strong punch. Getting a cup, he found a convenient spot to sit and watch the rest of the notables enter. Where Maria went, he cared not. Let some young pup have at her; it meant less humiliation for himself as Maria was rather contemptuous about his inability to rise to any occasion without a great deal of effort. He knew that she owned the smaller and somewhat obscure house next to their own which she used to meet her current "friends," as it was easy enough to slip back to their house during the early morning hours, though he did not know why she bothered. It is not as if either cared.

As he sipped his punch, George stared at the people arriving, waiting to see someone of interest. There seemed to be no one, not until the Darcys arrived.

George had seen relatively little of them over the years. He and Maria traveled in rather different circles. Her primary estate was in Devon; his in Derbyshire, and the Darcys spent little time in town. He had heard all the gossip available, not that there was much beyond how devoted they
were to one another and the births of Darcy's children. He had his heir and spare first, of course, that bastard, and two girls as well. George could not help but stare at the couple.

Oh, it was not fair. Darcy was perhaps a tad thicker around the middle with a trace of gray about the temples but looking all the more distinguished, yet that was nothing to the transformation to Mrs. Darcy. She was no longer the newlywed girl he'd first seen and puzzled over but a woman whose additional curves, instead of making her look matronly, ended up adding to her beauty. She was one of those women who seemed to grow more alluring as she matured. Now she was every inch the great lady but renowned for her quick yet gentle wit, her sparkling eyes and her devotion to her family.

Quite a few rakes had tried to challenge that last bit of her reputation, without any luck, as she was clever and careful enough to deflect, deflate, or dismiss any man who tried to impose upon her, even once she had provided her husband with two sons. It was incredible to think that she was not long bored with her dull stick of a husband, but so it seemed. Not too surprising to Wickham was the fact that Darcy himself was still just as immune to the attempted seductions of the bored wives, widows or courtesans, beyond being still quite attentive to his wife. As bloodless as he had always seen Darcy, Wickham could not wonder that he would not be particularly interested in outside temptations when he had such a desirable woman at his beck and call, especially since Darcy seemed to have realized that he had managed to acquire an unusual prize, and clearly he was willing to defend it against all comers.

Damn the man. He had wealth, beauty, posterity, and freedom, and what did George have? He had security and enough to eat and drink as well as a bitch of a wife who did as she pleased while keeping him on a leash. If he could only have managed to elope with Georgiana, he would have had everything, and never would have needed to depend on the nonexistent mercy of Maria Montcraven. But that time was long past. Georgiana had married a baronet's son just after her twentieth birthday. He had seen them not long after their marriage but had not dared approach, and when he finally had the misfortune to meet her face to face nearly a year later, he was humiliated when she did not recognize him until his identity was pointed out to her and then all she did was flush in slight embarrassment before she and her husband moved on.

Damn it all. He could have had so much more. George looked at his glass. Empty. If he was going to make it through the evening, he was going to need a lot more punch.

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Out of the corner of his eye, Fitzwilliam Darcy watched his wife with pleasure as she was speaking with Lady Stewart. She looked lovely in her gown of gold, the style particularly flattering to her figure, not that her figure needed any flattering as he knew from long experience and very private observation. But still, whenever he saw her in her finest gowns, all he really wished to do was get her out of them again, even after ten years of marriage.

However, that would as always have to wait. While he would never be overly enamored with certain of their required social engagements as he far preferred to spend his time with his wife and children, he no longer dreaded them, and that was all due to Elizabeth. It had taken some time and a few missteps, but she had managed to find her place in society and with it their own distinct place as a couple, something he had not given much thought to as a single man. After all, he was born into this society, and while he knew that he would have greater social obligations once wed, he had not considered all the implications.

But Elizabeth with her greater ease in company made it far easier for him to do his duties as host with less reserve than was his natural wont, though perhaps he found it easier to deal with society
now that he was no longer the natural prey of the world's matchmakers. While he had occasionally to fend off offers of another sort, that was nowhere near as trying to his nerves as the offers he knew his wife had been dealing with. It was one of the primary reasons why he kept up with his sword practice and pistol shooting and had a goodly reputation with both. Happily he had not had to go so far in defending his wife's honor, as beyond the friends and allies that they cultivated in society who were very useful in weeding out undesirable attention, they also spent much of their time at each other's side and when not had perfected a signaling system to indicate distress or a desire for rescue.

For the moment, however, there was no need for concern, Lady Stewart had become a good friend to Elizabeth, as they tended to have a somewhat similar outlook on life though Lady Stewart was far more interested in the ton's gossip and had a rather acerbic wit, and Sir Nicholas with whom he was discussing the latest political news even as he watched his wife was a man with a wide cynical streak and a penchant for sarcasm, that complemented Lady Stewart's own humor. It was almost always entertaining to converse with him.

"I hope your uncle will manage to be sensible over the issue..." Sir Nicholas was saying before stopping and in a different and quieter tone of voice said, "Devil take it; Lady Spode has spotted us. Why are you so blasted tall, and why does she have to be your sister-in-law?"

Darcy repressed his own sigh once he saw Lady Spode, the former Caroline Bingley, heading their way. "I prefer to think of her as my sister-in-law's sister-in-law," he said quietly.

Not that he could avoid her as much as he liked considering their familial relationship, as distant as he preferred to think of it. Another trial was the fact that on the occasion of their marriage, her husband Sir Humphrey (a well to do widower sixteen years her senior) had purchased Netherfield Park on his new brother's recommendation as he had been looking for an estate within an easy distance of town, and unfortunately they could not always schedule visits to Longbourn to coincide with the Spodes' time in London. Nor, unfortunately as he had no need to learn now, could they entirely avoid them when in London. He took comfort in the fact that the Spodes rarely visited the Bingleys who now lived within thirty miles of Pemberley, as Sir Humphrey disliked the North of England.

"Oh, Sir Nicholas, Mr. Darcy, what a pleasure it is to see you again," Lady Spode said, as she came up to them. "I never see either you or your lovely wives enough."

"More than enough," Sir Nicholas murmured.

"So unfortunate," Darcy said, thinking that it was unfortunate that they could not avoid her for yet another night.

"Are you in town for long, Mr. Darcy?" she asked. "We really must have you and Mrs. Darcy over to dinner. After all we are family."

"I will have to consult with Mrs. Darcy, as I know we have a number of engagements before our return to Pemberley."

"Oh, I shall certainly do that," she said, and spotting Elizabeth immediately made her way over to her.

Darcy hung back for a moment until his wife turned and caught his eye with a raised brow which effectively summoned him.

As he reached her side, Elizabeth was saying, "I am afraid that I will have to consult my diary. We
have rather committed ourselves on this trip." And before Lady Spode could press more, she switched topics. "Have you heard the latest news from Jane and your brother?"

Lady Spode's eyes narrowed slightly but then with a forced smile said, "You mean about their expecting a new arrival? Of course, Charles says that this time it will be a son, but then he said that about the previous two girls. Your sister seems as prolific at providing girls as your late mother."

"How fortunate that Charles dotes on every one," Elizabeth said, then so sweetly, "as I am sure you must dote on your new granddaughter as I have heard Sir Humphrey does."

Darcy noticed Lady Spode flinch, though she hid it well enough. Even he was aware that she felt rather sensitive about the fact that her step-children were not that much younger than she, and that she hated to be thought of as a grandmother. However, under the circumstances, she could hardly make a protest without sounding churlish. Darcy always admired Elizabeth's skill in this particular arena.

Then Lady Stewart piped in with, "And your son has just begun his career at the bar, following in his father's footsteps. Not something that every woman can boast of at your age. Providence has been very kind to you, especially considering..." She trailed off significantly before waving a hand. "But then that is neither here nor there, is it? Oh is Sir Humphrey over there? We must not keep you."

"Of course," Lady Spode said, her smile tight. But apparently not to be gainsaid entirely, she added, "I will call on you, Mrs. Darcy, as soon as may be."

"I will expect it," Elizabeth replied neutrally.

As Lady Spode walked away, Lady Stewart said, "How is it that she always makes it sound like a threat?"

"What I would like to know is how her husband managed to become a judge?" Sir Nicholas said. "If his head were any more full of hot air, he could float across the Channel."

"Well, if it were not, how could he elevate his dear second wife to the level she desires?" Lady Stewart replied caustically. "Though with the lead weights she insists on donning..." She shrugged her shoulders.

Darcy had long known that Lady Stewart made the most of what she did not say, and Elizabeth had become equally skilled in her own way, as he could tell by the expression in her eyes that she agreed with him that they would be too busy to have time for any engagements with the Spodes until it was time to return to Longbourn where their three eldest children were visiting with the Collinses and Grandfather Bennet.

He hoped his children were not getting into trouble, considering they all preferred being free to run in the country with their cousins than being cooped up in the city with only well supervised visits to parks or exhibits to look forward to. He knew that little Meg wanted to be with her siblings; however, she was currently safely tucked up in the nursery of their town house, as they felt she was really too young to be any great distance away from them. Perhaps the next visit she would be ready.

As for the Collinses, their children took more after their mother and grandfather than their father, though he had to admit that Collins had improved over the years he had been at Longbourn. Darcy had long regretted that his estrangement from his aunt had made their time at Hunsford singularly unpleasant for them while they remained there. Out of guilt he had started looking for another
living for Mr. Collins; however, before he found one, they had found a solution of their own. With both Kitty and Lydia away at school and Jane and Bingley moving to Derbyshire, Mrs. Bennet found herself at a loss and suddenly welcomed the idea of training Mary to be the next mistress of Longbourn, and Mr. Bennet discovered that Mr. Collins had an enthusiasm for estate business that once sufficient instruction had been given left the elder gentleman more time for his books, so within three years, Mary and Collins had become permanent residents of Longbourn.

It also helped with Mrs. Bennet's nerves as both Kitty and Lydia once they left school ended up spending much of their time with the Gardiners or their married sisters in quest of suitable husbands, and both were married within a year or two of leaving school.

Seven years ago Catherine Bennet had married the vicar of Kympton, Reverend Smith, and they now had three children of their own. She had blossomed after leaving school and had become the ideal vicar's wife, devoting herself to her family and the parish. Lydia, who had never lost her love of red coats, had met and married a friend of Col. Fitzwilliam, a Col. Talbot, and soon to Mrs. Bennet's utmost distress was off to India with her husband. As far as Darcy knew they had no children as yet, but Lydia's letters were sporadic and filled with stories of adventures and mishaps all embraced with her particular carefree enthusiasm. Darcy reflected that her schooling had merely tamed rather than broken her spirit, and she seemed to thrive abroad in a way that she could never have done in England.

By the time Mrs. Bennet died four years past, the Collinses were effectively running Longbourn, and the estate was thriving as it had never before. So much so that they had made several renovations, including a separate study for Collins to conduct estate business, and soon after Mrs. Bennets death, Mr. Bennet had had the room next to his bookroom converted to a bedroom, letting the Collins take over the master's and mistress's rooms, as well as the estate's business in its entirety. He now preferred to indulge himself in his reading and spoiling all of his grandchildren, often to the chagrin of their parents, as well as dropping into his daughters' homes when least expected. As the arrangement worked for all parties, Darcy could hardly fault it, though he would prefer his father-in-law to give notice when he intended to visit. Otherwise, it certainly made things easier for everyone.

Forcing his attention back to his surroundings, Darcy was pleased to see that Lady Spode had moved on, and a far more welcome person had approached his wife.

"Charlotte, why did you not let us know you were in Town?" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"It was rather last minute," her old friend replied. "Lord Graves asked Prudence and me to watch out over his daughter Petunia who has come out this year. Well, I was a last minute addition as he said while he trusted his sister to keep fortune hunters away, he also needed someone who would not chase away the respectable men."

"I see," Elizabeth said. "That seems a rather sensible approach. You two are a formidable team."

Elizabeth had introduced Aunt Prudence to Charlotte at their wedding breakfast ten years earlier, and the two women had quickly formed a friendship. Within a year, Charlotte became her companion and not too much after that her acknowledged heir.

It was not a life that Elizabeth would particularly have wanted, but she believed it was certainly superior to a marriage contracted solely for reasons of security. The very thought of having to share a bed with a man she was at best indifferent to was enough to make her shudder. Men had simply too much power in the arrangement.
As for herself, Elizabeth was grateful to have married a man who both loved and respected her flaws and all. Theirs was indeed a marriage of true minds, even when they disagreed or argued, which was not that often now. His manners had softened with time and parenthood and her tendency to impulsiveness had done the same.

Though Elizabeth had had hopes of helping Charlotte find a husband she could truly love, once Charlotte had an assured income and a comfortable home, she had little interest in finding a husband. She and Aunt Prudence were truly kindred spirits and remained quite content spinster together. In the end, Elizabeth was glad for her friend and if Charlotte was half as happy as she, then her lot in life was fortunate indeed.

Elizabeth stole a quick glance at her husband across the room and smiled at him. Almost, she thought, as fortunate as me.

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George was slowly making his way to the card room. He could always count on a few cronies to be ready for a game at reasonable stakes. It was unfortunate that he ended up having to pass close by his wife who spotted him and summoned him to her side, where she immediately disregarded him as she seemed busy trying to make some point or sport with Mrs. Darcy, who was even lovelier close up, especially when compared to his wife's standard shrewish expression. Mrs. Darcy, at least, acknowledged his presence before Maria spoke again.

"The benefits of having a well trained husband," she said casually. "Always at my command. I am sure you must understand the benefits, as your husband so seldom strays from your side." Maria paused and then looking at Elizabeth with a slightly malicious expression. "Or is it that he has you well trained not to stray from his?"

Mrs. Darcy raised a brow. "Neither. After all, my husband never strays, he simply is where he is supposed to be. We neither of need leashes to keep us in check," she said. "I rather pity those that do."

"That is because you clearly have not had the pleasure of holding the leash," Maria replied with a slight sneer. "Few women do have that power."

"Oh, I rather relish the power I do have," Mrs. Darcy replied. "It has its own particular potency that nothing else can replace." She looked beyond Maria with a smile.

George turned to see Darcy walking to his wife's side.

"Pray excuse me," he said, "I must claim my wife." He looked at his wife with a small secretive smile. "Mrs. Darcy, the waltz is about to begin."

"Of course," she replied, before turning back to Maria. "This has been a most... interesting conversation, but do excuse me." The two left before Maria could do more than tilt her head.

She looked over at George. "Really, the Darcys are quite insufferable. Both of them. How that cow has become one of society's darlings I will never know."

It's because you cannot see past the end of your own nose or beyond your mirror, George thought but did not say.

As usual, Maria did not require a response as she immediately went on to another topic, the one he assumed he had been summoned for. "I expect you to return to me in time for supper," she was saying. "We will be sitting together, as I intend to be certain that you do not eat anything to cause
your gout to flare up. You are utterly useless when that happens."

"Of course, dear," George said indifferently, thinking it might be worth the pain to vex his wife.

Knowing he was dismissed, he continued his interrupted journey to the card room, passing by the Darcys on his way. Their almost palpable pleasure with one another was enough to make him curse Darcy under his breath again. But then he considered the rich red wine he was about to consume and let that thought take him on to his destination.

~o~O~o~

"Whatever were you discussing with Mrs. Montcraven?" Darcy asked his wife.

"I do not believe discussion had any place in it," Elizabeth said. "For some reason she felt a compelling need to subject me to a monologue on the topic of subjugating husbands."

"It seems to be her hobby horse," Darcy said. "However, what was it that you were finding so vexing?" He had seen her expression which is why he had had hurried to her side.

"Oh, that," Elizabeth replied. "It was the implication that either I or you needed some form of coercion to keep from 'straying' from one another."

"Obviously you refrained from disemboweling her," he said.

"Hardly necessary. I merely said that we neither of us needed a leash to stay together," she said before leaning in closer to whisper, "I refrained from mentioning the joys of trust and... restraint."

He closed his eyes for a moment as his memory threw up a very clear image of one of their more recent amorous adventures involving more than a bit of both. Opening his eyes, he looked at his wife. "You are a cruel woman, Mrs. Darcy," he said softly.

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth replied with exaggerated innocence.

"You know very well," he said. "You are altogether too quick with word play."

"I have to find a way to hold my own," she said, "considering your own considerable skills."

"I believe we are evenly matched in that respect," he said. "And I look forward to returning home with you this evening. However, right now, I believe our dance is about to begin."

Darcy led his wife to the floor. While it was not customary, everyone knew that Darcy would always and only dance the waltz with his wife. It was an accepted eccentricity on their parts, and he always relished the opportunity to hold her in his arms in a public setting.

"Have I told you how enchanting you are tonight?" he said.

"For an old married woman?" she responded with a teasing quirk of an eyebrow.

"Without any modifications at all," he said. "Dancing with you makes up for a host of ills."

"And that is why I delight in being married to you. You have such a silver tongue," she said with only a hint of a smile.

"Only on occasion," he said. "And only with you."

"So I should hope," she whispered. "I claim that talent for my own exclusive use."
"Always, dearest Elizabeth," his voice was low and soft, "queen of my heart and hearth, the finest woman I've ever known."

"And the most fortunate... to have fallen in love with you."

"And I you."

"Fortune, it would seem, has been kind."

"Indeed," Darcy took Elizabeth's hand in his, "and I pray it continues to do so. We have a very long life ahead of us."

"Well," she smiled, "if not, we'll make our own luck... together."

The End

Chapter End Notes

If the name Spode sounds familiar then you are probably a P.G. Wodehouse fan and thus have additional good taste (in liking Austen and Wodehouse I mean). I wish I had his talent for light comedy. And just for information Caroline has three stepchildren, the eldest Harold who's just started making his way in his career as a barrister, the next Millicent who has just made her a grandmother, and Eustace who is still a school boy. She's not overly maternal. And well, Sir Humphrey is as described, and when his wife died he wanted an ambitious, attractive woman to act as hostess for him, and Caroline, who was starting to get long in the tooth by Regency standards, was willing to accept the role; she'd spent far too much time focusing on men who weren't interested in her. She's not the most perceptive person on the planet as we all know.

For those interested in the names of the Darcys' four children, they are Bennet, Edwin, Penelope, and Margaret. And I expect that they'll welcome two or three more in the otherwise unmentioned future, but there will be no twins.

The Bingleys have 3 girls so far, and I have not bothered to name them nor have I named the Collins' children though they have a boy in-between the ages of the Darcys' sons and a girl slightly older than the Darcys' elder daughter. As well, all the Fitzwilliam information I have is in the way of backstory, and I haven't bothered projecting into the future for them as I have to draw the line somewhere and as with the exception of the Colonel they are all OCs I figured no one would really care except as they related to the novel's characters hence the mention of Miss Graves, and sadly I don't have the love for the Colonel that some have. For me his primary function is his inability to keep his mouth shut. Someone (and I wish I could remember who) dubbed him either the Big or Loud Mouted Plot Device, and that pretty much sums up my feelings for him. I have read charming, rakish, goofy, wicked, and in other ways interesting Colonels, but I really never understood how he became Col. Studmuffin to so many. Different strokes for different folks, I guess. So I leave his future fate to those who favor him.

I didn't name the son of a baronet for Georgiana mainly because I was wondering if I
was going a step far as I made him a son of Sir Percy Blakeney (aka the Scarlet Pimpernel), and as I've only read a few of the Pimpernel books and seen several adaptations, I have no idea of what any official offspring were, even if he had any. But by my calculations the timing works for him to have an offspring of the right age for Georgiana to marry.

Initially Kitty and Lydia weren't mentioned in the epilogue because it was a challenge to figure out how where they would fit in, but from reviews I did realize that the readers would want to know about them, especially Lydia, so I managed to work it in though I do think it is rather awkwardly done.

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