Six awful months and Elizabeth Bennet loses her respectability, her home and her hopes for the future. What she doesn't count on is Mr. Darcy appearing to help. His ideas are unorthodox, but he might be the only chance she has.
Chapter 1

An Odd Notion of Kindness

Afterwards, he asked, “Did I hurt you?” He pressed the palm of one large hand against her back. The question was inane and too late in coming. It would have done him well to think about her comfort before he acted.

She said yes, then she said no, then she laughed — a harsh, joyless sound, mixed with tears. “There was much discomfort,” she said finally, “yes. But, I would say my pride is hurt more than my body.”

He considered this, then replied, “Though I did expect discomfort, it grieves me to hear of it.” She nodded. She had anticipated pain and humiliation, and been rewarded with all the pleasure of being correct. “Your pride,” he added, “I hope will recover.”

“It might be better for you,” she countered, “if I were to remain mortified and meek.”

“I would not have your spirit broken by my actions,” he confessed, “though in this case, I thought some difficulty necessary.”

She twisted to look at him over her shoulder, surprised and betrayed. She was under no illusions he still loved her. She had counted on lust alone to raise her fortunes. Yet, she had thought purposefully tormenting her beneath him.

“I think,” he said, settling against the pillows, “that you will find yourself quite capable of rising to the challenges your new circumstance will present. Some of it, you may even enjoy. But as a gently-bred woman, a part of you must be repulsed. A part of you must be mortified. I have no intention of hiding you from my friends or society. I hope you will learn to face the world with courage. But that is my hope for the future. For the present, I understand it will be difficult. And so, I thought it kinder to you to make this as difficult as may be. What you face beyond these walls, I hope, will seem easy by comparison.”

He had wanted her nude. He had wanted her in the daylight. Every swell and contour of her body, he insisted on seeing, on touching. From the moment his eyes first lit upon her unclothed form to the moment he withdrew in exhaustion, the act had been the most shameful experience of her life. At least it had been over quickly. She had never intended to be naked before any man, much less one who was not her husband.

But she said, “You have an odd notion of kindness.”

*****

“Oh, Lizzy,” Jane said, dropping onto the bed in sympathetic despair, “I wish it had been me.”

“I am just as happy it was not,” Elizabeth countered quickly. She shut the bedroom door behind herself. “You would have accepted him! No, better he ask me. I am practiced at refusals.”

“Mr. Harvey is a respectable, gentleman-like man and a good friend of my uncle’s,” Jane said carefully. “If a man is willing to raise our fortunes, we must accept him with gratitude.”
Spirits agitated, Elizabeth opened and closed the wardrobe. “You resent me, then? I knew Uncle would not be pleased, but I cannot marry a man I do not hold in some esteem.”

“Lizzy!” Jane cried, leaping from the bed to fly to her sister’s side. She embraced Elizabeth tightly. “I will never resent you. I do not care how many of my uncle’s friends you disappoint, I know you have good reason.”

Half-heartedly patting Jane’s hands, Elizabeth wondered aloud, “Are my reasons good enough? Uncle Gardiner has his own children and a wife to provide for. They bear it cheerfully, but you cannot deny how much our presence here taxes them. I am sure it is worse at Meryton. Mama, Mary and Kitty all living in Uncle Phillips’s house! Had I accepted Mr. Harvey’s proposal, I would have gained independence, my own house and the means to send a little money to Mama.”

“You do not love him,” Jane replied, resting her chin on her sister’s shoulder.

“Nor do you,” Lizzy said, “but you would have accepted him, had he asked you.”

“Our prospects are very bad,” Jane sighed. “Every morning I pray for happy news from Lydia, but I find myself growing more and more resigned to it never coming.”

As long as Jane’s sweet, sanguine temper had been able to weather their circumstance, Elizabeth knew she would be able to, as well. But even her sister, who truly thought the best of all persons, had lost hope. If Jane could not see a happy conclusion, Elizabeth was forced to admit there must not be one. “If she is alive,” Elizabeth said, “I know she is in Town.”

“You think she has died?”

“I do not know what to think!” Elizabeth cried. “I am certain Mr. Wickham did not take her beyond London, and he must have abandoned her by now. If they had married, Lydia would not have kept her silence for so long. Yet, it is equally unthinkable that she should be abandoned, and not sought help from her friends. Mr. Wickham would have taken all of her money, but surely she could acquire pen and paper somehow.”

“I agree that if he had abandoned her in London, she could have done something to find my uncle,” Jane replied thoughtfully, “so I think they must have not stopped in London, as we all thought. They were not traced any further, but I think it certain they did travel further.”

Skeptically, Elizabeth bit, “You cannot think they have married.” To the more cynical sister, Jane’s disposition had always been the most delightfully wondrous thing about her. She could not credit even Jane finding goodness in Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth wished there was some to be found, but everything she knew about him — his treatment of Miss Darcy, his debts in Meryton — told her the man who stole her youngest sister in the dead of night had no virtues. An elopement was scandalous, but a marriage taken place, it would be forgiven with time. What Mr. Wickham was done was worse than murder. Lydia was gone, facing untold horrors alone. Her family had been robbed of a vivacious young girl and their honor in one fell swoop. The uncertainty was a constant companion; nothing distracted her from thoughts of Lydia, wondering what she was doing.

Jane bit her lip. “No,” she admitted. “I did hold out hope for so long that they had wed. Lydia would have written to my mother of her triumph had a marriage taken place.”

“More likely,” Elizabeth said, “Mr. Wickham would have written Mama, demanding his share of Lydia’s portion.”

“Oh, poor Lydia,” was all Jane to could add.
Elizabeth smiled weakly. “I miss her. I long to know what has become of her. Yet, if she was to walk through that door, I promise you, I could cheerfully throttle her! To put us through this! Six months of the agony of not knowing where she has been, who she was with! It is nigh unforgivable!” With a sigh, she mused, “Though I should like the option of forgiving her.

“Someday, perhaps,” Jane said, squeezing Elizabeth tighter, “some opportunity will arise.”

A sudden pounding on the bedroom door cause the sisters to jump. The door swung open. “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Sally,” Jane said, recovering herself first. “Does my aunt have some need of us?”

“Mr. Gardiner has a visitor in the parlor, ma’am. He asks Miss Elizabeth come wait on him.”

Elizabeth grimaced. Her uncle had the best interests of his own children and his nieces in mind when he tried to make matches, but Elizabeth was feeling rather like a prize cow up for auction. She did not doubt Mr. Gardiner’s friends were excellent men. Her uncle was kind, intelligent and gentleman-like. She was sure his friends were of the same mold. With Lydia’s disgrace tainting the family, a tradesman was the highest status any of her sisters could hope for in a husband. Yet, Elizabeth did not entertain any intentions of marriage. The three remaining girls did. Kitty was as eager for male attention as she ever was. Mary hoped to distance herself from her family’s moral failings through a change of name. Jane only wished for her uncles to pass her maintenance on to a husband. If only one of them had been selected as the sacrificial lamb! Jane’s bloom of beauty had faded with stress and depression. The shopkeepers of Meryton were not yet feeling bold enough to offer for genteel ladies, however reduced their circumstance.

As for Elizabeth, the only man she could marry had been left in Derbyshire the dreary day she learned of Lydia’s flight. Her entire party had scrambled back to Longbourn, beckoned by a panicked Jane. With every passing mile, Elizabeth was taken further away from the man uniquely suited to make her happy. Mr. Darcy was a gentleman. With an unchaste sister, she could not expect him to renew his addresses. Six months of separation did nothing to weaken her resolve. She would have no other.

“Miss Elizabeth, sir,” Sally announced, ushering Elizabeth into her uncle’s parlor. She wondered how it had happened that Mr. Gardiner should learn of her refusal of Mr. Harvey so quickly. And that he should have another prospective husband to trot out already! Did he expect her opinion on marriage to change so drastically?

Though Elizabeth strode into the parlor with every intention of maintaining a facade of cool dignity, the sight of her uncle’s guest made her stumble. Forgetting her manners, she cried out, “Mr. Darcy!” without so much as a curtsy.

Mr. Darcy leapt to his feet. “Miss Bennet!” he said, tone equally surprised. “I had not known you were in Town.” He remembered to bow. She curtseyed.

“Jane and I have been in London these four months,” Elizabeth said awkwardly. She cast a questioning glance at her uncle from the corner of her eye. “Had you not heard?”

“Indeed I had not,” Mr. Darcy said. “I have arrived only recently myself. I heard about your father’s passing and wished to express my condolences to your uncle.”

She nodded.

“Though,” he added, “now that I see you are in residence, I, of course, wish to express my
condolences to you as well.”

“I thank you. My uncle has been very generous, taking on the maintenance of Jane and myself.”

“Is Miss Bennet in good health?”

“Very good health, thank you. And Miss Darcy, how is she?”

“She is very well, I thank you for thinking of her. She is visiting Lady Catherine, on whose information I learned about your father.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said slowly. “I should have suspected as much. I understand she was disconsolate to lose a rector like my cousin, Mr. Collins, but selflessly recommended his immediate possession of Longbourn. How do you find his replacement?”

Mr. Darcy considered. “I like him very much. His understanding and education are both excellent. My only concern is that I do not believe he is as attentive to matters of rank as my aunt would like.”

Elizabeth smirked. “Oh, yes, my cousin was singular in that regard. Men like him must be difficult to come by.”

With a secret smile full of shared amusement, he answered, “I fear they are.”

He must think her shameless. Her desire for his good opinion must be in the curl of her lips, in the lack of grace in her every movement. Elizabeth did not allow her imaginings bitterness; she will not read arrogant pleasure in his amiably. If he knew her thoughts, he would not be happy to break her heart. Mr. Darcy was above such pettiness. She was willing to allow him, however, any relief he may feel on escaping a connection to Lydia.

He stayed a quarter of an hour, then took his leave. When she applied to her uncle for how it should be that Mr. Darcy appeared in his parlor, Mr. Gardiner confessed to their friendship, but nothing more.

*****

Though Elizabeth did not see Mr. Darcy again for several weeks, she quickly learned that the relationship he forged with Mr. Gardiner the previous summer had blossomed into an abiding friendship. Mr. Gardiner had not written to Mr. Darcy to share news, but that she could dismiss as deference to the disparity of their positions. The men were in company frequently. It was not until Mrs. Gardiner invited Mr. Darcy to dine with them that Elizabeth had the opportunity to converse with him. Her aunt dominated his attention during the meal. Much later, after talking and drinking and smoking cigars with her uncle, Mr. Darcy entered the drawing room in search of coffee. Elizabeth was happy enough to pour for him, and they were able to enter into conversation:

“You uncle seems very pleased to have Miss Bennet and yourself residing with him,” Mr. Darcy said.

“Tell him he may praise me all he wishes,” Elizabeth replied merrily.

Mr. Darcy hesitated, then said, “He will be distressed when you are gone to your own establishment.”

Elizabeth’s smile drooped. “I do not understand your meaning, sir.”

“Mr. Gardiner expects you will be married soon.”
Her smile disappeared. “My uncle is mistaken.”

“Perhaps I misunderstood him.”

His manner was cautious, neither hopeful nor disappointed. Elizabeth wished she could gauge how he felt about her marrying, and who the prospective groom might be now. Her uncle no longer thought her fit to be a gentleman’s wife. He would not be hoping Mr. Darcy would make an offer. She looked for her uncle. He had formed a card party with his wife, Jane and another dinner guest. Mr. Gardiner was a man of many talents, but she did not think him capable of convincing Mr. Darcy to take on a ruined wife.

“I do not believe so,” Elizabeth answered honestly. “He has hopes I will marry as soon as may be.”

“And your own hopes,” Mr. Darcy wondered, “do they match his?”

Looking at Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth thought her hopes were in tandem with Mr. Gardiner’s for the first time in months. The similarities were superficial. She hoped some solution may present itself to give her a future with Mr. Darcy. Mr. Gardiner would not aspire to a match that grand. So, Elizabeth said, with all honestly, “They do not.” Thinking it better to explain fully, Elizabeth added, “My uncle hopes to marry myself and my sisters to tradesmen. You know too much of Lydia’s situation to question why he thinks that the best hope for our futures.” Here, Mr. Darcy nodded. “I understand his point. To an extent, I even agree with him. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Phillips cannot support five women indefinitely. We must marry, and relieve them of the burden.”

“Yet you admit to your agreement having stipulations.”

“It is a different thing all together for man! A man takes on a wife, and his lot changes not at all. A woman cannot enter into the marriage state lightly.”

“You use your uncle ill,” Mr. Darcy stated, “if you accept his charity, but think he toys with your future.”

The accusation stung. “I am not mercenary,” she answered. “I have no wish for my uncle to support me as a spinster, but I cannot marry for money alone.”

“I will not ask you to betray any man’s confidence,” Mr. Darcy said after a moment.

He would not ask if she had received proposals of marriage other than his own. Elizabeth thought him curious. He would not have drawn attention to a failure to ask otherwise. She could not acknowledge his own proposal in a drawing room, crowded with family and guests. If anyone should overhear, poor Mr. Darcy would be embarrassed. “By the reckoning of some,” she said vaguely, “I am perhaps more experienced refusals than a girl in my position ought.”

Taking charge of his own embarrassment, he asked, “More experienced than I would have predicted?”

“Indeed.”

His eyes wandered to her uncle. “Have you made your feelings on this score known to your uncle?”

“Some,” Elizabeth answered. “He knows I am not swayed only by practical considerations.”

“Yet his hopes remain unchanged?”

“He believes I shall have to accept my situation and act accordingly soon enough.”
“Perhaps in time, some other solution may present itself.”
Chapter 2

The offer hit her like a slap in the face. She nearly struck him, but maintained enough sense to refrain.

Her restraint was for Jane’s sake, rather than his. Her dear sister had never been a great reader, but with a twinkle in her eye and a secret smile, Jane immediately took to the far corner of the library. She studiously perused the shelves, leaving Elizabeth with relative privacy and the man she admired. Elizabeth had not burdened her already taxed sister with romantic fantasies about Mr. Darcy, but Jane, though blind to the faults of others, was observant in her own way. Elizabeth had been grateful for Jane’s retreat.

If she had struck him, Elizabeth would have needed to explain herself. She had no intention of acknowledging his vile words to anyone, least of all sweet Jane.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he began again, “please hear me out.” Her distracted silence was enough encouragement for him to continue.

“I have heard far more than I care to hear,” Elizabeth replied. “I beg you, call for a hack chaise. I must return home immediately.”

For weeks, Mr. Darcy had appeared at the Gardiner house as a friend and guest of her uncle. He conversed with Elizabeth when circumstances brought the men and the ladies together, but he had not especially sought her company. An excited shiver had passed through her the morning Miss Darcy invited the Bennet girls to Mayfair for tea. The invitation was the brother’s doing, she was sure of it. Miss Darcy was painfully shy and had never made Jane’s acquaintance.

Elizabeth had tried to temper her suddenly fervent imagination. She would own being a romantic, but she was not irrational. Poor young men needed something to live on; rich young men needed valuable connections. If Mr. Darcy had thought offering for her a degradation when she was respectable, his character must revolt against the idea of a connection now. Her treacherous imagination would not be silenced. Every moment in his company tempted her to recall his fondness for Mr. Gardiner. Surely that friendship could not be sustained if Mr. Darcy considered her family beneath him.

Apparently, Mr. Darcy thought her lower than Elizabeth could have credited him for.

“Make my excuses to Miss Darcy,” Elizabeth continued. “Tell her I am become ill, or whatever you wish.”

“I shall not detain you, of course,” Mr. Darcy said. “My only desire is to help you.”

“Ring the bell,” she insisted. “Tell a footman to hire a chaise.”

Mr. Darcy looked at her askance, then did as she asked. Jane would be surprised they were leaving so suddenly. Miss Darcy expected her guests to rejoin her in the parlor once her brother concluded his tour of the library. Elizabeth started towards Jane while Mr. Darcy spoke with his servant, but he beckoned her return once he was finished. Elizabeth grimaced. She did not wish to cause Jane the concern ignoring their host’s summons would. She trudged back to his side, determined not to speak.

“Your uncle parades you about in front of tradesmen, hoping he can tempt one of them to buy you.”
Her resolution collapsed. “He means well,” Elizabeth replied stiffly. “My uncle is concerned for my future.”

“Yes,” Mr. Darcy agreed hastily. “I should not say otherwise. I have been pondering your situation for some time now. While Mr. Gardiner is doing what he believes to be in your best interest, I cannot but think his solution short-sighted.”

“I have to disagree,” she said. “Marriage is a lifetime commitment. It is by definition not short-sighted.”

“At least consider,” Mr. Darcy insisted, “that you have a mother and three remaining sisters. Though one of Mr. Gardiner’s friends may be prevailed to take you on, the remaining financial burden is high for a man with children of his own.”

“Even if he must dispose of us one at a time,” Elizabeth quickly countered, “the burden would be lessened by my marrying.” That idea had tumbled about her belly with every friend Mr. Gardiner introduced. Even so, Elizabeth had not been able to reconcile herself to a match. What was one girl, out of five? Would the money her uncle saved be worth losing her freedom? She could not bear becoming the property of a man she did not know. She was repulsed by the thought of surrendering in the marriage bed to a man she did not trust. Children she bore to a tradesman would be raised in conditions unlike anything she had known. Seen in that light, one girl still in the house hardly seemed a burden.

Mr. Darcy said, “Never the less, you have refused.”

“I am unable to reconcile myself with a marriage of convenience,” she confessed.

“So I understand,” Mr. Darcy replied. “That is precisely why I am offering you something else.”

“I suppose you think my condition in life so low as to make anything palatable,” she accused, letting her hurt take over. Elizabeth regretted it instantly. The Mr. Darcy of Hunsford stayed vanished; he had not said anything about the lowness of her circumstances. But, she could not determine who this Mr. Darcy was — this Mr. Darcy, who coaxed his sister into inviting her for tea as a pretense to make illicit offers.

“You fear your uncle will come to resent you if you continue to spurn eligible matches,” he posited. “This is based on my own observations of you these weeks. Am I correct in thinking so?”

“Shall you tell me he is very good and I am wicked to think it?” Elizabeth asked, “or will you further your own cause and claim my fears have merit?”

“Why must it be one or the other?” he countered. “I believe your uncle a good man, but I do not fault you for your fears. You are powerless. In Meryton, your family was the most socially prominent. You were accustomed to wielding the power that was your due as a daughter of the principle landowner. Your place in the world has diminished considerably. You are perfectly correct to be afraid.”

“I have acquainted you with my courage,” she answered.

He smiled. “Well demonstrated, I think, by your continued participation in this conversation.”

“I did consider striking you,” Elizabeth replied.

“I thank you for not going to such an extremity.” Mr. Darcy sighed. “I asked you to allow me to say my piece, and I have not finished. If you were to capitulate to Mr. Gardiner’s demands and marry a
tradesman, you would secure your own future, but your husband would not have the means to support your mother or sisters. Your sisters may eventually make similar matches, but it is by no means a certain thing.”

At another time, she would have blamed him for that.

“As for myself,” he continued, “it is well within my means to support four women in a modest lifestyle. I could provide you with the money to support them, and yourself. You would be a burden to no one, and retain all the freedom of a single young lady.”

She looked towards the library door. The footman must return soon with news of her hack chaise.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said, drawing her attention back to him. “If you believe the cost too great, then the cost is too great. You may reasonably fear your family coming to resent a refused marriage proposal, but in refusing to become a Cyprian, they could only laude you.”

The footman returned then. With great relief, Elizabeth said, “A generous gesture, but I must decline. Good day, sir. Should you call in Gracechurch Street, I do not anticipate being at home.”

*****

Within a day or two, she regretted dismissing him. Elizabeth was entirely secure in her refusal of his appalling offer, but she was hungry to understand his character better. It was impossible to sketch the mind of a man one refused to see. All of her ideas of being in love with him struck her as childish now. In Hertforshire, she thought him rude and above his company. Elizabeth had enjoyed hating him. Seven months ago, she had thought him generous, amiable and kind. When it was useless to want him, she told herself she loved him. Loving a distant, unreachable figure had been a pleasing distraction in the first dark months after Lydia’s disappearance. The thought of Mr. Darcy, existing in the world and being everything that was good and noble, had sustained her through her father’s illness and death. He had long been her comforting fantasy. Now, he so rudely reminded her that he was a man. He had a greater complexity than the fantasy she admired. He was not the embodiment of generosity and genius that she would choose to see him as.

Who was Mr. Darcy?

He continued to appear sporadically at her doorstep, always to visit her uncle. Though Elizabeth suspected Mr. Darcy had sought an introduction to Mr. Gardiner only for her sake, he did seem to like the man for his own merits. When her curiosity got the better of her, Elizabeth applied to her uncle: “What manner of man do you think Mr. Darcy?”

“Has my acquaintance with him eclipsed your own?” asked Mr. Gardiner.

“I believe so,” she replied.

Respecting the gravity of her tone, Mr. Gardiner thought the question over for a long moment, then answered. “I am always struck,” her uncle said, “by how Mr. Darcy seeks to take everything on himself. He is a man accustomed to responsibility, and he does not yield it gracefully.”

This kept with the general impression of Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth had formed at Pemberley. That her uncle still saw Mr. Darcy in that way was comforting. Perhaps the fantasy she had loved was the closest to the real Mr. Darcy she had ever been. It was also devastating. If that was his truest self, she wanted to love him.

Seeking some way to rescue herself from treading so dangerously, Elizabeth suggested, “It must be difficult doing business with him.”
But Mr. Gardiner replied, “His calls are social.”

“You can have nothing in common,” she protested.

“We both enjoy fishing,” he said, “and you will recall what a devoted brother he is to Miss Darcy. He is more a father to her than brother, I should say. He indulges me in talk of the children.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth echoed, “he has said something to that effect before.”

Her image of the good and caring Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth wanted to over throw stayed quite secure. Afterwards, Mr. Gardiner’s saying Mr. Darcy did not gracefully relinquish responsibility struck her. What responsibilities had Mr. Gardiner tried to wrestle from him?

*****

Mr. Harvey accepted his disappointment with more grace than any of Elizabeth’s previous suitors, but he was soon replaced with Mr. Laurie. Mr. Laurie was as intelligent and kind as Elizabeth would expect from a friend of her uncle. He soon proved himself to not be of a steady character. He had not the nerves to be in love without encouragement, and Elizabeth’s indifference soon dashed all hopes in that quarter.

With Mr. Laurie’s disinterest protecting her, Elizabeth examined the idea of being Mrs. Laurie. She needed to reconcile herself to making a match for prudent reasons. Elizabeth tried to picture how a man like Mr. Laurie might fit up his house. She wondered what it would be like to be needed in the kitchen or at the warehouse. In these imaginings, Jane always stayed behind at Gracechurch Street. Living in Town did not agree with her sister. The air was often poor. The weight of too many missing loved ones was heavy on Jane’s shoulders.

Elizabeth preferred to picture Jane in a cottage in the country. The air and the freedom would do her good. With time, Elizabeth added her mama, and Mary, and Kitty to the imaginary cottage. The loss of Lydia and their father would always be felt in a family party, but for Jane to reunite with Mary and Kitty must improve her spirits. When Elizabeth noticed she had not added herself to their little cottage, she wondered if this fantasy was a part of Mrs. Laurie’s story.

No. Mrs. Laurie would have a shop and children to pour her money and energy into. She could not put her mother and sisters up in a cosy cottage. That fantasy was part of Elizabeth the Cyprian’s life. Mr. Darcy would dress her in jewels and silks — possibly translucent, she did not really know — parade her through Town as a provocative ornament, then pillage her body when the whim struck him. She would send her money to her mother and sisters, in their happy cottage, where they were a burden to no one.

The picture was haunting. Once conjured, Elizabeth struggled to disperse it. Whenever she grew distracted from her needlework, she could feeling phantom hands, grabbing at her.

When she was still at Longbourn, Elizabeth had never relied on an imaginary world within her mind to face the day. Since leaving her ancestral home, she had become more and more reliant on her own thoughts as a means of escaping her situation. Now, even her thoughts were tainted. Her fantasies were no longer a safe place to retreat. The rebellion of her own mind was a different sort of problem than the challenges she had faced in these past months. The issue was in her own head. It was the first problem she had the power to solve. She let it occupy her, building fortitude and banishing paranoia.

It was refreshing, to have the power to solve a problem.
Another problem appeared in the Gardiner house soon after. The new term at preparatory school had begun, and her little cousin Edward did not go.

His father could not afford to send him.

It was refreshing, to have the power to solve a problem.

*****

Elizabeth approached Aunt Gardiner with a suggestion to invite Miss Darcy for tea. It had been an age since she had seen Miss Darcy last, and she was wild to return the invitation of some months’ past. Mrs. Gardiner required little convincing. The invitation was sent. Miss Darcy and her companion came for tea. With a small bit of coaxing from Mrs. Annesley, Miss Darcy issued an invitation for the Gardiner party to dine at Mayfair later in the week.

Mr. Darcy had the humility to look everywhere but in Elizabeth’s direction when she sat at his table. That would never do.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies after the meal, Elizabeth approached Mr. Darcy and said, “When last I was here, my sudden turn for the worse prevented me from properly seeing your library. Would you be so kind as to give me a tour now?”

“It is a small collection,” he replied. “I believe you have seen what few volumes of interest I keep in Town. To examine it further is surely unnecessary.”

“There was one book in particular I would like to see,” she pressed. “We discussed it quite vehemently, if you will recall. In retrospect, I wonder that I was understanding it correctly.”

“None could be dissatisfied with your understanding, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I would like the opportunity to judge for myself,” she replied.

“Your first reading allowed sufficient opportunity to judge.”

“There is always something new to be discovered on subsequent readings.”

“I wonder that you have this sudden interest in the volume,” Mr. Darcy said with some exasperation.

“I have always been a great reader,” she replied. “Are you acquainted with my cousin, Edward? He is eight years, and my aunt and uncle’s eldest.”

“By reputation only,” Mr. Darcy said. “Mr. Gardiner speaks of him with great frequency.”

“He may not gain the opportunity to become as great a reader as myself,” Elizabeth said. “Books are so valuable. I think it a great tragedy for a young boy to lack an education.”

“I understand your uncle is disappointed,” Mr. Darcy replied cautiously.

“Jane, as well,” Elizabeth added. “She has been out of sorts since we came to live at Gracechurch Street. I have been thinking on how country air would improve her spirits. A modest cottage that she could share with my mother and sisters would be just the thing, I think.”

He stared at her for a long while, strode to her uncle, said something quickly and ushered Elizabeth from the drawing room.

“Sir?”
“I have told your uncle that you have an interest in a volume in my library, and that it would take us but a moment to retrieve it.” Once a few paces from the drawing room, Mr. Darcy made no advancement to the library. Agitated, he demanded, “Miss Elizabeth, what is the meaning of this?”

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said, taking a fortifying breath, “am I too late to accept your offer?”

“No,” he said, in strained tones, “never. I will always be available to you.”

For Jane, for Edward, for her uncles, she said, “Please make whatever arrangements you feel necessary for a mistress. I beg you, do not tell my uncle until it is done.”

Mr. Darcy said nothing, but he nodded.

He ushered Elizabeth back into the drawing room. When Mr. Gardiner noticed they were without the volume they had left to fetch, Mr. Darcy said, “We could not locate the book.”
To Mr. Darcy's evident displeasure, it was necessary to continue employing pretenses to allow him private conversation with Elizabeth. He called at Cheapside with greater frequency, occasionally when he knew Mr. Gardiner to be at his warehouses. He would then offer to walk out with the ladies or beg Elizabeth to play the instrument. Whether walking ahead of Jane or turning pages at the piano, if he kept his voice low, Mr. Darcy was able to acquaint Elizabeth with the arrangements he had made.

His attention to Elizabeth was impossible to overlook. She would be very surprised if her aunt did not harbor hopes of a marriage. Elizabeth's heart ached at the thought of Mrs. Gardiner's inevitable disappointment. There would be no wedding.

On one such visit, Mr. Darcy suggested an outing. Recently, he had rented a house and wished for the opinions of women as to how it should be furnished. The owner had removed to Bath, to retrench. Mr. Fry had left his furniture behind, but Mr. Darcy owned it was not to his taste. Miss Darcy was too reluctant to offer her brother advice, and so he was left seeking the opinions of other ladies. Mrs. Gardiner, Jane and Elizabeth immediately accepted the proposed outing.

The house was in Mayfair, a short distance from his own townhouse.

Mrs. Gardiner asked, "Are you intending to put Miss Darcy into her own establishment?"

Mr. Darcy hesitated. His eyes flickered to Elizabeth, and then back to her aunt. He answered, "My sister had her own household two summers ago, but I found she was too young for such independence. Though it is perhaps better for me to have a lady in my household, for my sister's sake, I hope she is soon ready to manage her own."

The house, they saw when they arrived, was large and furnished to such a degree of ostentatious display as to make it incompatible with Mr. Darcy's modest taste. Elizabeth could not wonder at Mr. Fry's need to retrench. In addition to furniture, he had left behind a well-stocked library and a number of servants. Elizabeth was introduced to the shrewd housekeeper and a bored lady's maid, who was young and pretty. The house boasted a number of sitting rooms, two dining rooms and a several bedrooms.

While Mrs. Gardiner and Jane were occupied by examining pieces and admiring the wall coverings, Mr. Darcy pulled Elizabeth aside.

"I hope you will find this establishment suitable," he said.

Surprised that he intended such a grand house for just herself, Elizabeth replied with a polite, "It is a lovely house."

Mr. Darcy's tone made it clear he did not agree: "You are of course free to redecorate. Any pieces you do not care for can be stored in an out of the way room."

"I shall keep that in mind," Elizabeth said, shifting her weight.

"Some rooms I expect you to redecorate," he continued. "Any room you will use for entertaining should be a reflection of yourself and your own tastes. Certainly, you must redecorate the drawing
room, dining rooms, a sitting room and your bedroom as soon as may be. Anything else you choose to alter about the house, I leave to your own discretion."

His idea of what should be done in the house constituted a large project. That Mr. Darcy had included her bedroom with places she might entertain a guest made Elizabeth flush. "I trust you do not expect the owner to reclaim his property in the foreseeable future."

He shrugged. "The lease I purchased is for one year. Should Mr. Fry find himself wanting to return to Town after that, you will remove to another house."

"Renting a house of this size, in such a neighborhood, must be expensive," she said. "I shall endeavor to have the redecoration done within as small a budget as you see fit."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Darcy. "Let your own tastes guide you, not the expense."

Mrs. Gardiner called her then, to come admire a painting. Elizabeth met his eyes, then hurried away.

*****

The property Mr. Darcy found for Mrs. Bennet and her daughters was in Kent, about ten miles from Tunbridge Wells. He thought it a fine distance: far enough from a town to limit spending, but close enough that there would be no difficulties in procuring needed items. He did not intend to provide them with a carriage, but it made it clear that Elizabeth should have one. If her mother and sisters had a real need for a chaise, she could send her own on to them.

The cottage was on the land of a Mr. Cleese, a widower of Mr. Darcy's acquaintance who had sequestered himself in the country after the death of his wife. He had two small children and, in Mr. Darcy's opinion, a desperate need for genteel society. A family of women, fallen on hard times, would be the perfect tenants. They could provide him with society when he desired it and not infringe on his manor rights.

After Mr. Darcy had assured her the cottage was ready for tenants, Elizabeth wrote to her mother about their sudden windfall. Elizabeth refrained from explaining directly how it was that Mr. Darcy should come to sponsor the Bennet women in a cottage. She worded the letter carefully, hoping to ward off expectations like her aunt's, but did not illustrate the actual arrangement. Having told Mr. Darcy she would be his, and after allowing him to spend so much money on the preparations, she was as fixed in the situation as surely as if it had been an engagement. Some called a mistress a 'wife in watercolors;' like paints, the relationship was easily dissolved. But it could only be so easily severed for the powerful. Once she surrendered the last vestiges of her chastity to him, she would always need a protector to provide for her. She would always need a man she could trust to care for her and protect her. She would be his wife not in ink, but in watercolors. Kitty would find it a great adventure and wildly romantic, Elizabeth thought. Jane and Mary must object. Mary, especially, would not forgive her. Mary, who quoted the famous passages of famous theologians and had many pretty extracts about a lady's virtue, but never wondered at the hypocrisy of those men, or their fashionably impure mistresses. No, it was better to write a careful letter, filled with facts but avoiding undue speculation.

Fortunately, many months living under the roof of her sister had made Mrs. Bennet anxious to be mistress of her own household again. Never a thoughtful woman, she did not question too much how the cottage came to be her own. The letter she wrote to Elizabeth detailed her raptures and eagerness to get out of Meryton. She had quite enough of Lady Lucas and Mrs. Collins smug superiority to last her a life time. New neighbors were the very thing she needed.

Elizabeth arranged it so that herself, Jane and Mr. Darcy would arrive first at the cottage, meet with
Mr. Cleese and ensure everything properly done. Mrs. Bennet, Mary and Kitty would arrive by post soon after. Once they were settled, and had acquainted themselves with the house, their servants and neighbors, Mr. Darcy would take Elizabeth back to London. Even if he did not touch for her for the entirety of the trip, once she had spent three hours alone in a carriage with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth's reputation would be in tatters. To her sisters, who already shared in Lydia's disgrace, Elizabeth promised herself that she would remain a diligent correspondent. Discourse with her aunt and uncle would end when Mr. Darcy took herself and Jane from their house. She had betrayed their good will. Even if they were still willing to see her, Elizabeth did not think herself equal to facing them.

When the appointed day came, Elizabeth could scarcely contain her anxiety. Jane would be horrified when Elizabeth did not stay at Kent with the rest of her family. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner would think they had housed a scheming stranger all these months. Mr. Darcy would lose a valuable friendship. Mr. Darcy called, as she knew he would, and doubts were useless. The cottage was waiting for its inhabitants. Mrs. Bennet would have loaded her meager positions on a cart by now. Mr. Cleese's open fields and clean air would heal Jane's spirits. Kitty and Mary would find themselves much adored by the tenant farmers.

And herself, she had loved Mr. Darcy once. His offer had shattered her illusions about him. Yet, Elizabeth knew there were good and noble things about him. She could not have entrusted her future to his hands otherwise. Other men may have offered marriage in time, but even her broken picture of Mr. Darcy was more attractive than a stranger. If she was determined to focus on the parts of him she could respect, Elizabeth was sure she would love him again.

Mr. Darcy called, as she knew he would, and Elizabeth went to him. The Bennet girls' trunks were packed, ready to be loaded onto his carriage. "Please let me explain everything to my uncle," she entreated.

"If that is your wish," Mr. Darcy said. "Though, I must ask to speak to him privately on another matter first. It will take but a moment."

Elizabeth was skeptical, but walked Mr. Darcy to her uncle's study. She rapped on the door. "Uncle? Mr. Darcy is come."

"Darcy!" Mr. Gardiner called, throwing open the door. "How good of you to come! What brings you? I had not expected you." Eyes bright, her uncle asked, "Have you news?"

"I regret," Mr. Darcy said, "I do not." He looked at Elizabeth, who still stood at his side. Though he had asked to speak privately to her uncle, she was loathe to leave him. She thought it unlikely that a man such as Mr. Darcy would allow a girl to speak for him. She believed he had every intention of letting her say her own piece, but thought he would want to speak his own first. "Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy prompted, "if you would excuse us?"

"You can have nothing to say to my uncle that I cannot hear," she replied.

He raised his eyebrows. Elizabeth shrugged and stayed where she was. "Sir," Mr. Darcy said, turning back to Mr. Gardiner, "let me assure you, regardless of what the future holds, I shall not cease any of my efforts in a certain quarter."

Mr. Gardiner's eyes drifted between his friend and his defiant niece. "I had not anticipated your quitting," he said. "Elizabeth, I had not known you to be aware of Mr. Darcy's activities."

"Yes," she said. "And I would beg you to leave him be."

Her uncle's mouth quirked. "Leave him be? He has been a great boon to us, and I heartily appreciate
"He is very good," Elizabeth said, "I am pleased that you can see it. I can only hope that you can continue to appreciate all that he has done for us."

Mr. Gardiner looked from Mr. Darcy to his niece and back again. "It is not like Lizzy to be so dramatic."

"Miss Elizabeth is concerned with matters you have not been acquainted with, sir," Mr. Darcy said. "She has asked that I not speak of it to you, but the time has come that it can no longer be concealed."

"Concealed?" Mr. Gardiner echoed. "How unlike you, Darcy. I admit, I am becoming concerned."

"Your niece asked me not to speak of it," he repeated. "I would not betray her confidence so." He squared his shoulders, lifted his chin. His face was a mask of implacable hauteur.

"Uncle," Elizabeth began. Through the windows behind him, she could see Jane's trunks being loaded onto the carriage. "Mr. Darcy has a friend who has been kind enough to find a cottage on his property for my mother and my sisters. His name is Mr. Cleese and his estate is in Kent, but thirty miles from here."

Her uncle beamed. "Wonderful news, Darcy! When will it be ready? My sister will be pleased beyond measure!"

"We are leaving to-day," Elizabeth answered.

Her uncle's smiled faded. "Lizzy, you know your aunt and I would have been happy to help you get settled. I know you have thought yourself and Jane burdensome, but we were pleased to do all we have done for your girls, and would gladly do more."

Tears threatened to spill. "I know, uncle. You and aunt have been very kind. Jane and I are, and always will be, grateful. Pray do not think we are insensible to all that you have sacrificed for us. Yet, we cannot trespass on your kindness forever." Her uncle may be very happy to help her, but what of Edward? He was too young to understand the maintenance of his cousins had cost him school. When he was grown, and struggling in business, would he welcome spinsters in his house? Would his younger brothers? Elizabeth dashed her tears away. "Mr. Darcy has made a very generous offer and after careful consideration, I have accepted."

"Your aunt thought as much," Mr. Gardiner said. "May I wish you joy?"

Mr. Darcy's hauteur slipped, and for a moment, he looked positively ill.

"No, uncle," Elizabeth said. "Mr. Darcy is going to keep me as his mistress."

"Elizabeth," her uncle said lowly, "go upstairs."

Elizabeth took hold of Mr. Darcy's arm, but he said, "Miss Elizabeth, do as your uncle says."

"And you!" Mr. Gardiner cried at Mr. Darcy, "I am appalled! Disgusted! My nieces are gentlewomen, and far from friendless! I should call you out!"

"You are not a gentleman," Mr. Darcy said coolly. "Do not think I would accept a challenge from a tradesman."
"Leave him be," Elizabeth reiterated. "Jane's trunks are packed. Come, Mr. Darcy, let us go."
Tugging on Mr. Darcy's arm, Elizabeth led him from the house. Spying Jane in her traveling things, Elizabeth took her elder sister by the hand.

"Lizzy?" Jane asked. "What is going on? Why was my uncle shouting?"

"Uncle received a piece of bad news," Elizabeth said. "Please, let us not ruin to-day. I am anxious to see the cottage, and Mama."

*****

The cottage was everything a cottage should be: irregular floor plan, thatched roof and spacious enough to accommodate the family, their guests and servants. Leaving her family the next day was everything leaving loved ones should be: emotional and exhausting. Elizabeth's letters to her mother had included her plans to return to London, but Mrs. Bennet had neglected to pass it on to Mary and Kitty. The omission confused them when Elizabeth prepared to leave. Jane had not known, either, but that secret had been Elizabeth's. As the eldest, responsibility for the family's security should have been Jane's. When their father was alive, the sisters had all thought Jane's beauty would lead her to a brilliant match. Elizabeth had been unable to confide in Jane. She would want to take the responsibility onto herself. No offer had been made to Jane. They had all been made to the less beautiful and less dutiful younger sister, and so it had fallen on her to change their fortunes.

She did not want Jane to learn the truth from a newspaper, but she could not look her in the eyes and tell her, either. Elizabeth resolved to write Jane a letter explaining everything once she was in Mayfair. The resolution did not make leaving any easier. For the first hour of her journey with Mr. Darcy, she wept. For the second hour, she slept. The third hour was spent in conversation about inconsequential things, which Elizabeth found more palatable than discussing what had happened at her uncle's. Mr. Darcy felt none of Elizabeth's concerns would be addressed by himself and her uncle shooting at one another. That topic, she quickly dismissed. They spoke of the weather and the roads, the build of his carriage and how long the coachman had served his family.

When they arrived at Mr. Fry's former residence, Mr. Darcy followed her in. As long as Elizabeth had still been under her uncle's roof, she had done nothing to redecorate the townhouse. She ordered a cold supper to be served from whatever Cook had, and they sat side-by-side in the ostentatious drawing room.

Mr. Darcy broke the awkward silence with, "May I kiss you?"

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "I had not thought one in your position liable to ask permission from one in mine."

He shrugged. "Shall I take that as an affirmative, or an avoidance of the question?"

"Take it as you will," she answered. "You are accustomed to having your own way. A situation such as this is designed to cater to it."

"In that case," Mr. Darcy said, "I shall." Cupping her cheek with one large palm, he turned her head to face his. Elizabeth watched, trying to will herself not to be so rigid. The arrangement hinged on her ability to please him. She was not a sculpture. She was in watercolors.

"Close your eyes," he said softly.

Her aunt was right; the shape of his mouth was pleasing. Prepared for the touch of his lips, she closed her eyes. It was not so terrible, to be kissed. His lips were soft, their movements slow and
gentle. When his mouth opened and his breath blew hot across her skin, that was pleasant, too. Elizabeth supposed she had expected to find it repulsive, a man's hands on her. All of her fantasies had been frightening, not gentle. His fingers in her hair, on her neck made her shiver. His mouth followed the trail blazed by his fingers, hot on her neck. Elizabeth bit her lip.

It was not supposed to be like this.

She reached out like a blind woman, found his chest and pushed.

Breathing hard and with a wild look in his eyes, Mr. Darcy huffed, "Miss Bennet?"

"Sir," Elizabeth said, nearly panicked, "I think you had better go." He would have her body. She was resigned to that. He would have her heart. She needed to give him that. But her mind was her own, and that, he could not have.

He frowned.

"Some other time would be much better for this," Elizabeth insisted. "The past two days have been very full and given me much to think on. My mind is not at all where it should be."

"I shall return later in the week," Mr. Darcy said, standing up. "Please have prepared a list of pieces you should like replaced by then."

"Yes, sir."

He was tall. She had always known it, but for him to stand over her made Elizabeth feel it more than she had before. "I don't know what has caused this change in you," he said. "I hope you can find some way to reconcile yourself to the situation you agreed to."

"My courage rises with every attempt to intimidate me," she said. What was once a playful phrase she used against him was quickly becoming a shield to protect herself.

"I am not afraid of you," he replied. Elizabeth smirked. "Nor," he continued, "should I like you to be afraid of me. I would not want to think I must intimidate you in order for you to feel able to proceed."

"I am not prepared at present," she admitted. "I will be when you return. You may depend upon it."

After one more glance at her, Mr. Darcy took his leave.

Her supper was served soon after. As she ate, Elizabeth wondered if she was telling the truth.

*****

He came back one sunny morning three days hence. Her list prepared, Elizabeth sat in the parlor, reading a novel she had found in the library. A footman entered to announce the visitor and Elizabeth asked for him to be shown in. Mr. Darcy entered, moving quickly, in agitated spirits.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said politely. "I trust your sister is well?"

"Yes," he said, hurried. "I thank you. Your maid, would you ring for her?"

Elizabeth, feeling that was a strange request for a man, folded over the page she had been reading and rang for Robinson. While they waited, she offered Mr. Darcy a seat, but he could not be still. When Miss Robinson arrived, every bit as bewildered as her mistress, Mr. Darcy spoke to her shortly.
"Miss Bennet," Robinson said when they were finished, "this way, please." Elizabeth looked at Mr. Darcy with a raised eyebrow, and followed.

"Is Mr. Darcy the master of my household?" Elizabeth asked, lips turned in an amused smile. If he was going to set her up in her own house, rather than put her in one of his own, then he should at least pretend she was in charge.

"Please, ma'am," Robinson answered, "I would not tell a man such as him 'no,' no matter whose house I was in."

"What did he ask of you?" Elizabeth wondered, amazed that he should have anything to say to an abigail.

Robinson blushed. "He told me I was to take you to your dressing room, and prepare you." Very red, she said, "He is come to bed you, ma'am."

"Yes," Elizabeth said, "I thought as much. We have an arrangement, Mr. Darcy and myself." He had promised to return within the week. Elizabeth was not surprised he had kept that promise. She was, however, astonished he intended to take her during a morning call. Elizabeth supposed she would have to become accustomed to the vagaries of men. He had given her three days to accustom herself to the idea of his taking what he had been offered, what he had paid for. It was, she reflected, more generous than she could have expected. She had sold her body to him and then made him wait to collect.

"Ma'am," Robinson said in hushed tones, "he says you are to be unclad when he enters your chambers!"

When he entered, she had nothing to cover her body but her own self. Elizabeth had draped her hair to conceal her nipples and folded her hands over the apex of her legs.

When he entered, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, daring him to act. He swept her hair aside.

Afterwards, he asked, "Did I hurt you?" He pressed the palm of one large hand against her back. The question was inane and too late in coming.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank JrTT for cold reading this chapter and helping me work through some of the issues.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After her other guests departed, Elizabeth took Darcy back to the drawing room for another cup of coffee. The past weeks had taught her much of his tastes and expectations. She enjoyed learning more about him. Enough time spent with him, and she would be able to reconcile his character. Darcy showed many facets to the world. There was much she still did not know.

Conversationally, Darcy said, “I believe Gilliam was rather taken with you.”

After she completed redecorating the small dining room and the drawing room, Darcy had suggested she host a dinner. Though Elizabeth had not dreaded the event, she had not found the idea appealing, either. She was not a solitary creature. It would never suit her to roam her townhouse alone, or with only Robinson and Darcy for company. It was not meeting new people that she disdained, but meeting their expectations. A dinner in London was a very different thing than a dinner in the country. Darcy and his fellows favored French cooking. As a hostess, she needed to address the palates of her guests. To create her menu, Elizabeth was required to match meats and side dishes that she had never sampled. Her own tastes were more rustic. In this, Cook proved helpful.

To place herself at best advantage as fashionably impure, however, was a task for which she had no assistance. Darcy had insisted she order fine gowns. Robinson, despite her youth and ennui, was talented at dressing hair. These things did not make Elizabeth coy and flirtatious. She did not excel in any feminine art. She was a poor pianist, scorned needlework and longed to be among fields and stiles.

Of Mr. Gilliam, Elizabeth answered, “He was charming.” Her partner at dinner, Mr. Gilliam had appreciated her wit and indulged her with his impression of the varied characters of the party. “I admit,” she confessed, “your friends were better company than I had anticipated.”

Darcy sipped his coffee, then asked. "Did you think I spent my leisure time with men as dull as myself?"

She laughed. "No, I know better than that. I have Mr. Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam to show me otherwise." Elizabeth paused, trying to find the best way to verbalize her surprise. "I did not think a dinner I hosted would be taken by your friends as a respectable way to spend an evening."

He frowned. "You thought I invited them so that they might make a spectacle of you?"

"No," Elizabeth answered. Darcy did not appear satisfied. "I know we have had our misunderstandings in the past," she added. “We know each other much better now.”
"That," Darcy said, with a nod of his head, "I cannot dispute."

She had learned he was thoughtful and deliberate; there was little Darcy did without an express reason. His reasoning was not faultless, for however carefully considered it was. Her uncle had called him responsible, and Elizabeth still agreed with that assessment. That he had gone to Kent himself to ensure the cottage had been prepared properly for her family was not kindness she was apt to overlook.

Elizabeth had learned other things, too, things that made her heart race. He was captivated by her breasts. Her fingernails ignited his passions, whether she was combing his hair or clawing his back. She learned — and in retrospect, it struck her as obvious — that if she let him be slow and gentle, there would be little pain and no blood. The education of their girls was something her parents had treated with negligence and nonchalance. For the most part, she had been able to learn all that she cared to, and disregard all that did not interest her. As a gently bred maiden, however, some topics were forbidden. What she had learned about relations between a man and woman had come from novels — usually morality tales where a heroine was the object of a dangerous man’s lust. To a maiden, men were a threat. As a mistress, she was learning that did not have to be the case. Darcy’s attentions could be pleasing. Preconceived notions of what surrendering to a man was supposed to be did not necessarily have a place in their lives.

“I was surprised that your friends treated me with respect,” Elizabeth said. “I am afraid I did not know what to expect. I am out of my depth.”

"Miss Bennet," Darcy said, “Your respectability is not a question. Your name has been linked to mine. My consequence will protect you. In time, I hope you will grow comfortable with that. There are many amusements in London I believe you will enjoy. Do not think society closed off from you.”

“I thank you for introducing me to your friends,” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Gilliam was very charming.” She noticed Darcy’s coffee cup was empty and offered to fill it again. He assented, thanked her and watched her pour. He had, of course, assured her of much the same before the invitations went out. It was a different thing to have him boast of the protection of his consequence than to have six well-bred friends sit at her table.

When she handed the cup and saucer back to him, Darcy said suddenly, “He would not provide for you.”

“Pardon?”

Darcy shrugged. “He would not provide for you as I have done.”

"Sir," she said carefully, endeavoring not to let the bubbling offense overtake her, “I hope I am misunderstanding you at present.”

The saucer clattered when Darcy placed it on a nearby table. “I would not want you to think that any
man would do for you and your family as I have done."
Folding her arms, she asked, “Are you trying to warn me off seeking another protector?”

To her surprise, Darcy answered with a vehement, “Yes.”

"Let me assure you,” she replied, vexed, “I have no intentions of seeking another arrangement at this
time.” She had spurned the interest of respectable men because of her feelings for Darcy. Unable to
reconcile marrying another man while in love with him, she had refused Mr. Harvey and discouraged
Mr. Laurie. Her love had been fragmented and splintered by Darcy’s subsequent choices, but she still
had greater faith in him than any other man. That he could think otherwise was infuriating! Had she
been willing to give over everything to any man that offered, she would have married Mr. Harvey!

But Darcy only heard, “At this time?”

Elizabeth sighed. “It would be unreasonable of me to think you and I will have this arrangement
forever. You must marry someday, and while I know it is the typical thing for a man in your position
to have a mistress whether he is married or single, I think you are the type to have enough respect for
his bride that he would keep only unto her, at least in the beginning.”

Darcy dismissed her concerns with an airy, “I have no intention of marrying.”

"You must. A man has a duty to provide an heir to his estate.”

He insisted, “I am not concerned about that.”

"I do not believe it,” Elizabeth replied. “To be unconcerned about the future of your estate would be
irresponsible, and that is not in your character.”

"Georgiana's son can inherit as well as any of mine,” Darcy pointed out.

“Miss Darcy is a child still,” she argued. However womanly the figure of Darcy’s sister, she was not
yet out. To speak of Miss Darcy’s children, like it was a done thing, was absurd. “She has no
children of her own. You cannot put all of Pemberley's hopes on her.”

Irritated, he asked, “What would you have me do?”

"Pay me the compliment of your honesty,” Elizabeth answered.

"I am.”

"I know better, sir, than to think you intend to while away your life in bachelorhood,” Elizabeth said.
“You must marry someday.”

To this, Darcy said, “I am my own master.”

"Society is the master of every man and woman,” Elizabeth countered. “You will give over and cede to expectations and responsibilities. Sooner, rather than later, I expect. When you do, I must be prepared."

Darcy said, “I am shocked at you, Miss Bennet.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “I am become very cynical. That is the lot I have chosen. Upon reflection, I do not believe I chose it with my eyes as open as I thought.” Her fingers gently touched the lip of his china coffee cup. His money had brought her peace of mind and many beautiful things. It was naive to think that peace would be anything but fleeting.

"There is no undoing it now,” he replied.

“You are quite correct,” Elizabeth answered. “This is the lot I have chosen, and this is what I must make do in. I have the illusion of respectability so long as your consequence protects me. Should you fail me, I will need another protector or poverty awaits me.”

His burning eyes intent, Darcy hissed, “I shall never abandon you."

Under normal circumstances, Elizabeth delighted in arguing with people when she felt they were in the wrong. In this instance — his belief being so passionate, and her own being detrimental to herself — she decided to end the row. “We have barely begun. There can be no need for a conversation such as this now.”

"Miss Bennet,” he insisted, “you must believe me. I regret introducing Gilliam to you, if this is what your knowing single men leads to. Let us discuss others of the party.”

That suited Elizabeth well enough. “Mr. and Mrs. Atkinson were quite pleasant. I liked them very much. I do not think Mrs. Atkinson easily scandalized and it was very pleasing. Tell me, how do you know such a fine couple?”

“Atkinson is a member of my club,” Darcy answered easily. “I was loosely acquainted with his wife before they were wed through some mutual friends.”
Finding this a much more pleasant topic of conversation, she asked, “How long have they been wed?”

He said vaguely, “Two years, perhaps?”

Darcy was neither a gossip nor a student of character. It was rare to engage him discussing other people. Elizabeth could not resist asking, “Do you think them happy?”

He shrugged. "Tolerably so. Their match was made in money and consequence. Their tempers are well-suited, and they have every appearance of being satisfied with their lot. They do not like one another as much as one might wish to like a spouse, but I suppose they felt the compromise fair in light of all the other circumstances in its favor.”

As casually as she could, Elizabeth asked, “Did you support them during their engagement?”

The question appeared to surprise him. “I suppose I did,” Darcy answered after some consideration. "I cannot recall either of them looking to my opinion. Certainly, there is nothing about the match that gave me cause for concern. Their families approved, their situations were well-suited, and their
tempers a good fit.”

“They do not love one another,” Elizabeth protested. Darcy had separated Mr. Bingley from Jane because he had thought she did not care. What hypocrisy led him to approve of a loveless match between the Atkinsons? True, it was not his concern. They had not asked for his opinion and it sounded as though he had not offered it. Yet, the Atkinsons were both from wealth and he thought it unobjectionable to marry without love. Jane, who was poor, was penalized for shyness.

Darcy shrugged again, “I do not believe either of them were looking for a love match.”

“I feel sad for them, then,” Elizabeth sniffed.

He protested. “They are happy with their choices. You would not choose to marry a man you did not love, but you cannot expect every person to make the choices you would. You must account for differences in situation and temper.”

“I suppose the temper that is confusing me is yours,” Elizabeth admitted.

“I am hardly party to this.”

“And that is the part that is hard to credit. We both know there have been young ladies in your life, who, when not showing a degree of affection you felt adequate, you encouraged their beaus to abandon them. Yet, when the lady is rich, apparently, you find a complete lack of tender feelings acceptable.”

Darcy frowned. “You speak of your sister.”

Elizabeth did not find that worthy of a response.

He sighed. “Your own knowledge of your sister, I have acknowledged must be the superior. I will not argue with you on that score. I will, however, explain that it is not a lack of tender feelings I find objectionable, or even unequal affections. What I find impossible to overlook is willful deception.”

“Jane has never deceived anyone in her life!”

“If you believe so,” Darcy replied, “it must be so. You have the greater knowledge of Miss Bennet. I would not say otherwise. For my part, I saw my friend overcome with feelings for a young lady, feelings which he thought mutual.” He held up a hand to stop Elizabeth’s protestations that those feelings had been mutual. “I saw pleasing manners, but no indication of regard. I would not wish for him to offer for the young lady, marry her, think he had made a match in mutual affection, only to learn years later that she had done it to please her family. If a person is honest from the beginning that their interest stems from material considerations, and the potential spouse finds it acceptable, I shall not argue.”

When she last saw Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth had been assured he still loved Jane. So much had happened since then. It was possible his affection could have withstood the tragedy of Lydia’s flight or the reduction of Jane’s circumstances, but it was clear his courage could not. Darcy was wrong about Jane. She could not hear him speak of her sister without her blood boiling. But what did it matter now? Bingley’s love for Jane could have saved them, but he had never acted. Darcy had acted. She was torn between anger and gratitude. Darcy provided for her family, but had he not interfered in the first place, his protection would not be needed.

Elizabeth found herself wondering again who the man before her was. Needing to make some reply to him, she said, “You may choose not to argue with persons who marry for consequence, and you
are perfectly right to refrain, but such a marriage cannot be agreeable.”

“And yet that is what you insist I must make,” he mused.

Elizabeth was puzzled. “I never said any such thing.”

“That is precisely what you have been insisting,” he said.

“I am not understanding your meaning. I claimed you needed to wed to produce an heir. I gave no parameters for how you should feel about the lady.”

“If your intimate knowledge of myself is not enough for you to discern it, then to expand on the subject could only be disastrous.”

Elizabeth threatened him sweetly: “My imagination will run free with it.”

”Let it run as free as you wish.” Darcy reached for her hands. “Come, I wish to take you to bed.”

Elizabeth allowed him to clasp her hands and said, “You are very bold. We were arguing not a moment ago.”

“Do you object?”

“To boldness, arguing or allowing you in my bed?”

“Any of the three.”

“Boldness,” Elizabeth said, “I prefer when it is my own. Arguing with you has no sport at all. You are entirely too rational.”

“And the other?”

“If that is your wish,” she answered, “I can oblige.”

*****

Elizabeth looked up at the canopy above the bed and focused on breathing. The first thing she became aware of was his thumb, rhythmically stroking hers. He had grasped her hand soon after he had begun, intertwining their fingers. As her belly got tighter, her grip had grown more fierce. The happy fire he ignited engulfed her entire person in its flames, was smothered by pleasure and left her limp and whole. Looking down her body, past the rumpled skirts and petticoats he had gathered
around her waist, Elizabeth saw Darcy’s curly hair. He knelt on the floor, flanked by her legs, with his head pillowed on her thigh.

When she was master of herself, Elizabeth lifted the leg beneath him. “Darcy?”

“Are you well?”

Elizabeth squeezed his fingers. “Very well. And yourself?”

“I came off,” he answered. “You can have nothing more to fear from me to-night.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to JrTT and SMAW for cold reading this chapter and offering lots of good feedback.
“I should become an actress,” Elizabeth said, her eyes following the players on stage instead of the occupants of other boxes.

Darcy had insisted that she maintain a box at the Theatre Royal. Elizabeth had always enjoyed attending the theatre with her aunt and uncle when she was in Town. She did not object to Darcy’s suggestion, though she was not entirely pleased with his reasoning. To Darcy, a Cyprian needed to have a box to show her status. Ostentatious displays of wealth, he did not care for. Careful attention to projecting the correct image, however, he found a necessity. On the heels of his requirement for a box was a further stipulation: Elizabeth should not attend a performance without him.

The theatre was a common place for women in her position to shop for other lovers. Elizabeth could not exactly determine Darcy’s motives for requiring his presence. She supposed it could be jealousy. Her remarks about Gilliam earlier in the week had ignited some possessive side of him. Or, perhaps he wished to save her from being cornered by unwanted admirers. If she spied on the occupants of the other boxes — as was often the true goal in attending the theatre — she knew she would see women in attractive gowns holding court to a bevy of admirers. As for herself, she was content to be admired only by Darcy.

Actresses, of course, amassed legions of admirers. To her tease, Darcy replied stiffly, “You certainly shall not.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “I do not recall ambitions of the stage being part of our negotiations, Mr. Darcy. It seems to me if I wish to become an actress, as long I as I make myself available to you, you can have no cause for complaint.”

“You are not serious,” he decided, “so I shall not argue with you.”

“No,” she admitted. Then, curiosity spurred her to wonder, “Tell me, have amateur theatrics ever been part of your house parties in the country?”

“Never any of mine,” Darcy answered.

Elizabeth grinned. “So you have only taken part as someone else’s guest. I long to know what parts you have played.”

“You have a vivid imagination,” he said. “I say I have never held theatrics and your mind wishes to know what characters I have played.”

She shrugged. An accusation of a vivid imagination was hard to refute, even if she wished to. Every word he said only embellished the image in her mind of Darcy, graceless in a poorly thrown together costume on some slipshod stage. “You would be the hero, of course.”

“Do me the honor of giving me a small part in your imaginary theatrics, if I must take part.”

“Oh, no!” Elizabeth cried. “You must play the hero! I am perfectly convinced no one would allow you play only a minor part, even if you objected strenuously to the activity.”

“As it turns out,” he said drolly, “I do object strenuously to the activity.”
“There can be no evil in a small production,” Elizabeth argued, “among friends with strong moral characters.”

“The evils inherent in a production such as this,” he said, with a nod towards the stage, “you tacitly acknowledge.”

“You are determined to avoid naming the roles you have played, but I am equally determined to learn them. You have made the dire error of introducing me to your friends. If you do not tell me, I can always ask one of them.”

“I think no reply serves me best at this time,” Darcy said. “Any protest I make regarding my friends’ knowledge would be taken by you as a confirmation of things that were neither stated nor implied.”

“And that was no reply?” she asked, hiding a smile behind her fan. “I’ve always thought a lack of a reply would involve some sort of silence.”

In the brightly lit theater, Elizabeth scanned the boxes on the opposite end of the auditorium. To see and be seen was the purpose of coming to a play. She was at a disadvantage. Those of Darcy’s set who had heard he had taken a mistress and bought her a box at the theater need only recognize him to realize who she was. For her part, there were few faces she could link to him. She had not yet seen Colonel Fitzwilliam or Mr. Bingley in Town. She had been acquainted with a handful of Darcy’s other friends. There were scarcely over half a dozen faces she could link to Darcy as his connections. How many people in this theater actually knew him?

How many women knew him as she did?

Her eyes flickered back to the stage. Darcy had said something about the evils of the production, but the evils were in the seeming lack of virtue in the performers. Men desired visible, sought after companions, and no woman was more visible than an actress on stage. As for the actresses, none of them seemed to find much wrong with securing multiple protectors. For a woman in her own position, even a box was a venue for seeking more interested men. Even now, in this very room, there were Cyprians showing off their bodies and angling for trinkets.

How many gifts had Darcy given to a woman with a pretty décolletage? How many actresses had he wanted, and how many had he had? However ignorant she was, the occupants of those other boxes knew. He was nine-and-twenty years old, well-connected and staggeringly wealthy. Everything Darcy did was of interest to someone, and he had spent several seasons in London already.

Somehow, her own ignorance embarrassed her more than what the occupants of those other boxes thought of her. They would see her and think Darcy had purchased her beautiful gown, Darcy had reserved her a box at the theatre, Darcy had put her up in a grand house in Mayfair. They would think she had wound her legs around his waist as he lifted her against the floral wallpaper in that house. And they would be correct, or as reasonably close to correct as strangers tended to be. It was easy to be ashamed of it, but it was equally easy to read the society section of the newspaper and know not one of them was any better. Money and consequence made morality operate according to different rules.

And though the world may ignore the vices of the rich, it was hard to ignore hypocrisy from Darcy. He claimed the theater evil, and the licentiousness of its participants was the root of that, but he claimed so to his mistress. Was their situation not equally evil?

Elizabeth was saved from these musings by a third person entering their box.

“A pleasure to see you again, Miss Bennet.”
“Colonel Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth cried in delight. She turned to Darcy. “You had not told me your cousin was in Town!”

Warily, Darcy answered, “I had not known of it.”

“I wrote Georgiana,” the colonel answered. “She was to inform you of it.” Eying Elizabeth, he added, “But I suppose you’ve found the company of another lady preferable as of late.”

Elizabeth colored. Darcy rose and said, “Unacceptable, Fitzwilliam.”

Continuing to address Elizabeth, the Colonel shrugged. “Your being here, in that context, with him is neither here nor there to me. I am surprised at Darcy,” he said, with stern eyebrows turned momentarily towards his cousin, “but it is common enough for men.”

“Who did you hear it from?” Darcy barked.

“Lady Catherine, if you can believe it.” Casually, the colonel sat. “She was rather triumphant about it, really.” He glanced at Elizabeth and added, “I shall spare you quoting her exact words.”

“I think I would prefer to know,” Elizabeth answered. “I see nothing about my situation that can cause any persons triumph.”

“Gossips,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, wincing slightly. “You know how they are, pleased as punch at anyone’s misfortunes but their own. Lady Catherine in particular had that dreadful parson, you remember the one?” Darcy nodded.

“My cousin,” Elizabeth reminded the colonel, “Mr. Collins.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “Well, you know it was on her advice that Collins turned you all out of your father’s estate — do not recall the name.”

“Longbourn,” she interjected quietly.

“Right. She believes herself quite right to have done it now.”

“And I suppose,” Elizabeth said heatedly, “that she is entirely insensible to the fact that without her advice, my situation could never have been brought down so low?”

“Quite on the contrary,” Colonel Fitzwilliam answered. “I think that to be her favorite part.”

Elizabeth turned to face the stage, repulsed. Lady Catherine had made it no secret that she disapproved of how the Bennets had educated their daughters or how they put them all out into society at once. Elizabeth herself had not tempered her impertinent tongue or opinions during her time at Rosings. Lady Catherine must find it fitting that such wild girls be punished.

She was startled out of her reverie by the touch of Darcy’s hand, covering hers.

After a moment, Colonel Fitzwilliam said, “It is not so bad, is it? You have almost all of London open to you now.”

Her father had hated London. Growing up, she had always thought he simply disliked the travel and expense of moving a wife and five daughters to Town. The air was bad. There were too many things to do. Mr. Bennet never would have had a moment of peace when his daughters began arguing over what amusements they would see. Lydia would have wanted to go to a ball every night. Kitty would follow her lead. Serious Mary would stay in, preferring to study with masters. Mrs. Bennet would want to see plays and concerts — to see and be seen. As for herself, Elizabeth loved to dance. She
would have wanted to follow Lydia and Kitty to those balls sometimes. But other nights, she would stay in, so that she could rise early to enjoy the parks and gardens. And dear Jane would want to please everyone and do everything. Mr. Bennet had not the social natures of most of his daughters. It would have been torture to be dragged about from ball to play to concert and back again. But, he would have adored the hypocrisy and foolishness of the ton.

Tears pricked in her eyes. Glaring at the Colonel, Darcy forcefully ushered him from the box. “Whatever you think of my actions, you can have no cause to disturb Miss Bennet.”

“Darcy, we shall discuss this further at another time,” Colonel Fitzwilliam promised on his way out.

When his cousin was gone, Darcy began: “Lady Catherine —“

Elizabeth held up a palm to silence him. “It is not that,” she insisted. “Colonel Fitzwilliam’s words made me think of my father. He hated Town. His preference to stay at home is the only reason I had not been much in London society before.”

“We should leave.”

“That will create talk,” she protested, searching through her reticule for a handkerchief. “Miss Bennet makes an appearance at the theatre, begins to cry and leaves early? What will people say?”

Darcy shrugged. “Let them say what they wish to say. It shall not be remembered long.”

She dabbed at her eyes. Convinced the spell had ended as suddenly as it began, Elizabeth said, “No, I would prefer stay.”

*****

Darcy’s silence on the subjects that arose during the performance lasted only until they were ensconced in the carriage to return home. “I hope you shall not let my cousin’s words concern you.”

“He was but the messenger,” Elizabeth replied, “and is quite safe. I shall retain the right to be as angry about Lady Catherine’s part as I wish.”

“She has no power over you.”

“Perhaps not now,” Elizabeth assented, “but she has power over my cousin, and she used it ill when it mattered. I never held expectations that Mr. Collins should allow my family to stay at Longbourn indefinitely. It is a small estate and it is natural that its provisions should go to his wife and children over his predecessor’s. But I cannot but think it very unChristian of him to refuse my family the time needed to make provisions. Splitting us between my uncles was all we could manage.” Her mother had considered saving money perfectly useless; her father had not made the attempt to check her. Truthfully, they would have always been in need of some benefactor. Securing a benefactor through a brilliant marriage had been her mother’s plan. A plan built on securing the cooperation of hypothetical persons was doomed to failure.

“I feel some responsibility in that must be mine,” Darcy suggested heavily.

“What do you mean?”

“I find it unlikely that my aunt was insensible to my attentions towards you.”

Like Jane, Elizabeth mused. Though the object of his affections, Elizabeth had been a stranger to his ways, and therefore, unable to perceive it. To those who knew him better, his intentions must have
been clear. "You believe she struck a petty blow at my family through Mr. Collins to discourage you?"

"I would not think it beneath her," he answered.

"If she intends for you to marry Miss de Bourgh, I am certainly no threat to those plans now," Elizabeth surmised. A mistress did nothing to affect a man’s desirability in the Marriage Mart. From her ladyship’s perspective, it could even be a reasonable compromise: Darcy could both have the country girl he had admired and make a respectable match with his cousin. "Yes, if your theory is true, she is right to feel triumphant. She has done a splendid job of securing her own interest to the detriment of others.'"

"You, of all people, should know I have no intention of marrying Anne," Darcy claimed.

She wanted to laugh at that statement, but there was no way of twisting it into a joke that would not cause him pain. Lady Catherine’s interference had escalated the situation that herself, her mother and her sisters had faced. That she had done it in the name of an event that would never come to pass neither brought Elizabeth peace nor undid the detrimental effects of Lady Catherine’s actions. As for a marriage between Darcy and Miss de Bourgh, Elizabeth accepted his words. Had he any intentions in that quarter, he never would have proposed marriage to Elizabeth last April. It would be a marriage for money and consequence, not for love. While Darcy could accept that choice from others, it would not choose it for himself. More recently, he had told her he had no intentions to marry. But he should know from experience that falling in love was not a choice. One could only choose what they did with their love. One could choose to nurture it or let it wither and die. He had loved Elizabeth against his will. Why did he find it unfathomable that he may someday love another lady?

"Have you shared your lack of intentions with Miss de Bourgh?" Elizabeth wondered.

"I have never given her any cause for expectations," Darcy replied.

"Her mother has done that for you," Elizabeth reminded him. "If she takes her mother’s words as law, like so many of her ladyship’s acquaintance do, the burden on your shoulders is not to build expectation, but to dispel it."

"Expectation is built on friendships. I have none with Anne. If she chooses to delude herself, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, there is nothing I can do for it."

"I suppose it would be rather rude," Elizabeth agreed, "to visit Rosings and tell your poor cousin, apropos of nothing, that you have no intention to marry her."

"I would think so." He smiled slightly, but it soon fell from his face. "Tell me honestly, how are you faring after this evening?"

Elizabeth sighed. "Well enough. I had always known Lady Catherine advised Mr. Collins to turn us out. I cannot be too surprised if she did it out of malice, or if she is pleased he listened. I will even do her the favor of remembering that what you think she hoped to gain from it is only a theory, and not something either of us know for certain."

"I am certain my cousin’s comments were not intended to elicit any painful recollections about your father."

"Such thoughts must intrude," Elizabeth replied. "I would not wish to stop thinking of him."

The carriage came to a halt in front of Elizabeth’s house. Darcy alighted from the carriage and
handed her down. He walked with her to the door, and as she entered, said, “If you do not object, I should like to stay here to-night.”

Elizabeth looked at him, confusion on her face. "I do not follow. Do you mean to sleep here?"

A maid came to take their coats, hats and gloves. Elizabeth walked to the parlor, Darcy trailing behind her. When they assured of privacy, he said, “I would prefer that you were not alone after this evening.” He reached out. One of his fingers stroked the back of her hand.

Elizabeth bit her lip. “You do not think yourself unwelcome,” she said, “but I fear Miss Darcy will worry if you do not come home.”

"I keep later hours than my sister," Darcy parried. "She will not notice."

“Think of to-morrow,” Elizabeth said. “You have no clothes here. What will you wear?”

"I shall send for my valet in the morning," Darcy answered. "He can bring a change of clothes and my shaving kit."

"You do not have a night shirt," she suggested. "You shall be cold."

He stepped closer to Elizabeth, drawing her into his arms. He swiftly kissed her mouth, then did it again, then said, “I shall have you to keep me warm.”

Feeling a bit obtuse, Elizabeth realized he intended to sleep in her bed. He had never done that before, nor had she ever expected him to. He kissed her again. “Oh,” she breathed. “All right.”

Darcy stepped back, dropping his arms from around her. Elizabeth took his hand to lead him to her bedroom. New wallpaper, cheery linens and delicate furniture had quite transformed it from the room it had been when she claimed it. Robinson would be waiting in her dressing room to help her into a nightgown. She eyed Darcy. What he would wear and who would help him change remained a mystery to her.

“Shall I call a footman to help you out of your coat?” Elizabeth asked.

“That shall not be necessary,” Darcy answered. He raised an eyebrow. “I think you quite capable of divesting a man of his coats.”

Determined not to be unnerved, Elizabeth peeled Darcy’s coat from his shoulders. His tight evening jacket hugged his arms with such ferocity as to make it hard to remove. When she was finished, and he stood in his shirt sleeves, Elizabeth laid it over a chair. His waistcoat required her attention next. She unbuttoned it, and smoothing her hands against his chest, was able to easily slip it off. The waistcoat joined his other on the chair. A greater problem was presented by his cravat, tied in a fashionable cascading pattern. “Should I strangle you,” Elizabeth said, lifting the cloth in search of its hidden knots, “it was not done on purpose.”

“I thank you for the assurance,” he rumbled, his palms finding her hips.

“I would think again on distracting me just now,” Elizabeth said, digging her nails into the knot.

Withdrawing his hands, he said, “My apologies.”

When the neckcloth came loose in her hands, Elizabeth gathered up his coats again. “I shall have Robinson hang these up,” she explained.
“A moment, please,” Darcy said. He toed his slippers off, stripped himself of his braces and breeches, and of the latter requested, “Have her hang these, as well.”

Elizabeth accepted the garment. Leaving Darcy in nothing but a loose shirt that hung halfway down his thighs, Elizabeth disappeared into her dressing room.

By now, she had learned her abigail’s boredom was a mask the girl did not wear well. Robinson was, as Elizabeth anticipated she would be, disconcerted to have the charge of a man’s clothing. She was a good girl, and she hung the items up as she was asked. When she was finished, Robinson transformed Elizabeth from fashionable patron of the theatre to country girl in a modest nightgown. For Darcy’s comfort, she slipped on a pair of stockings. It would not do to give him a chill if her feet were to touch him in the night.

Darcy was in bed, thumbing through a book of poetry she had left on the bedside table. He put it down when she entered, and shuffled to the side to let Elizabeth climb under the covers. He laid on his back, and tucked her against his side. Elizabeth waited for him to lift her nightgown, but he only put out the candle.

*****

In the morning light, Mr. Darcy had unkempt hair and a chin covered with short, prickly whiskers. It fascinated her to see him so; Elizabeth wanted to touch his face. She did not wish to wake him and that alone kept her from indulging in her curiosity. Sadly, it appeared watching the man with some intensity was enough to wake him. Darcy blinked at her, and rolled onto his back. He had begun the night in that position and shifted to his side as he slept. Now that he had returned to it, Elizabeth noticed something that had not been present when they had gone to bed. A peculiar aspect of his person had caused the linens to be raised unmistakably.

“That is for me, I suppose,” she said cheekily.

“Pardon?” Darcy asked. He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. His hands collapsed onto the pillow. Darcy met her gaze. Elizabeth raised her eyebrows and glanced towards the area of interest. “No,” he said, sleepily. “That occurs every morning.”

“I believe I could be prevailed upon to accept it regardless,” Elizabeth said as he sat up. In other respects, Darcy was slow to rise. His mind was still fogged with sleep. “Of course,” she added, “I do not have to, if you are finding yourself unequal to it.”

“No, no,” he said, shaking off the rapidly withering drowsiness, “far be it from me to decline such a generous offer.” He pulled her onto his lap.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to JrTT and SMAW for reading and hashing out this chapter!
Chapter 6

Elizabeth’s satisfaction with her own daring lasted through breakfast. Wanting to spare Darcy the indignity of appearing in the breakfast room in evening attire, she ordered the meal brought up to her apartment. Because he needed to send a note on to his valet, Darcy asked for a sheet of paper while they waited. In the habit of using her pre-breakfast hours to attend to her correspondence, Elizabeth was happy to provide paper and ink for two. Though she had intentions of writing Jane, Darcy occupied her thoughts. It was strange new territory, to sit with a half-dressed man. She had seen him in states of undress before, but always in the midst of some act that demanded it. At those moments, one or both of them became frenzied and wild, seeking pleasure above all else. Even when he was seeking to give pleasure, rather than take it, there was a sense that he had lost touch with the sensible and worldly side of himself.

To have him sit in her room, calmly writing, while stripped down to last night’s breeches and shirt was an entirely new intimacy. No one had combed his hair but herself, with her fingers. The collar of his shirt laid limp on his shoulders, instead of high and hugging his neck.

Darcy liked to touch her neck. He liked to kiss it, especially. He kissed her neck like the compulsion to do so held equal sway over him as the need to breathe. He sucked on the places where her blood thundered. He pressed his entire face against it when he reached the heights of his pleasure, like he wanted to meld his entire being into herself. His neck was always hidden behind starched cravats. Elizabeth had a certain appreciation for how men’s fashion accented the male form. She had not, however, had the opportunity to properly admire his neck in the past. Elizabeth understood his fascination with her neck much better for having faced his own, across the table. She followed the curve of it as he bent to write with her eyes. Were she to kiss his neck, would he feel the same delight she did whenever he pressed his hungry lips to hers?

The letter to Jane she wished to write was utilitarian. Elizabeth hoped to describe the changes she had made to the house since Jane toured it and relate her observations of London. In her previous letters to the family in Kent, when Elizabeth wrote of Darcy, she praised his generous nature while carefully omitting any overt references to the unsavory aspect of their connection. Though she was too good to express judgement, Jane was neither ignorant nor obtuse. She knew what Elizabeth had allowed herself to become. Though Elizabeth did not write openly of it, the context of her place in Darcy’s life informed everything. Of her own confused feelings — love for him, or some confused shade of it; desire for him, or some ashamed semblance of it — she could say nothing.

When her pen was next out of ink, Elizabeth set it down. Shifting her focus from his neck to his hands, she watched him form his words. Even when sending only a few lines to Grosvenor Square, he wrote slowly.

She needed a distraction from her own thoughts. Ripe for the teasing, Elizabeth asked him, “Is your valet an educated man, Mr. Darcy?”
“No more so than any other,” he answered, confused. “To what can that question pertain?”

“To your labors over that note,” Elizabeth said. She raised an eyebrow. “A line or two would be sufficient. I hope for your sake he is an educated man, so that he will correctly ascertain the meaning behind the words of four syllables you toil to produce.”

Darcy smiled. “I expect ‘habiliments’ to be in the vocabulary of any valet.”

When he finished the note, Darcy gave it to Elizabeth. A footman and her carriage were dispatched; the footman to deliver the note and the carriage to return with Mr. Darcy’s valet and provisions. His own had been sent on the previous night, should Miss Darcy have some need for it this morning. With nothing else to do while they waited for breakfast, he took up the poetry book he had been perusing the night before. Mr. Fry had left a well-stocked library behind, which Elizabeth was far from averse to pillaging. When a particular passage interested him, Darcy read it out loud for her benefit.

Elizabeth put the letter away. There was little sense in attempting to finish it with him here. She requested that he read until breakfast arrived, and told herself to simply enjoy the timbre of his voice and the shape of his mouth.

When breakfast was served, they retreated to her dressing room to eat. It made for an idyllic picture.

*****

After he had been dressed and shaved, other responsibilities drew Mr. Darcy from Elizabeth’s side. Her house was too large for just herself. Though she owed Mrs. Atkinson a visit, a short morning call did little to alleviate loneliness or boredom. As she moved more in society, she would make more friends, but it could not make up for an empty home. To live so many years with a nervous mother and frolicking sisters, then months in Cheapside with her little cousins, any house that was not filled with family would feel eerily silent.

Darcy returned at the Fashionable Hour, driving a phaeton pulled by matched bays. Living in Town had not provided her with the fresh air she longed for, and Darcy was determined to take Elizabeth on a ride through Hyde Park. For her part, an open carriage ride through the park sounded delightful. She required very little convincing.

They circled through Mayfair, back up to Grosvenor Square to enter the park through the Grosvenor-gate. Ladies began filling the park at five-thirty, not filtering out until seven. Their purpose was to see and be seen, but for Elizabeth, she ached to see the natural beauty of the park. The rich landscape of hill and dale, wood and water was artfully blended and eminently beautiful. Elizabeth looked forward to spending an hour or two in the park before needing to dress for dinner. The view from Mr. Darcy’s well-hung carriage and her partner’s conversation and appreciation for the park was all that she could have hoped for. They traversed the path at a leisurely pace, to both admire the scenery and greet acquaintances.

Without warning, Darcy’s open manner suddenly reverted to the man she had not seen since winter
in Hertfordshire. He became gloomy and morose, failing to give the friends they passed more than the slightest greeting. Elizabeth touched his arm. He closed his eyes. The horses clipped along, needing no direction from him.

"Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth said gently, "What is the matter?" Darcy steadfastly looked ahead and made no answer.

Elizabeth repeated her question.

He sighed, "They did not see us."

Concerned, she asked, "Who?"

"My sister and her companion," Darcy answered flatly.

"Oh." Her stomach sunk. Miss Darcy was a sweet girl, terribly shy and desperate to be a proper young lady. From the moment Darcy had introduced them at Pemberley, Elizabeth had liked her very much. Since meeting her again in London, Elizabeth had not been a good friend to Miss Darcy. Though Elizabeth had initially refused to become Darcy’s mistress, she soon changed her mind, and she had used her friendship with his sister to throw herself back into contact with him. It was no wonder Miss Darcy was so shy. To be used, as Elizabeth had used her, did not appear to be a rare occasion in her life. Mr. Wickham had taken her trust and trampled it. Miss Bingley often professed affection for Miss Darcy, but paid her no notice when they were in company together. It seemed Miss Darcy was doomed to be thought of as an expedient way to her brother by all her acquaintance.

"She is a very dear girl," Elizabeth said awkwardly. She deeply regretted forcing Miss Darcy into becoming involved, however remotely, with her situation.

"I am glad you think so," Darcy replied. "It had been a great hope of mine that you would be friends."

"I am sorry to lose her friendship," Elizabeth said, "though I understand why you must feel I am no longer an appropriate friend."

"Miss Bennet," he sighed, "I do wish you would refrain from deciding my opinions without consulting me."

"You did not stop to talk to her," Elizabeth pointed out. "You did not even greet her. People will think you cut her. I cannot fathom how you intend to repair that damage."

"She lives in my house," he said. "I cannot think whatever gossips saw us will be overly concerned."
She and Darcy did not share the same view of his consequence. He thought himself perhaps more important than he was, she thought him perhaps more interesting to the ton. It was fruitless to argue. Whatever he needed to do to circumvent the gossip would be done on his own terms, at whichever time he thought it necessary. Darcy was the sort to not accept less. Wryly, she replied, “I will leave that for you to determine.”

"Georgiana is exceedingly fond of you," he said suddenly. 

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “I imagine that your doing," she replied. "Miss Darcy looks up to you so much that I do not believe she would hesitate to adopt any opinion of yours. You wanted her to approve of me, so she could not help but oblige. Which is not to say," Elizabeth hurried to add, "that I am accusing her of insincerity. She was entirely sincere in all of our discourse. Merely that you cannot deny your opinions inform hers."

"No," he said. "I think that a fine observation. However much I influence her, she was fond of you.” Darcy sighed. “And if you think I hate for her to see you now, you are correct, but not for the reasons you suppose. It is not that I am ashamed of you, Miss Bennet, or that I think you unfitting company for a young girl. I hold you in the highest regard.”

It was kind of him to say, Elizabeth thought as she watched him. There was sincerity in his countenance, though she thought his esteem misguided. He kept her in a fine style, and she had access to more amusements and money than ever before, but she had still been a gentleman’s daughter. No matter how many pretty things she had or how much money she sent to her mother, the choice she made should have been unthinkable.

Darcy continued: “You have changed. I have changed you. The way you dress, the way you interact with society — I have made you change these things about yourself. You do not hold yourself as you once did.” He slapped the reigns against the bays. “Perhaps they are all superficial changes. Yet, I should not like my sister to see you again, and know the price you paid because of her brother.”

Weakly, Elizabeth asked, “Miss Darcy knows?”

Darcy looked at her oddly. “Of course she knows. An attempt at disguising it,” he said, with a distasteful turn of his mouth, “would cause more grief than not. I would not pain my sister by lying to her.”

“You were surprised that Colonel Fitzwilliam knew,” Elizabeth reminded him.

“Because he is not often in Town,” Darcy explained, “not because I sought to conceal it from anyone. Miss Bennet, concealment of these arrangements invites investigation and in some cases, extortion. You know me too well to think I am liked by all my acquaintance. If we were to hide it, and someone was to discover an unmarried woman, who presented herself as chaste —“ he stopped there suddenly. “They would hold power over you, Miss Bennet,” he finished. “It does not bear thinking about what they would do with it.”
If the ton had seemed before hypocritical and foolish, now they struck Elizabeth as dangerous. Talk was quickly forgotten, but it was often malicious. People sought to rise their own standing and diminish that of others. If Darcy had not precisely sought to diminish her, he still had. In the eyes of his cousin, in the eyes of his sister, she was not the gentlewoman she once was. The Colonel was too polite to speak against her in her presence and Miss Darcy would never utter a word against her brother. Yet, her relationships with both of them must change as a consequence of her understanding with Mr. Darcy. The very way she interacted with society had by necessity changed. She belonged to Darcy. She depended upon him for everything. She had thought, when she entered this arrangement, that she would retain more freedom as a mistress than as someone’s wife. Her investments were her own. She did not need to consult with anyone before making financial choices. A man was still necessary. She would sink into poverty and disgrace without a protector. And the ton, who had much hypocrisy and even more foolishness, had little compassion. They would notice it, smirk, and forget.

“I wish to return home,” Elizabeth said.

Darcy obeyed, urging the bays out of the park. “I had hoped you would enjoy this outing,” he said.

“Perhaps another time,” she replied lightly. “Hyde Park is beautiful. I think, whatever the fashionable hour is, that I would rather see it in the morning.”

“Another time,” he echoed.

When they arrived at the house, Darcy could not stay, citing another engagement for dinner. “I do not foresee making an escape before supper,” he confessed. “Would you be willing to receive me after?”

The lateness of Town hours meant he was asking to come in the dead of night.

Eyebrow raised, Elizabeth asked slyly, “To what can such a visit pertain?”

“Merely that I prefer your company to any other person’s,” Darcy answered. “I prevented you from enjoying our outing to the park; for that, I am exceedingly sorry. You must let me make it up to you.”

Elizabeth was shaken by their conversation in the phaeton. In that, she was not alone. If Darcy required assurance, she had little to give. Herself, however, she had in abundance. “If you chose to come,” she said, “you may come. I will inform the housekeeper, lest you be locked out because the staff has all gone to bed.”

“You are in Town, Miss Bennet,” he said, taking her hand and drawing it to his mouth. “No one goes to bed that early without good reason.”

*****
He had taken her with a desperate ferocity, and when it was over, had laid his head upon her chest, one arm curled around her waist.

It had to mean nothing.

From this angle, Elizabeth could not tell if Darcy had fallen asleep or if he was resting quietly. She could not see his face, only the top of his head. She wound one arm around his shoulders, and with the other, stroked his damp hair. Darcy said nothing. If he had fallen asleep, she would not be surprised. The act seemed to tire him like nothing else, and he had been particularly vigorous tonight. Ironic, that for whatever guilt he carried over what he had done, Darcy sought absolution in her body.

Elizabeth also understood that while the pleasure Darcy produced in her was sometimes quiet and warm and sometimes incredible and intense, his own intensity hardly ever wavered. He had a tendency to lose his composure and his wits. He would cling to her body as he moved, gasping against her neck and saying things that sometimes she could understand and other times she could not.

On this particular evening, as he stretched her out, pressing their clasped hands over her head, her knuckles grazing the silk fabric of the headboard, mere seconds before collapsing, Darcy had cried out, “I love you!” Exertion made his tone raspy, agitated.

The moment was at the end. An uneasy quiet enveloped them. At the very peak of pleasure, Elizabeth could never judge what he was aware of. She had certainly said and done things to him without being fully aware of it. She blushed to recall the many ways she lost control. Darcy had moved off of her, leaving only his head in contact with her person, and grown quiet and still. Elizabeth was left wondering, did he know what he had said? Had he intended to say it? Would Darcy recall saying it?

She was not a stranger to the idea of Darcy harboring tender feelings towards her. He had, nearly a year ago, professed love and offered marriage. She had disdained him, and declined. She had hurled terrible accusations at him, and insulted him grievously. And he, in his goodness, had forgiven her, and wanted her still when they met again in the summer. Lydia’s flight had changed everything. Darcy had always harbored doubts about her suitably because of her family. It was impossible that she could retain power over the man with the connections that she had. That he had appeared in her life yet again was not owing to any attraction to her, but because he had maintained a friendship with her uncle.

That he should say he loved her now, Elizabeth could only imagine that it meant nothing. The intensity of what he felt in bed had always overwhelmed him, making him lose his sense and equanimity. She could not hold him accountable to anything he said at such a time. It would not be fair.

When she thought about it further, Elizabeth painfully acknowledged that it was only proper that it should mean nothing. In light of her family’s weakness, it was unreasonable to assume Darcy still felt tenderly towards her. He may have supposed the easy virtue of one sister was characteristic of them all. That conjecture, Elizabeth certainly proved correct in herself. Though she had been hesitant to accept his offer, she had ultimately surrendered her chastity to him. As a man of strong moral character, he could not love a woman of weak virtue. The painful reality of her situation bore down on her.

Five weeks’ education in the demimonde had cost Elizabeth some of her naivety and almost all of her innocence. She knew mistresses and protectors often had long standing relationships. A woman could be kept by a man for years, if not a decade complete. It would be foolish to assume a stable
relationship did not engage emotion. Without law and God binding these couples, the only thing that kept them together was their desire to be together. It was not that Elizabeth was so innocent to believe love impossible between a man and a woman in such a circumstance. Her own feelings towards Darcy had been engaged long before he took her as his mistress and their intimacy had only intensified them. She could never deny her connection to Darcy now. Yet, she thought, as she shut her eyes against him, as a man, to overcome objections and make a declaration was his duty. Had Darcy felt something towards her, something real and powerful, he would have made an offer of marriage. Had he loved her as he loved her last April, Lydia's disappearance should not have mattered.

It had to mean nothing.

Their situation was tenuous, volatile. She gave him her favors in exchange for income. Many such relationships lasted for years, but many more did not. Once the Season was over, Darcy would leave London to spend the summer in the country. He had an estate and responsibilities. The fortunes of innumerable people rested on his shoulders. For now, he was content to touch Elizabeth and discover her body’s secrets, but no matter what he said, at some point, he would want more. She did not really believe that Darcy would be satisfied to watch Miss Darcy marry, or to teach her sons about Pemberley when he should be teaching his own. He would want a wife someday. He would want children to follow in his footsteps.

If he loved her, that made this situation worse.

It meant nothing.

Darcy stirred, the hand at her waist traveling up her body to cup her breast. He raised himself on his other elbow, kissed the slope of her bosom.

"Are you well?" he rumbled.

Elizabeth plastered on a smile and said, "Yes."

Chapter End Notes

Endless thanks to JrTT and SMAW for their impressions, corrections and suggestions.
Chapter 7

Jane's intention in writing a letter had not been for Elizabeth to spend her morning stewing in anger and self-recrimination, but that was the result.

About halfway down the page, Jane had written:

_My sister Mary is lately married to a farmer on Mr. Cleese's land. Mr. Chapman is a very good sort of man by all accounts. He has worked Mr. Cleese's fields for several years and is well-liked among the tenants and cottagers. As his wife, Mary will have to work hard, which I think she looked on with great anticipation before the marriage took place. It has been hard on her to not have the occupation we had at Longbourn. I think Mary wishes to contribute to a household, rather than live on charity from her sister. In Kent, she has had only scripture to occupy her mind with. My mother and I hope Mary will soon be blessed with children._

Absent from Jane's letter was any indication how Mary felt about her Mr. Chapman. Though marriages were typically made between couples who had not been acquainted long, Mr. and Mrs. Chapman had only known one another two weeks before the first reading of the banns. It was impossible to comprehend a lover's character in so short a time! Reading between the lines, Elizabeth understood Mary's reason for marrying was simply to remove herself from a household supported by a Cyprian.

Mary was the most pious of her sisters. Elizabeth had always suspected Mary's learning had not been sincere; lacking the personal charms of her sisters, Mary had pursued accomplishments with greater zeal than the others. She did not have Lydia's easy flirtatiousness or Jane's angelic beauty to recommend her. She had needed skills and knowledge in order to stand out. Lydia's disappearance had triggered a number of moralistic lectures from Mary. Though she had celebrated virtue and warned against how irretrievable lost virtue would be, she had also championed the sisters taking solace in one another. Taking solace was acceptable. Taking money from a second fallen sister, apparently, was not.

Elizabeth could see the wisdom in Mary's choice. A wise girl supported herself through a marriage. Though Elizabeth was revolted by the idea of surrendering her independence to a man she did not properly know, Mary must find that the lesser of the evils. Yet, for Elizabeth, to be rejected still hurt.

Jane was too good to ever voice disapproval of Elizabeth's choices. She suspected that if she had told Jane beforehand what she intended to do Jane would have tried to convince her otherwise. Believing herself to have needed very little convincing to cry off, Elizabeth had elected not to tell Jane. It could not be undone, however, and a Jane who could not change anything was a Jane who would not speak against it. In her heart, she had to disapprove. It was only natural. It was a relief to Elizabeth's mind, however, that Jane did not say so.

What concerned her was Kitty. Harriette Wilson, the famed courtesan, had three sisters who followed in her footsteps. Sophia's marriage to Lord Berwick, only two years ago, had not been forgotten by Kitty. She penned notes to Elizabeth, begging to take her into Town. If Elizabeth would only let her borrow her gowns, Kitty was sure, a Duke or an Earl would fall madly in love with her. Elizabeth answered Kitty's letters, but did not give credit to the idea that Catherine Bennet would be the next Sophia Dubochet.

Elizabeth did not think herself a candidate for the next Sophia Dubochet ending, either. A baron like Lord Berwick had the power to force society to accept his bride, but the same was not true of a gentleman landowner like Darcy. The wife he refused to consider taking would have to be
respectable, with a flawless reputation. As for herself, she had refused three men she did not love already. She had no fantasies that a peer would come whisk her away once Darcy moved on.

Mary's decision to marry a man who would have her was wise, but in other ways, it hardly seemed just. Mary had known her husband only two weeks before the banns had been read. In that time, she could not have learned his character or disposition. She could have learned only that he was willing to take her despite the ruination heaped on her by the choices of her sisters. Though she did not know his temper, or know how well they would suit, they were able to make a respectable marriage, sanctioned by the laws of God and man.

Lydia had written of her love for Wickham. They had an acquaintance of many months. It was ample time to judge a person's character. Wickham, for example, had been able to determine that Lydia was foolish, romantic and willing to go along with any scheme that might end in a wedding. He had been able to learn how little Lydia guarded her virtue, and how little her father would exert himself on her behalf. He could comprehend her sister perfectly, and he used it to destroy her life.

For herself, Elizabeth had a long standing acquaintance with Darcy. On multiple occasions, she had thought she had sketched his character completely, only to have him overthrow it. He was a man of many faces. He was a careful guardian to his sister. He was generous in his provisions for herself and her family, and she knew his servants at Pemberley thought highly of him. He was educated and his mind had a quickness. He was unerringly polite. But, he could also be insulting. He could be myopic. Exerting himself to see past his own point of view often seemed beyond him. She questioned much about him, but not her own affection. She could know him, try to understand him and even love him, but the impurity of their union remained.

She could easily recognize that in the eyes of society, only one of these relationships could be considered good. The marriage where neither party could know or understand the other would be seen as natural and right, while Wickham's wicked manipulation and Elizabeth's sincere affection were both disgusting.

Elizabeth was pondering this when she was alerted to Darcy's carriage rolling up to the house. His unexpected confession three nights ago had not been mentioned between them. She had decided to pay it no heed, and he seemed to be of similar mind. Elizabeth was still unsure if he was aware he had said it, though if he was, he seemed eager to forget.

When a maid announced, "Mr. Darcy is come, ma'am." Elizabeth put Jane's letter away and removed to the sitting room to receive Darcy. His unexpected confession three nights ago had not been mentioned between them. She had decided to pay it no heed, and he seemed to be of a similar mind. He visited each day. His interest in conversation had waned, and without teasing or discussions of books and news to sustain them, the visits soon resulted in brief, unfulfilling copulation. Elizabeth was no closer to knowing if Darcy was even aware that he had said it.

When a maid announced, "Mr. Darcy is come, ma'am." Elizabeth put Jane's letter away and removed to the sitting room to receive Darcy. His unexpected confession three nights ago had not been mentioned between them. She had decided to pay it no heed, and he seemed to be of similar mind. Elizabeth was still unsure if he was aware he had said it, though if he was, he seemed eager to forget.

When Darcy was shown in, Elizabeth greeted him cheerfully. Having spent her morning thus far in unpleasant reflections, Darcy's presence must be an improvement on her day. If he insisted on being quiet and poor company, he would still have his arms around her in short order. After the defection of her sister, his affection would be a comfort, even it lacked the peculiar pleasure of past encounters.

He did not reply. Peering at his face, Elizabeth determined that he was in a dour mood. In such a case, it must be her duty to cheer him, and in turn, perhaps raise her own spirits. She invited him to sit and offered refreshments. Darcy took neither, but stood, silent.

"Get your things," he said abruptly.

"Pardon?"
"Your things," Darcy reiterated. "Your gloves and hat. Come, we must to your uncle's."

Dismayed, Elizabeth reassessed her belief that Darcy's visit must necessarily improve her morning. "My aunt and uncle can have nothing to say to me," she said. "I used them most ill."

"Miss Bennet, please," he said. "I must insist you accompany us." He strode to the bell pull and rang for a servant. "If you will," he told the answering maid, "fetch Miss Bennet's hat and gloves." The maid, a woman of sterner stuff than Robinson, turned to Elizabeth with a question in her eyes before obeying. After a few moments, Elizabeth nodded. Imperious Darcy was the master of all he surveyed. She could argue with him, but with the mood he was in, Elizabeth questioned if he would hear her.

When her pelisse, gloves and bonnet were brought to her, Elizabeth allowed herself to be helped into them. Swiftly, Darcy guided her out of the house and handed her into his waiting coach.

Elizabeth froze. There was another woman in the carriage. Her clothes were tattered, her belly round.

Elizabeth cried out at once, "Lydia!" She slid across the carriage cushions and collided with her sister, wrapping her in a fierce hug. "Lydia," she sobbed, "Oh, dear Lydia, where have you been?"

Elizabeth pressed a kiss to her sister's temple. Unnoticed, Darcy slipped into the carriage and settled himself on the opposite bench. He rapped the ceiling, and the carriage lurched towards Oxford Street.

Gripping Elizabeth's forearms, Lydia said, "I let a room in Drury Lane!"

"Why," Elizabeth exclaimed, turning to Darcy, "we were just there!" To Lydia, she lamented, "I have been so close to you! How is it possible…?"

Darcy answered, "I have had men searching for Miss Lydia since I first learned of her flight from Brighton, in the company of Mr. Wickham. I confess, I had hoped my knowledge of Mr. Wickham's friends and habits would be of a greater assistance than it was."

"Wickham!" Lydia spat. "I should be very happy to never hear his name again! Lizzy," she prompted, "did you know he said he loved me, and that we would be married?"

Elizabeth loosened her grip on Lydia just enough to lean back and take in her face. "I had seen the letter you left Mrs. Forster," she admitted.

"I suppose you think it was stupid of me," Lydia huffed. "You can go ahead and say it. You're quite right. I thought we were going to get married and that I would be the first of all of us to get married. I couldn't wait to see the looks on everyone's faces when I came back Mrs. Wickham! What a splendid joke it was to have been!"

"I would not dare say it," Elizabeth answered forcefully. Oh, she had said the same and worse when Lydia was missing, but it had been born of fear and desperation. Now that she had her sister in her arms, she could not dream of saying a word against her. "But Lydia, why did you not write us for help?"

"When Wickham left," Lydia said, "he stole all my money! Why, it's been all I can do to keep my rooms. Some nights, I don't get to eat at all."

"Surely," Elizabeth said, uncomfortably aware of her fine clothes and echoing house, "a sheet of paper and some ink cannot be so expensive." Postage was paid for by the recipient.

"It is!" Lydia insisted. "You need paper, and ink, and a pen, and a pen knife because they are useless
when they go dull. And it all must be sealed up with wax. All together, when you can scarcely buy
food, it is a great deal of money! I imagine Papa would not have… After all the fuss everyone made!
He would not want me back!"

Elizabeth swallowed a lump in her throat. "Lydia, do not dare say things like that! You know Papa
would have brought you home!" Some men would be inclined to send a fallen daughter off to live in
seclusion, but Elizabeth could not imagine her own father taking such steps. Her mother would have
railed at him if he dared suggest it.

"Maybe if Mama made him," Lydia said, echoing her sister's thoughts.

Still, such conjectures could never be more than conjecture. "Papa…" Elizabeth said carefully, "Papa
became very ill some months ago, Lydia."

"Months ago?" Lydia scoffed. "He is all right now, I dare say."

"No, no," Elizabeth whispered, "he died."

Lydia opened and shut her mouth several times in succession. Elizabeth looked to Darcy, but he sat
staring out the window, arms folded. Finally, Lydia croaked, "When…?"

"Six months ago," Elizabeth answered.

Lydia was silent for a long moment. Then, absently, she said, "I should have thought it was at least
that long ago. That's a very fine gown you have. Not like mourning clothes at all."

Elizabeth flushed. She had given over mourning clothes a month early, replacing her dreary grays
and purples with eye-catching reds and elegant whites. The lovely gowns Darcy had provided for
her were at least appropriate now. "I am so sorry you found out like this," she said.

Lydia dashed her tears. "Lizzy," she said, "I thought I would never have news of anyone ever again.
Isn't it better to know for sure than think you'll just never know?"

Elizabeth could immediately agree that it was.

"You must tell me about everyone else," Lydia insisted. "How is Kitty? And Mama? And Jane? And
even Mary, tell me about Mary, too."

"Papa's death was very hard on my poor mother, of course," Elizabeth said, "Mr. Collins took
Longbourn and Mama and Mary and Kitty went to live with Uncle Phillips."

"Good lord!" Lydia cried. "I should hate to live with Uncle Phillips! I bet you anything Kitty hated
it!"

"Kitty is worried about you, Lydia," Elizabeth admonished. "I hardly think she cares a jot about
anything else."

"Good!" Lydia preened. "And you and Jane went with Uncle Gardiner, I expect, though why you
are so far from him now is beyond me." She frowned, thoughtfully. "That looked to be a very fine
house you have. I am envious of your gown." Slyly, Lydia asked, "Did you get married, Lizzy?"

Her stomach churned. With great effort, she did not look at Darcy. In her mind's eye, she saw him,
sitting still and stiff, not paying Lydia's words the compliment of his attention. "No, but I just had
word from Jane to-day that Mary did!"
"Mary!" Lydia lamented. "Mary is the first of us? But she's so plain and dull!"

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Some men like a girl of strong moral character."

"La! I bet that's my fault, isn't it? I thought I would marry Wickham but he was a louse and now it's bad for everyone!"

There was no kind way to respond to that.

Reading her sister's silence, Lydia huffed, "Well, I am very sorry that Wickham is a louse, but it was worse for me, you know. Being abandoned and robbed and hungry!"

"Oh, Lydia, of course it was worse for you," Elizabeth said. "No one thought otherwise for a moment. We have been terrified! We had not known if you were alive or dead!"

"Well, here I am alive!" she cheered. Then, added, "Though, perhaps it would be better if I was not!"

"Lydia!"

"It's true, you know! I let Wickham do whatever he wanted! I thought there was no harm. It was fun and felt so lovely, and we were going to be married anyway, so what did it matter?" Lydia dropped her voice, "He had done it and worse with lots of girls, and no one but dreary Mr. Darcy thought poorly of him! Why should I have to be a virgin? Busy bodies like to pretend they are so scandalized whenever someone goes to bed, but they aren't any better! Everyone's got a lover on the side these days, and nobody really cares. And even if they do, I meant to marry Wickham, so it would not have even counted. A wedding makes everyone forget about what happened first.

"But Wickham ran off, took all my money and I'm no longer a virgin. People like Mary or Mr. Collins think a story like that has to end with the girl dying."

"Your life is not a novel, Lydia," Elizabeth said. "And no one, least of all your own sister and cousin, would prefer you to be dead."

Lydia shrugged. "Well, here I am," she repeated. "I've done lots of shocking things, would you like to hear about them, Lizzy?"

"I would not," she answered.

Lydia continued, heedless. "Did you know a man will only pay three pennies to push you against a wall and have a go at you upright?"

Darcy now said, "Miss Lydia, that is quite enough."

Lydia shrugged. "I just think it ought to be worth more than that. I'm lucky if I can find someone who'll take me for a shilling."

She had let a room in Drury Lane. The curve of her stomach showed she was breeding. The clues that Lydia had become a demi-rep had not been lacking, and quick witted Lizzy had seen it immediately. The disparity of their situations was stark. Lydia had scarcely enough money to eat. The men she served paid nearly nothing. Her clothes were tattered.

To Lydia, her sister's situation was not illuminated. "Don't you judge me, Lizzy. Anyway, it's not hard work and it doesn't take very long. I'd rather be a whore than scrub floors."
Elizabeth had a box in Drury Lane. Her stomach was flat as of yet, but could that last forever? Her table overflowed with fine French food at every meal; whatever she and Darcy and the occasional guest could not eat, her numerous servants enjoyed. Darcy had spent hundreds, if not a thousand, pounds already on her maintenance. She had gowns and jewels, a carriage and a library.

Their situations were different, but the work was the same. Not difficult and over quickly. No, the difficult part was disregarding passionate confessions. The difficult part was when he wanted to read poetry to her and introduce her to his friends and drive her through the park. It was when he did not want her to be alone. The difficult part was all of those things together, and knowing there was an end rushing towards her. Perhaps this summer, perhaps ten summers hence. But with every day, it drew closer.

Darcy said, "Miss Lydia, some propriety, please."

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Men shouldn't go acting like they've never visited a brothel; no one believes you, and they shouldn't!"

"Lydia," Elizabeth said tersely, "Mr. Darcy has done a good thing finding you and taking you back to your family. You should not be so rude."

"You know it's the rich men who only pay three pence and leave the rest of us poor! And as soon as we get to Uncle Gardiner's, he's only going to send me away. I don't know why I even came!"

"Better to be sent away and live in the country than stay in Drury Lane!" Elizabeth cried.

The carriage rolled to a stop. They had arrived at Gracechurch Street.

"Miss Lydia, stay in the carriage. The less you can be observed, the better. Any future as a respectable woman you have will depend on anonymity for the rest of your time in Town. Miss Bennet, would you rather come to the door or stay with your sister?"

Elizabeth, whose disgust with herself and her sister required a moment away from Lydia, said, "Help me out."

Darcy handed her down from the carriage. Her hand tucked against his arm, her agitation was ebbing away, leaving her with questions. As they approached the Gardiners' door, Elizabeth asked, "Why did you not tell me you were looking for Lydia?"

"I had no wish to give you false hope," Darcy answered. "Though I hoped she had remained in Town, I had no evidence of it."

"I had no wish to give you false hope," Darcy answered. "Though I hoped she had remained in Town, I had no evidence of it."

"My uncle knows, I wager?"

"Yes. Your sister having fallen on the town is a worst case scenario, but I do not believe he will abandon her now." When they reached the door, Darcy knocked. Her uncle's man answered. "Mr. Darcy to see Mr. Gardiner," Darcy said formally, presenting his card. "I understand Mr. Gardiner may decline to see me. Please assure him it is a matter of some delicacy and that his own interest is substantial." The man disappeared into the house to give the message. When he returned, and bid them entry, Darcy steered Elizabeth into the foyer. Then, he hurried back to the coach. He handed Lydia down from the carriage and swiftly ushered her into her uncle's house.
Chapter 8

The guests were received in the parlor by a befuddled Mrs. Gardiner, whose confusion was not so great as to prevent her from recognizing...“Lydia!” Immediately, she was at the bell pull, first seeking refreshments to be brought in. Then, frenzied, she rang again, this time asking for a bath to be prepared. A third thought occurred, and she rang a third time, instructing the harried maid to go through her mistress’s gowns and find one that could be made to fit Lydia.

For her part, Lydia was enjoying the fuss. When the refreshments arrived — tea, fruit and cakes — she gleefully piled confections onto a plate. None of the party commented on her exuberance or manners. When she exclaimed, “Lord! I am so hungry!” before taking her first large bite of cake, it was taken as a statement of fact by all witnesses.

Brows drawn and arms folded, Mrs. Gardiner clucked at Lydia. “You will be staying for dinner.” To Darcy and Elizabeth, her tone was not so commanding. “Tea?” she asked mildly. “Help yourselves to the refreshments.”

Darcy nodded his thanks, but did not move toward the food. He had always shown a particularly amiable side of himself to his former friends. Elizabeth did not wish for Darcy to be rude, so she made him a plate and pushed it into his hands. When he met her eyes in surprise, Elizabeth raised her eyebrows before moving back to the table to make a plate for herself. “Tea would be lovely, Aunt, thank you.”

Mrs. Gardiner poured tea for each of the guests and a cup for herself. She did not need to ask anyone how they took their tea. A proper hostess, Mrs. Gardiner knew the preferences of everyone assembled. That she should not ask her nieces was natural enough, but she did not need to ask Darcy, either. Knowing his taste was further proof of the friendship that had once been shared.

Darcy mustered the civility to say, “I thank you,” as he accepted his tea. Gingerly, he sat on the settee. Out of defiance or some desire to support him, Elizabeth immediately placed herself next to him.

“My uncle,” she prompted, “does he mean to join us?”

“Mr. Gardiner is at one of his warehouses,” the aunt explained. “A servant has been sent for him.”

Elizabeth nodded. How strange it was, to be a guest in a house that was once her home! Stranger still, to be an unwelcome one. Oh, her aunt was everything polite and accommodating. She had been shocked to see them, but her instincts as a hostess soon took over. Despite the reception, Mrs. Gardiner could not be pleased to have Elizabeth or Lydia in her house.

“Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Gardiner addressed him, “tell me, how did you come by Lydia?”

“My men have been searching the city,” Darcy replied. “When she first left Brighton with Mr. Wickham — “ (Here, Lydia interjected a snide, “Wickham!”) “— I searched myself. Mr. Wickham and I had been companions enough that I thought myself well acquainted with his friends and habits. Unfortunately, our friendship — if it could have ever been called such — lapsed after the death of my father. I had not looked on Mr. Wickham’s absence from my life with regret until the poor results of my search made it clear to me he had made other friends without my knowledge.”
“Extraordinary,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “More extraordinary still that you should take on such efforts.”

“I had no knowledge of any of it,” Elizabeth added, looking fondly at Darcy.

He cleared his throat. “As I said,” Darcy reminded her, “I had not wished to give you false hope. London is a city of one million people. Finding a single girl was a remarkable stroke of luck.”

They heard a voice in the hall before anything else, “I am come home! Terry said it was urgent!” Mr. Gardiner burst into the parlor. “Is it the children —” he stopped cold, frozen by shock. “Lydia,” he murmured finally, “Lydia.”

Lydia swallowed a large mouthful of cake. “Uncle!” she called cheerfully. “Have you missed me?”

Mr. Gardiner gazed about the parlor in awe, taking in the faces of each. “Lydia,” he sputtered, “dear girl, how?”

“I was at Drury Lane, you know,” Lydia said with a shrug, “and I thought I found some good blokes who’d pay me well, but they ran off and do you know what they did? They went and got Mr. Darcy! Are you not diverted? I was! But he was very rude and cross and made me get in the carriage.” She sighed dramatically. “And then we went all the way to Mayfair to Lizzy’s very fine house — have you seen it? I asked her if she was married and she said no, but she must be because she’s got so many nice things. I think she’s just hiding it, because she doesn’t want anyone to know she got married when she should have been mourning Papa. But, we fetched Lizzy, and then we came all the way here.” Lydia groaned. “I have been in carriages for so long! I feel very ill, actually, but you and my aunt have such lovely food and I am so hungry!”

"You are increasing," Mr. Gardiner said.

"Oh, I suppose I am," Lydia replied. "Tis to be expected, I wager."

Mr. Gardiner turned to Darcy. “You have already decided how this ought to be handled, I expect.”

“Were the choice mine,” Darcy answered, “I would send her to Ireland. Hire a strict woman to mind her until a man willing to marry her can be found. He would require compensation for her past, of course, but hardly anything prohibitively expensive.”

“How horrid!” Lydia cried. “I don’t want to go to Ireland!”

Thoughtfully, Mr. Gardiner said, “That would be a desperate step.”

The maid entered then, with an announcement that the bath was ready. Mrs. Gardiner ushered Lydia out of the parlor. Elizabeth, torn between assisting her aunt with Lydia or her uncle with Mr. Darcy, wavered a moment before deciding to stay.

“I cannot think,” Elizabeth announced, “it necessary to send her so far.”

“She is going to have a child,” Darcy reminded her. “I asked the father’s name, and she told me she could not guess.”

“I admit it looks bad,” Elizabeth said cautiously, “but as you said, anonymity is her greatest asset. Lydia Bennet is known to no one. She cannot return anywhere she is remembered, but our entire family has already left Meryton.”

“What would you suggest?” Darcy asked.
Elizabeth chewed her lip. “I think we can agree there are three ways to deal with an unmarried girl’s breeding. Send her away, as you suggest, Mr. Darcy, lie about what has occurred, or admit the truth of the matter. Uncle,” she said to Mr. Gardiner, “I do not know if you have heard, but Mary is lately married. We have only Jane and Kitty’s prospects to worry over. Lydia is too poor for her sins to be forgot, so honesty could only hurt them. Suppose, however, that Lydia stays here in Town until she is delivered of the baby. She could go to Kent, take Mary’s place in my mother’s house and pretend the baby is a foundling.”

“You cannot think such a story would be believed,” Mr. Gardiner protested.

“Sir,” Elizabeth replied, “no one on Mr. Cleese’s land knows she has eloped. They shall not spin a tale about a girl falling on the town for the sake of it.” Mary’s husband likely knew everything that could have been known when the Bennets arrived in Kent. Without knowledge of Lydia’s elopement and disappearance, and Elizabeth’s arrangement with Mr. Darcy, Mr. Chapman would have had no reason to think a girl of gentle birth would have him. Now that Lydia had reappeared, Mary must tell him everything. She owed her husband honesty. Mary was no gossip and she would not spread the tale any further. Kitty would, but Kitty also longed to be a courtesan in the court of the Prince Regent. One more fanciful tale of sexual deviancy could be as easy discarded as the others. Jane would be too wise to tell the tale; Mrs. Bennet, too interested in courting favor with their neighbors. Lydia’s reputation would be as sound as that of any other girl just entering the neighborhood. “If she enters the country with a child, whether she claims it a foundling or the orphan of a dear friend, even the most suspicious persons will not have just cause to disbelieve it.”

“Her day of reckoning is months away,” Mr. Gardiner said. “Your aunt was that size with Edward at seven months; five, with the others.”

“She could stay with me until she is delivered of the baby,” Elizabeth insisted. “When her confinement is over, I shall send them to Mama.”

"Out of the question," Darcy interjected.

"Sir," Elizabeth said, with a warning tone, "she is my sister."

"And you are too well known," Darcy replied. “Your servants still prefer Mr. Fry to yourself. They will talk. The news will spread from house to house. If real news follows Miss Lydia into Kent, it will not matter how many tales of foundlings she weaves. The truth will be discovered."

This, Elizabeth dismissed. “It will not travel so far. Mr. Cleese no longer comes to Town. The tale must reach his servants, if it is to reach his tenants.”

“True, he does not come much to London anymore,” Darcy admitted, “but he does have connections among the ton. As does my aunt, let us remember. For Miss Lydia’s sake, it is best to keep her from being seen in Mayfair.”

“She cannot go to Kent increasing,” Elizabeth said mournfully. “She needs somewhere to stay until she is delivered.”

Mr. Gardiner suggested, “Could we not say she has a husband in the Navy? Admit she eloped with an officer, but behave as though they did marry. It will appear strange, at first, that she never goes to port to meet him, but the neighbors will forget with time.”

“She would not be able to produce proof,” Darcy reminded them. “Further, the best ending for Miss Lydia is still a marriage. If she is supposed to already be someone’s wife, she cannot make a match.”
“She can be a spinster,” Mr. Gardiner argued.

Darcy sighed, “Sir, I beg you forgive my saying so, and especially within the hearing of Miss Bennet, but Miss Lydia has not at all amended her wild ways. I do not believe she could traverse spinsterhood without breeding again. It is better to have her married to man who can claim and provide for her children. Her past would, of course, be divulged to a man who made a serious offer, but he can be compensated for it.”

“How much, Darcy?” Mr. Gardiner wondered with exhausted frustration, “How much money makes a man forgive her spending seven months as a whore on the streets of London?”

Matter of fact, Darcy said, “That would depend upon his station in life.”

Wishing to ease the coolness between the men, Elizabeth suggested, “Uncle, could Lydia not stay here until she is delivered? Your servants love you too well to gossip, and even if they should, your circle is entirely separate from that of Mr. Cleese. Word could not reach anyone we would fear it reaching. She would make a poor example for your children, but you may tell them at least that she has a husband in the Navy.”

Mr. Gardiner said, “Your aunt and I will have to discuss it.”

To Elizabeth, his tone sounded doubtful. “There is no where else for her to go!” she exclaimed. “If you turn her out, she will end up at Drury Lane again!”

“Lizzy,” her uncle pleaded, “you cannot think me so cold-hearted.”

“No,” Elizabeth agreed, “I am sure it is you who must think me cold-hearted. I spurned your charity and used you ill. Lydia is so young. Her life does not have to be ruined. She has no where else to go. As her confinement draws near, she will be afraid. To have my aunt with her would be such a blessing!”

Looking sadly at Elizabeth, Mr. Gardiner affirmed, “I will tell the children her husband is in the Navy. Should they ask about him, they shall not notice if her answers are foolish.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Elizabeth said, tears of gratitude welling in her eyes. Lydia was saved!

Her uncle gave her a weak smile. “Now, go see if your aunt needs any help.”

Though she did not care to leave Darcy alone with her uncle, Elizabeth understood the necessity of acquainting Lydia with the plans that had been made for her future. She wished to ask Darcy, ‘Will you be all right?’ but found it too rude to ask in uncle’s presence. Instead, she brushed her fingers along his shoulder as she left.

Elizabeth climbed the familiar staircase. She spied a maid holding a bundle of laundry. Stopping her, Elizabeth asked, “Connie, where is my sister?”

“Miss Lydia is in your old dressing room, ma’am,” Connie assured her.

“Thank you.” Elizabeth continued her walk through the familiar hallways and into the apartment she had once shared with Jane. Her aunt was in the bedroom, critically eying two gowns that had been spread out for her approval.

“Do you require any assistance?” Elizabeth asked Mrs. Gardiner.

“No,” her aunt answered. “Lydia is much taller than I. She will look foolish in any of my gowns.
This evening, it cannot be helped.”

“My uncle has decided Lydia shall stay here until she is delivered,” Elizabeth announced. “Then she will go to my mother, and claim some other parentage for the child.”

Sly, Mrs. Gardiner said, “I am sure your uncle made such a decision with no interference from yourself.”

“Some,” Elizabeth owned. “Mr. Darcy wished to send Lydia to Ireland, but my uncle thought such a distance too great.”

“A very great distance,” Mrs. Gardiner agreed, “for someone as young and foolish as Lydia. A girl who has learned from her mistakes might live in seclusion very well, but I cannot think it would do for Lydia. She would chafe and do something rash.”

“My mother has always indulged Lydia in the past. I do not think that likely to change in the future,” Elizabeth admitted. “Fortunately, there is little trouble to make as a cottager in the country. She will be miles away from balls, assemblies and eligible gentlemen. If a tenant farmer takes a liking to her, it would make an excellent marriage.”

“Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “now that we are so well-assured for Lydia’s future, I would like to discuss yours.”

Wary, Elizabeth said, “Yes?”

“You are an intelligent girl, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “and I have no interest in feigning otherwise. What is done cannot be undone, however foolish, ill-conceived or immoral it was. For a woman to have done as you have is not a rare thing, but you are neither friendless nor of low-birth. Lydia’s disappearance was damaging to your reputation, of course, but only in that it reduced the circumstances of the sort of men who might apply for your hand. Circumstance, you well know, is no indicator of a man’s worth. Girls do not want to marry down, but you would only be returning to the class of your own mother’s birth.”

“It was not like that,” Elizabeth protested. Marriage to a tradesman would relieve herself of being a burden to the Gardiners, but no one else; Darcy could rescue all of them — including, miraculously, Lydia. Supposing all of the Bennet girls married within a few years, it would still take her uncle some time to recoup the losses he had spent in taking care of his nieces. This necessarily damaged his own children’s prospects.

Lydia’s situation had been urgent. Maidenly virtue would not have fed or housed her and she was no virgin.

Mr. Gardiner, though a tradesman, was successful. He and his wife were not fashionable, but you would not know it from looking at them. Had Elizabeth chosen to stay, he would have been able to keep them all in a comfortable style. His friends must be like him. Mr. Harvey or Mr. Laurie could have kept her comfortably as well. No matter what noble reasons she could concoct to defend her actions, on some level, Elizabeth had chosen Mr. Darcy simply because she preferred him to anyone else. Her father had died. Lydia was gone. Jane was a shadow of the cheerful and optimistic person she had once been. After all that she had lost, why should she lose him as well?

“What has Mr. Darcy done,” Mrs. Gardiner asked, “to secure your future?”

As keen as Elizabeth was to keep him, it seemed she was not the only person to feel he was slipping further out of her grasp with each day. “He has been generous,” she said.
“Not so generous,” her aunt replied, “as to write up a contract keeping yourself and your sisters housed and fed in perpetuity. No man would be. What has he done for you?”

“For my establishment, he has purchased a one year lease on the house, the one we visited. What we shall do when it ends will depend on the owner — if he means to return to Town, that is. Mr. Darcy purchases whatever he feels I need, and gives me an allowance besides. My mother’s landlord and servants are paid on rent days. They receive a small allowance for provisions.”

“Do you invest your allowance?”

“Yes, all of it. Mr. Darcy is so thorough with what he feels my needs are that I find I have no immediate use for it.” The portion of spending money Darcy provided for her mother and sisters was so meager that she had been tempted to send them some of her own allowance, but eventually, prudence won. They would all be better served by letting the sum she had grow. Her father had found saving money to be useless and Elizabeth was determined to learn from his mistakes.

“Which is well and good as long as your arrangement is on-going. What shall be done in the event it is terminated, as these things so often are?”

“I am to be paid a small stipend each year, provided I do not marry or accept funds from other gentlemen,” Elizabeth recited. “It is enough to continue paying rent on the cottage, but hardly more. We would have to let the servants go.”

Her aunt sighed. “Men are notorious for refusing to honor these promised stipends, Lizzy.”

“I have no doubt that Mr. Darcy made these provisions with every intention of honoring them,” Elizabeth replied.

Intentions at the outset and actions actually taken were not necessarily the same, as Mrs. Gardiner easily determined. “Were he to wed,” she posited, “his wife would have other ideas.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth agreed. “I think it very likely she would. I am resigned that if Mr. Darcy does dissolve our arrangement, I will have to seek other protectors.”

“Many things may happen between now and then,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “What does he plan to do if you become with child, as Lydia has?”

“Mr. Darcy is convinced he is rich enough that his sins will be forgot,” Elizabeth answered. “Any of his issue will have his name and live at Pemberley. Any girls we have will not move in society, and the boys only as far as he assists them, but he has no intentions of his children living in poverty.”

“And if Mr. Darcy was to die?”

Elizabeth’s stomach churned at the thought. “Do not say such things.”

“Has he made any provisions for you in his will?” her aunt pressed.

“Not that I am aware of;” she admitted.

“I am sure his heirs would contest it,” Mrs. Gardiner mused, “even if he did.”

“They could not do so for long,” Elizabeth said. “A will must be honored!”

“He has already demanded you take no other protectors to receive your stipend,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “A will is likely to include that demand as well. His heirs could delay your payment long enough to
force you to take another lover to support yourself, thus making the bequeathment invalid.”

As far as Elizabeth knew, a son of Miss Darcy’s was to be the next master of Pemberley, should Mr. Darcy die without legitimate issue. She could not picture Miss Darcy being so petty as to manipulate anyone out of their inheritance.

“All things considered, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “it may behoove you to find yourself with child as soon as possible.”

Elizabeth could not help laying a protective hand over her stomach. “While being mother to Mr. Darcy’s child may give him cause to be more generous with myself, I have understood children to come on their own time, with no reference made to if the parents are anxious for their arrival.”

Connie burst through the door, needing a gown for Lydia. Mrs. Gardiner, frowning at both options, gathered them up and followed Connie into the dressing room. Elizabeth, who had abandoned Mr. Darcy to her uncle long enough, went downstairs.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to JRTT and SMAW for their help betaing this chapter!

After Mrs. Gardiner and Connie left to see to Lydia, Elizabeth returned to the parlor where she had abandoned Mr. Darcy to the company of his host. As Elizabeth slipped into the room, the tense air was silent. Had they been discussing anything, conversation had stopped as soon as they heard someone approach. Knowing she and Darcy could not take their leave without saying goodbye to Mrs. Gardiner and Lydia, Elizabeth tried to promote conversation between the assembled party until the other women returned. If Mr. Gardiner had been speaking to Mr. Darcy prior to her joining them, Elizabeth was sure his words were confined to disapproval and censure. She wished to help Darcy make his escape, but not at the expense of seeing that Lydia would be well-taken care of and would mind her aunt and uncle.

Half an hour or so later, a freshly scrubbed Lydia, adorned in an ill-fitting but quality gown, threw open the parlor door. Elizabeth greeted the sight of her ebullient sister with relief. Lydia was in good spirits. Her great adventure on the streets of London was over. The youngest Bennet girl had been returned to the bosom of her family. As a gentleman’s daughter living in the country, Elizabeth knew little of the seedy underworld of London prostitution. As Darcy’s mistress in Mayfair, he had sheltered her as much as possible. Many women in her position made friendships with other Cyprians, but Darcy had carefully prevented Elizabeth’s making such connections. She never went anywhere Cyprians were known to frequent without him at her side. Her imagination could run free with speculation of Lydia’s activities, based on the conditions of her clothing and hunger when Darcy found her, but true knowledge of what Lydia had gone through was beyond her. If any woman was wise and kind enough to convince Lydia to talk honestly, without all of her energy and bluster, it would be Mrs. Gardiner.

Finally, the time had come to take Darcy out of this place, a site of former friendship that could only be oppressive to him now.

Before she went, Elizabeth wrapped Lydia in a hug.

“Lizzy,” Lydia said in an eager whisper as the two sisters embraced, “you must tell me at least! Did you marry Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth stepped out of Lydia’s arms and caught her sister’s hands. Lydia’s question, she ignored. There were more worthwhile things to be said. “You must mind my uncle. He will be very strict, I am sure, but he is doing you a kindness. Some men,” Elizabeth warned, thinking of Mr. Collins, “would throw you out of their home. Do be grateful, and listen.”

Lydia shrugged. “You must come visit me,” she insisted. “Kitty and Jane, as well! It will be very dull here! I will simply die of boredom if you do not come every day!”

“You will not,” Elizabeth insisted, bristling at Lydia’s demands. She would love nothing more than to visit this cosy home, full of beloved family! Her aunt and uncle were dutiful hosts, but even their patience had limits. The greater need for the Gardiners’ charity was with Lydia. Poor Lydia had done what was necessary to survive. Without her family’s protection, she would have no choice but to
return to Drury Lane and continue selling herself for pennies. Elizabeth would not tax their kindness by adding herself to the Gardiners’ burdens. She had been stupid and selfish, turning away men who would have provided for her in the name of unattainable idealism, until she was left with only Darcy’s dismal proposal. Of the two of them, only one sister had chosen her lot.

“You will mind my uncle,” Elizabeth instructed, “help my aunt and be thankful.”

Lydia heard what went unsaid. Pouting, she whined, “You mean you will not call on me?”

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder. Behind her, Darcy stood with her aunt and uncle. Few words were exchanged. Those that were, sounded terse. As long as her allegiance was to her protector, visits would be a trial. “I may come sometimes,” she said cautiously.

Lydia followed her sister’s eyes. “Mr. Darcy is very rich,” she said, “but a kind husband would let you go wherever you wished, even if it were Cheapside.”

Elizabeth frowned. “I did not marry Mr. Darcy.”

Dropping her voice, Lydia asked, “Does your husband know Mr. Darcy looks at your derriere?”

“Lydia!”

Her sister shrugged. “I am very good at catching these things, you know. He looks away right after, like he doesn’t wish to be caught, but he keeps doing it.”

The observation was both flattering and infuriating. Elizabeth’s connection to her aunt and uncle was fragile. It was unkind of Darcy to flaunt his position by staring at her body in their home. On the other hand, there was some security in the knowledge that he still wished to look at her. She had feared his interest was beginning to wane. These past days, he had come to her without the enthusiasm she had grown to expect. He had stopped holding her hands during the act. If his attraction to her was as strong as ever, then it must mean her position was secure.

“I have not married,” Elizabeth insisted. “Not Mr. Darcy, nor any other man.”

“It is not very sisterly of you to keep secrets,” Lydia whined. “Something has happened! I don’t know what you’ve done to have such a nice house and such a nice gown if you did not marry someone very rich!”

It had not been very sisterly of Lydia to have run off with a man with no thought given to how an elopement would have affected her family, but Elizabeth, cognizant of how Lydia had suffered for it, did not say so. She might have, had Lydia’s flight resulted in any other outcome. “Mr. Darcy has seen our reduced circumstances,” Elizabeth said, vaguely. “He has been very generous to our family.”

Elizabeth knew she should be able to admit what she had done to Lydia, but somehow the words could not escape her lips. She supposed she wished for her younger sisters to look up to her. Kitty was ignorant enough to think what Elizabeth had done was romantic and exciting. She did not want the kind of respect Kitty offered, even if Lydia had still been naive enough to give it. No, Elizabeth wished for someone to still think of her as pure and moral, even if she knew it was impossible to be believed for much longer.

Lydia, whose opinion of Mr. Darcy was far from positive, even after the service he had done her, looked skeptically at Elizabeth. “He wishes to take a flyer,” she said flatly.

Elizabeth flushed. She had had amorous congress with Darcy enough to know how little he opposed
leaving his shoes on.

Lydia’s eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped and she cried, “And you would let him!”

Their conversation until this point had been conducted quietly, but with Lydia’s exclamation, all eyes in the room turned to the sisters. Lydia clamped her hands over her mouth. It was not out of shame, but to stifle whatever other noise was coming out of her mouth. Screaming or laughter, Elizabeth could not tell.

Herself ashamed, Elizabeth looked helplessly to Darcy, who was red in the face. Whether he was angry or embarrassed, or perhaps both, she could not determine. He took her by the elbow and steered her out of her uncle’s house, barely pausing long enough to collect their hats and coats.

Without any unnecessary words, Darcy handed Elizabeth into his carriage. Looking back at her uncle’s house, Elizabeth could see Lydia’s face in the window. The lack of chaperone must confirm everything. Darcy climbed in after her.

As long as he was visibly disturbed, Elizabeth was happy to leave Darcy to his sullen silence. She herself needed the silence to collect her thoughts after the trying experience that was a return to Gracechurch Street. As for Darcy, the house fronts they passed appeared to fascinate him. As they rolled towards Mayfair, he stared determinedly out the window.

Feeling she needed to say something, and finding Lydia’s observations too truthful to dismiss while too uncomfortable to discuss, she tried, “I was sorry to leave you with my uncle. I hope he was not too trying.”

Darcy turned, appearing surprised Elizabeth should address him. After taking a moment to collect his thoughts, he said, “No, not too difficult. I have long been sorry to lose his friendship. I know you must have wished to speak with Mrs. Gardiner. You must miss her guidance.”

“I do,” Elizabeth admitted carefully. Though she had always tried to respect her mother as much as a girl should, Mrs. Bennet was silly and ignorant. Elizabeth had never been able to go to her mother for advice. In some respects, Aunt Gardiner was to Elizabeth what a mother should have been: able to understand her, willing to correct her and more experienced in the world. “I hope Lydia will appreciate my aunt’s sense.”

Darcy refrained from comment.

“Sir,” Elizabeth ventured, “I have noticed something about you ever since we renewed our acquaintance.”

“Have you?” he wondered with a sardonic edge.

“You do not offer opinions about my family,” she observed. “I can only imagine you keep silent as to not offend me, but in this instance, it is unnecessary. If you find my sister’s manners offensive, you may say so. I am not unaware of how her behavior must look to you, nor would I find your opinions unjust.”

“She is your sister,” Darcy replied. For a moment, that appeared to be all he had to say on the subject. When he resumed speaking however, it was not in the direction Elizabeth had expected. “You must know her better than I, yet I wonder at the wisdom of having her live in the same neighborhood as your mother and sisters. Miss Lydia appears to me to be careless in her speech. It would take very little, some slip of the tongue on her part, to ruin the situation of the rest of your family.”
Elizabeth exhaled heavily. He was not wrong. “Lydia is wild,” she admitted. Her father had never checked any of the girls. “It does not appear that her experiences have taught her anything. It may be with time and reflection, she realizes that her own life will be better if she was to be silent about certain things. Interest, if nothing else, could censure her.”

“I am surprised that you would gamble with the future of Miss Bennet and Miss Catherine,” he replied.

“Is it such a gamble?” she countered. “Their ability to move in society has already been hindered. If Lydia betrayed herself, then the only thing to do would be for my mother and sisters to remove to another neighborhood. Mary must stay with her husband, but the others would be free to relocate. I would rather give Lydia the chance to live with her mother again than simply assume she cannot be trusted.”

“You are more forgiving than most would be,” Darcy replied, “in your position.”

“Am I?” she wondered. “Most girls who have done what Lydia has done -- indeed, most girls who have done what I have done -- are friendless. They do what we have done because they no longer have a family to consider, so one can hardly say what their families would do. For myself, I cannot judge her too harshly. Lydia acted to survive. I acted to be comfortable. From that perspective, my actions are worse.”

“Such an assessment neglects the effects of your choices for your family,” Darcy replied. “You acted to secure the comfort of Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bennet, Miss Catherine and -- my apologies, I have forgotten the name of Miss Mary’s husband.”

“Mr. Chapman,” she interjected.

“And Mrs. Chapman,” he finished. “Miss Lydia’s actions brought about their ruination. You would not have found yourself making the choices you did without hers to first propel you into action. Most women, I think, would resent such a sister.”

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said, “you have a sister yourself and know that one does not give over love so easily. Second, you must remember how long I had gone without any word of her. Any news was to be welcome. I am thankful she is alive and will be cared for.”

“You have a generous heart,” Darcy said. “It overlooks much when you are determined to love someone.”

Elizabeth imagined Darcy meant it as a compliment, but it was a puzzling one. Was not forgiveness the very definition of love? She decided to steer the conversation elsewhere.

"What did you and my uncle speak of?"

But that was not to be. "Financial arrangements for Miss Lydia."

Darcy’s answer shocked her. Elizabeth had thought Mr. Gardiner would have to take on the responsibility of Lydia’s maintenance as long as she was under his roof. Once she removed to Kent, she and her child would be part of Elizabeth’s agreement with Darcy.

“I trust your aunt to make any arrangements Miss Lydia requires. She will require gowns and a nurse, perhaps two, once she goes into her confinement. All bills should be sent to me. I will, of course, compensate your uncle for all other expenses she accumulates, as well as her transportation to Kent.”
"That is very generous," Elizabeth said.

Darcy shrugged. "It is kind of you to say."

Elizabeth frowned at his modesty. "It is the truth."

He sighed. "The truth is," Darcy said heavily, "that this has only occurred because my pride allowed it. Had I made anyone in Meryton aware of Mr. Wickham’s character, your sister would have been safe."

"You chose to prioritize protecting Miss Darcy," Elizabeth protested. "In that, you are justified."

Even this, Darcy argued. "Mr. Wickham’s misdeeds are great enough in number that no connection to my sister ever need be mentioned to illustrate his character. A word to any of the principal men in Meryton or his commanding officer in the regiment would have been enough. It would have required very little of me, and I found it not worth the effort."

"You cannot take it all upon yourself," Elizabeth countered. "After reading your letter, I knew what he was as well. Jane and I discussed making his character known in Hertfordshire and we, without any of your inducements, came to the same conclusion. We thought it best not to attempt it. We thought it would not matter, as he would be leaving us soon. Further, if he had hoped to reform, to reveal him could only have made him desperate."

Viciously, Mr. Darcy said, "Any cursory investigation of his activities would have shown that he was making no attempt to reform!"

Chastised, Elizabeth admitted they had made no attempt to investigate. Jane’s goodness had wanted to believe in Mr. Wickham, and Elizabeth had chosen to indulge her.

Darcy raked his hands through his hair. "That was not meant as censure, Miss Bennet. As a lady, you could not have investigated his debts of honor."

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Elizabeth’s townhouse. Adopting her aunt’s forceful tones, Elizabeth said, "You will come inside."

As much as Darcy blamed himself for Mr. Wickham’s activities, Elizabeth could not do the same. She had remained every bit as silent as he, even knowing the truth. Further, she could not credit publicizing Darcy’s account would have changed the opinions of the neighborhood much. Wickham had been popular in Meryton; Darcy was despised. In London, the disparity of the consequence of the two men would have decided who was heard. In a small community like Meryton, it was affability. Mr. Wickham was poor, but the better neighbor. To blame Wickham for his own poverty would have only encouraged the people of Meryton to think meanly of Darcy.

As for Lydia, Mr. Bennet had already not thought her a worthwhile target for a man seeking his fortunes by marriage. Even knowing the truth about Mr. Wickham, her father would not have thought Lydia in danger from him. It would not have changed his position when the time came to send her to Brighton. Lydia herself would have probably been even more willing to elope with him, had she known Mr. Wickham to be a rake. The triumph of reforming a rake would only add to the excitement of being the first sister to wed.

No, Mr. Darcy could not have changed anything.

Dutifully, he followed Elizabeth inside. They had eaten at her uncle’s house, but still required something to do in her own, so Elizabeth asked for tea to be served. He was not so out of place here. At Cheapside, Darcy had been so careful with his every movement. Here, he sat without any of the
rigidity he had displayed at her uncle’s house.

Still, for a man who had just rescued a young girl from a terrible fate, Darcy struck her as angry. Perturbed, Elizabeth would have allowed. Lydia’s actions and behavior were indeed disturbing, however necessary to her survival they had been. And rescued her, he had. Darcy himself had ventured into the depths of Lydia’s illicit world to drag her out of that life. It would have been adequate to allow his men to take her, but according to Lydia herself, Darcy had personally seen to it. Even the word ‘adequate’ was unfair; after so many months, to still have been searching went far beyond what Elizabeth could have expected from anyone. Darcy had done more for her family than she thought possible, and he was angry to have not done more. He berated himself for lacking the foresight that would have stopped the events entirely, not caring that Lydia was an unstoppable force. She always had been.

Elizabeth poured Darcy’s tea. Sipping it pulled him out of his own dismal thoughts, forced him to react to a physical world occupied by the two of them. She sat next to him, as she had at the Gardiners’, but closer. She would not have dared touch him in front of her aunt and uncle, but here, the very site of their grievous sins of pleasure, she sat with her legs brushing against his.

Laying her cheek against his shoulder, she said, “Thank you.”

She felt, rather than saw, him shake his head. “What has befallen your sister was my fault, if not at my hands directly. You should not thank me for searching for her.”

“I will thank you,” Elizabeth insisted. “I will thank you for searching as long as you did. I will thank you for bringing her to me. I will thank you for taking her home to my aunt and uncle.”

Darcy jostled her by shrugging. “There was nothing else to be done.”

“That you think so, when so many others would have simply abandoned us,” Elizabeth replied, sitting up straight, “is why I must thank you.” She angled her body towards him, and stroked the fine wool of his coat. “I will, however, allow you to be modest, if you will allow me to be thankful.”

“If your gratitude hinges on men accepting such a girl, then its rightful place is with your uncle. It is he who welcomed her into his home.”

“My uncle is very good,” Elizabeth owned, “but he could not have done so without you first so diligently searching for Lydia.” Her fingers played with the buttons of his coat, slipping them undone. “If you wish me to thank him, you must first accept your own role.” When his coat was open, she slid her arms inside, low around his hips. She placed her chin on his shoulder. “Truly, I cannot speak of Mr. Gardiner now.” Her breath puffed on his ear. In her arms, his body grew tense. “Let me thank you,” she purred.

Darcy turned, colliding with her mouth for a desperate kiss. “I did it for you,” he said fiercely, before drinking of her lips again. Elizabeth met his passion, thrilled to have ignited it. His voice made ragged by shallow breathing, Darcy added, “I could not allow you to suffer. It was all for you.”

Her hands found the knot on his cravat. They were lucky; in his morning attire, the knot was simple. Elizabeth could pull it undone even as Darcy’s kiss demanded her attention. She unwound the cloth from around his neck and discarded it. When he took her to bed, they were helped out of their clothing by servants. Outside of the bedroom, these encounters rarely required the removal of anything -- a flyer, Lydia had called it. But Darcy was at an advantage those times. Her revealing gowns gave him unfettered access to her neck, to her shoulders, to her breasts. Burrowing his hands beneath her skirts let him make free with her legs and her hips before partaking of his true object.
He wore stiff wool and layers. The tight, starched garments made for a fine display of his figure, but there was very little available to her own greedy fingers. Her eyes had feasted on his neck some days past. It was only fair that her mouth enjoy the same.

Without the cravat, Darcy’s collar fell limp to his shoulders. Elizabeth drew closer to him, pressed her lips to his throat. He moaned. Encouraged, she kissed his sensitive flesh as he always had hers.

He tried to speak. “Miss Bennet, Miss Bennet, I --” Robbed of coherent thought, he said no more, only reached for her, smoothing his palms down her back, squeezing the oft-eyed globes of her derriere.

“Let me thank you,” Elizabeth said again, her mouth open on his neck.

His hands moved to her hips, and without warning, Darcy pushed her away. Shocked, Elizabeth tumbled against the cushions of the settee. Wild-eyed and breathing hard, Darcy drew back.

“Darcy?” she ventured. “What is the matter?”

Swiftly, he stood. Elizabeth could see his interest; it protruded rather unmistakably. Darcy strode to the fireplace, blocking her view. He said nothing.

Elizabeth arranged her gown and repeated the question.

“I need time,” he said finally.

Fear chilled her blood. Every day he withdrew from her would make it easier to not come back. What would she do without his society, his friendship? Darcy had been a truer friend to her than any other. His loyalty had been so natural and resolute that he did not even see it for the miracle it was. Elizabeth had wanted to demonstrate her appreciation, her abiding affection, and he soundly rejected all of it.

Without even two months’ of accumulated earnings, she would not be able to survive without him. If he placed her in a limbo where their arrangement had not ended, but he did not visit her, either, Darcy would effectively prevent her from collecting her stipend or seeking out other men.

“In two weeks’ time,” Darcy said a moment later, with a voice that betrayed none of their recent activity, “I will be leaving London to visit family. I intend to go from there to Pemberley for the summer months. I will leave it to your discretion whether you wish to spend the summer in London or travel to Derbyshire. The air is poor and there are no amusements in Town after Parliament has closed, but I understand if you would not want to remove so far from Miss Lydia while she is breeding. There will of course be arrangements to be made if you choose to come to Derbyshire. For that reason, I would prefer to have an answer before I leave Town.”

With no more to say, Darcy left.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This chapter is more explicit than previous chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Elizabeth had been given two weeks to choose between spending her summer in Town or traveling to Derbyshire. Though there was a certain gravity in making a choice of that magnitude, it was deceptively simple. Should she stay in London, Elizabeth would be closer to her own family. The Gardiners stayed in Town year-round. To visit her mother and sisters was only half a day's journey. It was comforting to think she had so many loved ones near. Any doubts she had about herself and her own choices could be stifled by the thought of her family, well-cared for and comfortable. Should she go to Derbyshire, however, the distance between herself and her family would be much greater. It would take news two days to travel that far north. If Lydia's confinement was a difficult one, it would be four, perhaps five, days before Elizabeth could return to her side. That consideration alone stopped Elizabeth from immediately declaring a preference for Derbyshire.

She was not built for solitude. Though her family was close in body, calling upon them with any frequency was out of the question. Lydia had been rescued from the life Darcy had found her in. She did not need the poor example of her elder sister tempting her back into it. The Gardiners' charity was being taxed enough by Lydia's being under their roof for the time being. Another wayward niece could not be welcome.

When Parliament ended its session, the rest of the gentry who wintered in Town would retreat to their country estates. What few friends she had made through Darcy's connections, like the Atkinsons, would leave in June. Without patrons, the amusements would close. She would have nothing to do but wander about her own house and no one to talk to until Darcy's return, which could be as late as January.

Though she carried true concern for Lydia's upcoming reckoning, Elizabeth felt it would be for the best if she went on to Derbyshire. Darcy's moods had been inscrutable these past weeks. She entertained some anxiety that his affections might not survive a prolonged separation. Elizabeth felt going home to Pemberley would be good for Darcy's spirits. When they met there last summer, he had been happier and more at ease than she had ever seen him before. It had been a pleasure to spend time with that young man. Additionally, she longed for the open fields and clean air of the country. Her visit last year had been so brief. There was still much to be admired in the wild Derbyshire landscape.

Elizabeth's resolution to travel to the country had little impact on Darcy's dour moods. She had hoped such information would please him, but he remained steadfast in his determination to be satisfied by nothing.

For the first week following his announcement of a month long visit to what he vaguely termed family, Darcy made himself absent from her parlor and her bed. When he resumed his visits, the calls were uniformly unpleasant. His conversation was dominated by awkward pauses and concise deliverance of news. For her part, Elizabeth tried mightily to tease him out of his ill humor. Darcy betrayed no interest in her company. Increasingly, she thought of herself as his obligation, an idea
that rankled her. She redoubled her efforts to tease and please him, tried to make him remember why he had chosen her and why he should appreciate her.

On one occasion, the last visit before his departure, Elizabeth tried to anticipate Darcy's destination: "You will be visiting Lady Catherine, I presume," she said.

They were taking tea in her sitting room. Ever since he first declared his intentions of visiting family, Elizabeth had been pondering his destination. The timing of it did not coincide with what she knew of his habits. From conversations with Colonel Fitzwilliam the previous spring, Elizabeth had understood Lady Catherine's nephews to visit her once a year, at Easter. Darcy's plans, as he had given, had him at Pemberley for Easter. Perhaps she was giving Colonel Fitzwilliam's words more weight than he had intended. Lady Catherine hoped Darcy would marry her daughter. If only for the sake of the match, she should demand he visit with greater frequency than once per year.

"You must tell Miss de Bourgh you are resolved never to marry," Elizabeth suggested. Her manner and tone of voice were light and teasing, but a corner of her heart was serious. Whatever her ladyship thought of a marriage, Miss de Bourgh deserved Darcy's honesty. If she, like the mother, thought Darcy's addresses more likely with each passing day, he needed to let her down.

"When you do it," Elizabeth further insisted, "take care to be dreadful."

Darcy said nothing, but he raised his eyebrows. Even that was a stronger reaction to her teasing than he was lately in the habit of giving.

"You do not wish for her to regret you," Elizabeth explained. "The sting of disappointment will be keenly felt if she desires the prize." The happy lack of disappointment in losing an unworthy object must be felt by him, in relation to herself. Though she could not discern Darcy's intentions for his own future, Elizabeth was not blind to the ample opportunities his former friendship with Mr. Gardiner had given him to renew a proposal of marriage to her. Instead, he had chosen to offer the position of his mistress, thus making her an even more unsuitable candidate for his wife than she had been at Hunsford. She had made herself, through her intemperate words, impossible to regret.

"I am sure that is excellent advice in some cases," Darcy said, "but in this one, a poor choice. Anne is my cousin. I shall have occasion to be in company with her all of our lives. I should not like to have so many inevitable meetings colored by an unpleasant episode."

"The occasion may be unpleasant," Elizabeth replied, "but I am to understand that it does not follow that all future meetings must be equally so. Disappointment turns righteous when the object desired turns out to not be so valuable." She had a petty, small-minded cousin of her own to remind her of that.

Darcy considered the doubtful wisdom of Mr. Collins as he sipped tea.

He had an especially thoughtful manner of drinking, she thought. She could see his mind working. "Family," he pronounced, "should always retain its value, regardless of whether we approve of our relations or not."

"Do you approve of Miss de Bourgh?" Elizabeth wondered aloud. Anne de Bourgh, by Elizabeth's estimation, was rude, selfish and perpetually cross. However, she must admit, she knew little of the girl. Darcy would be in a better way of knowing her good qualities. "Or," Elizabeth added, "is it that you wish her to approve of you?"

"It hardly signifies to me if I have her approval," Darcy replied easily enough. "My only interest in this score is to avoid the unpleasant scenes that must arise when one treats family in an infamous
manner." Then, he shrugged. "But it is no matter; I am to visit my uncle."

"The Earl?" She immediately regretted letting the question slip from her lips. To her own ears, Elizabeth thought she sounded intimidated, when the truth was she had simply never heard of any uncles besides his mother's brother. She supposed it possible Lady Anne could have multiple brothers; old Mr. Darcy was not known to her as an only child.

But Darcy affirmed her initial assumption. "The very same. I am looking forward to the visit. It has been some time since I have been in his part of the country."

Back at her ease, Elizabeth said, "I recall Colonel Fitzwilliam once telling me that you are nearly silent at Rosings Park, yet lively enough in other places. Is your uncle's seat a place of liveliness or silence?"

Though it was a teasing question, he answered it with all sincerity: "My uncle's position in life demands deference and respect, Miss Bennet. Rather than lively or silent, I would prefer to think of myself as paying due respect to any persons' whose house I may be in."

"Then you understand why I must ask," Elizabeth laughed, "what position in life is most correctly observed through lively conversation?"

He smiled, wanly. "Yours, I would hope. Or, have I proven myself a dull companion?"

Intricate characters were the most interesting to study. He had that claim. As long as Elizabeth had to strive to understand his every look and gesture, had to constantly adjust her mental sketch of him to accommodate new information, he could not be dull. "Are you so desirous of a compliment, sir," she asked, "that you would so boldly ask for one?"

"I cannot judge that answer as an affirmative or negative of my original question," he replied.

"Rest assured, sir," Elizabeth replied, "you are far from dull. A less dull companion, I could not have asked for."

"There is that, at least," he said.

Such a pronouncement was puzzling to Elizabeth. She was of a mind to ask what he meant by it when Darcy set down his tea cup and stood. He took her hands and pulled her to her feet. There was a look in his eye that she knew very well. They both knew his visits were compelled by his lust. Sometimes, his desire occupied the back of his mind, where it sat quietly without being acted upon. Other times, he had made demands almost as soon as he entered the house. For the past fortnight, they had been locked in an unspoken duel where he pretended his desire did not exist, and she tried to flame it. Finally, she had done something to overthrow the pretense. That look in his eye told her he needed the pleasure she offered.

He cast his eye about the room, and coming to a decision, asked Elizabeth to grasp the arm rails of the settee. Expecting to be lead to the bed, or pressed against the wall, she found this to be a strange request. Fulfilling it required Elizabeth to bend slightly at the waist and hold that unusual posture. Hearing the rustle of fabric that was the fall of his breeches dropping, Elizabeth realised his intention to possess her where she stood.

One of his hands covered hers on the settee. The other, Elizabeth suspected, was stroking his rude appendage. She could hear his mounting urgency in his ragged breathing, in the labored way he spoke when he directed her to pull up her skirts and open her legs wider. Elizabeth flushed, her stockinged legs and bare derriere on display.
She should be awaiting him with keen anticipation. Instead, Elizabeth found herself feeling none of the intimacy that such acts should inspire.

"Darcy," Elizabeth said, shifting her hips away from his, "I cannot do this." She dropped her skirts, smoothing them about her legs.

His hand retreated first, then he stepped back. Elizabeth waited for the sound of rustling fabric that indicted he had fastened his breeches before she turned around.

He bowed somewhat stiffly. "I see, then I shall importune you no further."

Elizabeth resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She tried so hard to bridge the space between them, yet he was prepared to retreat at the first words of dissent he heard. "I do not mean to say that your attention is unwelcome, sir. I simply find myself not prepared for for what you are currently desiring."

"I understand perfectly well," he said. The barrier between them was so strong it was almost tangible. "It has, of course, been my hope that you would grow accustomed to my demands on your person, find it easier to bear, if not something you could enjoy."

"I did, and it has," she answered honestly. Just as he owed complete honesty to Miss de Bourgh, Elizabeth owed her honesty to Darcy. "In the past several weeks, I have felt something between us change. I know you cannot be unaware. It is my hope that leaving Town and being at our leisure in the country will provide us the opportunity to repair it."

Darcy strode to the fireplace place and back again, large steps, full of nervous energy. "It shall be my hope, as well," he said.

The visit concluded soon after that, on both sides equally uncomfortable. There was little else to be done but for Elizabeth to bid him adieu and a pleasant journey.

*****

The phrase "absence makes the heart grow fonder" was an old adage since long before there was Elizabeth Bennet making observations about beloved sayings. This particular proverb, she had often found true. As a girl, her travels from Hertfordshire always seemed to be accompanied by an increase in her mother's affection. As a more cynical woman of London, it seemed to her that her tolerance for Lydia's vulgarity and ignorance was so great because of the length of her sister's truancy.

The state of Darcy's heart, she had feared to contemplate during her journey. Their parting had not been a promising one. Proverbial wisdom implied he would be pleased to see her. Yet, she could not deny that a month was time enough for him to reevaluate their relationship without the distraction of her pretty lips and prettier breasts. Distance was enough for his intellectual distaste to overpower his instinctual desire. She may be greeted by a man determined to cut their connection, or she may be greeted by the amiable man she met last summer.

As her carriage rolled up the drive of her little cottage at Kympton, Darcy was there to greet her. His eyes shined with pleasure as he handed her down. Her gloved hand, he brought to his lips, kissed her every knuckle, then held her palm to his chest.

"Miss Bennet," he rumbled, "you are very welcome to Kympton."

"Thank you, sir," she said sweetly.

"Come," he said, "let me give you a tour of the house. You will find it to be nothing compared to the house in Town, but I never found you to be entirely at your ease in Mayfair. I suspect you will
appreciate the cottage's rustic qualities." He motioned for her manservant, Matthew, to bring her trunks inside. Robinson would get to the unpacking.

It was a smaller cottage than the one he had found for Mrs. Bennet and the girls, but having only one occupant aside from servants, that was only natural. It was a house designed to be lived in, rather than to please the aesthetics of a gentlemen, with a regular floorplan and sturdy roof. Darcy warned her the staircase would be dark after sunset and apologized for the lack of a bookroom. ("The library at Pemberley," he added, "is of course at your disposal. I shall be happy to deliver any title you wish.")

He would bring what she wished. Kympton was not like London. In Town, mistresses were expected. Every man they encountered was a wealthy gentleman who had one of his own or wished for one. Small communities in the country were less forgiving. The life she had led quite openly in Town was now a secret. She brought some of her servants from Town with her. The truth of the situation was not hidden from them, of course, but with vigilance, no one outside of the designated circle would have cause to suspect anything untoward.

The tour concluded with a trip up the narrow stairwell to her bedchamber, where Darcy exercised his increased fondness for her person. He enveloped her in his arms, kissing her with a hunger that made her gasp. Indeed, Darcy was fonder of her lips than ever before. He could not be satisfied with kisses alone. He bit her lips, suckled them. He bruised them in his desire.

At her back, his hands were industrious, loosening the layers of garments that kept her breasts hidden from sight. Her breathing quickened as he cupped her soft flesh, his fingers plucking at her nipples until they protruded, puckered and deeply pink. And then his mouth, his starved mouth, descended upon them. His lips, his tongue, his teeth. Her own need made her whimper.

Darcy gathered her skirts himself, pushing them up around her waist. Her thighs were eager to part for him now, but his hands stilled her. He stroked her with a slow, delicate, dedicated reverence before guiding Elizabeth back onto the bed, finally allowing her to wrap her legs around his waist. He clasped her wrists above her head as he worshipped her, the burning kisses on her throat muffling the sounds of his pleasure. Her arms held aloft by his powerful hands, Elizabeth had no way of muffling her own sounds. In her ecstasy, she groaned and cried until she could do so no more, and was undone by him.

Afterwards, they made for a ludicrous picture, booted feet hanging off the bed. Darcy had spared her having to tug his tall boots down his legs, opting instead of the indignity of his breeches fallen and tangled around his knees. Elizabeth was no better, with her skirts in a pile around her waist and her bodice askew. She should have laughed at them, but her sweat-soaked, sated self was too exhausted to do anything but lie cradled in his arms. She could scarcely recall why she ever feared losing him.

Held fast against his body, Elizabeth could feel Darcy's speech as clearly as she could hear it. "I neglected to ask you," he said with contrite tones, "how you amused yourself in Town after I left."

"I did notice some preoccupation on your part," Elizabeth answered, cheekily. "I shall forgive it, as there was very little amusement to be had in Town without you." She could not help herself. She stroked his face.

"You called on Miss Lydia, I hope," Darcy suggested.

"Twice, I did," she answered. If there was ever a subject to dissolve her joy, it was this. "She has not much altered in spirit. My aunt has done the calculations and suspects her day of reckoning will be but a month hence."
"The plan to call the child a foundling," he wondered, "is that still what Miss Lydia intends for it?"

"Oh, yes. My mother will be the principal caregiver, I believe," Elizabeth said. "It will be good for her. There is much useful employment to be found on Mr. Cleese's land, but my mother eschews it all."

"She is a gentleman's widow," Darcy said, as though it were some excuse for laziness.

"She was a gossip, sir. People will talk anywhere, but there is very little news of interest among farmers and cottagers. Certainly not enough to entertain my mother. A child will give her something useful to do, and what good luck, it will be Lydia's child." Her equal in beauty and high spirits, Lydia had always been Mrs. Bennet's dearest daughter.

"Your mother welcomed the news of Miss Lydia's being found, then?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, incredulous. "Of course. All of my family did. One need not approve of a person's actions to welcome their safe return."

"I am glad of it," he answered.

Elizabeth pressed her cheek into the soft cotton of his shirt and was content to say no more. If he was glad, she had no desire to ruin it with more news. Mary disapproved, of course, and would no longer even visit her mother and sisters at their cottage. Kitty was a more determined flirt than ever before. Jane's spirits appeared to be rising - the tone of her letters were growing steadily more cheerful, but what a thing to take solace in!

"Your aunt and uncle," Darcy prompted, "how did you find them?"

"They were very kind when I saw them," she answered. "I fear they are overburdened."

"You have a loyal family. There is very little you would not do for one another."

She laughed. "Such praise, Mr. Darcy?"

"Indeed. I was very sorry to give over your uncle's friendship."

"Perhaps if you loiter in Cheapside," Elizabeth suggested merrily, "you may find another like him."

"Men like your uncle are rare, I believe. Certainly, I had never had a friend such as him before."

"I should imagine not," Elizabeth replied. "I would have been please just to hear you speak of him highly. To have you regret him so deeply is an honor I could not have asked for."

"Most of my friends," Darcy said thoughtfully, adding "— and I include myself in this — are idle. I could not ask for a better education, and yet, I have no particular use for any of my knowledge. My lands are overseen by a steward, my investments by a solicitor. I consider myself worldly, yet what experience in the world have I truly got? Society, ballrooms. Mr. Gardiner is sensible and trustworthy. He never looked to me for guidance. I am entirely ignorant of the knowledge he needs to navigate his life."

Elizabeth found the energy to laugh, and did so. "And you enjoyed being superfluous?"

He chuckled. "I suppose I did."

Rising onto her elbows, Elizabeth looked him over. "I never would have thought it of you. I supposed you loved to be of use."
"Like my aunt," he said drolly. "There is some truth to that. You must own, however, how refreshing it can be when one is used to one attitude, and encounters another."

Conversation had roused her. Awake enough for modesty, Elizabeth adjusted her bodice to cover her breasts. Darcy hooked a finger into her gown and exposed them again. His eyes fixed on her nipples. A small droplet of pale yellow liquid collected at the apex of one of them. Darcy caught it on his thumb.

"Too vigorous," he wondered, "was I?"

"You have been everything I hoped you would be," Elizabeth admitted. "When you were last in Town," - at this, he colored - "I had come to fear first that you saw me as an obligation, then that you were interested only in your own pleasure. This welcome has laid such fears to rest."

"I am heartily ashamed of my behavior on that occasion," he confessed. "Much of my behavior, I cannot think of without abhorrence, but that day was perhaps the worst. Allow me to beg your forgiveness."

"Certainly," she sang, "you may beg my forgiveness. And I, one day, when I am feeling magnanimous, may even forgive you."

"Miss Bennet," Darcy began, warily.

But she said, "Hush," and silenced him with a kiss. "I am teasing."

"And I am in earnest," he replied. "I have…" Darcy faltered, then began again: "I have, throughout our acquaintance, failed to treat you with the respect that is your due. I am not satisfied with my behavior on that score, and I would ask of your justice that you allow my most sincere repentance some honest consideration."

"I believe," Elizabeth said, "that we have already determined that the proper means of observing my station in life is through lively conversation. If that is to be our means of measurement, you are correct, sir. You have, in certain places and at certain times, been dour, inscrutable and difficult. It could be argued that you have not payed me the proper deference at all.

"But you have chosen your companion well, sir, for she is not one to agonize over past wounds when the present provides more pleasant contemplations."

"I thank you, Miss Bennet," he answered, voice thick.

She kissed him again and, feeling herself very magnanimous indeed, took his hands and covered her breasts with his palms. He fondled her gently, coaxing more liquid to bead at the rosy tips of her nipples. She sighed when he licked it off, wrinkled her nose when he caught it on his thumb and held it to her lips.

When she grew tired of this game, Elizabeth prompted him, "You must tell me about your trip."

Darcy shrugged. "Yourself not being acquainted with any of the principals," he replied, "stories can be of little interest."

She caught his fingers where they still played with her chest. "I am well acquainted with you," Elizabeth reminded him. "I think your stories will have much to inspire my interest. You must share one, at least."

Darcy considered for a moment, then asked, "Tell me, are you familiar with the Ospedale della
Elizabeth, whose education in the modern languages was incomplete, ventured, "Italian?"

Darcy affirmed it, then explained, "It was once an orphanage for abandoned girls, but has since become a renowned music school located in, as you said, Italy. It has boasted of the finest violin virtuosos for many years now. Through his connections, my uncle was able to secure a performance during his house party. Never before have I heard musicians of such caliber."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said, amused, "you are more accustomed to my meager playing of the piano-forte."

"Your playing gives me great pleasure," Darcy said, "but to hear the violin compositions of Antonio Vivaldi, played by students of his own school - though he has of course been dead many years, God rest his soul - was an altogether different experience, moving in a way all of its own. I have not the skill with words to describe it."

"Then I wonder, sir," Elizabeth said, "that this is the tale you chose to relate."

"The music is such a thing of beauty that it alone makes the listener wish to relate it," Darcy said, "however impossible one might find doing it justice. More to the point, I wish to relate it to you because their playing put you in my mind rather forcefully."

"The condition in life of the musicians," Elizabeth surmised.

"Yes," he answered. "Many of them, if not all, were of illegitimate birth or some other unfortunate circumstance. Yet, they created such beauty. Their skill at their craft unparalleled."

"Tell me," she said, "were you thinking of our daughters and what beautiful creatures they may be?"

"It gave me much to think on," Darcy replied.

****

A country girl happiest keeping country hours, Elizabeth was soon in the habit of rising early and exploring the rugged landscape of Darcy's neighborhood. Not so careless a guardian as her father had been, Darcy expected her rambles through the countryside to be attended by a servant. Robinson made for good conversation and had an excellent eye for spotting wild flowers, though she could not name any of them. Matthew was more adventurous, willing to follow her on long walks that traversed unknown fields. To Elizabeth's eternal frustration, Darcy kept city hours even in the country. He was late to rise and late to retire. To watch him, one would think there was enjoyment to be had in burning candles alone.

She was hardly surprised the morning he came to call, and she was still abed.

"Miss Bennet!" Darcy cried, bursting into her bedchamber, "Matthew says you are ill."

"Indisposed," she corrected softly.

This calmed him somewhat. "Is there anything I can get for your relief?"

Elizabeth considered. "I thank you, no."

Chastized, Darcy supposed, "You must be wishing my absence. I shall leave you."

"No!" she bid. "No." With a sigh, Elizabeth sat up. "It is certain to be better if we say all there is to
be said as early as possible."

There had been signs, of course. Like most young ladies, she knew there was a connection between her courses and her ability to bear children, though she did not quite understand how it was. When her courses came down, her womb was empty. If they did not come down, perhaps it was not. Darcy's ardor had never been troubled by her courses. He had never had any opportunity to encounter them.

Two weeks ago, on her first day in Derbyshire, her breasts had leaked.

This morning, she awoke to feel it fluttering inside of her. A child, quickened. Her courses, she could explain away. Their steady rhythm could be upset by so many things. Anxieties, illness, a change in diet. The quickening, she could not explain away.

"I am increasing."

Counting backwards, Elizabeth could see that he must have planted this child at the very beginning. Before she came to appreciate her own appetite for what he did. Before everything had become a topsy-turvy muddle. Before Lydia. Before her aunt's observation that a child would make her own situation more stable.

Darcy paled. "You are certain?" he asked. "Absolutely certain?"

"It has quickened." She smiled at his incredulous expression. "You can have no cause for such shock. You have known this would occur. It was not so long ago that you were expressing your hope for such children."

He stalked to the window, his back turned to her.

"Darcy," Elizabeth bid, "I would not have you ignore me by pretending the view is so striking."

"Do not misunderstand me," he said sharply, turning to face her. "While I understood it to be expected that our union should bear fruit, I did not hope for such. I do not hope for illegitimate children. The lives of such children do not necessarily have to be categorized by scandal and shame - that was my great revelation."

"I expect the amount of scandal and shame such a child as ours will face will depend largely on his parents. What do you intend to do to promote him?"

Darcy was silent for a long time. Then, he said, "Pray for daughters."

Chapter End Notes

As always, the combined efforts of JRTT and SMAW were very necessary in bringing you this chapter. Their questions, demands for clarification and grammatical corrections were extremely useful!
Chapter 11

Walking out was Elizabeth's usual cure for pique. She found the benefits of walking immense. First of all, it allowed her time to consider her thoughts. If there was something to be done about what caused her irritation, determining what action to take lifted her spirits. If there was nothing to be done, then being upset about it was useless and she would resolve to stop. Second, there was something deeply soothing about admiring a natural landscape. Whether it be the strength of ancient trees, the smell of blossoming flowers or the sound of all the animals who made their homes in the wilderness, there was always something to delight her. Fresh air could cure any ill.

Oddly, examining her feelings on Darcy's comment about daughters had the effect of increasing her offense rather than mitigating it. Men, she knew, desired sons. It was a just desire. Sons would steward the people and the land in the next generation. Daughters left home to marry other men. Their loyalty necessarily shifted from the family of their birth to the family of their husband. A son inherited his father's home, carried on his father's name.

Her own parents had birthed only daughters. Elizabeth loved her sisters, but she had never been blind to the problems that arose in the absence of male children. The largest problem of course had been the entail itself, but so many other issues compounded it. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had been sure of having a son eventually, and had therefore refused to practice economy in the early years of their marriage, when it could have helped their daughters' fortunes. Mrs. Bennet's dowry had been fine for the station she was born into, but once it needed to be divided among five genteel daughters, it had become inadequate. With each passing year bringing more disappointment, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had lost any hope of maintaining affection for one another. A son would have inherited Longbourn. He would have put an end to the entail, allowing the resources of the estate to be shared with his sisters. He would have been a joint source of pride for his parents.

Darcy wished for daughters. If a legitimate son was preferable to a legitimate daughter, then it appeared in Darcy's eyes that bastardy made the opposite true. For an otherwise childless man, to sire a natural daughter was less of a tragedy than a natural son.

As a woman, Elizabeth was insulted. That Darcy could value females so little as to find the birth of a natural daughter to be less of an indignity than a son was repugnant to her feelings. She was insulted as the child's mother, that he should consider the birth of his own offspring objectionable. Regardless of the circumstance of the child's birth, his rights as the father would always supersede her rights as the mother. He, who was already prepared to be disappointed, would always have greater claim than she, who nurtured the baby within her womb. His child only just quickened, and Darcy was already looking for fault in it.

Walking was not the cure for her offense. The more she thought on it, the angrier she became.

Robinson was happy enough to let Elizabeth's dark mood sour her own. The maid's cure for pique was millinery. They rode into Lambton to admire hats, purchase ribbons and put thoughts of Fitzwilliam Darcy and his eternal search for inadequacy in his fellow man out of their minds. Elizabeth purchased a yellow ribbon that she thought would look very smart on the bonnet she wore to church. Robinson was pleased, but her approval did nothing to alleviate Elizabeth's annoyance.

Nor did the fact that Darcy himself was at her cottage when the women returned home, holding a paper-wrapped bundle Elizabeth could only assume was a peace offering. In London, he had gifted her with jewels and gowns, but that had been so that he could admire her. In Kympton, he gifted her with a book.
Curiosity more than gratitude stopped Elizabeth from rejecting his overture. The tome was old, its title worn off the leather cover, its bookplate faded and scarcely legible. It had once belonged to a Darcy of Pemberley, but what ancestor of his and when they had obtained the book, Elizabeth could not determine.

She had a small collection of other books from his library. Those books were in pristine condition, read once or not at all. When Elizabeth inquired about a recent title, Darcy was generally able to procure it quickly. The bookplate usually attributed ownership of the book to himself; one or two belonged to Miss Darcy. Elizabeth shared a taste for poetry and natural history with Mr. Darcy. He was forever trying to tempt Miss Darcy's interest with novels, but she had no mind for reading anything but sheet music.

Then, Darcy said the strangest thing about presenting the old, worn book: "This duty should belong to your mother."

Though her mother was capable of reading, she had never, to Elizabeth's knowledge, actually done so. Inside, the title of the book was still legible: *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. The works of the ancient Greeks were more suited to a man's education than to the teachings of a mother to daughter. "You cannot have mistaken my mother for a student of philosophy, sir," Elizabeth said, puzzled.

"Nor was the author of that book," Darcy replied, "much as he claimed. My intentions in giving you this book are more practical than that would imply. It is a text explaining copulation and midwifery. I trust the early chapters will not be of interest to you. They are largely concerned with describing organs and acts with which you are already familiar. The portions written for the direction of childbearing women, you should find useful."

"I thank you," Elizabeth said, surprised at her own sincerity. She had been unable to master her anger with him through her usual venues. Now that he had shown an interest in the development of his child, he was absolved of some of his offense. Further, the evident age of the book paid proof to the idea that it had long been an occupant of Pemberley's library. Not only the woman to have birthed Darcy himself, but the women who had borne his forefathers had likely read this very book as they prepared for the arrival of their sons. "I am especially honored to be trusted with a book that has spent many generations in your library. I wonder how many women in your line read this book in the hope of being delivered of a healthy child." Opening to the bookplate, she tried again to read the name. If she could determine the original owner, perhaps he could count the generations of Darcys to have held and read it.

Darcy shrugged. "I could not say. I would hope only that the women of my family were desirous enough of healthy children that they followed whatever good advice they were offered."

"You appear to put great faith in its words," Elizabeth observed slyly. "What need of this book could you have had in the past?"

"A book is, perhaps, not the most effective way to satisfy a young man's natural curiosity about the bodies of women," Darcy confessed, "but like so many young men, I did read it in my youth."

"At what age?" she wondered. Her Darcy was a man of the world. His resources were vast, his ability to find an answer to any question that concerned him unparalleled. He was fascinated by her body, by the pleasure she could rouse in him and the pleasure she could be made to experience, but she could not think of him as curious. She could not picture him a fresh-faced innocent.

Darcy considered the question. "Fourteen?" he guessed. "Not more than fifteen."

Elizabeth was sure there were miniatures of him in the gallery at Pemberley that young, but in her
foolishness, she had not thought to look when she had the opportunity. It was hard to imagine him young and inquisitive. "And how did you find," she asked, "the bodies of women?"

"You must be teasing me," Darcy replied, "for I do not believe you could have any doubts on that score."

"I am," she affirmed. "But, supposing I was not, what would you say in your defense?"

"That I have found your body most particularly pleasing," Darcy answered. "I am, and have long been, a great admirer of your figure."

"That is the education of young men?" Elizabeth scoffed sweetly. "I do not recall needing a book to inform me how to admire a man with a fine figure."

There was something about the turn of his mouth that she could not determine. It was wise and hungry all at once. "Let me assure you, madam, I had no need for a book to tell me that. You asked how I would defend myself had you not been teasing. That is how."

"In that case," Elizabeth protested, "you must tell me what you did learn from such a book. It is not at all fair of you to tell me you read it, what brought you to read it, and then refuse to share what you learned."

"It has been my design to share with you what I learned these three months at least," he answered.

"You are being deliberately obtuse, sir!" Elizabeth complained. Laughingly, she added, "And more smug than is becoming."

Darcy cleared his throat. "Were you to read the entire volume - and I would ask you do not, for much of it is irrelevant to your needs and you have better uses of your time - you would find the author is particularly concerned with the lust of virgin girls, and how one might please them."

It was a rude reminder. Three months ago, she had been a virgin. He had taken that from her in a bout of quick, uncomfortable, almost humiliating fornication. But then, she had not known being possessed by a man could be anything but uncomfortable and humiliating. Darcy had taught her otherwise later. When she could no longer be cowed by a kiss, he kissed her impure places. Her body was as capable of ecstasy as his. She only required more coaxing.

The promise of pleasure in his voice made her yearn for his touch. When had that happened? How could such a shameful duty become something she longed for in only three months? Elizabeth remembered the morning he had awoken erect. She had offered herself. Because she thought it her duty? Because she wanted to bring him happiness? Or to chase fulfillment for herself?

So it was true; he had changed her. Women in her position were called Cyprians - from the Greek island of Cyprus, worshippers of Aphrodite, students of lust. While Elizabeth preferred that term to other, more blatantly sexual names, she had always considered it to be more wishful thinking on the part of the protectors than an accurate descriptor of the women. Any man would rather think his mistress motivated by wanton desire for him than for the practical need for his money. Perhaps it was not so simple. Perhaps the appetites of virgin girls, once whet, grew as fierce and hungry as a man's.

Determined not to tremble, Elizabeth flippantly retorted, "I do not know anything of virgin girls being pleased, Darcy. In my experience, neither do you."

"What is done is done," he answered. "At the time, I rather thought you needed the boost to your courage. On reflection, mine was perhaps not the best plan, but the assessment of you itself was without error."
"Some schools of thought would recommend comforting someone who is afraid," Elizabeth dryly countered.

"The circumstance being what it was," Darcy replied, "I cannot credit that you would have accepted comfort from me."

He had been the villain of the piece in her mind. To cry on his shoulder would have been ludicrous. Even now, she did not much care for the idea of whispering her fears to him. What did he intend for their child? What would become of her when he grew bored with her favors?

One of Darcy's large hands cupped her cheek. "That has changed, I hope?" Something in her eyes must have alluded to her thoughts, because he then added, "Perhaps not." Sighing, he leaned down to kiss her gently.

Elizabeth's unpleasant recollections had effectively smothered any desire stirred by the promise of passion in his earlier words. The sweetness of his kiss, however, could not go unanswered. His lips proved as capable of enflaming her as his voice. Elizabeth kissed Darcy fiercely, clutching his lapel with one hand, even as the other still held his book. This encouragement was enough for him. Experience had taught Elizabeth how eager Darcy was to make the most of every encounter. His fingers curled around the back of her neck as he kissed her deeply.

When they broke apart, Darcy took a shuddering breath. Then, he said something entirely unacceptable: "I should leave you now. Send Matthew on to the House if you are in need of anything."

*****

Ever since her father first taught her to sound out letters on some ancient primer, Elizabeth had been an insatiable reader. She learned very quickly that reading pleased her father, taught her knowledge otherwise unattainable in her tiny corner of the kingdom and sparked her imagination. When Darcy gave her a book and warned her against reading its entirety, no part of Elizabeth intended to skip to the sections that pertained directly to her own situation. To be only concerned with one's own immediate needs was no way to learn, so while she did flip to the parts about childbearing to skim some of the advice, she quickly doubled back to start at the beginning.

As a manual intended to explain fornication, conception and midwifery, the tome contained information enough to tantalize a young man and terrify a virgin bride. There was nothing much to interest the modestly experienced Cyprian. There were, however, passages to incite anger in the breast of a modestly experienced Cyprian.

The author, fine Christian that he was, had endless advice for enjoyable copulation - and he was certainly fond of the word "copulation!" - but he was quite adamant that such advice only be taken by married persons. The false Aristotle had a high regard for the marriage state and a firm belief in a loving marriage. Elizabeth's idealistic self was pleased. 'What an addition to happiness a good wife makes!' the author claimed.

No idealistic virgin about to embark on a loving marriage, Elizabeth was a kept woman given this volume by her protector. That self was less pleased that he should give her a book whose author further declared, 'How much more satisfaction a man receives in the embraces of a loving wife, than in the wanton dalliances of a deceitful harlot.'

It was not that she denied its truth, necessarily. However common it was for a married man to take a mistress, a loving wife made a more preferable companion than a Cyprian. Too often, marriages were made in haste, between men and women who did not properly know one another's character or
with an eye only to material considerations. In such instances as those, where respect and esteem were absent, the marriage state itself could not be agreeable. The distinction between a wife and a loving wife could not be understated.

No, what Elizabeth took issue with was the descriptor deceitful. Was the author claiming that a woman who sold her favors was inherently untrustworthy? Elizabeth had never offered Darcy anything but what she thought herself able to give. Though she knew little of Lydia's exploits - a conscious, purposeful ignorance - Lydia did not possess the guile to say anything but exactly what she thought.

Though Darcy claimed to abhor disguise, any deceit in their relationship belonged to him. He made outlandish claims, insisting that he would never marry, that he would never dissolve their connection, even that he loved her. Though she knew it was not in his nature to lie, such outrageous statements could not be anything but falsehoods uttered for some purpose of his own. Even after all these months, his character was still one that puzzled her. What purpose could he have behind such fabrications? Was his goal to make her a more pliant consort? Did he seek to justify his actions in his own mind?

How could he own a book praising the marriage state, admit to having read it as a young man, value its advice enough to give it to her and still claim that he did not desire such happiness for himself?

These thoughts created disorder in Elizabeth's mind. Aristotle's Masterpiece warned against mental excitement in the expecting mother. It further claimed she should avoid too much exercise. Elizabeth chose to interpret 'too much' as varying among individuals. She was of a hearty constitution and was able to weather more exercise than many women of her acquaintance.

Still, she did not venture farther than her own garden. While Elizabeth was sure some exercise would do her more good than harm, to walk all the way into town now struck her as needlessly reckless. Gazing upon the flowers, Elizabeth thought she should have brought shears and a basket. The blooms would make for a lovely centerpiece, the creation of which would give her some distraction.

Elizabeth shrugged. She still had fingers. Crouching in the flowerbed, she began snapping the stems of the brightest blooms. She had gathered a small bouquet when the sound of hoofbeats roused her from her work. Turning, she saw Darcy dismount. Hand still clutching the reins, he walked towards her, his beast following behind.

She met him halfway. At least some of her greens must look tasty to a horse and she would rather they all escaped, uneaten. The hand not holding her bouquet hung limp at her side. Darcy reached for it, dropped it as soon as he had taken it, and instead brushed his hand against her stomach.

"Are you well enough to be in the sun?" he asked.

It was true she had gone out without a parasol, but she did have a bonnet. Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "I am well, sir," she replied. "In any case, it is not my intention to be out for much longer. I think my bonnet will do for protection."

"You are not accustomed to restrictions," Darcy observed. "Some of your behavior must be curbed. A woman who is increasing cannot do everything she did as a maid."

"I have only been out a short while," she protested. "I must have some exercise."

He frowned. "Some, of course," Darcy echoed. "Take care that it is not too much."

"I have," she replied. "Had I not taken care, I would have walked into town."
"If there is anything you need," he said, "do not hesitate to ask for it."

"Oh, no," Elizabeth answered, "I go only for the pleasure of walking."

"Then I thank you for using your judgement and refraining while you are in a delicate condition." Darcy turned his face towards the sun, and squinting, said, "Let us go inside."

On their approach to the house, Matthew took the horse. Inside, Robinson took their hats and gloves and the flowers.

In the parlor, Darcy put his hands on her belly again.

"You could not feel her in the garden," Elizabeth chided, "you shall not feel her in the parlor."

He met her eyes. "You are certain it is a girl?"

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows as she sat on the sette. "You have prayed for a girl," she answered, "so a girl she must be. Old wives and your Aristotle have many ways to divine the sex. I imagine most women would have squeezed milk into a basin of water by now. That will not do for me. Why should I go to such effort when I have you to determine it?"

Darcy frowned. "You are wishing to characterise me as controlling, though you know I have no greater control over this than yourself."

She shrugged. "You will not deny that you prefer to have your own way." Watching him carefully, she added, "Your desire for daughters is singular. I do not believe I have known a man who prayed for girls before."

Though he had drawn Elizabeth inside with concerns about the sun, Darcy himself walked towards a window. He faced the garden rather than Elizabeth when he said, "In our present circumstances, we can do better by daughters. To ensure their growth into accomplished ladies and find gentlemen-like men willing to marry them will be painful in its way, but their illegitimacy need not plague them. A son is a different matter entirely."

"A better one, I would have thought," Elizabeth confessed. "Girls cannot enter good society. Your own admission of marrying them to gentlemen-like men confirms it. A son would not have every door open to him, but if you sponsored him, he could find a good situation."

"If we have sons, you can depend on it, I shall," Darcy promised. "That I would prefer daughters should not be taken to mean I intend to neglect sons."

"I suppose it is difficult to account for the preference itself," Elizabeth admitted. "I find myself thinking you must not find natural daughters as repugnant as natural sons."

"Miss Bennet!" he cried. "If that is your thinking, it is not to be wondered that you are not well pleased with me."

She snorted. It should not be a wonder to him at all if she was unsatisfied with him! To think she should be, with a connection as tenuous as theirs! "Pray, sir," she prompted, "perhaps you should explain your thinking."

"Daughters know they are to leave their father's house and cleave to their husband. A son should take his father's place. Though I understand it may be necessary, I do not relish telling your son Pemberley shall not be his."
Her son. So he did intend to have sons with another woman. With a bitter taste rising in her throat, Elizabeth began, "Neither he nor I could expect otherwise."

Darcy turned. "Miss Bennet, please. Whatever you may think, I am no fool. The circumstance between ourselves was never so simple as to give me the means of convincing myself that all may yet be resolved to best please me."

"I had not thought you a fool," Elizabeth protested. "As for the rest, I cannot make out your meaning."

Folding his arms behind his back, Darcy stalked from the window to the fireplace. "Had I behaved," he spat out, "in a more gentleman-like manner, I would have been blessed with your pity, nothing more. Had I spent my time in Hertfordshire desirous of being amiable to your neighbors or paying you attention more pronounced than quiet admiration, you would not have loved me. Perhaps you would have cushioned your refusal in kinder words. But what would you have me tell my son? That his father was an arrogant fool, his mother was right in wanting nothing to do with him, and it is the child that must suffer for it. It is the son that must be denied his rights because of the father's crimes?"

It was clear Darcy was in the grip of a powerful anger, raging at himself for indiscretions long forgot. His attitude was beyond her comprehension. When she chastised him for coldness in bed, he disregarded it. He was consumed by offenses that struck her as minor when compared with everything he had done since. What did it matter than he had been rude to his neighbors when she was carrying his bastard?

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said formally, drawing herself up, "I must insist you come sit. Shall I fetch you a glass of wine?"

"No," he bit, followed by a hollow, "thank you, madam."

"You may refuse the wine if you like," she replied, "but I shall not converse with your back to me any longer. Come, sit by me. Let us be friends." She extended her arm, holding her hand out until he finally came to take it. When he sat, Elizabeth did not relinquish his fingers.

"Had I known," she began, "that you still felt my intemperate words from an occasion so long ago, so long, in fact that I no longer think on it, I would have apologized for them! I was very much mistaken about your character. Pray, do not let it plague you so."

"In some specific instances," he answered, "you were mistaken in your understanding. My character, you had the right of. As much as I would rather present you with proof to the contrary, everything I have done since only confirms it."

"Your book warns against mental excitement in the expectant mother," Elizabeth answered. "For her sake, perhaps care against mental excitement can be taken by the expectant father?"

"There is nothing I would not do for you, Miss Bennet."

Despite her teasing, Elizabeth observed that he did not appear to be any less agitated. She should, she knew, comfort him. She should remind him of his sterling attributes, how dedicated he had been to finding Lydia, of the respect he had earned in the community. However, her own fears were enough that she could not bear spending her time placating his. If he could be raw and painful in his honesty, so could she.

"Sir," Elizabeth said, gripping his hand, "I have a confession to make."

He turned to her, a question in his eyes. "Yes?"
"I am," she took a deep breath, "Despite my best efforts to the contrary, I am very afraid for my baby. When you speak of the future, it all sounds so certain. And I am sure that, in your mind, it is certain. But my position is precarious. I cannot be certain." Her voice was thick. He could hear her tears, she was sure. She would cry later, when he was gone. Not now.

"I have given you nothing but cause to doubt me," he answered. "It is certain in my mind that I shall do everything in my power to promote their health, happiness and positions in the world. You may depend upon it."

She took a deep breath before answering, "As it happens, I do."

Darcy snorted and made to rise, but her unrelenting hold on his hand halted him. "That was never my intention. Above all other things, that is what I would wish to save you from."

"You had best explain yourself," Elizabeth said warily.

"I did not wish to see you beholden to any man," he confessed, "most of all, one you could not respect."

"Darcy?"

"Your uncle," he said, "hoped to marry you to a man who would prove to be a good business connection. We spoke of it. Too often, to my mind."

Darcy and Mr. Gardiner had been friends. It would be foolish to assume they did not speak of the events in their own lives. That Darcy had heard her uncle's wishes to marry her to a tradesman mortified Elizabeth.

"Mr. Gardiner's lament made it clear to me that you did not share your uncle's ambitions."

Blushing, Elizabeth answered, "It was not that I objected, precisely."

"We spoke on the subject," Darcy reminded her. "You did not wish to marry for mercenary considerations alone."

"My uncle thought I would have to accept my lot in life and act accordingly eventually."

"In this instance, the financially prudent course of action would be to marry a man beneath you, one whom you were very likely to neither understand nor respect, and spend your life beholden to him."

"You make it sound very unpleasant," Elizabeth observed.

"Such a life would be acceptable to some," he answered. "One of your sisters has done so."

"Mary, yes."

"But," Darcy continued, "it would not be acceptable to you."

"Necessity," Elizabeth replied, "has a way of changing one's standards."

"I thought," he confessed, "that the necessity might soon change yours. Soon enough, your uncle's wishes would triumph and you would accept a husband he had chosen for you. Respect for your uncle should overpower any other consideration. You are too sensible for anything less."

She had thought a great deal about Mr. Laurie. He had not been interested in a woman who did not encourage him and from that arena of safety, Elizabeth had considered what it would mean to accept
one of these friends of her uncle's. Growing up in her parents' household had lead Elizabeth to think often and deeply on the components of a felicitous marriage. The ideals she had formed at a young age would have to eventually give way to doing the proper thing and accepting a man who could help her situation. She had known that. With each day, she came closer to resigning herself to it.

"Yet I did not want that for you," Darcy continued. "You, with your intelligence, with your determination to choose right for yourself, you should not have been forced to compromise your ideals."

"Odd words," Elizabeth replied, "coming from the man who made the offer you did."

"I did not," he said miserably, "anticipate your accepting it."

Utterly shocked, Elizabeth cried, "Why make such an offer?"

"Your initial reaction," Darcy answered, "was what I had expected. You took offence and cut our acquaintance. My avowed goal had been to lessen the pressure Mr. Gardiner placed upon you. By your own admission, you felt that your uncle expected you to soon accept your changed circumstances and marry, though you disdained marrying for material consideration alone. I had wished very much to give you an alternative, one that would empower you long enough to withstand your family's pressure to marry in haste. While whatever decision you came to should meet the approval of your family, your pleasure in it should come first. I was willing to sacrifice our friendship, as trifling as it was, to give you greater independence. Why should you fear anyone's disapproval, anyone's frustration with your insistence on acting for your own happiness, when you know you may leave at any moment? I never intended for you to accept me. I only wished to decrease your uncle's influence, inasmuch as it stood in the way of your happiness. It was another solution, the only one I felt within my means to provide at the time, knowing our history."

"You wished to give me the means of having my own way," Elizabeth surmised. It could have worked, had she understood his plan. To Darcy, who had never been without social power, his transference of power to herself must have been obvious. If Elizabeth could leave Mr. Gardiner's house at any time, he lost the ability to pressure her into marrying a friend. She had never seen it that way. She had thought Darcy's degrading offer was made in all seriousness, steeped in selfishness and entitlement. "If you did not wish for me to accept it," she wondered, "why did you allow me to do so?"

"I tried to dissuade you," Darcy reminded her. "You would not be moved, and how could I reject you then? To accept such an offer! You had been desperate and humbled to come to me. I could not send you away." With his free hand, he cupped her cheek. "I will not send you away," Darcy promised. "Whatever fears you have for the future, know that, at least. I have made myself responsible for you, and I shall not abandon you."

She shrugged uncomfortably under the intensity of his gaze. "You may feel that way now," she hedged, "but in the future, you may yet marry. With such a history as ours, a wise wife would compel you to be rid of me."

"Miss Bennet," he groaned, "I love you. There is no woman alive that could compel me to deny you but yourself."

Though she had promised herself she would not cry, errant tears escaped from Elizabeth's eyes. Darcy delicately brushed them aside. It seemed impossible that throughout all these months, she still held his heart. Though she had told herself to disregard the confession he made in bed, this one she could not ignore. All that he had said to-day, he felt deeply.
"I will not marry any woman but you," Darcy whispered. "And you will not have me."

To that, there was only one thing to say: "Yes," Elizabeth replied. "I will."
Elizabeth’s satisfaction in her declaration was fleeting. The gratification aroused by Darcy’s warm reception was just as short-lived. It was exhilarating to know, despite all that had happened since the fateful day in April he had first proposed, that Darcy still desired her as a wife. On that day, she had been blind, prejudiced, partial and absurd. In the months since, duty to her family and her heart had led her to act in ways that were immodest, immoral and unchaste. She was pleased for herself that Darcy still valued her so highly. She was pleased for the child she carried who may yet be recognized by all the world as belonging to somebody.

On the occasion of his first proposal, Elizabeth’s understanding of Darcy’s character had been inaccurate. With her stubborn resolve to think ill of him, she had created an image of a vengeful and ill-tempered man. She had taken slander and revered it as gospel. In the time since, Elizabeth’s impressions could only grow more accurate. She had been given a score of opportunities since that day to know him better. Darcy had written a letter to explain his own perspective. She had met his housekeeper at Pemberley who spoke of him in glowing terms. As his lover, she had experienced him at both his most selfish and his most generous. Though Elizabeth had thought she understood Darcy better at present than she had formerly, his confessions to-day nevertheless proved to her that she was as oblivious to his mind as she had ever been. His own impression of events indicated the reverse was true as well.

Knowing him as poorly as she did, Elizabeth could not take Darcy’s words to mean he sincerely intended to take her as his wife. Persons were known to have idle wishes in their hearts that they had no intention of pursuing. As much as he might have wished to marry her, a gentleman who brought his mistress to the altar would be ostracized. Kings and peers, with their titles to protect them were embraced in all their proclivities. Kitty’s fashionably impure role model Sophia Dubochet now enjoyed an idle life as Lady Berwick, wife of the Baron. Men of every class enjoyed their paid companions, but without the power wielded by the highest among them, marrying one would be scandalous.

When Elizabeth had been a young virgin with an impeccable reputation and genteel father, Darcy had struggled against his feelings for her. He had thought marrying her would be a degradation. It had been the work of many months for him to overcome his objections, and even then, he still felt them. The force of his passion had induced him to be ruled by his heart rather than his sense. Elizabeth the Cyprian already answered to his passion. Now that a marriage between them would be truly reprehensible, how could he overcome his natural objections?

Would he gamble his standing in society on the chance that wealth alone could protect him from the disgust of the world?

Should he?

She had not the power to divine Darcy’s feelings and intentions from his words. So often, she had trusted only herself and her own perceptions and misconceptions, leading her to inaccurate conclusions about his mind and intentions. She should not assume Darcy’s unwillingness to marry another woman was meant as an offer of marriage to her. If it was, their tendency to misunderstand one another, compounded by isolation from society, could very well trap them both in lifelong misery.
For the good of her child, there was no question in Elizabeth’s mind that she would marry him if Darcy was willing. Her unreliable assessment of his character aside, she did think Darcy was too aware of his own wishes, too concerned with his own happiness, to rush headlong into a match that would lead him to disappointment. She could not be happy in a marriage that made her husband miserable. The example of her parents had taught her too well. She had not been willing to sacrifice her own happiness in marriage when she resided in her uncle’s house. Now, her child’s legitimacy was at stake. If a union with Darcy proved to be an unhappy one, she would consider her suffering a just penance for her foolishness.

Darcy intruded on Elizabeth’s musings with a sharp instruction: “Write your mother.”

Stirred from her thoughts, Elizabeth looked at him, then at their hands. Darcy had curled his fingers around her own, his thumbs stroking her knuckles. “Pardon?”

“Pray, you must write your mother,” Darcy repeated. When repetition failed to produce a gasp of comprehension from Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy entreated: “Miss Bennet, am I understanding you correctly in thinking you have agreed to be my wife?”

His direct, clear question, that could not be misinterpreted, was gratefully received. “You are,” Elizabeth affirmed. When he had asked, Darcy sounded worried. She wanted to attribute that to love on his part. Perhaps a corner of his heart feared she would not have him. Yet, Elizabeth knew better than to trust in her perception of him.

Darcy smiled and squeezed her fingers. “That being the case, you must write your mother and ask for her approval.”

His consideration for her mother flooded her person with affection.

With stronger conviction than she had felt a moment ago, Elizabeth replied, “I am of age.” Parental permission to wed was needed by brides and bridegrooms younger than one and twenty, but she had reached her majority long before they left London. Mr. Darcy himself was nearly thirty.

“We may not need her permission in the eyes of the law,” Darcy said, “but we would do better to show her respect. Though I will not pretend that we can avoid scandal, all things that can be done properly should be done.”

So scandal was on his mind, Elizabeth thought grimly. She prayed desperately he could not be swayed, but if he could, it would be better to know as soon as possible. “Are you certain this is what you want?” Elizabeth asked. “I have not spent so much time in Town as to feel the absence of London society. What is it to me if people I have never met shun me? It is you who are in a position to be harmed if we marry.”

“Miss Bennet,” he said, then with greater feeling, “Elizabeth. I have long been certain that above all else, I wished to call you my wife. What is it to me if the world disapproves if you do not?”

“It will be more than disapproval,” she reminded him. “We shall not be invited anywhere. You may find it difficult to conduct business. And Miss Darcy!” Her heart sunk. “Your scandal must harm her reputation.”

Darcy swallowed hard, his grip on her hands tightening. “Elizabeth,” he said with trepidation, “is it your intention to cry off, or to convince me to do so?”

In a tremulous voice, she said, “For my part, I am determined, sir.”

Darcy let out a slow breath. He drew one of her hands to his mouth and kissed the knuckles. “I am
determined,” he echoed. “However, I fear you are correct. Our marriage can only harm Georgiana’s prospects. If it were possible to wait until she was wed…” He shook his head. “We are not afforded the luxury of time.”

“We are in luck, then,” Elizabeth said, attempting to cajole him into better spirits with a tease, “that there is so little to be prepared.”

Taking her at her word, Darcy replied, “I had not realized that was to our advantage.”

She had meant it as a tease, but it was true. “Indeed. Being that I am already here in your neighborhood, I have no need for good-bye visits. You had new gowns made for me only recently that will do fine for wedding clothes. My mother will give her permission. You can have no cause to think otherwise. In fact, she may invite herself to come live in Derbyshire.”

“Though I think you will be happier in the country than Town,” Darcy said, “I do fear you would grow lonely with only myself for company.”

“How soon I should long for such loneliness,” Elizabeth replied mischievously, “if Mama is to come to Pemberley!”

“She would bring your sisters,” Darcy pointed out. He dropped one of her hands and curled his palm around her cheek instead. “That would make you happy.”

Elizabeth’s eyes softly closed. His skin was warm against her face. His voice was gentle. Listening to him made her ache in ways she had not known she could. Darcy was too pragmatic to think they would have an easy life, but she could hear his hopeful voice yearn for happiness.

She opened her eyes. Elizabeth had expected his lips to follow his hands, as they so often did. His gaze was fixed on her mouth. Deliberately, she licked her lips and closed her eyes again. Darcy’s response to the invitation was tentative. The touch of his lips was too brief and light to even be called tender. He bestowed upon her a perfunctory kiss to seal their engagement.

“Sir,” Elizabeth ventured, opening her eyes, “I hope you will not think me forward if I tell you I am not Missish.”


“Indeed. I am not such a hypocrite that I can make a hasty dash to church while pretending kisses offend my sensibilities.”

“You have been angry with me,” he replied.

Though she could not deny it, Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “I feel inclined to forgive you.” How neatly an offer of marriage diffused all of her anger! She had long been suspicious of his vows to never wed, but they had been born from a sincere devotion to her. He had not lied about his intentions. Her ire had been raised by his lack of consideration for their child, but in that respect he had shown himself to be interested and invested. In doing so, however, he had given his mistress a book that praised marriage and disparaged ladies of the demimonde. As his bride, Elizabeth was willing to overlook that offense. Darcy professed a steady regard for her that had remained fixed throughout these months of strife. She had not been so steady. Even as she strove to give him all that she could, her love had been tossed about like a small boat on rough seas. Through the steadiness of his character and the strength of his love, Darcy had returned her to shore.

“Magnanimous.” Darcy dipped his head and nipped at her mouth. She laughed.
When kissing proved powerless to stifle laughter, Darcy found something more effective: “We must tell my sister.”

Sober, Elizabeth agreed. It needed to be done. Being that their route to the altar would be a hasty one, informing Georgiana could not be delayed. Darcy confirmed that Georgiana would be at home, so they called for Elizabeth’s carriage to be brought around. He had ridden on horseback when he called, but Elizabeth was no horsewoman. She could not return on horseback with him, and Darcy was unwilling to consider their walking to Pemberley House while Elizabeth was increasing.

The great stone house was as beautiful and elegant as Elizabeth remembered. Inside, the furnishings were as fine and tasteful. In a lesser place, the servants might have looked at her askance, but Darcy’s men behaved perfectly well, whether they were stabling the horses or taking a message for Miss Darcy.

Darcy asked that Georgiana wait upon them in a sitting room that he had recently decorated for her use. For Elizabeth, it would be her first time conversing with Miss Darcy since using their friendship to gain admittance to her brother. In doing so, she had given up the right to call Miss Darcy her friend. She knew Georgiana was aware that Darcy had taken her as a mistress. Elizabeth wondered if he had told his sister about the child. It was not something he could have hidden from her for long. Still, he must have dreaded doing so. Her mind a jumble of such thoughts, Elizabeth sat where Darcy directed her. He settled beside her.

After a brief, awkward wait, a footman announced Miss Darcy’s entrance. Though Georgiana’s first steps into the room were taken with the confidence of a young lady moving about her own home and her own spaces, when she saw Elizabeth, she paled. Miss Darcy took a step back, but recovered herself quickly and stalked determinedly to the chair nearest the settee occupied by Elizabeth and her intended husband.

“Miss Bennet,” Georgiana said softly, eyes fixed on her own slippers, “what a pleasure to see you again. It has been too long since we last saw one another.”

Elizabeth eyed Darcy. His expression offered little illumination on his sister’s manners. “So it has been!” she replied. “We were all last together in London, with my sister, Jane, and aunt Gardiner.”

“Is your sister well?” Georgiana asked stiffly. “And your aunt and uncle?”

“Jane has left London for Kent,” Elizabeth said. “She finds it very agreeable. My aunt and uncle are very well, I thank you.”

“And your mother?” Georgiana asked. “And your other sisters?” She glanced away from her own shoes to her brother for a brief moment. “You have several sisters, if I am not mistaken?”

With relief, Elizabeth latched onto the opening to bring Darcy into the conversation. “Mr. Darcy,” she prompted, “have you been spreading news about my sisters?”

He shrugged.

“My brother does not gossip,” Georgiana put in hurriedly. Wringing her hands, she added, “He has mentioned that...the former Miss Mary Bennet married?”

Elizabeth nodded. “To a Mr. Chapman, yes.”

“Yes,” Georgiana agreed. “I hope she was made very happy by her marriage.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I thank you, and hope for that as well.”
“You do not --?” Georgiana squeaked, then flushed, and stammered, “Oh, no, I suppose not, I would have thought sisters more forgiving than that implies, but I am terribly sorry to hear it.”

Mr. Darcy should take pity on his sister’s lack of composure and say his piece, Elizabeth thought. Though still perched on the settee, he was now staring distractedly out a window. She supposed he was carefully formulating his words. She was not unwilling to give him time to decide how he wanted to proceed. Darcy had been intent on sharing their news with his sister immediately. He had not had the time to decide how he wanted to present their engagement to her. Looking back, it would have been better to have composed his speech first, if he desired an exacting one, and call on her afterwards.

But, Elizabeth told herself, amused, perhaps she was being too confident in her assessment of him. He could be distracted by thoughts of dinner or sport or whatever else young men thought about.

Before her own musings and the combined reticence of the Darcy siblings had made the pause in conversation unbearably awkward, Elizabeth said to Georgiana, “You must tell me what else your brother has shared about my sisters.”

“There is a Miss Catherine?” Georgiana asked with uncertainty.

Elizabeth laughed. “I would call her Kitty, as would many of her acquaintance, but I cannot imagine your brother regaling you with stories of Miss Kitty.”

Some portion of Darcy’s attention had stayed with the ladies’ conversation, for he suddenly inquired, “Is she called ‘Miss Kitty’ in company?”

Incredulous, Elizabeth laughingly answered, “Certainly!”

“It is rather undignified,” Darcy pronounced.

“It suits her very well, then.”

“And you,” he continued, “were you called Miss Lizzy?”

“Certainly!” Trading a look with Georgiana, Elizabeth continued, “Some within your hearing, I can assure you! You are disengaged in company! You must tell us, for I am sure your sister wonders as much as I, but holds you too much in awe to ask, what it is that monopolizes your attention so?”

Darcy did not direct his answer to Elizabeth, but to his sister: “Though I cannot doubt Miss Bennet knows quite well I am often distracted by contemplations of herself, it is unlike her to seek compliments so brazenly.”

“It is not!” Elizabeth insisted. To Georgiana, she explained, “I simply do not seek them from him! He is far too fastidious and rarely compliments anyone.”

Elizabeth and Darcy’s quick exchange of barbs and teases had done nothing for Georgiana’s ease. She sat stiff and tense, her eyes wide.

“Georgiana,” Darcy said, “Miss Bennet has done me the compliment of agreeing to become my wife.”

That Georgiana felt the shock of such a statement could not be denied. Looking at the distressed girl, Elizabeth wondered why Darcy had spent so long hesitating before sharing the news. He had not found a way to say it that would be sympathetic to Georgiana’s feelings on such an occasion. Perhaps he thought there was no such way, and after deliberation, decided it was best to say it
outright.

Her brother took enough pity on her that he did not require a response before he continued, “The circumstances are not ideal. If we could wait for you to be settled in a union of your own before proceeding, we would. I will do everything in my power to lessen your association with my misdeeds.”

“Fitzwilliam,” she said weakly, “I...I do not know what it is I should say to you.”

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth cut in, “perhaps Miss Darcy and I might have a word alone? Separation of the sexes is as much for we ladies as you men. It will be easier to discuss such joyful news without a gentleman present.”

Darcy glanced between the two women and assented. “For a moment.”

Droll, Elizabeth replied, “You are all kindness, Mr. Darcy.”

“I shall not go far,” he said.

“No, no, heaven knows what mischief we could cause if left to ourselves. A quarter of an hour should be sufficient time for we ladies to understand one another without giving you too much cause for concern?”

Darcy bowed and exited.

Elizabeth, left alone with his sister, heaved an exasperated sigh and said, “Well. I know how you look up to him and should hate above anything to disappoint him. To Miss Bennet, I hope, you can speak your mind?”

“May I wish you joy, Miss Bennet?” Georgiana asked.

Relieved, Elizabeth cried, “You may! I daresay you may wish your brother joy, as well.”

“I am pleased for your sake, Miss Bennet,” Georgiana said.

“But not for his,” Elizabeth surmised.

“Oh,” Georgiana fretted, “pray do not misunderstand me!”

Wryly, Elizabeth observed, “I have a unique gift for misunderstanding your family. Please, speak plainly with no fear of giving offense, otherwise we might never understand one another.”

Georgiana bit her lip. “You were my friend,” she said quietly. “Then my brother...he took you.” She furrowed her brow. “I am not as naive as one would expect. I know men...do such things. Even the best of men! But you were a gentlewoman and my friend, and he did it anyway. I am happy, for your sake, that he will respect you as he should. I do not know what to think of him.”

“I felt the same way,” Elizabeth confessed, “when he made the offer. He, who I thought I had understood, became somewhat of a stranger to me. Nevertheless,” she added with a smile, “I could do worse than marrying him. Whether the reverse is true remains to be seen.”

“You think he will be hurt by it?” Georgiana asked, distressed. “Before we came to Pemberley, we visited my uncle. My cousin thought he would be alright.”

“Your cousin the Viscount, or Colonel Fitzwilliam?” After Georgiana indicated the former, Elizabeth sighed. “A viscount in the same position, I expect, would be alright. He has a title to
protect him, not to mention his father. Darcy is a gentleman. A gentleman with powerful
connections,” she admitted, “but a gentleman. A gentleman with a mistress is a cause for concern to
no one.” Except, she reflected, his younger sister, if the mistress in question was from a good family
and a particular friend. “A woman is hated if she knows a man without the benefit of marriage. A
man is hated if he knows a woman and decides he would prefer her as his wife. It is an odd thing, is
it not? The same act that will forgive my sins will condemn him in the eyes of the world.”

“My uncle will protect him,” Georgiana insisted.

Elizabeth smiled at Miss Darcy’s conviction. Did Darcy share it, she wondered. She had supposed
he would not have anticipated the support of his family when he took such a step. “Am I correct in
thinking this is something you have discussed?” she asked.

Georgiana blushed. “A very small bit,” she admitted. “My cousins were unhappy with his choice.”

“Because I am a gentleman’s daughter,” Elizabeth wondered, “or because I was previously
acquainted with yourself and Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Both, I should think,” she replied.

“Shall they welcome the news of our engagement?” Georgiana faltered instead of answering, which
was answer enough. “I shall not be displeased with you if you give me your honest impression of
their opinions,” Elizabeth assured her.

“A marriage is preferable to a gently bred mistress,” she said, “but I think they both would find
setting you up someplace far away to be preferable to that. Of course,” she hurried to add, “we must
avoid any appearances of discord in the family. They will be kind to you.”

“Well, I believe we all have our future roles well delineated. Your brother will respect me, I shall try
to make him happy, your cousins will be kind, your uncle protective.” With a lopsided smile,
Elizabeth said, “Miss Darcy, I believe yours is the hardest duty of them all.”

She frowned, thoughtfully. “Mine?”

“Indeed. For yours is to accept that sometimes the people we love behave in ways we do not agree
with, yet they are no less worthy of our love. It is a lesson I have both learned and taught these last
months. I look forward to taking on a new role.”

When her brother returned, Georgiana wished him joy. For his part, Darcy feared more for
Georgiana’s future than his own. He eloquently expressed his regret for how his actions had led him
to a point where he had to choose, but ultimately Darcy admitted to his sister, “I have been a poor
replacement for our father. I have given you whatever trinkets I thought would please you, but I
have never guided or nurtured you as you deserve. I must do better for my own children.”

***

The following weeks were a flurry of activity. The first object was to secure the future of the child
through marriage. It would be impossible to pretend the child had been conceived in wedlock, but as
the parents were not immune to illness or accident, they elected to be wed within the month.

As Elizabeth predicted, the preparations were fewer than what would be necessary for a
conventional marriage. There were few good-byes to make, no wedding clothes to order. It was not
customary for friends and relatives to travel for a wedding ceremony, so even a large wedding
breakfast was unnecessary. Only Colonel Fitzwilliam and Georgiana would be in attendance. After
the ceremony, he would escort her to his father’s house, where it had been decided she would live.
Through a series of rapid letters, it had been determined the greater share of the uncle’s protection rightfully belonged to the niece. Darcy had made his choice and would not be swayed, but his sister was innocent. When Parliament began its session in the winter and the gentry returned to Town, the Countess would be Georgiana’s guide and chaperone. The Darcys would remain in the country to avoid distinction. They would publish nothing.

Come winter, there would be talk, of course. Mr. Darcy’s failure to appear would invite curiosity. With luck, the endless amusements of London and the Earl discouraging gossip would mean Darcy would be soon forgotten. In the event that his wealth meant his absence was still keenly felt, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy were nevertheless confident that when their firstborn was ready to move in the world, many other scandals would have come and gone. The almost tragedy of a narrowly escaped illegitimate birth would be of lesser interest than his or her inheritance.

The morning of the wedding, bride and bridegroom met at the altar to be joined according to God’s ordinance. The birth was five months away. The rector wisely said nothing. The circumstances of the marriage did not prevent Darcy from throwing handfuls of coins to the locals who had gathered at the church steps, which was all they cared about. The sister wept for happiness and anticipated homesickness. The Colonel bundled her into his carriage when all was done.

For the rest of the day, Elizabeth and her husband barely parted from one another. Happiness suited him very well. When the supper had been served and eaten, however, they bid one another adieu. According to ‘Aristotle,’ consummation of the marriage would need to be delayed for two months. At that time, they could safely meet in amorous congress. Now, copulation threatened to shake down her courses.

Elizabeth had never envisioned a wedding night where she and her husband parted ways. An apartment had been fitted up for her use. The room was airy and elegant, the furniture fine without being ostentatious. It was in every way exquisite. As much as it would be a pleasure to sleep there, Elizabeth did not care to do so alone now that she was a wife.

Robinson assisted Elizabeth in her evening ablutions. The dressing room was as delightful as the bedroom. Even her fashionably bored abigail was visibly pleased with everything about Pemberley. After dismissing Robinson for the night, Elizabeth slipped on her dressing gown and padded the grand hallways of her new home to her husband’s apartment.

She rapped on the door. Darcy’s muffled voice bid her to enter, and she stepped inside. Her husband was reclining on his bed, book in hand. Upon seeing her, he sat up. “Elizabeth!” The book was shut and tossed aside. “I had not expected to see you to-night.”

Crossing the room to him, Elizabeth replied, “You have wed a bold woman, sir. I recommend resigning yourself to it as soon as possible.”

He said, “I would ask for none other,” and rewarded her with a brief kiss once she had climbed onto his bed.

It was as good an opportunity as any. “If I may,” she said, “I have a question I would ask.” Elizabeth could be bold, impertinent and independent-minded, but she was not inclined to speak inappropriately. One of the questions that had weighed most heavily on her mind throughout their short engagement, she had not asked. There were occasions where a wife could speak when an intended bride would be better served holding her tongue.

“You may ask anything,” Darcy said. “I would prefer you ask me, openly and frankly, any time you have cause for concern. Not speaking shall not aid us in understanding one another.”
“You must allow such excellent advice to guide your own conduct as well,” Elizabeth told him. “I have no wish for a marriage built on strife and frustration, which is precisely what we will have if we are not frank with one another.”

“I am glad we are of one mind in this,” Darcy said. “Your question?”

“Be warned,” she said archly, “I am speaking frankly, and you may find yourself despising my presumption.” Darcy chuckled, which spurred Elizabeth to continue with confidence. “I find myself wondering why you did not offer marriage.”

With evident surprise, he said, “I did, if you will recall.”

“When I was living in London,” Elizabeth specified, “You and my uncle spoke ‘too often’ of his hoping to marry me off. Why did you not offer for me then? I will boldly say that I do not believe it was from a lack of interest on your part.” She did not add that such motives were what she had attributed his silence to at the time.

Darcy rolled his head back against the headboard. “I considered it, of course. Elizabeth,” he sighed. “Mr. Gardiner felt Lydia’s actions would prevent a man of any standing in the world from offering for you. He is a sensible man. You heard the justice in his way of thinking and felt the same.”

Here, she nodded.

Darcy exhaled slowly before continuing. “To my thinking, it would be very likely that if such a man did offer, you would feel obliged to accept. The tradesmen you could more easily disregard. They could not offer you anything but a roof over your head. A man of consequence would elevate you in society. He would provide for your family. You could not justify refusing an offer of marriage in such circumstances. Though I was the last man in the world you would ever choose to marry, you would not have had a choice, and that, I found repugnant.”

Tears pricked at her eyes. Perception of himself as an unwanted object had been the foundation of his silence. With such a view, it was understandable that Darcy would think the offer he had made would be so undesirable that he was in no danger of its being accepted. He had told her, Elizabeth remembered, that her family would laud her for rejecting such a degrading proposition. He anticipated she would refuse. When she needed fortification, she could remember him, remember she had options beyond her uncle’s word, and carry on in pursuit of her own happiness.

“When I came to you,” she said, “having reconsidered becoming your lover without the benefit of marriage, you must have known that a woman willing to become your mistress would be willing to become your wife!”

“What a neat trap that would have been,” he cried with some agitation, “to rescind the offer you had accepted and put in its place one you had already rejected! Had I prized myself in manipulation, I am sure I would have done that very thing.”

Though it was a useless point to make now, Elizabeth could not help herself from saying, “You would not have had to rescind. The two offers could have existed together and I could choose whichever I preferred. That should have pleased you, for I know how you enjoy the power of choice.”

“Two unhappy alternatives,” he replied. “Had you married me, it would have been because it was the only honorable offer you had received. Had you agreed to become my mistress regardless, it would have been because you wished to retain the power to leave and find a more agreeable situation.”
“But you did such a fine job of warning me off other protectors!”

“There are women in London,” Darcy said, “who do very well for themselves amassing a number of lovers and collecting gifts and money from them all. A Cyprian has the ability to leave her lover when he displeases her. A wife does not. Though it was a comfort to me that such an option was yours, I did everything in my power to discourage you from leaving. Any apology I issued for that would be far from sincere, I am afraid.”

“That is just as well,” Elizabeth confessed. “I often thought of what I would need to do should you terminate our connection, and never with any pleasure.”

“The terms of our contract were designed so that you would never need to do anything distasteful,” Darcy pointed out.

“And I had every confidence that you set it up in good faith,” she replied, “but I understand that once a relationship has ended, women often have difficulty collecting money owed.”

“I told you again and again that I would not abandon you.”

Her left thumb sought the gold band on her ring finger. Darcy had put it on her hand that morning in church. The ring was cool and solid, a testament to his responsibility to her and their family. It was a reminder of all she had sworn to do: love him, honor him, obey him. It was a reminder of all that he had promised to her. The ties that bind a man to his mistress were easy to dissolve. The bond between a man and his wife was nearly impossible.

“Pretty words,” Elizabeth said, “but not so comforting as a ring.”

Cupping her face in both hands, Darcy said, “Elizabeth, you must have known I loved you.”

Her own hands fitted so well with his, her palms sliding along his wrists, her fingers brushing his thumbs as he stroked her cheeks. “You were so distant,” she whispered. “After Lydia… I did not know what to think.”

Leaning his forehead against hers, Darcy admitted, “You were unmoved by my love. I told myself it did not signify, as long as I cared for you. Over time, that changed. I realized the only way your lack of feeling for me could mean nothing was if I felt nothing for you. I did everything in my power to convince myself I no longer cared. The day you refused me in London, I realized I had done that and more. I had convinced myself you were no longer someone to be respected. I was horrified. It was in every way deplorable! I could not continue fighting my better feelings -- my desire for your happiness, my wish to take care of you. It is no longer a mystery to me that you are not be moved by such a man.”

Elizabeth slid her hands from his wrists to his shoulders. He had laid her fears to rest. Oh, she had been terrified after he had left that final day in London! They were not to see one another again for weeks. Could his commitment to her withstand a refusal followed by a lengthy separation? But when they reunited, he had been warm and welcoming, everything amiable and pleasing. When she came to him with a new fear, the fear for their child’s future, he had married her. Though it had meant scandal, sacrificing any hope of being welcomed in good society and giving over the guidance of his sister at a crucial point in her life, Darcy had married her without a moment’s hesitation. Just as he had relieved the burdens on her heart, so must she relieve the burdens on his. Elizabeth pressed her lips to his temple and wondered, how was she to do so?

Darcy stirred in her arms and Elizabeth released him from her hug.
“As I have answered your question,” Darcy said, “you must answer one of mine.”

“You may ask anything,” she replied.

“On several occasions, you told me you could not resign yourself to a marriage made in material considerations.” To this statement, Elizabeth could only agree. “As there are a very few people able to marry without considering practicalities, I have often found myself wondering,” Darcy said, “what it is that you dislike about the institution?”

Elizabeth laughed at the question. She could not help herself. “Let me assure you, husband, I hold nothing against the institution of marriage.”

“Do not think I criticize you for not entering a union that would make you unhappy, for I would not. But it is my understanding that you have refused a number of men. They cannot all have been wanting.”

“No,” she agreed deftly, “they were not all bad men, regardless of what I may have thought at the time.” Sobering, Elizabeth explained, “I loved and respected my father, and was grateful for all the affection and care he showed me, but I do not believe he was a pleasing husband to my mother, nor was she a wife able to make him happy. They did not respect one another. When I was a girl, what I desired most was a marriage made in mutual respect.”

“Your uncle’s friends were all respectable men,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “Yes. My uncle is an educated, gentleman-like man. He would not be friends with men I could not respect. By then, however, my heart was engaged elsewhere. I could not marry a man who would make me a wife, give me an establishment of my own, while I loved another. To resign myself to that unhappiness was impossible.”

Darcy was silent for a long moment. Finally, he asked, his voice raw and pained, “Do you still love him?”

What a question! She had promised that very morning to love him until death parted them! “It has not been an easy road,” Elizabeth admitted. “There were times I thought myself a fool for ever entertaining the notion, and there were times I thought loving him was as necessary to my life as breath.”

The fool of a man beside her dropped his head into his palms and groaned, “Elizabeth.”

The fool of a woman that was herself realized she had still failed to be clear. “I do not love him as well as I should like,” she continued, “so I am very happy to know I shall have all of our lives to improve upon my study of the subject.” Elizabeth pried his hands from his face. Somewhere in between finding his lips with her own and climbing onto his lap, she thought he reached a proper understanding.

***

Darcy looked up at her in silent confusion. After grinding the heel of his hand into one of his eyes and finding his wife still intently peering at him, he asked, “Elizabeth, what are you doing?”

Elizabeth was straddling his thighs. She thought it rather obvious and declined to answer the question. She followed his eyes as he squinted at the grand clock in his bedroom. Taking pity on him, she supplied, “It is eight o’clock, sir.” Gently chiding him, she added, “Two years we have been in the country and you still insist on keeping London hours. You are not yet out of bed, while I have had the time to go for a walk and attend to my correspondence. I received a letter from my aunt
“Eight o’clock,” he repeated, shaking the sleep from his voice. “Your sisters will be expecting you for breakfast.”

“They are capable of entertaining themselves for one meal,” Elizabeth replied. Truthfully, it was more likely that Jane would prevent Lydia from entertaining herself, but she thought they would manage to eat well enough. Lydia had come to Pemberley soon after the wedding for Elizabeth’s peace of mind. Her wild ways could not be curbed by anything less than the formidable stare of Mr. Darcy. Her daughter, Lydia had left in Kent to be raised by Mrs. Bennet. Elizabeth had invited her mother to come to Derbyshire as well, but the inconvenience of traveling with a small child exacerbated her nervous dislike of gallivanting about the country. With her sister’s marriage raising the Bennet sisters from disgrace, the determined flirt Kitty had abandoned her aspirations to become a rich man’s mistress and set her cap at becoming a rich man’s wife. Her widowed landlord Mr. Cleese, in need of a mother for his small children, found the idea of a pretty young wife agreeable. Mrs. Bennet happily moved into Kitty’s home. Jane, seeing her younger sisters pursue every bit of satisfaction and respectability in their paths, was prevailed to act in her own happiness, and so made her home with Elizabeth.

After taking a moment to process his wife’s excuse, Darcy asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected interview?”

“I must commend your wit, sir,” Elizabeth said, her hands stealing beneath his night shirt, “for that was a most excellently worded question.”

Her diligent hands produced from him a grunt and a question. “Now?”

“Now is the very best time,” she cheered, “for you kindly informed me some years ago that you awaken each morning with an erection. And I thought...why does a man have a wife, if not to provide assistance at such times? Let us not forget, ‘for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other’ is one of the reasons God ordained marriage.”

“So it was,” he murmured.

“And,” Elizabeth admitted, “I had a favor to ask.”

Darcy frowned. “This is an unconventional way to go about it. Pray do not think I require your convivial society as payments for favors.”

She flushed pink. “Oh, no,” she assured him. “Your society itself is the favor.”

Awkwardly, he sat up. Elizabeth linked her elbows around his shoulders. His hands settled on her hips. She brushed her nose against his and reflected that this was an easier thing to say when they were cocooned so nicely. “You have been so tender with me,” she whispered. Their mouths so close, it was almost hard to speak instead of kiss.

One of those hands that had been so comfortable on her hip abandoned it for her chin. He needed only to tilt her head a fraction, and then they were kissing. Elizabeth squirmed on his lap, teasing him until he kissed her with all the desperation she had already felt.

Breaking away with a ragged breath, Elizabeth continued, “I appreciate how gentle you have been. I do. But sometimes,” she dropped her voice, “I miss the way you used to touch me.”

“You are my wife. You are the mother of my son.”
Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. He sounded so scandalized. A man had the right to partake in the pleasures of his wife’s body when he chose and the responsibility to do so tenderly. “And I prefer it so! When you come to me, I am so pleased, Fitzwilliam.” She licked her lips and continued. “You restrain your passion out of respect for me. I appreciate that. It is only...there are times when I wished you did not practice such control.” She knew he was capable of so much more than what he had been allowing himself to give, so much more than what he had been allowing himself to feel.

“You would rather I did what?” he asked. “March you to your bed in the middle of the day? Press you against a wall?”

A small moan escaped her lips at the memory of passionate encounters long past. “Yes.”

Good man that he was, Elizabeth could not fault Darcy for failure to be accommodating. He all but leapt from the bed, Elizabeth in his arms, her legs wrapped happily around his waist. She bit her lip in eager anticipation when her back met the wall. Darcy tickled her thighs and in response, she let her feet hit the floor. He surveyed her a moment, but his restraint was not so easily toppled. “Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, “please.”

“I will,” he said, promise heavy in his voice. “But this first.”

Darcy dropped to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

This story would not have been possible with the help of my betas and sounding boards, Jessie and Sophie!

Thanks for reading!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!