The Road Back
by prhood

Summary

The Gardiners take their trip to The Lakes and Elizabeth never visits Pemberley.
Prologue

June 1812 – Longbourn

Elizabeth Bennet almost felt inclined to burst into a run to express the pleasure the letter from her Aunt Gardiner was providing. They were going to tour The Lakes after all! Her uncle’s business problem has been resolved satisfactorily and they were free to devote six weeks to the tour. Her aunt had even enclosed a copy of William Wordsworth’s Guide to The Lakes which her uncle had recently acquired. Their tour could not fail to be pleasant and entertaining given the company and the places they would visit.

Reaching the top of Oakham Mount, Elizabeth took off her bonnet, loosen her pelisse, stretched her arms upward and gradually letting them fall back down. Sitting on the log that was her usual resting spot, she extracted from her pocket the apple grabbed on the way out the door and gazed out over the distant buildings of Longbourn and Netherfield. Slowly munching the apple, savouring its tart taste, she gradually drifted her thoughts to those which had predominated for the last three months, or since the Day - the day she rejected Mr. Darcy’s proposal of marriage.

Could a proposal of marriage been more disastrously given or received? Fitzwilliam Darcy, despite expressing an ardent love for her, had managed to insult her, her family’s behaviour, her poor connections – her uncles in trade obviously figured prominently in his thoughts – and finally the inferiority of her social status compared to his own. A degradation he had called it. Granted he stated that he was prepared to overlook such impediments but, under the circumstances, she had not been prepared to ignore the insults. When she considered the arrogance of his behaviour from the very beginning of their acquaintance in Meryton and culminating in the absolute assurance he displayed that his offer of marriage would be accepted, she could not regret her rejection of it.

Nonetheless, her mode of rejection now left her embarrassed and mortified. She had accused him of maliciously separating her beloved sister, Jane, from Mr. Bingley and then accused him of dishonourable behaviour by depriving Mr. Wickham of a valuable living. Her dislike of Mr. Darcy, created in their very first meeting, had lead her to place full confidence in MR. Wickham’s worthiness based on his amiable and pleasing character. The letter, that Mr. Darcy handed her the day following his proposal, exonerated Mr. Darcy completely in his dealings with Mr. Wickham and showed her confidence and judgement to have been sadly misplaced. Wickham had, in fact, been compensated by £3,000 in lieu of the living, despite which he subsequently petitioned again for it. When such petitions were denied, his subsequent actions last summer were deplorable. His attempt to convince Georgiana Darcy to elope would both hurt Mr. Darcy by ruining his sister and given him access to her £30,000 dowry. Tragedy was avoided only by the unexpected appearance of her brother the day before the elopement was to take place. Georgiana was loath to disappoint him and revealed Wickham’s plan. Wickham, of course, disappeared, only resurfacing when he joined the militia regiment in winter quarters in Meryton.

When Elizabeth considered her early relationship with Wickham, she could rejoice for once in the paucity of her dowry. If she had had a £10,000 dowry like Mary King, she was sure that Wickham would have courted her quite assiduously. His amiability was such that she might well have developed an attachment to him. Mary King had an uncle who apparently looked into Mr. Wickham’s situation. Perhaps he had heard some rumours of debts owed to local merchants or perhaps he was simply concerned about Wickham’s limited income and prospects. Whatever the case, he had quickly removed Miss King and prevented the establishment of any attachment. Would
her father have bestirred himself enough to do likewise? Elizabeth would like to think so but was far from confident of such a result.

Elizabeth rose to her feet, tossed the apple core away and with a rather sharp laugh, she spoke aloud the thought she could never express in her home. “Perhaps I would be as fortunate as Mary King and be rescued by my uncle. I count his help more likely than that of my father although I could wish otherwise.” Looking out over Longbourn she could now see people moving around the house. It was time to return. Breakfast was being made ready and her family would begin to trickle down to eat. Swinging her bonnet in her left hand she began the descent of Oakham Mount.

Her steps slowed as her thoughts drifted once again to Jane. Darcy’s letter had also attempted to explain and justify his actions in advising his friend, Charles Bingley, against offering for her sister. Darcy had concluded, after observing Jane’s behaviour with Bingley, that her countenance did not showed a marked affection for him. Darcy believed that Jane would accept an offer of marriage because her mother would require her to do so. While questions about the propriety of certain members of the Bennet and the poor connections were raised by Darcy and by Bingley’s sisters, it was Darcy’s belief that Jane’s heart had not been touched which convinced Bingley to break off his attentions.

Elizabeth had only gradually reconciled her knowledge of the depth of Jane’s attachment with a recognition that Jane’s determination to exhibit a serene countenance and to guard her heart could easily be interpreted as a lack of affection by someone not of her intimate acquaintance. As time had passed, she also began to reconsider her perception of Bingley’s role. At first, she had absolved him of all blame. His very amiability was one of his most attractive features. Unfortunately, it also seemed to mask, a lack of resolve. His friend had made an offer of marriage to her, despite all the perceived impediments. Of course, Darcy also thought her to be expecting his offer. Elizabeth snorted. That was certainly proof that Darcy’s ability to read a female countenance and heart was sadly deficient. Nevertheless, if she was prepared to pardon Bingley for his lack of resolve - and she was - then she also had to absolve Darcy of being malicious. He had made a mistake and one many would have made.

She knew with some certainty that she was unlikely to encounter Darcy again and he assuredly would not be renewing his offers to her. No honourable man would put himself in the position of being rejected again. She knew not what to do for Jane; there was, in fact, nothing she could do and it would be best to put the matter aside for now. There was a trip to The Lakes to enjoy. With a lighter heart, she put on her bonnet and prepared to rejoin her family.

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Fitzwilliam Darcy sat alone in his study in his London home. He believed himself to have regained his equanimity, or at least a semblance of it, after the tumult of those weeks following his return to London from Kent. It had taken more than a few sharp words from his cousin Richard Fitzwilliam to remove him from seclusion and despondency. Georgiana’s distress at his behaviour forced him out of his room and to assume a demeanour of apparent normalcy.

The need to travel to Pemberley to oversee the spring planting, had required the engagement of his mind with thoughts that did not centre on Elizabeth Bennet. In fact, he rode the entire distance from London to Pemberley, eschewing his carriage for the physical fatigue of the horseback ride. Exhausted at the end of each day, he literally collapsed into his bed. Dreams still haunted his sleep but dreams he thought he could deal with.

Once at Pemberley, he allowed himself as little time as possible for errant thoughts. The planting, visiting the tenant farms, answering business correspondence and meetings with his household and
estate staff were such as to consume his waking hours. Any free time was spent riding. He managed
to pass a fortnight in such fashion until it became obvious that his presence was beginning to interfere
with the daily operations of Pemberley. He returned to town but, this time, by carriage.

As May turned into June, his life seemed to settle into a routine that kept the worst of his thoughts in
abeyance. He visited his club, his relatives imposed on him to attend dinners, he forced himself to
attend the theatre with friends several times and, in company with Georgiana, to attend several
concerts. Georgiana played the pianoforte for him in the evenings when he was home but it was a
bittersweet time since his thoughts would drift to memories of Elizabeth playing the pianoforte at
Rosings, seeing her countenance and impertinent smile. All too often he could see her face would
turn cold with anger as she spoke.

“You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any
other way than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved
in a more gentleman-like manner.

You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted
me to accept it.

From the very beginning – from the very first moment, I may almost say – of my acquaintance with
you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your
selfish distain for the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation on
which succeeding events have built so immovable dislike; and I had not known you a month before I
felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.”

Several times Georgiana had noticed his discomposure. Her efforts to engage him in conversation
designed to probe its cause had so far proven unsuccessful. It is rare for a man of seven and twenty to
talk about deeply distressing and personal matters with a sister more than twelve years his junior.
Darcy was not such a man. He knew his protestations that he was fine and only worried about
normal business problems were not convincing, but he could not think of any other possible
response. The truth was not something he could lay before a sister. He could only hope that he
would eventually be able to conquer his obsession with Elizabeth Bennet although he also knew it
would take time – a lot of time, if the past months were any indication.

Richard Fitzwilliam had sent a note earlier in the day to invite himself to dinner and some brandy and
talk afterwards. This was rather unusual since Richard was generally very casual about his comings
and goings. He obviously had some specific purpose in mind and wanted to ensure that Darcy would
be home for the evening. Darcy’s immediate concern was that Richard would have to assume active
duties on the continent – perhaps Spain. He would find out soon enough. Fortunately, he appeared to
have sufficient brandy for an lengthy evening with Richard.
Chapter 2

Early July 1812 – Darcy House, London
Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was the second son of the Earl of Matlock. Since his elder brother and wife had two very healthy sons, the likelihood of his assuming the title was scant. This did not trouble Fitzwilliam unduly since he had a good familial relationship with his elder brother. Nevertheless, he looked on Darcy more as a brother than cousin and was possibly closer to him than his own brother. Fitzwilliam's income and prospects were such as to provide him with a comfortable life but insufficient to afford a wife. He was not a handsome man but had quickly learned to be amiable and pleasing in most company. Despite his amiability, he was a professional soldier with a proven history in battle. His amiability masked a strong intelligence combined with a prudent leadership. He bought a Lieutenant’s commission and, only when he felt ready, did he allow his father to purchase a Captain’s commission. Subsequent promotions to Major and then Colonel were won on the field of battle. He was not a 'hell-for-leather' leader. Plans and actions were thought about and preparations were usually extensive before troops were led to battle; but lead them he did, enduring the same risks as his men. This was the man who sat down with Georgiana and Darcy.

Dinner was quietly pleasant. Fitzwilliam was his usual amiable self with his ready fund of stories, gossip and teasings. Both Georgiana and Darcy were quiet but were engaged in the conversation and only someone truly familiar with Darcy would have noticed his extra effort to appear engaged in the conversation. Under Fitzwilliam’s gentle teasing, Georgiana’s animation gradually increased and her low laughter became more frequent as the meal progressed. At last, Fitzwilliam pushed himself away from the table and stood.

“My compliments to Cook, Darcy. She has created a superb meal once again. After consuming barrack food all week, it’s a delight to eat something that doesn’t insult the stomach.” Looking at Georgiana, he asked. “Georgiana, could you indulge us with some music?”

"Of course, Richard. Do you wish for anything in particular?” Georgiana asked as she led the way to the music room.

Richard looked at her and said “Yes, I think I do. Darcy, could we have a glass of port?”

As Darcy filled two glasses from the sideboard, Fitzwilliam moved across the room to the pianoforte and looked through the sheet music placed beside the instrument. He selected a couple of pieces and quietly asked Georgiana if she knew them. After her assent, he asked her to play them interspersed with other quiet pieces.

Georgiana gave him a rather quizzical look and asked “Certainly, but why?”

“I will tell you tomorrow, if I can.”

Fitzwilliam moved away from the instrument and settled into the comfortable armchair behind Georgiana forcing Darcy to sit on the settee where Fitzwilliam could observe him somewhat unobtrusively. Both men sipped their port and listened as Georgiana began to play. As the music flowed from Georgiana’s fingers, Fitzwilliam could see Darcy relax and, when those pieces he had requested were played, saw Darcy’s face gradually become more introspective. Georgiana played for an hour and only stopped when Fitzwilliam stood and walked over to the pianoforte.

“Thank you Georgiana. That was delightful as always. As our Aunt Catherine would say, you have become a true proficient. …… now Darcy, how about a billiard game or two?”
Darcy stood, stretched and replied with a snort. “Certainly, as long as you are prepared to lose another guinea or two……. Georgiana, my thanks and appreciation as well. Off to bed with you and I’ll see you in the morning. I believe we are going to the Art Exhibit in the afternoon, are we not?”

“Thank you both and yes brother, we are and I am very much looking forward to it.” With which Georgiana left the two men who then moved towards the billiard room. As they walked, Darcy first checked to make certain that Georgiana was out of hearing and then asked Fitzwilliam if he had received orders to take his regiment to Spain. Upon receiving a negative reply, Darcy noticeably relaxed but now really began to wonder as to the reason for Fitzwilliam’s visit.

After entering the billiard room, they both availed themselves of the brandy decanter and racked up the balls for the first game. Discussion for the next hour was sparse with most comments restricted to calling the shots. Jibes and teasing comments were tossed back and forth - as between two men intimately comfortable each with the other - and another glass of brandy was consumed in relative harmony. Finally Fitzwilliam felt the time was right.

While getting them both another brandy, Fitzwilliam looked over at Darcy and said. “William, your game is really off tonight. I cannot remember the last time I won a couple of guineas from you at billiards.”

Darcy shrugged and gave a dismissive wave of his hand and settled down in one of the comfortable chairs by the fireplace. Fitzwilliam took the opposite chair facing Darcy and continued. “As I am sure you realize by now, my visit tonight was for a purpose. My parents and Georgiana have all become increasingly concerned about your recent discomposure and moodiness. Mother was going to speak to you but I asked to do so instead. I did not say as much to Mother but I thought I might have more background knowledge and also that you might be more comfortable talking to me than to her. Am I not right?”

Darcy seemed to sink a little deeper in his chair and simply responded. “I am not prepared to discuss this, with you or my aunt, at this time, Richard. Please desist.”

Fitzwilliam quietly considered Darcy for a few minutes and then stated. “William, you know you will talk to me at some point. You always do. However, this time I am going to do most of the talking at first. All that I ask, is that you listen to me without interruption.” He paused to organize his thoughts and began.

“While I had noticed some discomposure in your manner prior to our visit to our Aunt Catherine, I really became concerned when we returned to London. It was obvious that something was amiss with you then. Fortunately perhaps, I was too involved with the training program and exercises for my regiment to be able to devote much attention to it. I say fortunately because I think the lapse in time allowed me to get some perspective on the matter. In any event, I talked to Georgie on several occasions during this period and she provided some information, both interesting and revealing.”

“The first sign of a change in your behaviour was following your return from visiting Bingley in Hertfordshire. According to Georgie, you actually returned to London several weeks earlier than originally planned. As well you were abstracted and somewhat melancholy over Christmas and afterwards.”

“Then we come to our visit to Aunt Catherine. The first oddity was the decision to call on the Parsonage. I put that down to the presence of Miss Bennet and the fact that you had also been introduced to Mr. And Mrs. Collins in Hertfordshire. However, your inclination to make additional calls as our visit progressed was odd since you normally avoid such contacts whenever possible.”

“The next oddity, if that is the appropriate word to describe your behaviour, was your manner when
in Miss Bennet’s company. For someone deliberately seeking company, you were even more reticent than normal. I noticed as well that you watched Miss Bennet constantly, but, when Miss Bennet looked at you, your face seemed to freeze and almost became more withdrawn than normal, only softening when her eyes were focused elsewhere.”

“Next to come to my notice was the manner in which Miss Bennet responded to you those evenings when she was visiting our Aunt Catherine. From my observation, Miss Bennet was not well pleased with you but since Miss Bennet is basically very civil, I could be wrong but it seemed to me that her impertinence was sharper or more biting when directed at you.”

“I will not comment on our trip back to London other than to note an almost complete lack of conversation. After we returned to London, I recollected your rather conspicuous absences in the mornings during the last se’enday of our visit. You seemed to take morning walks quite frequently. The fact that Miss Bennet was also inclined to take long walks in the morning, and the coincidence of timing, only occurred to me later. Fortunately, our Aunt did not notice anything untoward. I believe or suspect that you were walking with Miss Bennet.”

“One thing I should mention is that, during my last walk with Miss Bennet a day or two before we left, I mentioned your recent effort to protect Bingley from what you considered a most imprudent match. Since Bingley was in Hertfordshire from Michaelmas last year, I am not too hesitant now to assume that the lady concerned lived in Hertfordshire and was known to Miss Bennet. Certainly she was extremely unhappy and displeased with your efforts.”

“Finally there was the evening when the Collins and guests were invited to dine at Rosings just prior to our departure. Miss Bennet was not of the party and you quickly disappeared leaving me to make excuses to our aunt. I did not see you again until the next day. You looked absolutely dreadful - as though you had not slept the night before. Your request that I apprise Miss Bennet of all the particulars concerning Wickham, including the Ramsgate incident, shocked me completely. I could not understand your purpose at that time. I would have complied with your request but Miss Bennet was, as I later informed you, not present during my visit to the parsonage later that day.”

Darcy roused himself and looked like he was about to comment. Fitzwilliam quickly held up his hand and said “Please, William, let me finish.”

At Darcy’s reluctant nod, Fitzwilliam continued. “That, for the most part, represents the facts that I had to work from. I would now like to tell you what I have concluded.”

“First, I believe you have developed a strong attachment to Miss Elizabeth Bennet which began in Hertfordshire. Second, I seriously question whether your attachment is reciprocated. I rather suspect the reverse. Third, I believe you and Miss Bennet had a serious argument on the evening you disappeared from Rosings. The objects of your disagreement I can only guess at, but I strongly suspect that Wickham was one of them. Finally, I am convinced that your attachment to Miss Bennet is unabated, hence your behaviour since returning from Rosings. Are these valid conclusions?”

Fitzwilliam paused to allow Darcy to respond but he seemed lost in thought. At last Fitzwilliam spoke softly once more. “Cousin, I should tell you this in all honesty. This may be the only time I envy your freedom to choose or regret that I am a second son. If I had had the means to support a wife, I would have followed Miss Bennet to Hertfordshire to court and win her hand in marriage. If you have any feelings for her, you must act on them. She is worth the winning.”

Darcy sighed and spoke so softly that Fitzwilliam could barely hear the words. “I did …and she refused my offer.”

When Darcy did not respond, Fitzwilliam spoke again more calmly. “William, you must tell me what happened and what was said. I suspect that for some time now you having been reliving the event over and over in your mind endlessly. You have my deepest sympathy. I can see that her refusal has pained you deeply but I think you need to talk to someone and I am here, willing to listen and not likely to kick you too hard when you are done.”

Fitzwilliam spoke more quietly still. “Come cousin, talk to me.”

Gradually Darcy began to talk and as the words began to flow, his anguish, anger and humiliation flowed with them. The story was incoherent at first but with a few quiet questions, Fitzwilliam began to grasp the essentials. He leaned back and regarded his cousin carefully, considering how best to approach the next step. Another brandy was definitely in order and he refilled their glasses and gave himself more time to think. Darcy seemed to sink even deeper into despondency.

“William, I am trying to grasp what happened.” Fitzwilliam spoke slowly. “I admit to a considerable degree of shock at first and it is quite possible that I have not understood everything. Perhaps if I summarize my understanding of your offer and the response of Miss Bennet, it would help both of us to see things more clearly.”

Fitzwilliam attempted to control his voice to eliminate any sense of censure as he began his summary. “First you told her you loved her against your character and will. Then you described how unworthy she was to be your wife – I believe the word degradation was used, was it not? - and then you asked her to marry you. Am I correct so far?”

Darcy grunted.

Fitzwilliam snorted. “I will take that as a Yes! At that point she accused you of ruining the hopes of her elder and favourite sister – the one she walked three miles through muddy roads to nurse – by separating her from Bingley whom she loved. I won’t comment on your response to this accusation. Then she accused you of depriving Wickham of a valuable living. And then, basically she called you arrogant, conceited and possessed of a selfish distain for the feelings of others. Is this a reasonable summary?”

Darcy growled. “You left out that I am the last man she would ever marry.”

“William, you obviously believed Miss Bennet to be expecting that you would make an offer but it is equally obvious that she did not. That suggests you did not make your intentions clearly known beforehand because I am pretty confident that, if Miss Bennet had had any inclination of such an interest, she would have very clearly dissuaded you. It also seems to me that you really do not know the lady very well.”

Darcy looked at Fitzwilliam oddly. “I fear you are correct, Richard. In the past I have been careful to avoid any efforts by match-making mothers to attach my interest to their daughters. I never had to learn to court or be amiable to any lady of consequence. In Miss Bennet’s case, early in our acquaintance, I made every effort to hide my interest in order to avoid raising her expectations. Obviously I was very successful in that at least. I was always at war with myself. I was becoming attached to her and fighting it at the same time. Her poor connections, lack of social status and the truly awful impropriety of her mother and younger sisters seemed to be insurmountable hurdles.”

Fitzwilliam took a sip of his drink and said. “Well, I am glad you wrote her a letter explain the dealings with Wickham. Telling her the reasons for acting as you did with Bingley may help as well. I admit I am not altogether pleased with your role there simply because I don’t think you were well qualified to know the heart of the lady concerned. How often were you actually in close company with her and Bingley? However, what truly upsets me were your actions – or rather, your lack of
action – in regard to Wickham. I think Miss Bennet’s reference to selfish disdain for the feelings of others was very much in evidence there, even if Miss Bennet was not aware of it.”

Darcy’s head snapped up at Fitzwilliam’s blunt statement. “I was trying to protect Georgiana.”

"Nonsense, you could have exposed Wickham as a liar, a cheat, a gambler and a seducer without involving Georgiana at all. You essentially cared so little for the residents of Meryton and Longbourn that you could not make any effort to protect them against him. You are an intelligent man. How hard would it be to quietly let a few people know the details of his propensity to accumulate debts that are never paid, to leave behind debts of honour and his success at seducing the daughters of tradesmen? You could have spoken to his commanding officer at the very least. You left a woman you professed to care about, completely unprotected. People in the area invited you into their homes, dined with you and treated you with civility and this was how you repaid them. This was badly done cousin, very badly done!"

Fitzwilliam shook his head. “Well, it is too late now, the damage appears to have been done.” He paused for several seconds and then looked at Darcy quizzically. “You know I rather suspected that Miss Bennet held you in low esteem before I mentioned to her anything about Bingley and her sister. Just as a matter of curiosity, when and how did you first meet her?"

“I have been going over that in my mind for the last few months.” replied Darcy. “I can remember all of my contacts with Miss Elizabeth. It was at a local assembly held a day or two after we arrived in Netherfield. Bingley wanted to attend and dragged the rest of us along with him. I definitely did not want to be there. I am afraid I made my displeasure obvious to everyone.”

“Ah, the famous Darcy glower designed to curdle milk and scare match-making mamas into the next room.”

“Yes, well…… Bingley and I were introduced to Miss Elizabeth’s mother. Bingley immediately solicited the next dance with the eldest daughter and Mrs. Bennet then tried to get me to dance with one of the remaining four. I was rather offended at her presumption but simply bowed and walked away. Later on Bingley annoyed me further by trying to get me to dance. He pointed to Miss Elizabeth who wasn’t dancing at the time and sitting nearby. I made some stupid comment – designed solely to get Bingley to leave me alone. I had not thought it was heard by anyone else but I suspect now I was wrong.”

“What did you say?”

“I don’t remember exactly but I think I called her tolerable but not tempting enough to dance with. I believe I complimented the eldest Miss Bennet by saying she was the only beautiful woman in the room.”

“Ahhhhh …… well at your first meeting you managed to insult Miss Elizabeth twice and possibly a third time. That was certainly not a comment to be made in a public setting. No wonder she had a low opinion of your gentlemanly qualities. It’s also no wonder Wickham’s words fell on fertile soil.”

Darcy ran his fingers through his hair, stood, stretched and began to pace. Fitzwilliam could see the old Darcy starting to emerge. He decided to wait until Darcy revealed his thoughts. Finally Darcy spoke.

“Richard, I appreciate this talk. My thoughts have been so confused that I hardly knew where to start. There is so much justice in Miss Elizabeth’s charges against me. And while I am sure she has absolved me of blame regarding Wickham, the other charges are all too correct. I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principal. As a child I was taught what was right, but I
was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principals, but taught to follow them in pride and conceit. I was spoiled by my parents, who though good themselves (my father particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to to think meanly of their sense and worth compared to my own.”

“I cannot say you are too hard on yourself, William. But chastising yourself is less important than correcting these faults. What do you intend to do about it?”

“I know that, as hard as it will be, I must attempt to remedy my mistake with Bingley. I may well lose his friendship over this but my honour demands that I tell him about Miss Bennet and my participation in those activities which separated her from him.”

“When do you propose to do so?”

“Bingley is in the country at the moment, up north somewhere I believe. I have invited him and his sisters to Pemberley in August. That seems like the most appropriate time. I want to talk to him and explain my thoughts. A letter, in such a case, may spare my feelings but at his expense.”

“I agree, though if he were in town now I would suggest acting immediately. How do you plan to address the major issue – your attitude towards and treatment of those outside your small circle?”

“I do not know. I expect that I will simply have to deliberately make the effort to converse and maintain a more amiable countenance. It will not be easy to undo the habits learned over the course of twenty years.”

“There appears to me to be two more things to consider. First, you must tell Georgie a little bit of what has happened. Not everything obviously but enough to satisfy her concerns. This is your story and you must be the one to tell her something. She is old enough now to understand much of what happened. Second, and more important, what do you intend to do about Miss Elizabeth? You obviously still hold her in strong affection. I know that she was angry with you but you may have, or be able to, address two of the major complaints she charged you with. If you can show her that you have also changed, her opinion could also change. She is worth the winning, is she not?”

“I will try and talk to Georgie tomorrow. It won’t be easy. As to the other, I am hopeful that if Bingley resumes his attachment to Miss Jane Bennet, I will be able to meet Miss Elizabeth frequently enough to show her, and possibly tell her, that her words were taken to heart.”

Fitzwilliam nodded his head, looked at his watch and asked Darcy to put him up for the night since it was too late to return to his rooms in the barracks. Both gentlemen retired for the evening, satisfied with their evening’s discussion.
Chapter 3

August 9 – Ambleside, Lakes District

It is not the object of this work to give a description of the Lakes District. For the three travellers, one enjoyment was certain, that of suitability as companions – a suitability which comprehended health and temper to bear inconveniences, cheerfulness to enhance every pleasure and affection and intelligence, to deal with and compensate for such disappointments which might occur. Their carriage drew up to the Inn where accommodations for the night had been prearranged. Their intention was to travel on the morrow towards Derbyshire and the village of Lambton where Mrs. Gardiner had lived for much of her life before her marriage.

As they were conducted by the innkeeper to their rooms, he mentioned that several letters had arrived by express earlier in the day. He promised to have them sent up immediately. Since it was two hours until dinner they had thought to walk around the village. Once the letters were delivered, Elizabeth saw that they were both from Jane and that one had been poorly addressed such that it had been sent elsewhere. Her uncle and aunt, leaving her to read and enjoy the letters, decided to walk towards the church a short distance away. The mis-sent letter had been written five days ago. It began with a description of recent parties and engagements and other such news as the area would supply; but the latter half, which was dated a day later, and written in obvious agitation, gave more important intelligence. It was to this effect,

“Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you. Be assured that we are all well. What I have to say relates to poor Lydia. An express came at twelve last night, just as we were all gone to bed, from colonel Forster, to inform us that she was gone off to Scotland with one of his officers; to own the truth, with Wickham! Imagine our surprise. To Kitty, however, it does not seem so wholly unexpected. I am very, very sorry. So imprudent a match on both sides! But I am willing to hope the best, and that his character has been misunderstood. Thoughtless and indiscreet I can easily believe him, but this step (and let us rejoice over it) marks nothing bad at heart. His choice is disinterested at least, for he must know my father can give her nothing. Our poor mother is sadly grieved. My father bears it better. How thankful am I that we never let them know what has been said against him! We must forget it ourselves. They were off Saturday night about twelve, as is conjectured, but were not missed till yesterday morning at eight. The express was sent off directly. My dear Lizzy, they must passed within ten miles of us. Colonel Forster gives us reason to expect him here soon. Lydia left a few lines for his wife, informing her of their intention. I must conclude, for I cannot be long from my poor mother.i am afraid you will not be able to make it out, but I hardly know what I have written.”

Without allowing herself time for consideration, and scarcely knowing what she felt, Elizabeth impatiently opened the second letter and read as follows. It had been written a day later than the conclusion of the first.

“By this time, my dearest sister, you have received my hurried letter. I wish this may be more intelligible; but though not confined for time, my head is so bewildered that I cannot answer for being coherent. Dearest Lizzy, I hardly know what I would write, but I have bad news for you, and it cannot be delayed. Imprudent as a marriage between Mr. Wickham and our poor Lydia would be, we are now anxious to be assured it has taken place, for there is too much reason to fear that they are not gone to Scotland. Colonel Forster came yesterday, having left Brighton the day before, not many hours after the express. Though Lydia’s short letter to Mrs. F gave them to understand that they were going to Gretna Green, something was dropped by Denny expressing his belief that W. Never intended to go there, or to marry Lydia at all, which was repeated to Colonel F. who, instantly taking
the alarm, set off from B., intending to trace their route. He did trace them easily to Clapham, but no further; for on entering that place, they removed into a hackney coach, and dismissed the chaise that brought them from Epsom. All that is known after this is that they were seen to continue the London road.

I know not what to think. After making every possible inquiry on that side of London, Colonel F. came on to Hertfordshire, anxiously renewing them at all the turnpikes, and at the inns in Barnet and Hatfield, but without any success. No such people had been seen to pass through. With the kindest concern he came on to Longbourn, and broke his apprehensions to us in a manner most creditable to his heart. I sincerely grieved for him and Mrs. F.; but no one can throw any blame on them. Our distress, my dear Lizzy, is very great. My father and mother believe the very worst, but it cannot think so very ill of him. Many circumstances might make it more eligible for them to be married privately in town than to pursue their first plan; and even if he could form such a design against a young woman of Lydia’s connections, which is not likely, can I suppose her so lost to everything? Impossible! I grieve to find, however, that Colonel F. is not disposed to depend upon their marriage; he shook his head when I expressed my hopes, and said he feared W. was not a man to be trusted. My poor mother is really ill, and keeps to her room. Could she exert herself, it would be better, but this is not to be expected; and as to my father, I never in my life saw him to be so affected. Poor Kitty has anger for having concealed their attachment; but as it was a matter of confidence, one cannot wonder. I am truly glad, dearest Lizzy, that you have been spared something of these distressing scenes; but now, as the first shock is over, shall I own that I long for your return? I am not so selfish, however, as to press for it, if convenient. Adieu!

I take up my pen again to do what I have just told you I would not; but circumstances are such that I cannot help earnestly begging you all to come here as soon as possible. I know my dear uncle and aunt so well I am not afraid of requesting it, though I have still something more to ask of the former. My father is going to London with Colonel Forster instantly, to try to discover her. What he means to do, I am sure I know not; his excessive distress will not allow him to pursue any measure in the best and safest way, and Colonel Forster is obliged to be at Brighton again tomorrow evening. In such an exigences my uncle’s advice would be everything in the world; he will immediately comprehend what I must feel, and I rely upon his goodness.”

“Where is my uncle?” cried Elizabeth darting from her seat to the door and, seeing a servant girl in the hall, called to her. “Please, I need someone to go and get my uncle and aunt – Gardiner is their name. They have walked down towards the church. They must return here with no delay. It is most urgent.

Upon receiving the servant's assent to fetch them, Elizabeth returned to her room, collapsing on the chair in tears. She was not sensible of how much time had lapsed before the Gardiners hurried back, alarmed that their niece had suddenly taken ill. Elizabeth was able to quickly alleviate their concerns on that regard, but reading them the two letters, they could not help but be very affected. Not only for Lydia, who had never been a favourite with them, but for all the family. Mr. Gardiner quickly promised his full and ready assistance. Elizabeth, expecting no less, expressed her gratitude. While they were desirous of leaving immediately, it was apparent that they could not make the nearest stopping point in the few hours of daylight remaining and so all preparations were made as to depart at first light on the morrow.

That evening after they finished their packing, they discussed the matter further. The Gardiners were inclined, at first, to lend some credence to Jane’s belief in Wickham’s willingness to enter into a marriage with Lydia. Mr. Gardiner expressed his thoughts as such “Having thought about this further, Lizzy, I am inclined to think as your sister does. I cannot suppose Wickham to be so lacking in character as to have designs upon a young woman who is not wholly unprotected, who was not friendless, and was under the protection of the Colonel of his regiment. I am inclined to hope for the
best. Would he risk losing his place in the regiment by not forming an attachment to her? Surely the risk is too great to behave in other than an honourable fashion?

“I believe him capable of the worst possible behaviour.” cried Elizabeth. “He will act in the most mercenary fashion; and will not scruple to compromise Lydia with no regard for anything other than his own needs and well-being. Oh my poor, foolish Lydia, she is lost and ruined. I, who knew what Wickham was, did not reveal to the world his character. If I had, it is unlikely my father would have allowed Lydia to travel to Brighton.”

Her aunt and uncle looked at each other in some confusion since Elizabeth’s words seem to suggest a degree of knowledge not previously made known to them. Her aunt asked “Were you aware, Lizzy, of an attachment between Lydia and Wickham?”

“No, not at all. I saw some inclination towards him when he first arrived, but no more than the rest of us.” Elizabeth blushed as she uttered these words, remembering her early familiarity with Wickham. “Lydia’s attentions seemed to be directed to Lieutenant Denny in fact.”

“Well, if that is the case, I really think you take too much upon yourself, Lizzy.” Her uncle cautioned. “However, you appear to have recourse to more information regarding Wickham than is currently known to us. Could you enlighten us?”

“Surely it is still possible that they have gone to Scotland?” asked Mrs. Gardiner.

“Perhaps so. I hope it possible indeed but the fact that they were thought to be seen on the road to London, suggests that was the destination. As well there was no trace of them on the Barnet road.”

“So then their destination is probably London. An odd choice for a couple with, I suspect, limited funds.” replied Mr. Gardiner. “However it has the virtue of being an excellent place to remain undiscovered if such is Wickham's intent. But I ask again, Lizzy. You seem to know more about Wickham and his character than I previously been led to believe.”

“I”……I have received some information in confidence while in Kent. I cannot provide details but Wickham has spread many lies about the Darcy family and the truth does not favour Mr. Wickham. I doubt not that he has accumulated debts of honour and is likely indebted to many tradesmen in Meryton. There may be other more serious misbehaviours but I cannot attest to them. His amiability has hidden a man of dissolute habits.”

Her aunt and uncle looked increasingly distressed as Elizabeth spoke. Her aunt exclaimed “You expect Wickham to have no intention of marrying Lydia then?”

“Since it would have been imprudent for me to have formed an attachment for him given our respective poverty, why would it be less so for Lydia? Fortunately, I had no serious interest beyond simple friendship but Wickham must marry a women with a respectable fortune and neither Lydia or myself have such. Why else would he marry? How could he marry and support a wife? He cannot do either. It is altogether too horrible!”

Mrs. Gardiner hesitantly asked "Do you think Lydia so lost to everything but love of him as to consent to live with him on any condition other than marriage?”

Tears streaming from her eyes, Elizabeth replied. “I know not. I would hope not. I cannot wish to think so ill of a sister. It is shocking to harbour such thoughts indeed but her behaviour has been so wild, so ungovernable as to lead me to believe it very possible. She is so young, and has been allowed to spend her days in frivolous and idle activities to the exclusion of all else. No effort has been expended to control her behaviour in public and indeed she has been encouraged to think only
of love, flirtation and officers. Her feelings are lively enough and she has been given free rein to exercise them. Her……susceptibility – for want of a better word – is such that she could be easy prey for such a man as Wickham who has the charm of address and person to captivate any women.”

“But Jane does not appear to think so ill of him.” replied Mr. Gardiner.

“Of whom does Jane ever think ill? She would be willing to excuse any behaviour until such time it has been absolutely proven against them. Indeed Jane knows the truth about Wickham as well as I do. We both know that he is profligate in every sense of the word, is without honour or integrity, and is as false and deceitful as he is insinuating.”

With these dismal thoughts, they retired to bed in order to rise as early as possible and begin the return to Longbourn. The Gardiners talked quietly together about Elizabeth’s surprising knowledge of Wickham. They became convinced that their niece was holding close some circumstance of a personal nature but knowing her reluctance to disclose her inner-most thoughts, they were inclined to not press her to reveal them. At least, not yet.

As Elizabeth sought repose, her final thoughts were on Mr. Darcy and how relieved he must feel when the news of the scandal attached to the Bennet name became public – because it would do so eventually – that he had not attached to such a family.
August 9 – Pemberley, Derbyshire

Fitzwilliam Darcy was considering how he was going to explain to his best friend, Charles Bingley, that he had erred grievously in his advice regarding Jane Bennet. It was probably going to be difficult inasmuch as Charles had displayed a pronounced affection for the lady. Darcy had been waiting several days since the arrival at Pemberley of Georgiana and Bingley and his sisters and brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst. He had thought it best to allow a day or two for everyone to recover from the rigours of travelling for three days from London. Yesterday they had taken advantage of a particularly warm day and invited several neighbouring families to a picnic by the pond.

Today had been spent touring the grounds in an open carriage. This had given Miss Bingley an excellent opportunity to rhapsodize over the beauties of Pemberley. It would have been more appreciated if he could have detected a touch of sincerity in those praises; unfortunately, he could not. Such praises were obviously, to him at least, designed to flatter him rather than reflecting any true appreciation for the grounds themselves. He doubted Miss Bingley would ever venture to walk through the grounds unless it was to accompany him. One could not get a true appreciation of the beauty of Pemberley unless one walked or rode the various trails and pathways. It had taken centuries to create the beauties of Pemberley; they could not be canvassed in an hour or two in a carriage.

He rather thought that everyone would be grateful for a quiet evening. He would prevail upon Georgiana and Bingley’s sisters to entertain them with some music after dinner. He and Charles could talk afterwards; Hurst would almost assuredly be sleeping by then, as usual.

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Darcy poured a glass of port for himself and Bingley. The men had moved to the library after the ladies and Hurst had retired for the night. Darcy and Bingley held a companionable silence as they savoured their drinks. Bingley seemed quite relaxed and, if he occasionally appeared slightly lost in thought, his manner contained little of the melancholy that was its characteristic during the winter in London. This puzzled Darcy a little and, rather than immediately opening the discussion that was weighing on him, he decided to temporize with a more general conversation.

“You must have in the north for several months before returning to London. What drew you there, Charles?”

“Business, Darcy. Well, business and family would probably be more accurate. You remember that Louisa, Caroline and I are originally from the area. I have never spoken much of my family but my parents each had several brothers and sisters all of whom remained in the region. As a result I have quite a family of uncles, aunts and cousins scattered thereabouts. To my regret, I really had little converse with them after I left to attend Cambridge. Of course, Caroline had no intention of maintaining any relationship once she moved to London.”

“Since I had rather urgent business in the area, I took the opportunity to re-establish a familial relationship when time allowed. In fact, the society was both amiable and interesting and I willingly extended my stay by almost a month.”

“I was aware that you were maintaining your ties to the business interests you inherited from your father but I did not expect that you were actively involved in the operations of such concerns.”
“Well, truthfully I have generally left the operation to several men that my father employed just prior to his death. I have full confidence in them and restrict myself to overseeing their activities. However, there are some recent circumstances that seem to call for a more active engagement on my part. At least this was the opinion of those persons and, once I had discussed the issues with them, I concurred with their opinion. I spent a good deal of time discussing their suggestions. It was an extremely interesting time. I cannot remember feeling so alert and satisfied since I left Cambridge.”

“Are you in a position to be more specific on these issues or are they of a particularly confidential nature?”

“I really cannot be too specific. Essentially, I am planning to be more directly involved in the running of these companies. We will be enlarging our operations and introducing some machines that have recently been created.”

“Are your intentions still directed towards acquiring an estate?”

“Yes, eventually, although I have decided it is not something that I can accomplish right now. With much of my time spent in the north, I will have to consider where I want to purchase.”

“There are certainly no shortage of estates in Derbyshire and other northern areas. Are you thinking then of giving up the lease on Netherfield?”

“Yes, I expect so. If I am spending more time in the north, I would not likely use the place with any frequency.”

“I see.” Darcy paused for a minute or two considering this rather new Bingley and not sure if he approved altogether with the changes that he was contemplating. However, after one disastrous intervention, he was reluctant to be critical. Besides, Charles did not appear to be soliciting his advice or opinion. Despite everything, his honour required that he confess to Charles how badly he had erred in regard to Jane Bennet. Let Charles make of it as he must.

“Charles, there was something I need to tell – confess – to you. While I was, I thought, acting in your best interest, I now see my actions as unwarranted interference. I do apologize and ask your forgiveness although I would not blame you if you were to refuse both.”

“My God, Darcy, this sounds serious. I can think of nothing that would cause you this much concern.”

“Hear me out. To speak plainly, I am sure you remember leaving Netherfield last November, repairing to London where your sisters and I joined you several days later. The sole purpose of our following you was to dissuade you from forming an attachment to Miss Jane Bennet. Your sisters were mainly concerned with the impropriety of Miss Bennet’s family, other than herself and Miss Elizabeth, and the lack of connections of the family. Your sisters had much higher expectations for your marriage. While I was in agreement with your sister’s concerns, my chief object was to ensure that you were not entrapped in a marriage of unequal affections. I could see your affection clearly; I could see no matching affection from Miss Bennet.”

“I now believe I was wrong. I spent last Easter visiting my aunt in Kent. While there I was frequently in company with Miss Elizabeth Bennet who was visiting her cousin, Mr. Collins, who lived at the parsonage attached to my aunt’s estate of Rosings Park. Miss Elizabeth had cause to learn of my involvement and, with her characteristic desire to protect her sister, took issue with my opinion. While I had not observed a clear affection, Miss Elizabeth was clearly of the opinion that Miss Bennet did indeed feel strongly but, since her nature was to conceal her innermost feelings, her countenance was uniformly serene. I do not recant my observations but the opinion of Miss Elizabeth
must assuredly carry greater weight. It seems likely, therefore, that Miss Bennet did return your affection and my advice to you, to have been wrong.”

“When I admit that I was quite possibly wrong in my advice, it was honestly tendered. However, I also later committed a more serious offence and one that I now consider to have been dishonourable. I withheld from you the fact that Miss Bennet spent several months in London after Christmas and, in fact, called your sisters. They returned the call although they waited three weeks to do so. As well their manner when making the call was such as to lead Miss Bennet that you no longer held any affection for her. Your sisters and I agreed that your feelings were too tender at that time to risk meeting Miss Bennet. It was presumptuous of me to have acted in this fashion.”

Darcy had barely looked at Bingley throughout his confession and now, when he did so, he could not discover from his visage, the thoughts or feelings displayed there. He simply waited for a reaction, any reaction. He expected anger, but that seemed absent. If anything, Bingley looked bemused, uncertain.

Bingley rose and went to the sideboard to refill his glass. He waved the decanter in Darcy’s direction but, upon his shake of the head, returned to his seat. His words came slowly and somewhat hesitantly.

“Your apology is accepted, of course, and you are forgiven. I think, if you had made this confession before I had gone north, I might have received it in quite a different manner. My feelings then are quite different than they are now. I am not sure how this change took place although I suspect that it is, at least in part, the result of the interest in those business dealings that I spoke of earlier.”

“You remember I spoke of my family in the area. I had cause to meet my father’s younger brother while in the area and was invited to stay for several weeks with his family. A truly fine man although lacking many of the surface graces deemed to be required to call oneself a gentleman but in the essentials - honour, integrity, courage, decency – he was a gentleman and one I am proud to know. Anyway, one evening we talked later into the night and consumed a fair amount of wine in the process. He had noticed a certain degree of melancholy in my countenance when I first arrived and was pleased to see it fading as my visit extended. He simply asked as to the cause and I told him all about Miss Bennet, my feelings and my sister’s concerns. Your concerns, particularly that she did not have an affection equal to my own, were mentioned.”

Bingley noticed a reaction from Darcy and immediately gave a short laugh saying. “Relax, I did not reveal your name although it is possible that he inferred it due to our friendship.”

“My uncle listened carefully and, after considering what was said, asked a couple of pertinent questions so as to clarify a few misunderstandings. Remember I mentioned that he was a good man; well he has a fine mind also. I began to feel I was back in Cambridge with a tutor employing the Socratic question and answer method. It was torturous but gradually I came to one basic conclusion.”

“If I had truly loved Miss Bennet, I would not have been so easily convinced to give her up. My uncle’s opinion, and I am quite inclined to agree with him, is that I was not ready to marry. He called me a ‘puppy’ and that is, I think a good description of my behaviour. I hope to grow and, perhaps in a year or two, to be ready to consider marriage. When I do, I hope to meet and win a woman such as Miss Bennet.”

Darcy looked at Bingley and tried to hide the consternation he felt. He could not but rejoice to see his friend’s new-found maturity and was quick to complement him accordingly.

“Charles, I cannot express enough my pleasure in listening to you tonight. It seems to me that you have grown a couple of years in the few scant months that you were away. My only regret is that
you did not visit this uncle sooner. He is a man I would like to include among my acquaintance. I think it is fair to say then, that you will not be renewing the Netherfield lease."

Bingley’s reply of ‘No’ was quite definite.

Darcy inspected his wine glass thoroughly and a small smile could be seen forming. “Have you considered the impact of your shift to the north on your sisters, particularly Caroline? I cannot imagine that she will be delighted to leave London.”

Bingley laughed outright. “Darcy teasing? This is a first. Actually my uncle and I discussed this very thing. He believes, and I have come to agree, that Caroline would do well to try and navigate the London season on her own; that I recognize her desires are not mine and that I would do well to create an establishment for her in London. I will be instructing my solicitor to find suitable accommodations for her. Her dowry will provide her a living allowance which I may supplement until such time as she marries. She will need to hire a companion unless the Hursts are willing to be part of the establishment. I have yet to discuss this with either of my sisters. Of one thing I am certain, Caroline will not be part of my household in the future.”

Darcy’s smile expanded. “I do not want to be in the area when you inform Caroline of your decision. Please wait until you leave Pemberley.”

"Well I can hardly blame you for that; however, it does raise another problem for me. I do not expect to spend as much time in London as in the past and I am reluctant to stay with either the Hurst or Caroline. Would I be imposing too much to ask to stay at Darcy House for those weeks I am in town?"

"Not an imposition at all. You will be more than welcome to stay and for as long as you like." Darcy fell silent and then asked. “There is something else that just occurred to me. You left Hertfordshire quite precipitously and you did not take a proper leave-taking of the families in the area. Do you think it advisable to visit the area for a day or two, to take proper leave of everyone?”

After pondering the question for several minutes, Bingley replied. “I suppose it could be done but, since the other commitments that I have entered into will not allow me to visit the area until very late in the year, I am not sure that such strict adherence to propriety will serve any purpose. My lease will have expired and I would be required to find lodgings elsewhere. No, I will not return. If I am in the area on some other purpose, I may well make my apologies to such families as I may encounter. But visit for that purpose, No!”

After thinking about this for a moment or two, Darcy nodded his acquiescence and then, looking at Bingley, began to chuckle. Queried by a perplexed Bingley, he stifled his mirth and answered, "I have just realized another reason to celebrate your change in plans."

"Oh, and pray what is that?"

"Well my friend, if you plan to become more fully engaged in business affairs, you will be corresponding with others frequently. Your handwriting is so atrocious that you will either have to learn to write properly so that a normal person does not have to interpret your words or engage a secretary to do it for you. I suggest the secretary since years would probably be required for you to improve your writing."

Bingley chuckled, "That is a suggestion to which I will give serious consideration. I thank you, my friend."

They then began to talk of other matters. Activities for the morrow were considered and an early morning ride was agreed upon. Georgiana had expressed an interest in once again visiting some local
ruins and Darcy would invite her to join them. Neither of Bingley’s sisters were much interested in riding and neither man considered inviting them to the outing.

Bingley excused himself to get some sleep and Darcy was left to ponder a problem that he had truly not anticipated. How was he going to meet Elizabeth Bennet again? He could not contemplate simply riding up to her door at Longbourn and calling on her. Their last meeting had been too tumultuous, her anger too great, for him to want to chance anything so direct. He wanted to come into her company obliquely and assess her feelings towards himself. He had no idea how his letter had been received and now Bingley would not be returning to attach himself to her sister. He could see no way forward at this time. And waiting was so very hard!”
Chapter 5

September 5, 1812 - Longbourn

It was a pleasantly warm late summer day and Elizabeth found herself able to enjoy an hour or two of solitude before tea. Her intent had been to sit in the garden and enjoy a new book of poetry that Uncle Gardiner had sent to her; however, she could not bring her mind to concentrate on the words in front of her. The window of her mother’s room was open and she could hear her mother’s voice rising and falling in volume as she gossiped with her sister, Mrs. Phillips. She could see, through the library window, her father reading in his comfortable chair while the sounds of a piano indicated that Mary was working on a new piece of music. In the garden, Jane was cutting fresh flowers for the parlour while Kitty whiled the time away on the swing. Elizabeth’s book lay open in her lap as thoughts drifted towards those events which had so radically altered the lives of the Bennet family over the past month.

To this day, she could remember little of her tour of The Lakes and her memory of the drive from Ambleside to Longbourn was a compound of mental and physical distress. Fortunately time had blotted out much of the torment.

Those small traces of optimism – that Lydia could be found and married to Wickham - that existed in the hearts of her family, had gradually been extinguished by the futility of the searches and endeavours of her father and uncle to locate them. Alone of her family, Elizabeth had never believed there to be any hope; her knowledge of Wickham’s character would not admit of such. The tide of reports emanating from Meryton with regard to Wickham – there was scarcely a tradesman to whom he did not owe money or whose daughter had been subject to his seductions – even, if only half true (which Elizabeth thought likely), could not help but confirm a belief in the licentiousness of his character. There could no longer be any expectation of a happy outcome and Lydia’s ruination was to encompass them all.

Already the family had been virtually ostracized. The only regular visitor was their Aunt Phillips to impart such news and gossip as she had obtained in Meryton; and, while Lady Lucas visited once a week, she did so unaccompanied by her daughters and had not invited the Bennet family to Lucas Hall. When Elizabeth and her sisters walked in Meryton, people would acknowledge their greetings but made no effort to stop and talk. Similarly, shopkeepers were more than content to accept their money, but customers in the shops did not initiate conversation as would have happened in the past. While there was to be an assembly in a fortnight, the Bennet sisters would not be attending this year. What would be the point? They were unlikely to be invited to dance and they would be the object of conversation and not participants.

Even attending church services found them in a cocoon of silence, isolated in their pew. Only the rector seemed sympathetic and generally had a small smile and a few words of comfort as he greeted them following the service. Thankfully he had not, in his sermons, dealt on the evils of licentious behaviour. Elizabeth could only rejoice that Mr. Collins was preaching in Kent and not Hertfordshire. The latter’s letter to her father decrying Lydia’s actions was, in equal parts, foolish and insulting and she could only hope that her father had consigned it to the fire after reading it. With no little amusement, she observed that her rejection of his marriage offer now pleased Mr. Collins as much as herself.

She shook her head to clear such thoughts and forced herself to consider how her family was responding to their new situation. Her mother had taken to her rooms almost immediately following the news of the elopement, attended now only by Jane, Mary and the housekeeper – Hill – in whom
they could repose much confidence. Elizabeth had attempted to assist them but found her temper not up to the challenge of suffering the complaints of her mother who bitterly found fault with the Forsters for not taking appropriate care of Lydia; her father for not allowing her – Mrs. Bennet – to go to Brighton to chaperone Lydia; Wickham for his licentious behaviour; Elizabeth for not marrying Mr. Collins, since presumably Lydia would have been in Kent had she done so; and even Jane for failing to secure Mr. Bingley. Bingley, though Elizabeth could not identify how this would have prevented Lydia’s misbehaviour. The only persons for whom no blame was attached were those who were most to blame, Lydia for foolish and improper behaviour and herself for permitting, even encouraging, a frivolous and self-indulgent behaviour of a daughter lost to any sense of propriety.

Kitty was an enigma to her. They had never been close since Kitty was very much Lydia’s shadow. Now she seemed adrift. The departure of the militia, the loss of Lydia who had been the instigator of many of their activities, the strictures of her father – incensed because she had withheld from him a prior knowledge of Lydia’s growing attachment to Wickham, all combined with a lack of any accomplishment - apart from decorating bonnets - and a weak understanding of any subject, left her with no resources to engage her mind. In truth she looked and acted bored, irritable and idle. When Elizabeth considered her next oldest sister, Mary, she could only realize how the enforced isolation was accentuating her predominant characteristics. Mary, not overly appreciative of society in the first instance, the loss of such only served to increase the time she could devote to reading sermons and scriptures, moralizing endlessly over the transgressions of Lydia and playing extremely tedious music on the piano. Elizabeth was not sure that she could be held responsible for her response if she had to endure one more lecture on the fragility of a women’s virtue, the need to ensure one’s behaviour did not attract the attentions of an undeserving man and the irretrievable nature of a loss of reputation on the part of a lady.

Elizabeth was having a much harder time ascertaining Jane’s feelings. Caring for their mother consumed much of Jane’s time and, for some reason, they had not had as many late night talks prior to sleeping. It had been difficult for Jane to surrender her belief that Wickham would eventually behave in a proper manner and marry Lydia. She could not conceive of such wickedness and, even now, Elizabeth suspected Jane to harbour secret hopes that all would turn out right. Jane’s serenity could not be as untouched as her countenance and manner would suggest.

For herself, Elizabeth knew that it her predominant feeling of anger was directed at herself for failing to warn people – and her father specifically – of the wickedness of which Wickham was capable. She regretted being unable to find a way to apprise her father, at least, of the particulars of Wickham’s past deeds without revealing the source of her information. At various times, she found herself furious with Lydia for her self-indulgent, thoughtless behaviour; at her mother for indulging Lydia to the ruin of all their reputations; at Wickham for being Wickham; and even at her father for his inability to control and discipline his family.

As time passed, she came to the realization that, as much as she loved her father, his was a sadly flawed character. Oddly enough, despite being perhaps ultimately responsible for the disaster they faced, he was the least affected as his life previously was spent largely ensconced in his library with books and port. He socialized as little as possible, was never averse to avoiding company and treasured peace and quiet and now had a surfeit of both. Elizabeth’s had managed to disguise her disappointment with him but now felt less inclined to seek his company in the library. She was uncertain if her father had noticed her discomfort, he certainly had not teased her about it.

Oddly enough her thoughts now turned very rarely to Darcy. If she had hidden in a small corner of heart, any thoughts of a renewal of his addresses, they had died with Jane’s letter in August. When she considered his concerns about the propriety of her family, she could not fault his reluctance to attach himself to them. He would surely congratulate himself on having avoided such an attachment
when he learned of Lydia’s situation.

Darcy’s comments with respect to her family now troubled her less than they had when she first read his letter. Its truth was incontrovertible. Her mother’s incivility and grossly improper behaviour and the wild unconstrained public behaviour of her two youngest sisters in particular had always been embarrassing. It was clear that they had materially damaged the prospects of Jane and even herself to some degree even before Lydia’s disgrace. The Bennet family, with the exception of herself and Jane, had displayed serious improprieties. Previously, Elizabeth could only ignore such behaviour since she could not correct her mother and the latter constantly overruled the efforts of Jane and herself to correct the youngest girls. But Darcy’s letter had required her to face things more directly.

Her father, as head of the family, must bear the ultimate responsibility for the family’s reputation and respectability. When she compared the behaviour of her uncle and even Darcy himself, to that of her father who was head of the Bennet family, she could not help but become dissatisfied. His was the final voice in decisions but all to often that voice seemed to be lacking.

Her observations of Darcy led her to believe that he took his responsibilities to manage Pemberley very seriously. His business correspondence while staying at Netherfield was large, while he also visited his aunt’s estate at Rosings Park annually to help with its management. As well, he was a considerate and involved brother and guardian for a sister more than ten years his junior. And he had been doing so for the last five years from the age of two and twenty. At an age when most young men were engaged in frivolous activities, he was required to assume heavy responsibilities. It spoke to his worthiness that he was able to do so successfully.

However, when she considered her Uncle Gardiner, the deficiencies of her father became even more apparent. She had always viewed her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner as second parents. She now realized how significant they were in teaching appropriate behaviour to herself and Jane. Mrs. Bennet had little knowledge of what constituted appropriate behaviour and her father was too disinterested to instruct or control her behaviour. The Gardiners, because their family responsibilities were yet light, were able to guide the two eldest Bennet sisters - who visited them regularly - at the time when they were first being introduced to society. As the Gardiner’s family responsibilities expanded, they had less time to devote to instructing the younger Bennet sisters who then, to their detriment, took their guidance from their mother.

Elizabeth could only look at the situation with dismay; her mother was uncontrolled and her father seemingly interested only in maintaining his peace and quiet. Lydia’s sojourn in Brighton and it’s consequence was proof of such, if proof were needed. Both Elizabeth and Jane had protested against allowing her to go, mentioning her uncontrolled behaviour, a disregard for even the basic proprieties and the lack of supervision that would likely exist in Brighton. Despite such protestations from Jane and herself, to Brighton Lydia went. Mr. Bennet treasured his peace and believed her to be too poor for her to be in any danger. Elizabeth was not inclined to celebrate having her judgement vindicated.

Elizabeth had never been blind to the Impropriety of her father’s behaviour as a husband. She recognized and was grateful for his treatment of her which was all that was affectionate and respectful. She had, in the past, ignored his treatment of her mother in holding her up to ridicule by his children and his treatment bordering on contempt for her younger sisters. The situation in which they now found themselves did not appear to Elizabeth to be one for which either parent was equipped to provide guidance. Both were withdrawn, one to her room and the other to his library.

Elizabeth was not by nature inclined to melancholy nor to inactivity and she felt a need to do something - anything - to improve the outlook of herself, at least, and perhaps her sisters. She had to break out of the ennui and feelings of helplessness and anger that engulfed her and begin to find useful activities to fill the void that now existed. She needed to talk to Jane. She already had a few
thoughts and she firmly believed that Jane could be convinced to assist her. She would think more on this tonight and discuss with Jane and perhaps her father tomorrow.
Chapter 6

September 7, 1812 - London

Bingley looked at his two sisters and his brother-in-law, Randolph Hurst, and gave a soft sigh. He realized he could not put things off any longer and spoke, "Can I see you all in the library, please. There is something I have to discuss with you all."

He got up from the dinner table, and moved quickly towards the library, not giving anyone the opportunity to complain or raise questions. He went immediately to the sideboard and poured a glass of wine for his sisters and port for himself and Hurst. Handing Louisa and Hurst their glasses, he noticed that Caroline had not entered the room.

"Where is Caroline?" he asked Louisa.

"I thought I saw her going upstairs."

Bingley immediately went to the door, summoned the first maid he saw and told her to inform his sister that he was requesting her presence in the library. Immediately. After several minutes of desultory conversation the maid returned with the message that Miss Caroline would be down later. At this Bingley strode from the room and ran up the stairs, knocked firmly on Caroline's door. Upon acknowledgement, he opened the door and saw his sister sitting calmly on a settee looking at a magazine. Keeping a very tight control on his temper and voice, he said "I believe I asked you to attend me in the library. You have ignored me. I am not interested in your reasons for doing so. You will accompany me downstairs now or decisions will be made that affect you and your concerns will not be heard at all and ignored thereafter. Are you coming?"

Caroline looked affronted and replied "I am not in ...."

Bingley interrupted. "Very well. So be it," and closed the door before she could finish. Shaking his head, he walked briskly downstairs. Before he had reached the bottom, he heard a door open and close and footsteps quickly following him down the stairs. He could sense Caroline behind him - her perfume was quite distinct. Not unpleasant, but also not one he found particularly attractive.

Turning he watch Caroline pass and sit beside Louisa. After carefully closing the door, he moved to the side table and he picked up her glass, passed it to her and then sat himself in his own chair facing them all. Taking a sip of his port, he considered his two sisters carefully. His uncle had spoken with him about this meeting and had made some suggestions as to how to present his decisions and their options to them. He had made a few notes and had worked out a basic approach. Now to see if he could get their compliance with a minimum of conflict. Caroline would be the most difficult one to convince. He could sense a touch of uneasiness in Louisa and Caroline as his silence continued. That did not bother him particularly and, in fact, he took some small enjoyment from their uncertainty. No matter! It was time to begin.

"I am sure that you are all wondering why I asked to talk to you tonight. There are a number of things that I want to bring up. First, I had a long talk with Darcy while at Pemberley. It was most revealing, particularly in respect of your behaviour towards Miss Jane Bennet last winter."

He watched the shock on the faces of his sisters, followed by a flush of anger on Caroline's face and possibly embarrassment on Louisa's face. He cut off a sputtering comment from Caroline by raising up his hand.
"Do not bother to deny it. Darcy told me the whole thing and you both have embarrassed me quite a bit. I would add that, upon recollection, your behaviour while at Netherfield was disgraceful from the moment we arrived to when we left. Your incivility and thinly disguised contempt for our neighbours during our residence there convinced me that I cannot trusted either of my sisters to act as a hostess in the future."

"During my stay in the north I was reconsidering my future. I have decided to move to York to be closer to the companies that our father built. I will be working more closely with my uncles and relatives in the north and, while I will still visit London, it probably will be for only short periods of time. I will be buying a residence in York and selling this house. When I visit London, Darcy has graciously offered to let me stay at his residence."

He could see the shock on Caroline's face and a growing anger. Determined to finish what he wanted to say before commencing the argument he knew would follow, he raised his voice a notch.

"Caroline, be quiet! You will have a chance to speak when I am done," pausing for only a second or two, he continued."What I have said so far is not open to discussion. I am not interested in your views on my activities. However, I am prepared to discuss your choices for the future."

"Caroline, you are now over three and twenty. Your dowry can be placed in your control in two years and that is what I plan to do. I am prepared to instruct my solicitor to make such arrangements as are necessary to accomplish this. I am assuming that there is no desire on the part of you or Louisa to move to York and that you would much prefer to reside in London. The question I would ask is whether you wish to live with the Hursts, should they be agreeable to that, or whether you prefer to set up your own establishment. If the latter, my solicitor can arrange to lease an apartment for you. If you have your own establishment, a companion will be required but Louisa and I can surely hire someone suitable. I am prepared to provide some modest assistance in the matter of acquiring an apartment. "

Bingley looked at his sisters. "Should I leave you to discuss this between yourselves?"

"But brother, what about our father's wish that you buy an estate? Surely you are not going to ignore that! And who will host for you in York if Caroline and I are in London?"

"I plan to buy an estate close to York and I have asked Aunt Julia to acted as my hostess in York. She is a fine, sociable woman, well connected in that city and was delighted at the opportunity. She is a widow whose children are all married and the situation appears to satisfy her quite well."

"I must also tell you both that Darcy has told me in no uncertain terms that he will no longer tolerate your using his name to get invitations to dinners or parties or balls. And, to emphasize something I have told you repeatedly, he has no intention, and has never had an intention, of offering for you Caroline. You must look elsewhere for a husband."

Caroline finally found her voice and the pitch was, if anything, higher than normal even for her. Bingley winced. She was so incoherent that he was not actually sure what concerned her most; his departure from London, his move to York or the diminution of the Darcy connection.

As he listened, he remembered the words of his uncle “When you think your resolve is weakening or your are losing patience or control, change your position. Get up, walk around, leave the room, get a drink … but do something different!” He abruptly got up and prepared to leave the room, saying. "I am going out for a bit of fresh air. I suggest you talk this over and we can discuss what you want to do when I return in an hour or so."

With that he collected his coat, hat and walking stick from a footman and headed in the direction of
the nearest park. Fortunately, there was still enough light remaining in the day for him to enjoy the evening colours. Quite a few people had been attracted to the outdoors given the comfortable temperatures and mild breeze. He met and chatted with several acquaintances on his walk and by the time he entered his house once again, almost two hours had passed.

Divesting himself of his outerwear, he inquired as to the presence of his sisters and, upon being told that they were in the library, he asked to have coffee delivered there. He then entered the library to find both sisters obviously waiting for him. Randolph was stretched out in a chair, dozing to all appearances. He wondered if he was even aware of the discussion, until he saw him wink at him surreptitiously. Caroline was the first to speak as he sat in his usual chair. She was obviously making every attempt to appear reasonable.

"You cannot be serious about leaving London. My chances of meeting and attaching a suitor will be much, much poorer if you are not here."

"Caroline, how many years have you been 'out', four? five? I have been there for all of them. During that time you have had multiple opportunities to acquire friends and acquaintances to provide access to such events as you need. I warned you repeatedly that fixating on Darcy was going to be unsuccessful. You chose to ignore me. Now you will have to manage on your own. If you have failed to acquire the connections you need, the fault lies with you, not me. However, I can attempt to arrange a marriage for you in the north. I am sure there are several eligible men in need of a wife with a sizeable dowry. Shall I do so?"

"Of course not!"

"Do you plan to set up your own establishment?"

"No, I will live with the Hursts. Why can we not live here?"

"I plan to buy a house in York and will need the funds from selling this house. Unless the Hursts plan to buy it, they will have to find other accommodations. I plan to move to York by the the start of the new year. The house will be sold as soon as possible thereafter. I suggest you start making arrangements."

Bingley paused for a few minutes and added, “You may dispose of the furniture in your rooms as you wish, I will be making arrangements to have the rest carted to York when I return to London.”

"You are leaving?"

"Yes, I leave for York in two days. I will keep you informed of my plans and expect to return at the start of the new year."

Caroline continued to press Bingley to change his mind with a repetition of those arguments which had already proved unsuccessful. After about half an hour she resorted to tears, sobbing onto Louisa’s shoulder who looked reproachfully at Bingley.

Bingley stood and stated “And yet I am unmoved. Good-night.” And as he moved up to his rooms, his immediate thought was “My, that felt good. For once Caroline did not get her own way.”
Chapter 7

Monday, September 28, 1812 – Longbourn

Hearing light footsteps in the hall, Mr. Bennet was unsurprised when Elizabeth entered the dining room. She gave a quick smile as she moved to the side and made up a plate of sausages, toast, and eggs. Placing that in the seat next to her father she returned for a cup of tea and settled down to eat. he gave her a small smile and asked "A good morning for a walk?"

"It was perfect and the rest of the day should be lovely."

"What are your plans for today?"

"Hill and I have to go over the house accounts after breakfast. Kitty will be helping me. Then she and I were planning to visit a couple of tenants. We have a charity basket for the Haddons and want to look in on Mrs. Mills who is with child."

"I gather then that Jane and Kitty will be dancing attendance on your mother."

Elizabeth struggled to control a slight frown at this comment. She was finding ever harder to accept her father's disrespect for her mother even as she recognized the truth behind the words. She quietly replied, "Jane and I agree that it is best if she handle Mama since I seem to excite her nerves a great deal. I admit I find it difficult to be as patient as I should."

Her father simply shook his head as he got up from the table, refilled his cup with coffee and made his way to his library. If he noticed her displeasure, Elizabeth could not detect that from his demeanour. As Elizabeth was leaving the room a few minutes later, her sisters entered and prepared to break their fast. She nodded at Kitty and said, "I will be sitting down with Hill in about a quarter hour in the kitchen. I shall see you then."

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Their Aunt Phillips visited that afternoon and obviously had important news for their mother and it was obviously too good not to share as widely as possible. On her way upstairs, she saw no reason not to impart it to Elizabeth, Jane and Kitty who had gathered in the drawing room. According to Mrs. Phillips, Mr. Bingley had given up the Netherfield lease and new owners were being sought.

Elizabeth glanced quickly at Jane but, apart from a small look of dismay, Jane's countenance was quickly schooled to its usual serenity. Anticipating her mother's lamentations, Elizabeth quickly suggested a walk in the garden, a suggestion with which her sisters were happy to comply. As they walked, Jane rebuffed all efforts by Elizabeth to discuss the news, saying only "Lizzy, I cannot talk of this now. Perhaps later tonight." With this Elizabeth had to be content.

Over dinner, their mother's profusions were much as in the past, decrying Mr. Bingley's unworthiness for having treated them all so badly, saying that he had used Jane very ill indeed and lamenting the loss of a suitor with five thousand a year. Jane bore the complaints with no obvious distress.

Later that night as she and Elizabeth prepared for bed, Jane sat on the bed and stated "Lizzy, you must believe me. I have quite given Mr. Bingley up. I still think he was one of the handsomest and most amiable man I have known but obviously his affection for me did not equal to mine for him."
Jane paused and then, looking at the floor, said with some reluctance, “Lizzy, I have a confession. When you were travelling with our aunt and uncle, I had cause to get something from your dresser. I saw the letter from Mr. Darcy and, to my shame, I read it. I know that you hid Mr. Darcy’s involvement in convincing Mr. Bingley not to return. I understand why and ask your forgiveness for intruding on your privacy.”

Elizabeth could not hide her dismay and embarrassment. Nonetheless she was not unhappy to have this secret revealed and replied “my forgiveness is easily granted. I am happy that I no longer have to hide it. Did knowing of the involvement of Mr. Darcy have anything to do with your change of opinion about Mr. Bingley?”

Jane was slow to answer. “Possibly, I am not sure. I know that I was most disappointed in Mr. Bingley’s lack of resolve. I can understand Mr. Darcy being unable to comprehend my feelings, but that Mr. Bingley would do so also is harder for me to accept. It seems to me now that either he lacks resolve or his attentions were not truly serious. In either case, I have to believe he is not the type of man who would make a good husband. I have resolved from this that, in future and should the opportunity arise, I shall make every effort to make my preferences known to an eligible suitor. I have to believe that Charlotte may have been correct and, while I cannot and will not display affections that I do not feel, I do think, should the right man seek to court me, that he be left in no doubt as to my regard.”

Elizabeth's face gradually assumed a pensive look and Jane asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I am thinking that the two most amiable men we have met this past year - Wickham and Mr. Bingley - are possibly the least suitable candidates for husbands. Funny, is it not, that the dour Mr. Darcy may be the best of husbands. What value then is amiability?"

Jane laughed "Shall we then look for husbands only amongst men who are disagreeable or reserved?"

Elizabeth chuckled “Perhaps we should. And, if you need to make your preferences known to a suitor, you should take lessons from Miss Bingley. She certainly was not inclined to hide her preferences.”

Their giggles lured Kitty and Mary into the room and as the teasing continued, the laughter increased in volume such that Mr. Bennet had cause to request peace and quiet, which was granted reluctantly by all participants.

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September 28, 1812 – Darcy House, London

Darcy sat alone in his study, reading for the third time a letter received in today’s post.

Fitzwilliam Darcy,

Greetings from one I know you would rather forget all about. As I sure you probably will guess, my situation is rather poor at the moment. I have had to leave the ____ Militia under adverse circumstances and while my immediate prospects are not dire, my long term prospects are quite poor. I am sure you are sadly disappointed and surprised to hear as much. Ha!

I know that I have trespassed on your charity quite frequently in the past but want, nay need, to do so once more – I expect for the very last time. You see, I fear my presence in this country is becoming quite uncomfortable. Indeed, there seem to be numerous gentlemen, of one ilk or the other, who desire to be uncomfortably, for me, severe with me. I would like to avoid such an eventuality if
possible. Hence my suggestion.

I wish to depart this country for the new world, specifically the rebel colonies. I believe they call themselves the United States of America. Presumptuous bastards! I should feel right at home.

Unfortunately I lack the means to pay my passage or to support myself there until I can find a suitable situation. If you can provide me with passage money and £2,000, I will commit to remaining there for the rest of my days. You will be assured that, by doing so, George Wickham will no longer be a threat to you and your family. I think your father would be pleased if you complied with my request.

Yours,
George Wickham

P.S. Please respond to me in care of Mrs. Younge, Edwards Street.

Darcy scarce knew how to respond. Despite his disgust and anger with Wickham, he still felt some vestige of responsibility due to his father’s regard for his godson. As well, the thought of removing Wickham as threat to Georgiana was attractive. He needed advice.

He quickly wrote a brief to note to his cousin and summoned Hodgkins, his butler. “Please have this delivered immediately to Colonel Fitzwilliam. I believe he is staying at _____ House at the moment. Have the man wait for a reply. Thank you.”

After Hodgkins left the room, Darcy began to consider how he might deal with this opportunity. First, he was definitely not giving Wickham another £2,000 – he would need some funds but not that much since it would likely be gamble away before the boat docked. No, any funds would have to be released when he arrived. Second, hostilities with the rebel colonies would make a voyage there quite difficult. Could he travel to the British colonies first and take passage from there? He thought his cousin might have a suggestion.

He would also need to have some assurances that Wickham would not return. He had bought some debts from Lambton. Perhaps he could acquire those he undoubtably left behind in Hertfordshire. Was his regiment still based there? Richard should be able to find out. The threat of debtor’s prison should dissuade Wickham from returning. As well, he apparently deserted the militia. Again Richard would know of possible charges.

Finally, he probably needed some contact in the new world to handle the transfer of funds and arrange passage from the British to the rebel colonies. He must talk to his solicitor on this also.

As disagreeable as it was, Darcy mused on his past with Wickham while awaiting word from his cousin. Hodgkins appeared an hour later and passed a note to Darcy which informed him that Fitzwilliam was not free until about eight in the evening.

At eight that evening his cousin knocked, showed himself into the study, headed to the sideboard for a brandy, took a sip and asked “What has Wickham done now?”

Darcy smiled and said “His final, I hope, piece of effrontery.” And he passed Fitzwilliam the letter. His cousin read it once and then again before turning to Darcy saying quite firmly “I hope you do not plan to reply to this! The man is an out-and-out scoundrel.”

Darcy shook his head and said quite deliberately “I admit that was my first reaction also. But stop and think, Richard, we might remove him as a threat to Georgiana once and for all. And, I am inclined to help him for the last time because of my father.”
“You are mad. I would let him stew in the stews of London. He could be a corpse before the year is out. I doubt he has any true friends left anywhere.”

"I fully comprehend your feelings but I am inclined to one last bit of charity.” Darcy replied and then began to describe to Fitzwilliam the plans he had sketched out in his mind while awaiting his arrival.

“Richard, I presume you know the probable penalty for desertion that he faces. If I can hold his debts and a military charge over his head, his should have little desire to return.”

“It galls me to help the bastard in any manner at all but if you must deal with him, this is as good an approach as I can see. The answer to your question is rather simple. He will face a court-martial and the punishment transportation – to Australia.”

Darcy nodded in acknowledgement. “I will see my solicitor tomorrow and begin the proceedings. This cannot be done too soon for my happiness.”

“By the way Darcy, I realize Bingley’s decision to quit Hertfordshire ruined your plans to approach Miss Bennet but have you given further thoughts to alternate tactics?”

“Not really, Richard. I have been rather busy with the harvest at Pemberley and since I was unable to effect a reconciliation between Bingley and her older sister, I doubt I would be received very favourably were I to call on her. In truth, my feelings have changed little and I fear that hers are also the same.”

“She might be visiting her friend in Hunsford again next spring.”

“Perhaps, although I would not expect her to want to visit Mrs. Collins at a time when she could expect that I would likely be visiting my aunt. Anyway, enough of this. Care for a game or two of billiards? I instructed Hodgkins to put a fresh bottle of brandy in the room and I need to win my guineas back from you. Honour demands it!”

"Just a final word about Miss Elizabeth. I do hope that you have not relinquished all hope of introducing yourself to her again. I know you have been greatly saddened by her refusal and I hope you know that you have my sympathy. As I said before, she is worth the winning and at some point, I think you should simply visit Hertfordshire and attempt to court her. Show her that you have taken her charges against to heart. Now enough about the lady, I have been practicing, Darcy and, as our aunt would say, I have become a true proficient!” With which the two men moved to the billiard room and a comfortable evening of billiards.
September 30 – Dark Horse Inn, London

George Wickham leaned his chair back against the and let his gaze wander out the grimy window of their second floor room. His thoughts were totally fixed on the prospects rendered possible by the letter that lay on the table beside him. If he gave any thought to the young girl dozing on the room’s bed, it was only as a small temporary impediment to the fulfillment of those prospects. Truthfully he thought very little of her at all. She kept his bed warm, provided some pleasure although even that was starting to pall given the inanity of her conversation and her whining. He considered the letter once more,

George Wickham,

I am prepared to assist you once more and for the last time. I will engage to the following: arrange and fund your passage to Halifax and hence to Boston in the United States; arrange for £900 to be released to you in Boston; provide you with £50 when you board ship to Halifax and an additional £50 when you board ship for Boston. Such funds are to cover your living expense in Halifax and Boston as necessary. I have every confidence that you will gamble these funds away but be that on your head.

I require from you only a list of your creditors in Meryton and such other locations as you have resided since we met in Meryton. This is to be sent to me directly. I await this list and your acceptance to make the arrangements necessary.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Wickham seated the chair firmly and, selecting a piece of paper, began to list the tradesmen that he believed he owed funds. Getting up from his chair, he opened his trunk and, sifting through the various papers, found those that were dunning him for payment. His movements had caused his roommate to wake. Hearing her stir, he quickly folded Darcy’s note and put it in his trunk. All too soon he heard her voice,

“What are you writing Georgie?”

“A note to Darcy, my love.”

“Mr. Darcy, why?”

“Darcy will be helping us. He has agreed to give me that living I was promised by his father. I am making arrangements now for us to move there in a couple of days.”

A squeal of delight issued from Lydia Bennet. Her first words were, “We shall be married then. Can we be married in Longbourn? We will have a special licence! Oh, I need wedding clothes. I must write mama. She will be overjoyed. Imagine, I will be the first to be married. What fun!”

“Gently my dear, gently. We will be married by special licence but it will have to be in Derbyshire and quite soon. We will not have time for wedding clothes before the wedding but you and your mother can arrange that afterwards, I am sure. I think it best to write to your family once we have arrived at our new home.”

Lydia walked over to stand behind Wickham and leaned against his back. He could feel her breasts against his shoulders and her hands running down his chest. His hand moved around her waist and
he pulled her into his lap. His hand stroked her thigh and moving up her over her hip, squeezed her breast firmly. Her head fell to his shoulder and she squirmed on his lap causing him to become quite uncomfortable. He abruptly moved his hand under her knees and stood with her in his arms. Moving to the bed, he dumped her in the middle and then grinned at her, saying, “Patience, my love, patience. I will tend to your needs when I have finished my letters.”

Ignoring her complaints, Wickham completed his list and wrote a note to Darcy accepting the terms. Lydia looked at him with anticipation but he shook his head.

“Not just yet, my love. I must post these immediately. I shall not be long and we have all night, do we not?”

Ignoring her pout, he was out the door quickly. He had arrangements to make and they were not such as he wanted Lydia to know.

October 7, 1812 – London

It was early in the morning when the hackney coach came to a stop at a side door to a three story building on ____ Street. Telling the driver to wait, Wickham escorted Lydia inside and greeted to proprietress, Mrs. James, who showed them to a room. Looking at Lydia, Wickham gave her a quick kiss and said, “Be patient a bit longer, my love. I must go to arrange our coach to take us to our new home. I will be back in two hours and we will be off. Mrs. James will take good care of you. You should rest now since we have a long drive ahead.”

Wickham hurried out the door, paying no attention to Lydia’s parting comments. Shutting the door behind him, he turned to Mrs. James and gave a small smile. “Give me a couple of hours before you break the news to her. I think she will do well by you. She is certainly enthusiastic enough though quite unskilled.”

“Skill we can teach, enthusiasm….not so much. Good-bye, George. I won’t ask to where you are bound.”

“Good, I will only say there will be a lot of water between us. Take care, Grace”

With that, Wickham walked out the door and boarded the hackney coach, which, in thirty minutes deposited him at Mrs. Younge’s boarding house on Edward Street. When Darcy’s coach drove up twenty minutes later, Wickham’s small trunk was quickly loaded on top. He entered the coach to find Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam seated across from him.

He was greeted by a cool “Hello George” from Darcy and a scowl from Fitzwilliam. Wickham was too pleased with himself to take offence and greeted them both quite cheerily.

“Darcy, Richard …..what a pleasant surprise. Here to see me off, I presume.”

“Here to see you get on the damn boat and the last of you, George.” Replied Fitzwilliam. “If I had had my preference, you would be courtmartialed and on your way to Australia.”

“Well, we don't always get what we want, now do we, Richard?”

Darcy spoke before Fitzwilliam could do so. In a deceptively mild voice, he said, “Richard is correct in this. We are here to make sure you get on the boat and leave. I have the £50 as agreed and will give you it when you are to board. As well, you should know that I have paid the creditors you listed and, when I include those debts I paid to creditors in Lambdon, the total amounts to nearly £4,000. Enough to put you in debtor’s prison for a very long time. As well, Richard has confirmed that an
order to arrest you for desertion has been issued. The penalty is transportation to Australia. If I hear of your returning to this country, I will make every effort to find you. Believe me on this, if you believe nothing else. You should never return, George. Never!”

The remainder of the drive to the docks was silent. As they drew up to where the ship was moored, Wickham got out of the coach followed by Darcy and Fitzwilliam. He walked towards the gangplank and, as he took his first step to board the ship, turned to both men and said “A final farewell then. Wish me luck amongst the savages.”

Darcy handed him two letters saying, ”Here are the names of the men you should contact in Halifax and Boston. And here is the £50 as agreed. Good-bye George.”

Wickham received a final nod from Fitzwilliam and continued up the gangplank until lost from sight. Darcy and Fitzwilliam strolled back to their coach, entered but gave no directions to depart. Wickham, from on board the ship, could see the coach waiting. An hour later, as the ship weighed anchor and began to move down the river, he watched the carriage slowly drive off. Inside the coach, Darcy turned to Fitzwilliam and said, “I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. He will not be missed.”

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At Mrs. James house, Lydia had dozed until about noon when she woke as the door opened. Her cry of “Georgie” was cut short when she saw Mrs. James enter the room caring a small tray with tea and a few biscuits. Mrs. James looked at her and calmly said,

“Not George Wickham, my girl. I have brought you something to eat. I suspect you have not eaten since breakfast. You eat and I will talk.”

Placing the tray on the table, she direct Lydia to a seat and placed another opposite her. She watched as Lydia began to eat with enthusiasm. She waited until Lydia had consumed almost all the biscuits and was savouring the tea. Finally she spoke.

“How old are you? Seventeen? Sixteen?”

“Sixteen”

“Are you with child?”

At Lydia’s puzzled look, she amended her question. “When did you last have your courses?”

Lydia thought for a moment or two and replied, “About three weeks ago.”

“Have you been sick in the mornings?”

“No”

Lydia’s puzzlement was obvious and Mrs. James only shook her head at such naivety.

“You are not with child then. Good.”

“I do not understand. Where is Georgie? He should be back to get me by now.”

“Girl, there are a couple of things that you must accept right now. The first is that George Wickham is not coming back for you. Not now. Not ever. If he promised marriage to you, he was lying. If you expected him to marry you, you are a fool.”
Mrs. James leaned back and observed the shock of her blunt words striking the young girl in front of her. Disbelief, anger, fear all chased each other across her face. Tears followed. And as she watched, she could hysteria taking control. She raised her hand and smacked her across the face. The shock silenced Lydia and she stared at the women with wide eyes and an open mouth.

“Be quiet and listen to me. You are a very foolish girl and you have placed yourself in a spot where there are few options open to you. I suggest you listen to me very carefully. I will not be repeating myself. First, do you have relatives in town here?”

"Yes, an aunt and uncle on Gracechurch Street."

“That is quite a distance from here – probably about several hours walk unless you have money for a hackney cab. Do you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You will have to decide if your relatives will take you in. Most families will send a girl like you away to distant relatives – out of sight, out of mind. You cannot expect to go back and live with your family as though nothing has happened.”

"Young lady, as I see things you have only three choices. The first is to walk out my front door and try to reach your aunt and uncle. You might be successful but I would not be surprised to see you lose your way and spend the night on the street. The second choice is to walk out my front door and try to make your way as best you can. I think you will find very quickly that, if you want to eat, you will have to sell the only thing you own – yourself. The men you encounter will care little for your welfare. They will use you, leave you and give you a pittance. Thieves abound and, if you are lucky, will leave you your life after they take what few coins you have. You will become very quickly intimate with disease and death. Truthfully I suspect that if you are unsuccessful in reaching your relatives, you will land in a similar condition. The third option is to stay here and work for me.”

“Work for you?”

“If you have not guessed, this is a brothel. I will feed and house you. In return, you will make yourself available to my customers. You will do for them what you did for Wickham except they will pay me and I will give you a portion. After a couple of years, you might be able to set yourself up as respectable. I will leave you alone for an hour to think. If you are still here when I return, I will assume that you plan to stay.”

Mrs. James stood and left the room, leaving Lydia alone once more. When she returned an hour later, the room was empty. Shaking her head, she returned downstairs. She had a business to run.

Lydia’s mind was to beset for rationale thought, unfortunately a concept with which she was quite unfamiliar. Accepting that her Georgie had left her, impossible to believe; selling her body, impossible to accept. Her only coherent thought was to reach the Gardiners and have them find George and have them marry. With little further thought, she gather her few possessions and hurried out of the house.

It is not the intent here to discuss those events which subsequently afflicted Lydia Bennet. Suffice it to say she did not reach her relatives on Gracechurch Street and the payment, for her wild and foolish behaviour, was heavy indeed. Mrs. James was, unfortunately, very accurate in her predictions.
Monday October 19, 1812 – London

Darcy walked up the stairs to the entrance of Colbert House. The entranceway sparkled with lamplight as the crowd slowly worked their way through and into the main hall. His pace was slowed by the crowd and his thoughts began to wander. He knew why he was here and it was not to find a wife, despite what others might think. His love for Elizabeth Bennet had not abated and he could not - would not - replace her with another in his heart.

When he had met Lord Colbert this afternoon, Colbert had invited him to the ball tonight. He was sure that a formal invitation had been received but was probably ignored. Darcy and Colbert had been at Cambridge together and Darcy knew Colbert's circumstances well enough to be certain that there was no ulterior motive behind the invitation, such as an unmarried sister. Not that the absence mattered a great deal since he, Darcy, would still face the usual procession of fathers or mothers or brothers all seeking to introduce a young, marriageable women supposedly accomplished and possessing a respectable dowry.

No, he was not here to find a wife but for another reason altogether. One of Elizabeth's charges against him was his apparent distain for those whose social status he considered inferior and a reluctance to engage with strangers. He, recognizing the truth of her criticism, was attempting to show more civility to strangers or in Elizabeth’s words – to take an illustration of their character before deciding they were someone with whom he might want to establish a connection. He recognized that, in the past, he had invariably acted with propriety but all too often his behaviour had lacked civility. He thought he had made some progress recently but it was a constant struggle to not fall back into old, ingrained habits.

He handed his cloak, gloves and hat to a footman and walked through the door and into the glittering throng ahead. Already he could see a few heads tracking his progress and felt his face settle into the mask he wore on such occasions - the Darcy Glower as Fitzwilliam called it. He laughed quietly at the thought and could feel his face muscles relax. That was the trick! If he could think of something amusing, he could assume a less threatening countenance. Surely there would be no shortage of amusement tonight. Elizabeth would see it everywhere if she were here tonight.

Sighting Colbert's familiar face off to his left, he began to work his way in that direction.

"Colbert, I decided to accept your invitation and here I am. A bit of a crush, is it not?"

"Ah Darcy, glad you decided to come. Planning to dance tonight?" Colbert joked. "Fortunately for you all my sisters are married."

Darcy smiled slightly "That is why I came. I knew you did not have a sister whose toes I would be injure if obliged to dance."

The two men continued to talk for a few more minutes before Colbert was claimed by his betrothed. His parting words were "Look out, the wolves have been circling and are now prepared to attack."

"I know, I have been watching them." Darcy's grimace only caused the other man to laugh as he walked away.

Darcy began to slowly circulate through the crowd, attempting to stay relaxed, looking for the occasional amusing scene and pausing every so often near a group of men who appeared to be
engaged in an enjoyable and interesting conversation. Surprisingly he did encounter two such groups during his wanderings and was, in both cases, able to introduce himself into the discussion. He was inevitably importuned during his wanderings by hopeful fathers and mothers and obliged several young ladies who seemed capable of carrying on an interesting conversation. Unfortunately, in each case, the young lady was reluctant to stray beyond the banalities. Questions about the theatre or books elicited the most trivial and circumspect responses. If there was a functioning intelligence underneath the lovely façade, it was most carefully repressed. It was disappointing but not unexpected. After each dance he returned his partner to her parents, smiled and moved on.

In the course of his wanderings he frequently recall his one dance with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Such a combination of pleasure and pain and happiness and anger. His conduct he could only view with abhorrence. So much pride and arrogance. Would it have taken a great deal on his part to have explained even a small part of Wickham's infamy? Could he not have canvassed the opinion Miss Elizabeth Bennet as to the feelings of her beloved sister? He could only remind himself that recriminations were useless now.

When it came time for supper, he noticed an empty place beside a gentleman he had observed in one of the more interesting discussions. The man dressed, spoke and behaved in a most gentlemanly manner and although rather quiet, he was not reluctant to contribute to the conversation. Darcy introduced himself; and, mentioned that he had observed him in one of the conversations he attended. He learned that the man's name was Cyril Johnson and that he was a cloth manufacturer. Darcy was quite surprised, although he tried to hide it, Darcy’s reaction did not escape Mr. Johnson's notice. He smiled slightly obviously expecting Darcy to withdraw from a discussion with someone from 'trade'. Johnson himself was surprised when Darcy continued the discussion and for the next half hour the two men continued to discuss the changes that were beginning to occur in cloth manufacture, the danger of the Luddite movement and other areas of mutual interest. During their conversation Darcy could see that Johnson’s attention was occasionally diverted to the woman sitting on his other side with whom he spoke quietly.

As Darcy made to rise from the table, Johnson also rose as did the women. Turning to Darcy, he asked “Mr. Darcy may I presume to introduce my wife to your acquaintance?”

“I would be very pleased to make her acquaintance.”

“Mr. Darcy, may I introduce my wife Amelia Johnson, Amelia this Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Derbyshire with whom I have had a most interesting discussion tonight.”

Mrs. Johnson curtsied saying “I am most pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy bowed and with a small smile, replied “Mrs. Johnson, the pleasure is mine. I apologize for taking so much of your husband’s attention tonight. It was really quite ill-mannered of me.”

“I would by no means suspend any pleasure of my husband, Mr. Darcy. I could see he was quite engaged in your talks and truly it was a pleasure to see his enjoyment.” She laughed at her husband “He is a reluctant participant at balls and does so to please me because I enjoy them so.”

Darcy could see the obvious affection between the couple and was content to continue to talk with them as they returned to the ball room. They discussed the theatre and plays that each had attended and certain art and museum exhibitions. The more they talked, the more impressed Darcy was by the Johnsons who were quite genteel, intelligent and sensible. This was a connection he was loath to lose and so he asked, “I am very pleased to have made your acquaintance and was wondering whether you could come to tea Wednesday or Thursday next, at your convenience.”

He could see both were very surprised at the invitation and Mr. Johnson looked at his wife and said,
“I believe we have no prior commitments on Wednesday.” At her slight nod, he continued, “We would be most pleased to accept your invitation.”

They agreed upon a time for the visit, after which the parties separated, Darcy to return home and Mr. Johnson to escort his wife to the dance floor. Both parties were equally pleased with the outcome of the evening. Both had acquired a new and pleasant acquaintance and one that was from a social sphere to which each wished to establish a connection. Darcy had the additional pleasure of seeing success from his efforts to make himself worthy of a woman such as Elizabeth Bennet.

Thursday, November 12, 1812 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Elizabeth could tell her Aunt Phillips had momentous news of some sort just by the way her hand was waving the handkerchief. The last time she had seen it move that spasmodically, Mrs. Phillips had chanced upon Lydia kissing Lieutenant Denny in the Phillips garden.

“Lizzy you will never guess! Oh, what news. Wait till your mother hears. Netherfield has been let.”

Elizabeth was not altogether sure why this was worthy of such excitement but she did follow her aunt into the drawing room to visit her mother. Mrs. Bennet’s immediate thought was to inquire with great excitement whether Mr. Bingley was taking the lease. Upon learning that it was not Mr. Bingley but a Mr. Thompson who was to be the new tenant, she asked the most important question. Was he married? Upon learning that he was, in fact, a man of more than 50 years with a wife (most unfortunate indeed), her interest subsided until she thought of the next important question. Did he have any unmarried sons? Mrs. Phillips could only impart that he was thought to have several sons plus a daughter. The marital status of his children she did not know.

Mr. Thompson was to take up residence at the beginning of December. He apparently was a wealthy London merchant and was planning to take up permanent residence in Netherfield. Mrs. Phillips could provide no additional information about the Thompsons but Mr. Phillips intended to write their brother, Mr. Gardiner, in the hope that he could provide more knowledge of the newcomer.

As Elizabeth watched this discussion take place, she was struck by how subdued her mother was in manner and voice. She could see the lack of society was wearing on her greatly. Her company limited to her sister and occasionally, Lady Lucas who, she suspected, only visited because of the connection to their cousin, Mr. Collins. That Lady Lucas also had cause to gloat because it was not one of her daughters that had been ruined, neither Elizabeth nor Mrs. Bennet doubted. No one was receiving her calls, neither were any of her daughters being courted or even called upon.

Mrs Bennet was not of a temperament to be satisfied with her own company; her favourite daughter was still missing and, even if found, could not be admitted back into the family. She had no interest in books or magazines unless they were to do with fashion and dresses; and what was the point of new gowns if there was no opportunity for her daughters to display them. Without company, dining became a mere family event and of little interest. If her nerves were somewhat less frazzled, she still found ample cause to be unhappy at the way she was treated by one and all. No one apparently had any sympathy for her. While Elizabeth was the main recipient of the complaints, even Jane, who hitherto had been spared much of her mother’s criticism, could not escape her attention. The loss of Mr. Bingley, the lack of suitors and even Jane's serenity seemed to frazzle Mrs. Bennet’s nerves. A married Mr. Thompson was no replacement for a Mr. Bingley with five thousand a year - unless he had unmarried sons.

After listening to her mother’s profusions and nervous twitterings for a while, Elizabeth invited Jane to walk towards Netherfield. Getting their bonnets and warmest pelisses, they set off. Elizabeth
mentioned the news about Netherfield but since she had few of the particulars, it could not occupy their attention for long. Her main concern was the lack of eligible suitors in their area. She opened the conversation as follows, “Jane there is a matter which is causing me some concern for both of us in particular. I do not know if you have thought about it but it seems to me that, even if Lydia had not eloped, you and I would not make the acquaintance of many eligible suitors. You are now three and twenty and I am one and twenty and the only eligible new suitor we have encountered in the last year was Mr. Bingley and he has left. Have you thought on this?”

Jane slowed her pace almost to a stop and, after thinking about Elizabeth’s comment, shook her head saying, "No, I have not. And now that you have mentioned it, I cannot but agree. Even if we were socializing as in the past, I cannot think of anyone who has attracted my interest. Our local society does not admit of any men of marriageable age who would, for us, be desirable suitors. It has been such for several years now. Oh Lizzy, what are we to do?"

“I think we may have to speak to our Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. They will be visiting for Christmas and we must discuss this with them. I do not know if they can help but I can think of no other plan.”

They walked on in silence for several minutes until finally Elizabeth said, “it may happen that the new tenant at Netherfield has a marriageable son or even two of them; however, I am not sure that will be of help to us. Would they admit our society I wonder?”

Jane's face had become more pensive as she considered the dilemma that Elizabeth had raised. “If nothing changes, or even if in a year or two, we are admitted back into society, we may be forced to accept a tradesman or farmer in order to secure a husband.”

Elizabeth just shook her head and sighed, “Well, as dismal as that sounds, it is probably better than being married to Mr. Collins. I do not have the temperament to live with him and endure the condescension of Lady Catherine DeBourgh. In all truthfulness, Jane, I am not sure but that I would prefer a life as a governess or companion than marriage to a man I could neither respect or esteem. The cost of security can be too high.”

Jane and Elizabeth walked on quietly for some minutes, both seemingly lost in thought. Surprisingly it was Jane who broke the silence, "Lizzy, are you as unhappy at home as I?"

Elizabeth gazed at her sister in some astonishment, "Truly Jane, you must have reached the end of your patience to admit to be only unhappy. "

"I weary of our mother's constant complaints. They never change. Mr. Bingley has been gone for a year now and still she mourns his loss. She is now the only one who does so. It no longer pains me to hear his name, instead I find myself becoming cross and irritable. It tries my patience greatly. I know we are duty bound to honour our parents but I am being tried greatly to maintain my decorum in the face of her almost daily admonishments. I now understand how you must feel when she chastizes you for rejecting Mr. Collins. I do not regret the loss of Mr. Bingley, I only regret being reminded of it."

"Jane, Jane. I do not think I have ever heard such from you. "

"Lizzy, I know I should be ashamed of such feelings, but I cannot right now."

"Perhaps I should attend our mother for some time to give you time to repair your feelings. You can handle the household accounts and tenant visits. I am sure, with Kitty's assistance, that I can keep our mother happy for a fortnight. I will almost assuredly need relief myself by then. "

As Longbourn came in sight once more, the sisters could not view their home with any satisfaction.
or pleasure.
Thursday, November 12, 1812 – Darcy House, London

Darcy and Georgiana were enjoying a quiet breakfast when Hodgkins brought in the post and placed it beside Darcy. “Ah! A letter from Bingley. Most unusual, I can read the address.”

Opening the letter, Darcy read with interest,

Greetings Darcy,

As you can readily observe, I took your advice and now employ a secretary to handle my correspondence. I accept your thanks in advance for sparing you the obvious pain in attempting to read my letters. I hired a young fellow from Yorkshire who had attended Oxford. He has been quite valuable indeed and has proven his worth in dealing with the volume of correspondence that grows by the day.

I have settled myself here in York quite comfortably. At the present time I am living with my uncle but I have purchased a house. Some repairs and improvements are required, but should be completed by the end of the year.

I have dined out several times and my uncle has hosted two dinners on my behalf. I am quite liking society here, it reminds me very much of Hertfordshire; very lively. I attended a small ball recently and it was quite enjoyable. I find myself inclined to enjoy the dances, but less inclined to attach myself to any particular lady. My uncle suggested that I only ever dance a single set with any lady so as to limit any suggestion of partiality. I have done just that.

I must return to London to make such arrangements as are necessary to sell the house and have my furniture carted to York. I hope to have that completed early in the New Year. I will enjoy Christmas with my relatives here in York and travel to London in the New Year, arriving there around January 9. I imagine you will enjoy Christmas at Pemberley. Could I break my journey and visit you and Georgiana for a day or even two? I would hope to arrive on the evening of January 5 and depart on January 7. As well, I would like to take further advantage of your kindness and stay at your house while in London. I cannot be too sure how long I will visit but a fortnight should suffice to deal with all problems.

Sincerely,

Charles Bingley

Passing it over to Georgiana, Darcy commented, “I look forward to seeing Bingley after Christmas. I was thinking of inviting him to join us, but he seems quite pleased with being amongst his family in York.”

Georgiana read the letter and looked at her brother with surprise written on her face. "Is Mr. Bingley separating himself from his sisters? I cannot altogether blame him, but I am surprised."

“It is as much a case of them separating from him, I believe. Bingley has decided to move back to York where his father built his business. His uncles remain involved in the company and Bingley has decided he needs to do likewise. His sisters, however, have a strong desire to partake of London society. If they were to behave in York as they did while in Hertfordshire, Bingley would not be served well. I do believe they will not find London society as welcoming as it was when Bingley was here. I did tell Bingley that I would not accept his sisters using my name to acquire admittance to
“I am looking forward to returning to Pemberley for Christmas. Will we have guests?”

“I have invited Richard and the Matlocks for the season. They will stay about a fortnight. “

Georgiana looked pensive and seemed about to speak. After several attempts she finally blurted, “Will I be expected to come ‘out’ next spring?”

Somewhat surprised, Darcy replied, “Your Aunt Eleanor and I discussed this recently. You will not turn seventeen until next July and we both felt that it would not hurt you to wait another year; however, we will be in London for part of the season. I plan to attend a number of balls with you although you will only be allowed to dance with family. You will also be attending some dinners. Our purpose is to let you become familiar and comfortable with such events for when you are ‘out’ the next year.”

“Thank you, Brother, thank you. I know it is silly but I simply do not feel ready.”

“I think your aunt and I realized that; and, since there is no real urgency, we decided to wait a year. Now, to change the topic, I plan for us to leave for Pemberley on Wednesday next. I will write to Mrs. Reynolds today to expect us on November 22. Any last minute shopping, like my Christmas present should be done soon.” Darcy smiled as he left the room and then stuck his head back in the door, “And yours has already been bought!”

Georgiana simply smiled in response and quietly finished her meal. Her French tutor was not expected for another hour so she moved to her sitting room to read. Once settled with her book, she found that the pages held little interest. Her thoughts veered to the dinner that her brother had hosted last night. It had been an extremely unusual, albeit interesting, dinner. Her brother had invited her cousin, Lady Frances Monteith, to act as hostess. Lady Frances was the younger sister of her cousin, Richard Fitzwilliam. Her husband Viscount Henry Monteith attended, as did Richard.

It was a small party since the only others present were two couples, both in trade, that her brother had met recently. She had previously made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson when they were invited to tea and had enjoyed their company. She found Mrs. Johnson to be a very amiable and sensible lady and had greatly enjoyed their discussions of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. The other couple, Mr. and Mrs. Tailor, were not previously known to her but, over the course of the evening, she found them to be enjoyable company also. They had shown an obvious knowledge and appreciation for music, particularly opera, and had discussed several operas with which she was not familiar and had encouraged her to learn the music scores.

When the gentlemen separated for their port and cigars, Lady Frances was quite comfortable directing the conversation. Georgiana knew that it was the ability of Lady Frances to mingle comfortably with people from trade that had induced her brother to ask her to be hostess for that occasion. In most circumstances he would have asked Aunt Eleanor but she tended to be less welcoming to such company. Georgiana was not insensible to the fact that the other ladies made a general, but not too overt, effort to include her in their conversation.

However, it was the behaviour her brother that truly interested her. She had said little but the changes she observed over the past few months could not be ignored. She had no difficulty in determining the cause for the change. A young lady by the name of Miss Elizabeth Bennet had forced her brother to change, and for the better in Georgiana’s opinion.

Her thoughts drifted to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She had not, of course, ever met the lady but her discussion about her with her brother remained fresh in her mind. She could recall that conversation
at will. It had begun in her sitting room after dinner last July. Her brother had invited himself in; dismissed Mrs. Annesley, and then sat silently for several minutes clearly trying to gauge how best to open the subject. Finally, with a rather forced calmness, he began,

“Georgie, I know you have wondered as to the reason for my distress or melancholy over the past few months. I would have you know that you are in no way responsible for it. I cannot, will not, provide you with all of the particulars and you must be satisfied with what I can impart.”

“While visiting Mr. Bingley at his estate in Hertfordshire last year, I met a young lady – Miss Elizabeth Bennet – to whom I was almost immediately drawn. She was the second eldest of a gentleman’s family with four other sisters and no brothers. The estate was entailed away and the mother was desperate to marry off her daughters and very obvious in her endeavours. For a number of reasons, pertaining to her status compared to ours and what I perceived to be major improprieties in the behaviour of her family - apart from herself and her elder sister. I made every effort to disguise my interest since I did not want to raise expectations that I was not prepared to meet.”

“I left Hertfordshire sooner than planned and a major reason was to avoid Miss Bennet’s society. I found, however, that leaving Hertfordshire did not remove her from my thoughts and she became a constant and most disturbing presence in them.”

Georgiana could not help but exclaim, “Brother, I have never heard you speak so of a young lady!”

"Yes, well I have not previously, or since, met her equal in our society. Anyway, this torment continued and then I travelled to Kent with Richard to visit our Aunt Catherine. She was there! She was visiting her friend who had recently married our Aunt’s parson, a Mr. Collins. Richard visited the parsonage almost daily. He enjoyed Miss Bennet’s society although they both realized that an attachment could not be formed – she had no dowry, you see. The party at the parsonage was invited to dine at Rosings by Aunt Catherine several times during the course of my visit. It quickly became clear to me that my feelings for Miss Bennet had not abated. I decided to court her and so joined her on several of her daily walks.”

Georgiana's face showed some confusion. Rather tentatively, she asked, “I know there has been no engagement announced, and yet I know you to be the best of brothers. What ….?”

Darcy grimaced. “I proposed, Georgie, and simply put, it was a disaster and she refused me.”

He leaned back in his chair with his head resting on the back, eyes closed and said, “It was a disaster, Georgie. A disaster! I had not only misread her affections – she had taken a rather strong dislike to me - but I also insulted her grievously in the course of my offer of marriage. She not only rejected me quite firmly but told me why she did so. Needless to say, I was quite affronted.”

“Brother, I do not understand, how could she dislike you so?”

“There were a number of reasons mostly of my own making. I cannot go into the particulars but I managed to insult her, her family, her neighbours and friends by my behaviour and actions. She called me arrogant, disdainful and conceited, and, in truth, I cannot now refute those charges. That I actively separated her elder sister from a most eligible suitor through my mistaken understanding of her sister’s feelings only made the situation worse. Miss Elizabeth loves her sister dearly.”

“I cannot imagine any young lady rejecting you no matter the cause.”

“Miss. Elizabeth rejected a man she found wanting, not Mr. Darcy, Master of Pemberley.”

Darcy was pensive for several heartbeats and then added, “You would have liked her a great deal.”
“What was she like, Brother?”

“She was lovely; her face came alive with laughter when she was happy. She was intelligent with a wit that was exercised on me several times and could be quite impertinent on occasion though never maliciously so. She loved to read, was never happier than when out walking – she thought nothing of walking for hours. She once walked three miles, though the roads were muddy, to nurse her elder sister.” He thought a bit and mused, “She was fiercely loyal to, and protective of, family and friends, and delighted in the foibles of her neighbours. She played the piano and sang with great emotion and feelings and, even if her skills were not of the same calibre as yours, I found nothing wanting in her performance - I rarely heard anyone play who gave me greater pleasure.”

“Would she have liked me?”

“I think she would have loved you very much. Everyone who knows your sweet nature could not help but love you Georgie. You are quite similar in nature to her elder sister, Miss Jane Bennet whom she loves dearly.”

“Brother, will you meet her again?”

“I hope to, but I do not know how to do so. We parted on such a hurtful basis that I fear to approach her directly. The only communication we have had since the night I made the offer, was a letter I gave her the following day, it was an attempt to explain my actions and while I can hope that it has redeemed me in her eyes, I cannot be confident that her opinions have improved. I have not given up hope but how to introduce myself to her once again is a question for which I have no answers.”

Darcy had then left Georgiana with her own thoughts.

Over the course of the past months, Georgiana had conceived and discarded several plans to connect Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her brother. She had thought of writing her a letter and even gone so far as to put pen to paper but when it came time to post the letter, she realized she did not know Miss Bennet’s address. For the same reason, her thoughts of visiting Miss Bennet were impossible to effect. She knew with a certainty that her brother would object strongly to any such interference, no matter how well-meaning; and the impropriety of writing to a young lady, to whom she had not been introduced, was too severe to contemplate.

“It seems like a hopeless case to me” she grumbled, “quite hopeless.”

Her thoughts were disturbed by a knock on the door. Mrs. Annesley had come to remind her that her lessons were to begin shortly. Together they moved to the music room for the lesson.
Wednesday, December 23, 1812 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The Gardiners had arrived the previous day, their children bursting out of the carriage to greet their favourite cousins. The enthusiasm, pent up for hours travelling from London, could hardly be repressed. Their cousins were equally glad to see them and delighted in playing with, reading and teasing them. It was a welcome change and spirits at Longbourn seemed to rise with the sound of children’s voices and laughter. There was little time for anything other than to enjoy each other’s company.

Mrs. Gardiner had spent the morning with Mrs. Bennet, listening to her complaints, attempting to temper her moods and distracting her with talk of London, fashions and such other topics as would interest her sister. No mention was made of Lydia by either woman. The new tenant at Netherfield was of interest to both ladies. Mrs. Bennet’s interest, of course, was tempered by the realization that while the gentleman concerned had two sons, both were married.

“The eldest son, Sister, will live at Netherfield with his parents and take on the management of the estate, while the younger son will remain in London and operate his father’s business. I convinced Mr. Bennet to make a call on them a fortnight ago but they have yet to call on us. Mr. Bingley did not serve us so!”

“Mr. Thompson is not of our acquaintance. Mr. Gardiner did make some investigations amongst his business friends but was unable to determine much more than Mr. Thompson is a very respectable man with a sizeable fortune. He appears to want to establish his family as gentlemen.”

With this Mrs. Bennet was required to be satisfied and, although her brother had gleaned more information, it was of such a nature that neither he nor his wife wished to make it more generally known. The particulars of his business and income were a matter for Mr. Thompson to disclose, should he desire to do so.

Mrs. Gardiner sought out her two favourite nieces and invited them to her room to talk. Addressing Elizabeth, she asked, “Lizzy, you last letter indicated that you and Jane wanted to talk to Mr. Gardiner and myself. My husband is with your father in the library at the moment and will likely stay there until dinner. I think attempting to bring him into the discussion now would attract more attention than you might wish. Is this not so?”

The two girls exchanged glances and both nodded in response. As usual, Elizabeth took the initiative to speak for both, “Aunt, it is difficult for Jane and me to bring this problem to you. It seems disloyal to our parents but we know not what else to do. They appear, to us, to be uninterested or incapable of resolving our problems.”

“Lizzy, Jane … you know you are as dear to us as our own children. I have suspected, from your letters, that the situation here has become very wearisome. Knowing your father and mother as we do, Mr. Gardiner and I are not surprised at your concern over the loss of society.”

Jane burst out, “It is not just the loss of society, Aunt. Our mother’s repetition of the same complaints, every day has worn on even my feelings.”

Elizabeth laughed, “I have begun to worry that Jane will take to her bed with flutterings and spasms.” She paused and continued, “It has come to the point where I can barely control my own temper when attending her. And, do you know the worst thing?” She shook her head and looked at
her aunt, "I have not visited my father’s library to read with him in weeks. I cannot bear to join him in his retreat from our lives.”

Mrs. Gardiner sighed, “I did not realize it had gotten so bad that two of the most level-headed young women I know are so very distressed.”

Elizabeth made a quick glance at Jane and continued, “There is more, Aunt. With Lydia’s disgrace, Jane and I are not likely to find men who would be respectable husbands. Truthfully, we both realized that our prospects were poor even before that occurred. We know it would be a great imposition, but would it be possible for Jane and me, or even just one of us, to move to London with you when you return?”

Mrs. Gardiner could feel the pressure of her nieces’ gaze. She wondered how long they could hold their breath and waited another moment or two before smiling, “It may amaze you both, but your uncle and I had discussed this very possibility before we left London. We knew that your situation was difficult although we had not believed it to be as bad as you have related.” She laughed at their collective sigh of relief, saying “We would be delighted to have you come and live with us. I must caution you that our social life, even during the peak of the ‘season’ is not extensive. We attend balls only rarely and many of our dinners involve your uncle’s business connections.”

“Aunt, we would welcome almost any society,” said Jane.

“Well, we can do better than that I believe. For instance, there is a New Year’s Day ball Mr. Gardiner and I always attend. You will join us for that. It is not, of course, one which society’s first circle attends, but it is lively and the people are both pleasant and genteel. You will enjoy it and I doubt that you sit out a single dance.”

“It sounds lovely, Aunt. Thank you.”

“We plan to return to London in the morning of December 27, so we have some planning to do. You both need to see to your gowns since I doubt there will be time to have new ones made. However, your uncle and I will talk to your father about funds to buy some new morning dresses and evening gowns. If you are going hunting for suitors, your weapons need to be sharpened.”

This elicited a laugh from both girls and, with their spirits and hearts much lighter, gave themselves over to planning for their stay in London.

That night the Gardiners met with Mr. Bennet after dinner to discuss their plans and obtain his consent to the move. He was reluctant to approve the loss of both daughters but was not insensible to their problems. He provided sufficient funds – to be supplemented by Mr. Gardiner as necessary - for both Jane and Elizabeth to improve their wardrobe and, most importantly, agreed to postpone informing Mrs. Bennet of the loss of two daughters until after Christmas.

With this prospect ahead of them, and the company of such valued relatives as the Gardiners, both Jane and Elizabeth were able to enjoy the season. If the company was more limited in numbers, there was no diminution in conversation, camaraderie and good spirits.
Chapter 12

Friday January 1, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

The maid pinned a final strand of hair in place, stepped back and ran a considering eye over the lady sitting facing the mirror. “There, Miss Jane, I think you are ready.”

“Thank you, Sally. You have done a wonderful job with my hair, as usual.”

Jane rose from her seat and looked at her sister sitting on the bed, “Time to put on our dresses.”

Elizabeth and Sally carefully lifted the ball gown over Jane’s head and carefully lowered it so as to avoid disturbing her hair. Elizabeth waited patiently while Sally buttoned the back of the gown and was then similarly assisted by Jane and Sally into her gown. The two young women looked at each other with satisfaction.

“I think we look very good indeed, Jane. And while are gowns are not new, they are new to the people we will meet tonight.”

A knock on the door signalled the presence of their Aunt Madeline. “You both look very beautiful. Your Uncle will be bursting with pride when he enters the ball room tonight.”

Jane blushed slightly at the compliment, “I think he will be equally proud of you, Aunt. I have never seen you look more lovely!”

“Thank you. I think we should join him downstairs since I believe the carriage is waiting.”

Mr. Gardiner was waiting at the bottom of the stairs and looked up as the three ladies began their descent. “I am speechless. I have never seen so much beauty in this house.” And taking his wife’s and, he whispered “you are even more beautiful tonight than ever.” His wife smiled since they shared a small secret - she was carrying their fifth child.

Looking at his nieces, he could only smile and say, “I suspect that neither of you will sit for any dances tonight, unless you choose to do so.”

Servants bustled about helping the ladies into their outerwear and a beaming Mr. Gardiner assisted them into his carriage. The drive to the location of the ball took very little time; however, they were required to wait a quarter hour behind a line of other carriages before reaching the entrance to the building.

The Gardiners took great satisfaction at the look of pleasure on the faces of their nieces. Elizabeth smiled at her aunt and exclaimed, “I did not realize till now how much I have missed being with people and making new acquaintances. Even if I dance but one set, I will be happy to enjoy such company.”

Mrs. Gardiner laughed, “Then you can expect twice the pleasure, Lizzy. You will be dancing most of the evening and making new acquaintance.”

Mr. Gardiner entered the ball room with Mrs. Gardiner on his army and his nieces following. The host for the evening approached. “Mr. Gardiner, I am pleased to to see you and your lovely wife tonight. May I be introduced to the two lovely ladies that accompany you?”

“Greetings, Mr. Hapgood. May I make you known to my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss
Elizabeth Bennet. Jane, Elizabeth this is Thomas Hapgood, our host for the evening.”

“Mrs Gardiner, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth I am pleased to welcome you here tonight. Mr. Gardiner, I know I will be besieged for introductions to your lovely nieces. It will afford me a great deal of pleasure to do so.”

Murmuring their appreciation, the Gardiner party moved further into the room and approached a small group comprised of several couples all of whom were well known to the Gardiners. After introductions were performed, conversation resumed with the Bennet sisters being welcomed into the easy discourse. The manners and talk of their companions were natural and easy but it also became quite apparent to both Jane and Elizabeth that behaviour was much more proper and restrained than at a Hertfordshire assembly. They found this to be rather comforting.

They could hear the musicians beginning to warm up their instruments and that dancing would soon start. Both Jane and Elizabeth were quickly surrounded by gentlemen and found their dance cards filled for the first three sets and were led onto the floor. Their enjoyment in the dance was evident to all, smiles and happy converse with their partners animated their faces and drew the eyes of many of the men. Jane’s cool beauty was augmented tonight by the very great pleasure she found in the admiration that was gifted her and her countenance displayed that pleasure clearly.

When the third set ended, Jane was returned by her partner to the Gardiners and then joined by Elizabeth. They barely had time for a refreshing drink when several other gentlemen approached seeking an introduction and a dance. As they waited for the next dance to begin, Jane noticed a gentleman approach. He was introduced as Captain Amos Stovall and he turned to Jane, bowed and asked, “Miss Bennet, may I have the pleasure of the supper set?”

“I have that set free, sir. I will be glad to give it to you.” Captain Stovall bowed again and expressed his appreciation. He then asked Elizabeth for a set, a request which that lady was happy to satisfy. He remained to talk with the Gardiners after both Elizabeth and Jane were claimed by their respective partners. A somewhat gentle exchange of information between the Gardiners and captain Stovall then took place. Neither he nor the Gardiners were unaware of the significance of his request for the supper dance with Jane. It would afford him the opportunity to sit and talk with her after the dance was completed.

Mr. Gardiner learned that Captain Stovall was a naval post captain whose ship, the frigate Amberon, was currently laid up in Portsmouth undergoing major repairs and refit. He had, in fact, just returned to England after more than five years at sea; and, had amassed a considerable fortune in prize money. He was not a particularly handsome man, but he was strongly built and not ill-featured in any way. His was rather reserved but plain spoken and Mrs. Gardiner thought she detected a trace of a Yorkshire accent.

Queried on this, the Captain was quick to compliment her. “You have it very right, Madam. I left Yorkshire some twenty years ago as a lad of twelve to take a position as a midshipman. I have been back but rarely since. Twenty years at sea have rubbed away much of my Yorkshire speech.”

“What is your family like in Yorkshire, sir?”

“Aye, I do. My mother and sister live in York, although they may move since my sister wed last month and her husband is to have a new living in the area.”

Captain Stovall was required to interrupt his conversation to lead Elizabeth to the next dance set which both enjoyed. Elizabeth had observed her partner’s discussion with the Gardiners and aware of the significance of his request for the supper set, set out to sketch her partner’s character as best she could. It became quite obvious that the Captain was an intelligent man and, if the quantity of
books available to him was limited by circumstance, his understanding and appreciation of them was not. She returned to her uncle and aunt quite satisfied to watch the Captain lead Jane in the supper dance. Her attention to them was interrupted when she was requested to also dance. Once on the floor, she could not easily follow her sister’s progress and had to abandon her efforts at sketching his character for the time being.

As she danced, memories of her last ball at Netherfield when she danced with Mr. Darcy flooded her thoughts. He had not really intruded to any great extent since last summer. She started to examine her feelings about him but suddenly realized that her partner was speaking to her and she had not the slightest idea of what he had said. “Oh, dear!” She thought, “I better tend to the dance and think of Mr. Darcy later.” She smiled at her partner, murmured something unintelligible and moved on in the dance.

Jane and the Captain were quiet for the first few minutes of the dance. Jane thought to initiate some conversation, “We must have some conversation, Sir. You were introduced to me as Captain Stovall, yet I do not see a uniform.”

Conversation then proceeded by way of stops and starts as the dance first separated them and then brought them back together time and again.

“How long have you been at sea, Captain?”

“I don’t suppose that I have been ashore for more than a year combined since I was taken on as a midshipman twenty years ago. I expect to be ashore now for about five or six months while my ship is repaired.”

“Was it badly damaged in battle, Captain?”

“While it did have some damage from fighting, a lot of the work was simply the result of five years at sea with no chance to refit.”

“I understand. On my father’s estate, we must keep up with repairs to fences and buildings else they fall into disrepair and need to be rebuilt altogether.”

The captain suddenly laughed, “True, Miss Bennet, but at least you did not have to worry about the bottom of your boat falling apart. I was praying every day until we reached the dock, I can assure you. Five years at sea can do monstrous things to a ship’s hull.”

“Captain, I am sure you have never seen the destruction that a dozen pigs can create if a fence is not maintained. Very ugly, Sir, very ugly.”

Conversation continued to be easy and comfortable for the remainder of the dance. Captain Stovall then led Jane to the supper table and, after sitting her, went to get them both a plate of food returning to sit beside her. Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner seated themselves across the table from Jane while Mr. Gardiner supplied them and himself with food. It was clear to all three that the Captain and Jane were
enjoying their conversation. If the Captain was not as animated as Mr. Bingley, his countenance did display a clear pleasure with the encounter. It comforted Elizabeth greatly to see the happiness on her sister’s face. She had not seen Jane as happy since the Netherfield ball.

Under some gentle prompting from Mr. Gardiner, the Captain engaged them all with stories of his time at sea, talking about the ports and places he had visited. While much of his recent experience was in the West Indies, he had, as a midshipman, sailed in the Mediterranean and visited places that Jane and Elizabeth had only read about. Jane found that time passed all too quickly, and soon it was necessary to return to the dance floor with a new partner.

Before they separated, the Captain turned to Jane and with, some hesitation, asked,”Miss Bennet, may I call on you tomorrow?”

If Jane was surprised, it did not show on her countenance. Rather she smiled and replied, “That would give me a great deal of pleasure, Sir. I would be pleased to receive you.”

“I will call at two in the afternoon, then. Good day, Miss Bennet.” The Captain then took his leave of the Gardiners and Elizabeth.

The remainder of the evening passed very enjoyably for all; however, Mr. Gardiner was not disposed to tarry until the last dance, given his wife’s condition, and they departed when Mrs. Gardiner started to feel fatigued. Neither Jane nor Elizabeth were unhappy to leave and could view the evening’s entertainment with considerable pleasure.

Later, as the sisters readied for bed, they considered the information that the Gardiners were able to impart about Captain Stovall. Elizabeth said, “I quite like him. He seems a sensible man and, if he is not overly talkative, what he does say has much value. He may not be overly attractive but I like his countenance.”

Jane looked at her sister, “Lizzy, I thought him quite attractive. I cannot remember when I have enjoyed talking to a gentleman more.”

“It is good that he plans to call tomorrow then.” laughed Elizabeth.

Jane became a little pensive, “Shall I tell him about Lydia, do you think?”

“No Jane, I would not. At least, not yet. We should talk to our aunt about this, but I see no point in telling about Lydia until you know if his intentions are serious. Although I admit to have rarely seen a clearer interest by a gentleman.”

Jane took comfort from these words and both retired to their beds and, while Jane fell quickly asleep, Elizabeth found her thoughts troubled by a vision of Mr. Darcy. “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” Much of his proposal had now been forgotten, these words remained. She was no longer insensible of the meaning of the many glances she had received from him – admiration, not disdain, had been their content - nor could she deny his handsomeness of person nor ignore his worth as a brother and manager of his estate. When she considered all the other signs of his regard that she had misunderstood, she could feel the mortification of her truly magnificent misjudgement. She still could not regret her refusal but she did regret the loss of an opportunity to understand him better. She knew she could not anticipate ever meeting him again. Their social circles were too different to allow that possibility; she would not think of him any more, truly she would not.
Chapter 13

Saturday, January 2, 1813 - Gracechurch Street, London

Captain Stovall arrived at the Gardiner front door at precisely two in the afternoon. If he was disconcerted by the presence of two other gentlemen callers, there was no evidence of such on his countenance as he paused in the doorway. Quickly advancing into the room, he paid his respects to Mrs. Gardiner and Jane and Elizabeth and acknowledged the introduction to the other gentlemen with a short bow. Elizabeth removed a work basket containing her embroidery materials from a chair next to Jane and Captain Stovall was not slow to occupy it. His back to the rest of the room, he acknowledged the manoeuvre with a small smile at Elizabeth.

After asking after their health and inquiring whether they had recovered from the rigours of the ball, the conversation moved on to a discussion of the theatre plays currently being performed. Stovall was quiet throughout the discussion, admitting that, due to his service at sea, he had never seen a play actually acted out. He had read a number of Shakespeare's plays while at sea but had never been ashore at a time and location to visit a theatre. He indicated that he planned to do so while in London.

After a short time, the other gentlemen departed declaring their interest to call again. Jane could see Captain Stovall visibly relax when they left. Jane turned to the Captain and with a gentle smile, said, “Captain Stovall, I admit to some confusion. I remember you saying you have been at sea for twenty years. You must have been but a child when you went to sea.”

"The navy is very different from the army. To become an officer you have to start very young and advancement is usually quite slow.”

“How came you to the navy?”

"My story is not really all that unusual. It was more a matter of necessity than interest. You see, my father died when I had about eleven years. A fever swept through our area and I lost my father, who had a small living outside York, and two younger brothers. Only my mother, a much younger sister and myself survived. With my father’s death, my mother had to depend on the generosity of her brother. Fortunately, he was able to settle her in modest comfort in York. For me, an occupation became necessary and, through his contacts, my uncle, himself a naval officer, was able to secure me an appointment as a midshipman. I admit I spent the first few months at sea questioning his decision and wondering if I would survive. It took me some time to get my sea legs I assure you. Now, I would have no other life.”

“I believe you have not seen your mother for five years! She must be wishing for you to visit.” Jane could not envision being separated from her parents for that many years. Much as they might irritate and anger her at times, they were her parents, and the love and care they had bestowed could not be forgotten.

"I correspond with my mother very regularly although delivery of letters whilst at sea is quite irregular. I sometimes do not get a letter for six months and then receive four or five all at once. But yes, I do want to visit my mother but cannot take leave just yet. The repairs being made to my ship will require my presence for another month or so. I plan to travel and visit her around Easter.”

“I have no doubt she will be overjoyed to have you home. Your ship is in Portsmouth is it not? It must be quite difficult to oversee the work from London?”

“Yes it is. However, I do not have to be there every day. Some Captains take lodging in Portsmouth
while repairs are made but I decided to come to London and travel down to Portsmouth as necessary. I usually have to visit it once a week to gauge how things are progressing. A Captain has to stay on top of the repair yard to make sure things are done properly. I will be travelling to Portsmouth on Monday next and will be back on Wednesday.” Stovall paused and very deliberately stated, “I am quite happy with my decision to come to London. If I had not, I would not have been invited to the ball by my friends.”

Jane blushed very prettily at the implied comment. Captain Stovall gave her a slight smile and then directed the conversation to other topics. Jane quite approved of Captain Stovall. He had every appearance of being a considerate son and brother, and his responsibilities as a Captain of a ship showed the dedication and determination to be successful. She felt she would have no trouble respecting him but could she learn to esteem and love him? And, more importantly, would he give her the opportunity to do so?

Mrs. Gardiner joined the discussion and the remainder of his visit was spent discussing the attractions of the northern areas with Mrs. Gardner championing the beauties of Derbyshire and the Captain good-naturedly defending Yorkshire. Before he left, he asked for, and received, permission to call again the next day.

That evening Captain Stovall was the subject of an extended discussion between the Gardiners. Their primary concern was to ensure that Jane was not hurt again by the actions of a suitor. His financial position was not known, although he was rumoured to have done very well in terms of prize money. Of the Captain’s interest, there was little doubt. Of Jane’s, even less. An invitation would be extended to the Captain to dine with them tomorrow and, Mr. Gardiner would, as delicately as possible, provide some information to the Captain about Jane’s lack of dowry and prospects.

Sunday, January 3, 1823

When the Gardiner family and their nieces attended church in the morning, Jane was pleased to see Captain Stovall waiting by the entrance. He accepted their invitation to sit with them and Mrs. Gardiner unobtrusively arranged for him to sit beside Jane. As he explained to Jane, while services were conducted almost every Sunday on board ship, such services were less formal than those held in a church. In any event, he listened carefully throughout the service and, if not gifted with a particularly melodic voice, displayed considerable enthusiasm when singing hymns.

As they left the church, the Gardiners invited the Captain to lunch with them and stay for dinner that evening. Jane and Elizabeth had planned, since it was a beautiful day and not too cold, to take the older children for an outing to the park after lunch. The Captain asked to join them and was readily included in the party. They returned to the Gardiner home and the three oldest Gardiner children joined the adults for the luncheon. As Mrs. Gardiner explained, they wanted their children to learn how to conduct themselves properly in society and such occasions, particularly if someone not of the family was present, were a means of instructing them in proper behaviour.

The Gardiner’s youngest child was deemed too young, at three years, to join her elder siblings in the outing. So, after the meal was over, the three older children were taken by their governess to be properly and warmly dressed. Jane and Elizabeth donned their warmest pelisses, bonnets and gloves and, accompanied by the governess and Captain Stovall, strolled in the direction of the park. They quickly separated into three groups with the children racing ahead followed as closely as possible by Elizabeth and the governess. The Captain and Jane strolled more slowly and, when they entered the park itself, the Captain offered Jane his arm citing the possible dangers if there was ice underfoot.
The offer was accepted although Jane saw no imminent danger from ice.

As they strolled, the Captain tried to direct the questions so as to encourage Jane to discuss her life in Hertfordshire, her family, the local society. Jane was quite aware of his purpose and disposed to answer as frankly as was reasonably possible. If she minimized certain aspects, such as her mother’s lack of propriety, she did not hide information about the size of the estate or the entailment to Mr. Collins. The Captain was particularly interested in those activities which pertained to managing the estate and the reason for his interest was quickly revealed. Once the war was over, he intended to acquire a small estate in the north, preferably in Yorkshire and near the sea. For, as he said, “I have lived on the sea for twenty years now; I could no more give it up completely than I could stop breathing. As well, I want to live close to my mother and sister. After being absent in their lives for so many years, I wish to know and enjoy their company.”

As they continued their stroll, the other part of their group rejoined them and, after completing a circuit of the park, headed back to the Gardiner house. With a laugh, Jane teased her sister, “It is fortunate indeed that there is no snow on the ground, else Lizzy would have started a snowball fight”. Elizabeth just laughed and expressed the hope that snow would come soon because she dearly loved a snowball fight with her young cousins.

The children had dissipated much of their energy and were now content to walk with the adults until they returned home. Once divested of their outerwear, the two middle Gardiner children importuned their favourite cousin, Jane, to read to them. She was quite willing to oblige and settling with the children in a large armchair in one corner of the room, read to them quietly until it was time to eat. The eldest Gardiner child, Phillip, was more interested in learning about the sea and naval life from the Captain and the latter was most willing to oblige. Questions from Phillip and Elizabeth encouraged him to talk about the day-to-day activities aboard ship. If he was aware of the occasional glance and small smile directed at him by Jane, it was not possible to tell from his countenance.

Dinner was as enjoyable as a meal can be when attended by persons possessed of knowledge and amiability. Mr. Gardiner sat with the captain to his right and Jane to his left with the others sitting as they chose. Conversation was quiet, even with the presence of three active children, and embraced a variety of subjects from theatre to the war in Europe to books. Once the meal was ended, the Captain and Mr. Gardiner retired to the library for a glass of port. Mr. Gardiner took the opportunity to talk privately, saying,

“Captain Stovall, I realize that I am being rather premature and I am definitely not asking about your intentions with respect to my niece. Mrs. Gardiner and I could not love Jane and Elizabeth more if they were our own children. Their father is a kind man but the estate is not large and their portion is meagre. As well, I have to tell you that Jane was treated very poorly by a young man over a year ago. He paid her a great deal of attention to the point that there were reasonable expectations of an offer of marriage; but he suddenly left and she has not heard from him since. I would not want her treated poorly again. I mean no offence by these words and I hope you take none.”

Captain Stovall was obviously a little surprised at Mr. Gardiner’s words but did not appear particularly upset. After some thought, he responded, “I hardly know my own feelings and thoughts yet. I am coming to admire your niece very much. Not only is she lovely to look at but she seems to have a warm and loving nature. I do want to get to know her better. Her dowry is not something I need care about.”

“That let us say no more on the matter for now and rejoin the ladies. Perhaps we can get Lizzy to play and sing for us. I think you would enjoy her performance.”

The two gentlemen returned to the ladies and were successful in persuading Elizabeth to perform,
which she did to everyone’s satisfaction, for nearly an hour. Since Captain Stovall wished to make
an early departure for Portsmouth the next morning, he took his leave but not before stating that he
expected to return on Wednesday and requested, and was given permission, to call on Thursday.

After Jane and Elizabeth readied themselves for bed, they met, as they frequently did, on the latter’s
bed to discuss matters close to their hearts. Jane was reluctant to reveal too much of her feelings. She
admitted that she thought that she could esteem and respect Captain Stovall but she did not yet know
him well enough to be sure of her feelings. “I think I could easily love and respect him, Lizzy, but I
have been in his company only a few times. It is too soon but I admit I think he is a good man and
his profession is not one for men who lack resolve.” With this, Elizabeth had to be satisfied. Teased
by Jane about her own callers, Elizabeth could only quip, “Perhaps my mother is correct, my
impertinence seems to frighten even the bravest of men. They came, they saw and they vanished.”
Tuesday, January 5, 1813 - Pemberley

Darcy and Georgiana were relaxing in the library when the butler, Mr. Reynolds knocked and entered to inform them that a carriage was sighted and should arrive in ten minutes.

“That will be Bingley. Good, he has not run into any bad weather.” Darcy leaped to his feet and moved quickly towards the front doors, followed closely by Georgiana. It was too cold to wait outside and so they greeted Bingley in the front hall when he entered.

After the usual greetings, Darcy directed Bingley to his room to bathe and change from his travelling clothes before dinner. He rejoined them an hour later looking much refreshed. Dinner was a quiet affair held in the small dining room with just the three of them. Conversation was amiable and comfortable as they discussed their Christmas activities. For Bingley, it had been the first Christmas spent in company with his father’s family since his childhood. He regaled them with stories of the various relatives and quickly had Georgiana laughing at the antics of some of his younger relatives.

After the meal, they repaired to the library to continue their chat in front of the fire. Darcy and Bingley enjoyed a glass of port whilst Georgiana was allowed a glass of wine, albeit cut with water at her brother’s insistence. The conversation continued in a lighthearted manner for the remainder of the evening covering such topics as the wars against Napoleon and the Americans, theatre, plays, books and music. As the evening wound down, Georgiana induced both men to join her for a sleigh ride the next day. Since both Darcy and Bingley had business to transact in the morning, Darcy to meet with his steward for planting plans and Bingley to review several reports he brought with him, it was agreed that they would venture out in the early afternoon.

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Georgiana was practising a new piece when she realized that there was someone in the music room besides Mrs. Annesley. Turning, she realized that Mr. Bingley had come in to sit in an armchair behind her. He quickly apologized, “I am very sorry. I did not mean to intrude and interrupt your session.”

“You certainly do,” she replied with a smile; “but it does not follow that the interruption must be unwelcome.”

“I should be very sorry indeed if it were. We are good friends, are we not?”

“Indeed we are, I hope. “

”Tell me Miss Darcy, will you be coming out this season?”

“No, my brother and aunt have decided that it would better to wait another year.”

“How you feel about it?”

Georgiana’s response was thoughtful, “I am quite happy to wait. Brother has said that I will attend a number of balls and family parties. I will only be allowed to dance with family but it will be good experience.”

“I am actually still trying to accept the reality that you are even considering coming ‘out’. Only yesterday it seems you were still in the nursery and now look at you, a delightful young lady.”
Bingley laughed, “I hope I have not been improper. You are very like a sister to me.”

“Really?”

Georgiana was not altogether sure she wanted Mr. Bingley to think of her as a sister and thought a change of topic was in order. “I understand you are arranging to transfer your household to York. Have you sold your house in London?”

“Yes, indeed. In fact, my furniture is being carted to York as we speak. While I have some business in London and will be visiting my sisters, my main purpose is to complete the sale.”

“Will you miss London? I seem to remember that you enjoyed society, the parties and balls, quite well.”

“I have found that business dealings absorb a lot more of my time than in the past. Nonetheless, I still find time for parties and dances and quite enjoy them. I do not find the loss to be irksome at all. But speaking of balls, will your brother host a special ball for your ‘coming out’ next year?”

“I believe so. Aunt Eleanor is also talking of hosting a ball.”

“Indeed. Your brother will obviously dance the first set with you but would you save me a set in your first ball?”

“Of course. I look forward to it.”

Georgiana was not sure how to understand Mr. Bingley’s request. The compliment of being asked did not escape her. She rather liked the changes that were taking place in Mr. Bingley, but his intentions were not clear. Did he ask because she was his friend’s sister or because he was possibly interested in her? Mrs. Annesley had been quietly noting the whole exchange and thought she saw enough to speak to Mr. Darcy.

For Bingley's part, he was only just becoming aware that his friend's sister was growing into an attractive young lady. Too young as yet for serious interest, but, he thought, getting to know the young woman she was becoming, would be very interesting. If she had some of the characteristics of her brother, she could be a very formidable woman; however, would she, or her brother, ever consider someone like himself, with a trade background, as an appropriate suitor?

The conversation between Georgiana and Bingley continued for several minutes until Darcy entered to say his business was complete and that the sleigh would be waiting for them in a quarter hour. All three made haste to don the warmest clothing available and, shortly thereafter, spent a delightful three hours touring the grounds. Later that evening, Mrs. Annesley related the conversation to Darcy.

Inasmuch as Georgiana was unlikely to encounter Bingley with any frequency during the next twelve months, Darcy saw no reason to get overly concerned. He had no real objection to Bingley as suitor given the maturity he seemed to be acquiring. It would be a good match for Georgiana, although most of society might not see it in that light.
Thursday January 7, 1813 – Gracechurch street, London

While the Gardiners and their nieces were having breakfast, a short note was received by Mrs. Gardiner from Captain Stovall inviting her and her nieces to view an Art Exhibition that afternoon. Mrs. Gardiner did not feel she could spare the time to attend but saw no reason that her nieces should not go and her reply fixed a time for the Captain to arrive at Gracechurch Street.

Captain Stovall arrived as expected and escorted Jane and Elizabeth to his carriage. It took but a half hour to arrive at the site of the exhibition. The Captain was first out of the carriage and offered his hand to assist each lady as she stepped down from it. Offering an arm to each lady they strolled into the building and began moving from room to room, viewing the art pieces and sculptures on display. The exhibition was quite a popular attraction and a considerable number of people were present and progress was slow.

As they strolled from picture to picture, it became obvious that they shared an affinity for particular subjects. Landscapes were a consistent favourite of them all and the presence of several pictures by John Constable were much appreciated. The Captain was attracted by seascapes but had no kind words for several pictures depicting the battle of Trafalgar. “No, No. That will never do!” He cried, “You would never have seen such!” Pressed by Jane and Elizabeth to explain, he pointed to the fact that the ships involved had all their sails displayed. “This will never do,” he stated, “When we enter battle, all sails, but a few, are furled to prevent damage. We carry only enough sail to provide steerage.” Shaking his head at such foolishness by the artist, he quickly led two rather amused ladies to less offensive pictures.

The carriage ride back to Gracechurch Street passed quickly as they discussed the merits of the pictures they had seen and they entered the house satisfied with an afternoon spent in enjoyable company. Captain Stovall approached Mrs. Gardiner, while Jane and Elizabeth were refreshing themselves, to ask for a private interview with Jane. She readily agreed and directed him to Mr. Gardiner’s study. When Jane came downstairs, she was told that Captain Stovall had requested an interview and awaited her in the study.

Jane entered the study to find Captain Stovall absorbed in gazing out the window and quickly seated herself in the chair facing her uncle’s desk. When the Captain seemed oblivious to her presence, her gentle cough startled him and he turned and faced her. That he was nervous and uncertain was obvious. He several times began to speak and then did not. Finally, he shook his head and gave a short laugh, “Miss Bennet, I am as nervous as the day I took command of my first ship. I have never done this before and I am moving in uncharted waters. Please excuse my foolishness.” Jane’s smile and slight nod of her head gave him encouragement to continue.

“Miss Bennet, I am a plain-speaking man. I have been in your company on several occasions now and find myself drawn to you. Your beauty first caught my attention but it is your good nature, your kindness, your conversation that has drawn me back. I wish to know you better and I wish for you to know me better. To speak very plainly, I wish to court you and, I hope, eventually win your hand in marriage. Will you allow me to court you?”

Jane had trouble controlling the tears that flooded her eyes. Dabbing at them with her handkerchief, she replied, “Captain Stovall, I would very much like to have you court me. What I understand of your character pleases me a great deal and I would like to know you better.” She paused, and then, speaking more slowly, continued, “However, before I give you my answer, I must ask my aunt to join us. There is something she must impart to you that bears on this.”
Jane rose and quickly left the room, returning within minutes with her aunt. With her voice under tight control, she looked at an obviously puzzled and concerned Captain Stovall and said, "I am going to ask my aunt to explain something that happened to my family. I trust her to tell the story more than I trust my ability to do so. Aunt, would you speak of Lydia, please."

Looking directly at the Captain, Mrs. Gardiner spoke quietly, "Captain Stovall, while I have only known you a short time, you have impressed me with your honesty and frankness. We can do no less than afford you the same courtesy. If you like, our honour demands it."

Captain Stovall looked a little surprised at these words, saying, "I appreciate the compliment, Madam, but that sounds rather ominous."

"There is a particular situation regarding Jane that you should know about. I know Jane finds it difficult to speak of it even now. You may certainly speak with her in private afterwards should you desire to do so."

Pausing for a second, Mrs. Gardiner continued, "Last August, Jane’s youngest sister – Lydia – eloped with an officer in the militia. She was but fifteen years old and a wild, unruly child. We have not heard from either since then and our last knowledge of them was that they had reached London. We have given up all hope that they reached Gretna Green and were married. Jane and Elizabeth came to live with us to be removed from the censure that they felt in Hertfordshire. Two more proper young women I have never known, yet they are the ones suffering most from the folly of their sister. I have revealed this to you in confidence. I know that we would all be saddened if this knowledge should cause you to end the courtship, but we would understand your difficulties."

Captain Stovall returned Mrs. Gardiner’s gaze and looked at Jane's face where distress was evidenced by the tears she was trying to control. Consternation was written on his face as he spoke, "That poor child. How you must worry for her." As he began to consider the implications of Lydia’s actions, he understood why Mrs. Gardiner had mentioned the problem at all. A more relaxed look appeared on his face as he continued, "I understand your concerns now. For my part, there is no impediment to the courtship. You must understand that I have lived at sea for twenty years. Society and such rules as these have little impact on me and, besides, the reality is that I will probably be much at sea for several more years until this war with the French is finished. I will not be there to bear society’s censure should it occur. My sister is already married so the situation would have no impact on her prospects."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled and replied, "Well said, Captain, well said. I know that Jane is much relieved. Would you like to speak to her in private for a few minutes?"

"Indeed, I would."

After Mrs. Gardiner had left, he turned to Jane.

“Miss Bennet, this is a distressing story. I can only imagine the sorrow you must have experienced with her loss. You and your aunt were obviously concerned that I might wish to withdraw my offer of courtship when I learned of your sister’s actions. I do not. I most emphatically do not. Should I withdraw, it will only be because I believe that I have failed to secure your affections."

He considered her for a few seconds before continuing, "I will repeat what I said to your aunt. The censure of society will bother me very little, if at all, and the Admiralty will not be bothered at all. As well, it is my intention to settle in the north, preferable in Yorkshire and well removed from much of society and Hertfordshire. I see no impediment, Miss Bennet, none at all." And then in a teasing tone said, "Now, I believe I am owed an answer."
Jane looked at him with a watery smile and replied, "Indeed, Sir, you are and my answer is Yes, I would be honoured to accept your offer of courtship."

Captain Stovall paused to consider something further, then asked, “Miss Bennet, forgive me if I am too blunt. I suspect that not being exposed to polite society for twenty years has caused me to be less careful of the proprieties than I should be. But I must ask, do you have questions of me?"

Jane shook her head, smiled at him and said, “No, Sir. I appreciate your candour greatly. I can only return the compliment and speak frankly also. You have relieved my mind since I confess that the thought you might end the courtship, distressed me very much. “

"Miss Bennet, I will make this promise to you. I will deal honestly with you and, since the main purpose of a courtship in my opinion is to determine if two people can build a life together, I will attempt to answer truthfully any question you may pose."

Jane rose from her chair and, taking his arm, said, “Sir, I thank you and will attempt to do likewise should you have questions. Now, I believe we should rejoin the others.”

With that they returned to the parlour and Jane announced to her aunt and sister that Captain Stovall had asked to court her and that she had accepted. The approbation of both was quickly apparent to the Captain and he delighted in the happiness that was obvious on Jane’s face. Sitting next to Jane, he quietly began discussing his plans for the next month or so. His responsibilities as Captain required that he visit Portsmouth every week and he intended to do so from Monday to Wednesday, thus leaving the rest of the week to spend in London. While here he hoped to attend a theatre play, visit a few museums and bookstores and walk in Hyde Park to see the “ton.” The latter was spoken with a smile and elicited a most unladylike-like snort from Jane.

Dinner was again a convivial affair and Captain Stovall was prevailed upon to talk, to the particular delight of young Phillip Gardiner, about the West Indies and his duties and his experiences there. After dinner, Mr. Gardiner invited Captain Stovall to join him in his library. Once settled in armchairs, each with a glass of port in hand, they conversed amiably with Mr. Gardiner telling the Captain stories about Jane when she was younger.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies, Elizabeth was prevailed upon to entertain them once again on the piano for a half hour. Before he left, Captain Stovall indicated an interest in attending a stage play and wished to know which evenings might be most appropriate. Learning that the Gardiners and their nieces were expecting to dine out Friday evening, they fixed on Saturday or the following Thursday to attend the play. Captain Stovall would make the necessary arrangements.

That evening Mr. Gardiner sent a post to Mr. Bennet, advising him of the courtship and requesting that it be kept secret from Mrs. Bennet for the time being.
Richard Fitzwilliam alighted from his carriage to greet Georgiana and Darcy who had come out, despite the cold, to greet him. They hurried him inside and, after the usual greetings, he retired to his room to refresh himself and change his clothes. An hour later he joined them in the music room where Georgiana was practicing.

“I am glad you decided to break your journey at Pemberley, Richard. Where are you bound?” Darcy asked.

“London. I have some business with headquarters there. I thought I would take the opportunity to visit with you and Georgiana for a day or two. I have to depart on Monday.”

Darcy looked at his cousin carefully and wondered how much he was not saying. He knew that Fitzwilliam expected to be called back to duty. He would not press the matter now but later, yes. He raised an eyebrow at his cousin and replied, “We are pleased that you decided to do so.”

“We have someone else that we expect to break his journey with us today.” Georgiana mentioned. “Mr. Bingley is returning to York from London and we expect him later today.”

Fitzwilliam glanced at Darcy, “How is he coming along? I remember you telling me that he had grown up quite a bit in the past year.”

“He stopped here on his way to town about a fortnight ago. It is astonishing, the change in him. He has gone from boy to man almost overnight. He has become much more engaged in business activities with a consequent reduction in idleness and frivolity. I admit I am pleased to see it. I like the new Bingley very much.” Darcy replied.

Georgiana tentatively offered, “I had not seen Mr. Bingley for quite a while. The change is marked and I very much like what he has become.”

Fitzwilliam and Darcy exchanged glances and Fitzwilliam’s raised eyebrow was noted by Darcy who gave a slight nod to his cousin. “Obviously another topic for discussion with Darcy” thought Fitzwilliam.

The three cousins spent a relaxed hour before dinner discussing estate issues, tenant problems, spring planting plans and planned renovations to Pemberley. None of the topics were of pressing urgency and both Darcy and his cousin were content to let the conversation embrace such non-contentious issues. The avoidance of mention of military matters was by a mutual, unstated agreement between both men.

Bingley’s carriage rolled up to the front entrance of Pemberley just as they all sat down for dinner. Quickly rising from the table, Darcy and Georgiana hurried to greet Bingley as he was ushered into the front hall.

“Welcome Charles, I hope your journey was not too cold.”

“Thank you Darcy, I am afraid it was bitterly cold for the last hour or so. Greetings Miss Darcy, it is a pleasure to see you again so soon,”

After Bingley divested himself of outerwear, Darcy began to lead him toward the dining room, and
said, “we are just starting dinner. Would you like to refresh yourself before eating? We can easily wait another quarter hour.”

Bingley immediately accepted and headed to his usual room. Before he had climbed too many stairs, Darcy mentioned that they had another guest his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam which delighted Bingley since he and the Colonel had always enjoyed each other’s company.

A scant quarter hour later, a refreshed but tired Bingley joined the Darcys and Fitzwilliam for dinner. It was a simple meal, held in the small family dining room. The talk was deliberately light-hearted, with Fitzwilliam delighting Georgiana with tales of the antics of his nieces and nephews while visiting at his parents’ home. He also passed on an announcement, “You will most likely get a letter from my sister, announcing that she is with child again. I think her confinement is in June.”

“Marvellous news, Richard. Marvellous news! I suppose your mother is making more noises about getting you married so that you can provide more grandchildren,” teased Darcy.

Fitzwilliam laughed, “I believe she mentioned the subject once or twice.”

Once the meal was finished they decided to settle in the music room as Georgiana offered to play some pieces that she was developing. The men sat quietly sipping port and relaxing to the music flowing from Georgiana’s fingers. After about an hour she stopped and excused herself, indicating a desire to retire to her rooms to read before sleep.

Darcy invited the others to the library where a fire was warming the room. He poured himself a brandy, sat in one of the chairs ringing the fireplace, and invited the other two men to help themselves. Fitzwilliam also took a brandy, but Darcy noted with interest that Bingley poured himself a whiskey.

“Whiskey, Bingley? That is new.”

“I have acquired a taste for it over the last few months. I am getting some excellent whiskey from Scotland now.”

"Dare I ask how your efforts in London went?” Noting Fitzwilliam’s questioning look, Darcy explained a bit further: "Bingley has decided to move to York and sold his London house. He had to help relocate the Hursts and Caroline.”

“Actually, the Hursts acquired their own house with little help from me. I did pay part of the cost since Caroline will be living with them. I cannot say how long that arrangement will last. Caroline is still not reconciled to my departure. They live in a respectable neighbourhood. Not of the first tier as Caroline would wish for, but respectable. The Hursts appear content, at least.”

“Charles, I had thought I might visit you later this year. I have no fixed plans as yet but I would like to meet this remarkable uncle of yours. He seems to have done more for you in a couple of months than I did in years.” Darcy said.

Bingley thought for a minute or two and replied, “I would be delighted to have you visit. May or June would be the opportune times although, truthfully, it does not matter a great deal.” He thought a bit more and suggested, “There are a number of people that you might be interested in meeting. The investment opportunities in the north have much potential.”

“That sounds quite intriguing; I will consider my plans. Right now I have to deal with the spring planting in April and visit my aunt in Kent.”

Looking at Fitzwilliam, Darcy hesitated and then asked, “Richard, will you be accompanying me this
Fitzwilliam grimaced and shook his head. “As I suspected, you have already guessed that I will be returning to active duty. I received word several days ago and told my family. I hardly need say that they want me to resign my commission and marry. The problem is simply that I have not found the woman, with the necessary dowry, that I would want to live with for the next forty years.”

He took another sip of his brandy and sighed, “I have seen too many unhappy or unsatisfied marriages to want to take that risk or burden.”

“When do you report?”

“Wellesley is in winter quarters in Portugal as we speak. My regiment will be sailing at the end of the month to join him. It will take me every minute there is between now and then to get the regiment ready.”

“Georgiana and I had planned to travel to London on Wednesday next. I am sure we could accompany you on Monday instead.”

Fitzwilliam thought and nodded his head. “That sounds like an excellent idea. I will return my father’s carriage and travel with you.”

“Richard, do you want to break the news to Georgiana or shall I? It is possible that she has guessed already.”

“Let me do it. It won’t be any better coming from you than me but she deserves to hear it from me.”

“Fine, I suggest you tell her after church services tomorrow. I will let her know before breakfast of the change in travel plans.”

Bingley had sat quietly throughout this discussion, finally rising to his feet and stretching. “I am tired enough from the travel and the whiskey will help me sleep. I will refresh my glass and head up to my room now before I fall asleep in this chair.”

Darcy and Fitzwilliam bade him good-night and settled down in comfortable silence with their brandy. Darcy broke the silence, “Do you remember that comment Georgie made about Bingley during your arrival? Well it appears that they had an interesting conversation about a fortnight ago when Bingley stopped here on his way to London. The crux of the matter is that Bingley asked her to save him a dance set at her ‘coming out’ ball. Mrs. Annesley, who was present for the entire conversation, saw nothing improper between them but she also suspects that each became aware of the other as a possible suitor. She believes, and it is agreed, that there is nothing to alarm us since they will be in each other's company only rarely and that dance is over a year in the future. However, it seems I must consider Bingley’s suitability as a suitor.”

Fitzwilliam had sat up straight when Darcy mentioned ‘suitor’ but then a thoughtful expression crossed his face as he responded, “You know, he might be a very good suitor if he has grown as much as you believe. I don’t give much credence to concerns about ‘trade’ if the man is a gentleman. I like Bingley quite a bit.”

“I agree. I won’t discourage his suit should he decide to press it but Georgie will have at least one season before she chooses to marry. That should let her consider the men available.”

Fitzwilliam considered Darcy overtly and decided to probe an issue that they had not talked about for months. “Tell me Cousin, what are your plans or intentions with regard to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”
Darcy looked over at Fitzwilliam with a surprised look on his face. “Are you taking up mind-
reading, Richard?”

He smiled and continued, “This has been much on my mind recently. I have determined to visit
Hertfordshire and call on her. I have several engagements and business in town that I must take care
of first, but I am determined to call. I cannot go on in this state of uncertainty. I must know, once and
for all, if there is a chance I can win her.”

“I am glad to hear that, Cousin. I think she is too sensible a woman to still bear you a grudge, but I
do think you must be completely honest with her. And for heaven’s sake, think before you speak. If
your first thoughts are for her well-being, I do not see how she can refuse you.”

“Let’s to bed, Cousin, I have a lot to do tomorrow, if we are to leave two days early.”
Chapter 17

Sunday, January 24, 1813 - Pemberley

Darcy was up early as was his habit and immediately sent a note to Georgiana’s maid advising her of the change in plans and the need to begin packing for the trip to London. His own manservant, Hawkins, had been advised the previous night of the change in plans, Darcy had a number of letters to write and meetings with his steward before he could depart and he did not expect to have much free time today. Meetings that had been scheduled for Monday and Tuesday would now have to be completed this afternoon. He also had to ensure that the carriage was checked and travel arrangements changed at the two stops along the route.

Realizing that his work had reduced the time available to get ready for church services, a small breakfast was brought to his room for him to eat while getting ready. As a result, he was waiting in the front hall for the others to arrive. Once they reached the chapel, Darcy and Fitzwilliam unobtrusively ensured that Georgiana and Bingley did not sit together.

After lunch, Georgiana went to the music room to work on several pieces that she was practicing. Colonel Fitzwilliam had gone to the library after lunch but, upon hearing the sound of the piano, went in search of Georgiana. Finding her, he was quite contented to sit unobserved while she practiced. Finally, after a particularly good effort on one of the more difficult pieces, he applauded her heartily which quite caught Georgiana by surprise.

Fitzwilliam knew it would not get any easier if he waited to impart the news that he was going to Portugal but wanted to do so as gently as possible. Rising to his feet, he said, “Georgie, do you realize that I have not visited the conservatory for several years? I would like to see it again. Will you accompany me?”

Georgiana was agreeable and arm-in-arm they strolled to and into the conservatory. Fitzwilliam maintained a steady flow of light conversation as they walked. When they arrived at a spot with benches for sitting, he sat down and invited Georgiana to sit beside him. He took her hand and spoke in a very matter-of-fact voice, “Georgie, I am sure you have a suspicion of my news but I wanted to tell you myself. Headquarters has given me my orders and I am taking my regiment to join Wellesley in Portugal. I leave at the end of the month. I know that you, along with the rest of my family, do not wish for me to go but I am bound by honour and duty to serve my country. I can make no promises about my safety but I value my life and the lives of the men I lead. I risk neither their lives nor mine unnecessarily.”

Fitzwilliam could see her distress, “What troubles you so, Georgie? You know I have seen active duty before and always returned, I will do so again. I plan to dance at your wedding and I insist right now you save the third set for me. I will allow your new husband the right to the first set and won’t deprive your brother of the second, but the third is mine. Understood?”

Giving her a quick hug, he teased some more, “Now, if I am to be a proper guardian, I need to know your wishes in terms of a husband. Who and what should we look for in your husband? Short? Fat? Scottish with a brogue you could cut with a knife? Old? You really must help your brother and me to sort through all the candidates and let us know your preferences.”

“Richard, I don’t want to even think about marriage right now.” Georgiana replied trying to stifle a giggle, “And certainly not about a short, fat, old Scotsman.” And she gave a delicate shudder.

“Nonsense, my girl. All young ladies think about potential husbands. Come, come …confess it now,
what does he look like? Tall, perhaps? Dark hair? A bit of a fop? An Earl, at the very least?"

Georgiana giggled, “No, No ….. Well, perhaps tall, anyway.”

“You need to help me a little more, Georgie. You have only eliminated two out of three men in England. That still leaves me with a very, very large crowd. If he must have a title, that can reduce the numbers quite a bit. There cannot be that many men with a title, can there?” The last was uttered rather plaintively by Fitzwilliam.

Georgiana hesitated slightly. She found this teasing to be slightly uncomfortable and decided to hedge her answer, “A title would be nice I suppose, but hardly necessary.” She paused and then, more seriously, responded, “I think I want a good man. With such examples as you and my brother, I could hardly settle for less, now could I?”

“Ah….you are not playing fair, Georgie. Be careful what you wish for. You could get my visage and your brother’s manners.”

“Oh, my brother’s manners are not so bad.” Georgiana replied attempting to control a smile.

Fitzwilliam laughed, “Minx!”

They both fell silent for several minutes and then Fitzwilliam looked at Georgiana, “I may not be home in time for your first ball but if I am, I want the second set. Promise?”

“I promise! It is yours!”

Fitzwilliam went over to her and gave her a hug, saying “I will write as often as I can but the post service is rather poor when people are fighting. I hope you will write to me often. I will be in London for about three weeks before I depart. I expect to be very busy but will make an effort to see you several times before I leave.”

They both started at the sound of a cough and turned to see Bingley standing on the pathway.

“I hope I am not intruding?”

“Not at all," responded Fitzwilliam. “I was just getting Georgie to tell me what she wants in a suitor when she is of age to have such. So far we have only determined that she does not want a short, fat, old Scotsman with a heavy brogue.”

“Does anyone want such a man?” chuckled Bingley as he sat down. He had been standing on the path for several minutes watching and considering Georgiana before making his presence known. He was more and more impressed with her. He knew she was obviously still too young to consider marriage and he himself was not ready either; but he could see no reason not to cultivate her acquaintance as a friend and thus keep himself in her attention.

“Miss Darcy, I have been living in York for several months now and have yet to hear your equal on the pianoforte. Could you oblige me with a little music?”

“I would be happy to do so.” Saying which, Georgiana led the way back to the music room and began playing some lively Scottish and English ballads. After playing for an hour, she excused herself claiming a desire to rest. The two gentlemen continued to talk in a desultory manner until Bingley suggested a game of billiards, which claimed their attention until it was time to prepare for dinner.

Dinner itself was a quiet affair, as was the remainder of the evening, which most spent reading and
Sunday January 24, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

Jane was trying to remember the last time she had been as content – happy perhaps – as she did at this moment. Captain Stovall had been courting her officially for a fortnight and she had been in his presence almost every day that he was not in Portsmouth. Oddly enough, while some of that time his attention was directed to the Gardiner children or to the Gardiners themselves, that had not lessened the pleasure she took in his company. She could not remember now if she ever had talked with Mr. Bingley as she talked with Amos – for she was beginning to think of him as Amos now. They had talked about his years at sea, her time in Hertfordshire and some of their hopes for the future. She was getting to know the man and she approved of him very much. His comfortable play with the children – and he had become a favourite with them – bode well for a future in which they had children. Her mind came to a lurching stop – they had children. Was she…had she already arrived at a decision, should he offer marriage? She blushed and looked quickly at his face as he walked beside her. Yes! Should he ask, she would be very happy to accept.

Captain Stovall was equally contented with one small niggling concern. He believed strongly that the woman on his arm was one he would delight to call his wife. She had a good heart, a kind heart, a loving heart and a strong, sensible approach to life. But he must know if some part of that heart still belonged to another man. He was determined to speak and this seemed as good a time as any.

“Miss Bennet! I am going to ask what most people would consider a very improper question. You see, the first evening I dined with you and your family, Mr. Gardiner and I had a short discussion over port after the meal. His sole concern was for your well-being and he intimated that your affections had been engaged by the particular attentions of a gentleman who then left without making an offer, which caused you considerable distress. Mr. Gardiner considered the gentleman’s behaviour somewhat dishonourable and wanted to prevent a reoccurrence. I was most willing to provide such assurances. My question is simply this, Miss Bennet – Is your heart unattached?”

Jane’s feet simply stopped working as she came to a complete stop and looked up at him in some amazement. By stopping, she had forced Captain Stovall to partially turn and face her. She continued to gaze at him for a few more seconds and then, reaching a decision, forced them both to resume walking.

“Captain Stovall, you promised me honesty, when you offered a courtship. I find myself unable to be anything less. The gentleman, Mr. Bingley – I see no reason to hide his name, since you will likely learn it should you meet my mother – was quite handsome and amiable. He most assuredly engaged my affections and I certainly believed myself to be falling in love with him. Then he left, promising to return but did not. I was hurt - hurt and very confused - for months. I learned that he had been convinced by friends and relatives to leave because of my poor connections, some impropriety of my mother and younger sisters, a lack of dowry and a belief that I was only interested in him because of his wealth. My hurt and pain gradually turned to anger. Anger that he knew me so poorly as to believe such of me. Now…..even the anger is gone. If I were to meet Mr. Bingley tomorrow, it would be as an acquaintance…..no more. The only person in Longbourn to now regret his departure is my mother and her lamentations do nothing more than cause me irritation.”

Jane turned her face to look directly at the Captain, raised an eyebrow and smiled, “So Captain, if I have not answered your actual question, I have, I think, been honest in answering the implied question, have I not?”

He stopped turned to face her and taking her hands in his bestowed a kiss on each, saying, “Yes,
Miss Bennet, you most certainly have.” Then turning to walk once again, he settled her hand on his arm, placed his other hand over hers and intertwined their fingers. “She did not say her heart was unattached, only that it was not attached to this Bingley. Excellent!”

In this fashion, they continued to stroll through the park until recalled by Elizabeth’s reminder that dinner was approaching. Elizabeth was quite amused by Jane’s absorption in the Captain and the pleasure expressed on her countenance. She was convinced that removal from her mother’s profusions and manipulation had allowed Jane to display her feelings more openly since she no longer had cause to guard the expression of those feelings.

She thought back to the past two weeks during which they had gone to the play Twelfth Night, walked in Hyde Park and attended a dinner party; society enough to satisfy even her desire for company. A grin crossed her face when she considered the night they went to see the play. While she had chosen to wear a relatively modest evening gown, Jane had selected one that was rather more daring. It was deep blue with simple, classic lines and a v-neck which displayed the upper portion of her breasts. She looked absolutely stunning which described the look on the Captain’s face when Jane descended the stairs in the Gardiner house. He hardly took his eyes off her on the ride to the theatre and, once there, was the first to exit the carriage. Turning, he offered his hand to help Elizabeth descend and then offered his hand to Jane who, grasping his hand with her own stepped out of the carriage bending forward slightly as she did so. The Captain’s intake of air was quite noticeable and a blush spread over both his and Jane’s countenance. Only Elizabeth noticed the small smile of pleasure on Jane’s lips.

After Mr. Gardiner assisted his wife out of the carriage, the party moved slowly through the crowd. After divesting themselves of their outerwear, they moved into the intermission area. Jane quickly attracted surreptitious and admiring glances from many of the men. Captain Stovall did not appear to mind at all, satisfied to be the man escorting her to the play. Several couples known to the Gardiners approached and were introduced but Mr. Gardiner and the Captain were persistent in moving their party forward and towards their seats.

Once seated, Elizabeth had enjoyed and attended the play so closely that she had little attention left for the rest of party. While it was not one of her preferred Shakespeare's histories, it was so well acted that she was lured in almost despite herself. Captain Stovall was completely enraptured, repeating several times that seeing the words come to life on a stage gave new meaning to them. He vowed that he would make every effort to see another play before his time onshore ended.

Returning home, they had partaken of a light tea after which Captain Stovall made ready to leave. Elizabeth and Jane accompanied him to the front door and, Elizabeth having deliberately stepped several paces back to give them some privacy, he turned and took Jane’s hand, saying, “I thought tomorrow I might visit a bookstore. Would you and Elizabeth wish to accompany me?” Upon receiving her agreement, he raised her hand and turned it, pressing a kiss to the palm of her hand causing a small gasp by Jane. A pleased smile graced his face as he murmured, “I will call at ten then, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth had teased her sister quite thoroughly afterwards and was now only wondering when the good Captain would offer for Jane. Her sister’s affections were no longer in doubt. The pleasure she received from his attentions left little doubt Captain Stovall’s suit would be successful. The only issue lay in when he would make his offer.
Thursday, January 28, 1813 – London

Darcy stepped down from his carriage in front of the Johnson home. It was a fairly modern, four story building somewhat smaller than his own house and located in one of the better sections of the city. His arrival must have been anticipated because the butler had the door open before he reached it. Recognizing Darcy immediately, he bowed and then motioned a footman to take Darcy’s hat and cloak saying, “Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are with the other guests in the drawing room, Mr. Darcy.” He led Darcy there and opened the doors, waiting for Darcy to pass through. Darcy paused in the doorway to assess the people within the room. With a quick scan, he recognized two couples, apart from the Johnsons, that were known to him.

He saw his presence was recognized as Mr. Johnson moved quickly towards him. “Mr. Darcy, welcome.” he said in a quiet voice. “As ever, we are pleased you could join us tonight.”

“How could I pass up the opportunity for fine food and fine conversation? I welcomed your invitation.”

“There are several people that I would particularly like to introduce to your acquaintance tonight, Mr. Darcy.”

“By all means, Mr. Johnson but I would like to greet my hostess first, if I may.”

“Certainly, sir. She is sitting over there.” Saying which Mr. Johnson led Darcy to Mrs. Johnson with whom he then chatted for several minutes. Seeing Mr. Johnson’s slight impatience, Darcy smiled and let himself be led away. For a quarter hour, Mr. Johnson guided him to several gentlemen and their wives, effecting introductions and their connection to Mr. Johnson.

Looking around Mr. Johnson said, “There is one more gentleman that I would most particularly like to make known to you. I have only become acquainted with him in the last six months or so. He has made it possible for me to expand my production by his access to markets in other countries. It has truly been fortuitous for me.” Saying this, he led Darcy towards a gentleman who was talking to several young ladies as well as a woman and a gentleman only a few years older than Darcy himself.

As they approached the group, the young ladies turned in response to a slight nod from the gentleman facing Darcy. His shock was total. He heard Johnson speaking but he could not understand the words. All he could see was her face. He wondered if his was as pale.

“Mr. Darcy, are you all right, sir?”

He grasped the remnants of his self control, essayed a small smile and replied, “Perfectly, sir. I was simply caught totally by surprise.” And, looking directly at Elizabeth, “A most pleasant surprise!”

Johnson was not sure what exactly had happened but obviously Mr. Darcy was known to at least one of the Gardiner party. He pressed on, “Mr. Darcy, may I make known to you Mr. Edward Gardiner, Mrs. Madeline Gardiner, Captain Stovall and Mr. Gardiner’s nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Ladies, gentlemen, allow me to introduce Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, who is from Derbyshire.”

Darcy bowed and spoke quickly, “I had the very great please of meeting the Miss Bennets in Hertfordshire while visiting a friend there. It is a pleasure to meet you both once again. Mr. Gardiner, Mrs Gardiner, I am pleased to make your acquaintance also. I seem to remember hearing Miss
Elizabeth speak fondly of you both.”

Mr. Gardiner responded, since both of his nieces seemed to have lost the power of speech, “Elizabeth has spoken of you also, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow and, glanced at Elizabeth, before looking at Mr. Gardiner and replying “That was most equivocal, Sir. But I suspect she treated me most justly.”

He could feel Elizabeth searching his face. He turned to Jane and asked, “Miss Bennet, I trust your family are all well?”

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, my family in Hertfordshire are indeed all well.”

"How long have you been in London?”

“Our aunt and uncle visited us at Longbourn over Christmas and we returned with them a few days later.”

Darcy continued to become acquainted with the other members of the party and had just discovered that Mrs. Gardiner had ties to Derbyshire when conversation was cut short by the announcement that dinner was to be served and everyone began to move towards the dining room. Darcy had hopes of acquiring a seat close to Elizabeth and was only partially successful. Her place was on the other side of the table and offset by two other people. Fortunately, he could observe her and hear parts of her conversation. The uncertainty that had begun to plague him – that both his memories and love of Elizabeth were fading – was gone. He found that his admiration and longing were as strong now as they ever were, and possibly stronger. He wanted nothing more than to simply look and admire her.

"I must attend, I must behave in a civil manner with those around me.” It took a conscious effort to begin to talk with the people on either side of him. He hoped he was not appearing too distracted but he knew his eyes were constantly shifting to look at Elizabeth. Mrs. Gardiner had taken the seat next to him which provided him with the opportunity to talk with her about Derbyshire and gaze at Elizabeth, who was sitting almost directly across from her aunt, with, he hoped, discretion. Having spent many years prior to her marriage in Lambton Mrs. Gardiner knew Derbyshire well and had also toured Pemberley and its grounds several times. Through her conversation, she had quickly impressed him as a genteel, elegant and intelligent lady and it was obvious that she had been a positive influence on the two eldest Bennet sisters. Good manners required Darcy to pay some attention to the lady on his other side and, after several attempts to discover a topic of mutual interest, he was able to engage her in talk about her charitable work which attempted to provide some education to children in impoverished areas. He could not help but be impressed with her dedication and enthusiasm as she expounded on the various projects that were underway, and was not reluctant to promise financial support to her efforts.

Turning to talk again with Mrs. Gardiner, he saw Elizabeth gazing at him. He gave a small nod of his head and a slight smile and was gratified to have it returned. His attention was then captured by Mrs. Gardiner who had begun to talk with the gentleman sitting across from him – a Captain Stovall, who Darcy now remembered as part of the Gardiner party. From Mrs. Gardiner’s comments, Darcy realized he was a naval captain and asked, “Are you between commands, Captain?”

"No, Mr.Darcy. My ship is in sad shape and laid up being repaired. I probably will not get back into the war until the summer.”

“The navy has borne a huge portion of the war burden so far and we all owe you so much. I do think that our army will now be taking on a larger portion of the effort. My cousin and his regiment are shipping out soon to join Wellesley in Portugal.”
“I agree, if we are to defeat Napoleon, it will have to be on land and that is the job of the army. I wish your cousin well and hope he returns safely.”

“As do we all, Sir. As do we all.”

Darcy turned to Mrs. Gardiner and asked, “Mrs. Gardiner, did you ever have occasion to meet my parents while you were in Lambton?”

“Yes sir. I remember meeting and speaking with your mother several times over the years. She was always a pleasure to meet and obviously concerned about the welfare of people in Lambton. I remember her visiting the one or two poor families in the town and providing them with food and clothing for the children. A truly kind lady.”

“I am most gratified to hear that, madam. I could wish that my younger sister could be here while you speak of her. She has few memories of our mother and is always eager to talk with anyone who knew her.”

“I should be pleased to share the few memories that I have, should the occasion arise, Mr. Darcy.”

Wishing to talk of less personal topics, they began discussing, by mutual, unstated agreement, the various events that Jane and Elizabeth had enjoyed while in London. Darcy did discover, to his satisfaction, that both sisters were expected to remain in town for several months.

Elizabeth was maintaining her composure with some difficulty. She had recovered from the shock of turning to come face-to-face with Mr. Darcy with no warning. She had felt almost like she would faint and then, when she was struggling to regain her mental balance, she had received a second shock. He had said meeting her again was a pleasant surprise. She had recognized that he had been as shocked as herself initially, but he seemed to regain his poise much quicker. His manner had changed. She could tell that he was obviously still quite reserved but he was civil, extraordinarily so to her, and that civility had extended to everyone. He was talking with everyone around him and, if his reserve was intact, he was obviously making an effort to be amiable. And he had smiled at her and his self-deprecating comment to her uncle showed a certain willingness to admit errors on his part. And he smiled at her again at the table!! Did he still feel some affection for her? But, did it matter? Lydia had effectively ruined whatever hopes she could entertain with regard to Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth knew she was not behaving as was her usual wont in company. Her thoughts were too engaged and chaotic for that. She looked up at Mr. Darcy once again and noticed her aunt watching her with what looked to be a very speculative eye. Elizabeth suspected that her aunt would very likely want to talk seriously about Mr. Darcy. How much should she confide?

Before Elizabeth realized it, the ladies were rising from the table to go to the drawing room, leaving the gentlemen to their port and cigars. Elizabeth was approached by the hostess and asked to perform. This was not unexpected, although tonight it might be a little more difficult to remain composed. She could hope he did not sit where she could observe him while performing and discompose her. Given her feelings now, her composure would suffer much more than it had at Rosings Park when he last attended her performance. She was surprised at such thoughts. She had thought little of Mr. Darcy in recent months. She knew now she was not insensible to his attractions, nor to the fact that he had admired her greatly. Of her feelings, she was uncertain but admiration for Mr. Darcy seemed probable.

Darcy had risen to stretch his legs and was handed an excellent port. He saw Mr. Gardiner watching him from across the room, his face carefully bland. This seemed like an excellent opportunity to begin to ‘illustrate a character’ as Elizabeth had once attempted to do with him. In this case, he wanted to sketch that of Mr. Gardiner. He casually walked over and introduced himself once again, “Mr. Gardiner, I believe we were introduced but had little opportunity to converse.”
“True, Mr. Darcy. Unfortunately, we were also too separated at the table to make conversation possible.”

“I did have the opportunity to talk with your wife, sir. She obviously finds Derbyshire as beautiful as I do. It was an interesting conversation. Do you often visit the area?”

“We had planned to do so last summer but we had to cancel our plans at the last minute. Perhaps in a few years. We have no plans to travel this year or next.”

“Mr. Gardiner, our good host was most interested in having us meet. I suspect he believes that we might have some mutual interests in business. Might I call on you to discuss such possibilities?”

“Certainly, Mr. Darcy. My place of business is on _____ Street, just off Gracechurch Street.”

After arranging for a convenient time to meet, they talked amiably until their attention was captured by others. After about a half hour, their host suggested they rejoin the ladies. Darcy, upon entering the drawing room, immediately looked for Elizabeth and, seeing her by the pianoforte looking through the sheet music, approached and offered to turn the pages if she were to play. He could see her blush, hesitate and then nod her acceptance. He then leaned towards her and whispered, “I cannot read music. You will have to nod your head, or kick me, to let me know when to turn a page.”

“Is the choice mine, sir?” she whispered back. “Is he teasing me?”

“Indeed it is.”

“I will be kind then and nod, sir.”

Whereupon she sat, did a few exercises to loosen her fingers and began to play. Darcy sat beside her and when she nodded, turned a page. Watching her face was a pleasure but it took considerable self-control to not become absorbed in watching her expressions. He was not always successful and Elizabeth, on several occasions, had to repeat sections until he had gathered his wits. For her part, Elizabeth knew she was not playing as well as she usually did. She was extremely conscious of the man sitting beside her. His cologne, and a very male presence, caused her thoughts to scatter. Eventually, it was over and she received the appreciation of the other guests. She did hear Darcy say, “As always, your playing affords me considerable pleasure, Miss Elizabeth.”

A quiet, “Thank you, Mr. Darcy” was all she could manage. “He had said that before. I thought he was being sarcastic. Another misjudgement on my part?” She walked over to the hostess to get a cup of tea. Darcy did likewise and seeking an opportunity to talk with her privately, gestured towards a settee somewhat removed from everyone. “May we speak for a moment, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked. She moved to the settee, and sat. She could see her aunt and Jane watching them both. “It will be an interesting night when I get home,” she thought.

Darcy sat down beside her and turning to face her, murmured, “I apologize. I suspect I am causing some concern on the part of your aunt and uncle.”

“I will have some explaining to do later tonight, I believe.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I cannot tell how very happy I am to meet you again. I would like an opportunity to talk with you in some privacy or as much as propriety will allow. This is not the time or place for such. May I call on you tomorrow morning?”

Elizabeth’s confusion had not abated a great deal. Of what would he want to talk? Was there any
purpose given the Lydia situation, but she could hardly refuse on that basis since he could not be aware of it.

Darcy viewed her obvious indecision with increasing concern and blurted, “I am sorry. My request is obviously distressing you. You need not …” And he began to rise from the settee.

Elizabeth spoke immediately, “No! Wait, please. I would be happy to receive you tomorrow morning. I…I was simply surprised by your request. I am sure I do not deserve such consideration.”

Darcy shook his head, “Quite the contrary, Miss Elizabeth. You merit every consideration. Now, may I enquire as to your address?”

Elizabeth gave him the Gardiners’ Gracechurch Street address, looking at Darcy to see if the location bothered him but could observe no aversion on his part. Noting her aunt approaching, Darcy stood up and offered her his seat which she accepted. Darcy offered to refill their tea, an offer graciously declined by both ladies, after which he left, ostensibly to refill his own cup, and moved to talk with others. The rest of the evening passed uneventfully for all. Upon returning home, Darcy retired to his room with a glass of brandy and a conviction that Elizabeth’s opinion of him had changed materially. Tomorrow would be difficult but he had to convince her to allow him to show that he had taken her reproofs to heart. He could hope once more.

Elizabeth’s evening, however, was not over when she arrived home. She had informed them all, during the drive home, that Mr. Darcy had asked to call tomorrow morning. Her aunt and uncle were surprised, but not unduly so, given what they observed of the behaviour of Mr. Darcy. Madeline Gardiner decided she needed a private talk with her niece before either of them slept.

As she was heading up to her room, Elizabeth was detained by her aunt. “Lizzy, we must talk. I will be up in a half hour.” There was no suggestion that the talk could or would be deferred. Elizabeth nodded and went upstairs to don her nightgown and robe. Jane wanted to talk over the evening also but Elizabeth indicated that her aunt was going to want an explanation of tonight’s events and did not seem willing to wait. Then Elizabeth sat and waited, attempting to organize her thoughts.

When her aunt entered the room, she carried a tray with biscuits and tea. Pouring a cup for them both, she passed one to Elizabeth, offered her a biscuit and sat with her back resting against the footboard of the bed. Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow, “Is this going to be that tiring, Aunt?”

“That depends on you, Lizzy. I cannot force your confidence, but I do think that there is some important information about Mr. Darcy and yourself that your uncle and I need to know.” She paused and then continued, “I know that you are used to keeping your own counsel, but this time I think you need to trust us to help you.”

“It was plain to your uncle and me, and I dare say Jane as well, that Mr. Darcy admires you a great deal. This seems to contradict the opinions you expressed a year ago when you stated he disliked you. And then, there is your behaviour. Where once you were quite adamant in your dislike, I saw evidence tonight of quite different feelings. There is much that you have not told us, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth stared at her hands, sighed and then moved to sit, resting against the headboard. “As usual, Aunt, you have grasped the essentials. I think I will have to tell the story from its beginnings, despite how badly I have behaved. Jane, by the way, knows everything.” She then talked for almost an hour, uninterrupted by anything more than the occasional “Lizzy, you did not!” or “Oh dear!” Or “He said what?” from her aunt. Elizabeth ended by retrieving the letter that Darcy had written and handed it to her aunt who read it thoroughly, twice.

Madeline Gardiner quietly considered her niece, “So many mistakes, errors of judgement, mistaken
pride. I don’t suppose any couple could have done worse, if they deliberately tried to do so. If it were not for Lydia, I would think, from what I observed tonight, that a strong attachment could exist between you. Because of Lydia, I cannot see how such an attachment is possible. Mr. Darcy would face considerable censure and disapprobation, if he attached himself to you. Would he be prepared to face that consequence? I do not know. I do think you have an obligation to hear what he has to say tomorrow and I will ensure you both some privacy. Should he want to continue to see you, he will have to be told about Lydia. Do you want to do so? Or shall I? Your uncle performed the service for Jane and I would suggest either I, or your uncle, do likewise for you. “

Elizabeth considered the problem for several minutes. “It is quite likely that I will be too discomposed by our conversation to be truly coherent. Nonetheless, I think it best that I speak of Lydia.”

“Very well, I will enlighten your uncle tonight about the particulars of your relationship with Mr. Darcy. And Lizzy, do not worry and fret. It will serve no purpose. “

“Thank you, Aunt.” replied Elizabeth knowing that, no matter her wishes, her mind would not be easy. Before tonight, she had, for the most part, reconciled herself to the loss of a Mr. Darcy that she previously had not wanted. Now, with the possibility of his interest in her, she would lose him once more and the anguish would be greater since she now understood how estimable his character was.
Friday, January 29, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

At precisely ten in the morning, Darcy presented his card requesting to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He was shown into the drawing room where Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner awaited him. He bowed to each and was acknowledged by a curtsy. Mrs. Gardiner spoke first, “Mr. Darcy, Lizzy has informed her uncle and me that you have requested a private interview. I am sure you appreciate the unusual nature of such a request, inasmuch as we are not aware of any attachment between you both. However, because of rather unique circumstances that seem to exist, and Lizzy has told us much of the history between you, we are prepared to allow you to meet in our parlour directly across the hall. The door will remain open, as will the door of this room, and I will remain here. Is that satisfactory, sir?”

“Indeed, Mrs. Gardiner. Quite satisfactory and thank you.”

Mrs. Gardiner then led the way into the parlour and seated them both. Satisfied that a proper distance separated her niece and Mr. Darcy, she returned to the drawing room.

In the parlour, each considered the other, wondering who was to start. Elizabeth believed that since Mr. Darcy had requested the interview, the responsibility for initiating the discussion rested upon him. Nevertheless, she did desperately want to apologize for her mistakes, her anger and her abuse of him. Darcy, for his part, wished to apologize but feared his tongue would betray him once again.

“Miss Bennet, I …”

“Mr Darcy, please allow …”

They looked at each other and Darcy’s small smile elicited a shake of the head from Elizabeth. A slight gesture of her hand, motioned him to proceed.

“Thank you Miss Elizabeth. I asked for this interview for a number of reasons, the first of which is to ask for your forgiveness for my behaviour to you throughout almost all of our acquaintance.”

Elizabeth could not allow this to stand unopposed. “Sir, I behaved most poorly towards you and particularly during my stay in Kent. I cannot …”

“Miss Elizabeth! Please do not upset yourself so,” responded Darcy whose feelings would not allow him to remain seated. He was up and moving towards the window before he realized he was no longer sitting. He immediately stopped himself and turned to face Elizabeth. “I apologize for such abrupt behaviour. I could not sit!”

“Miss Elizabeth, my conduct towards you, your family and even your neighbours merits the strongest reproofs. You accused me of pride, arrogance and a selfish disdain for others. I was angry, very angry at your words. It took weeks for my anger to cool enough to realize the truth of your reproof. It took some time more, before I could even recognize how grievously I had insulted you, both in the manner of my proposal and its content. I stand here ashamed of the man who made that offer of marriage to you that evening. All that I realised then was that I was not worthy of your hand in marriage.”

Elizabeth could not move her eyes from his face. That he could make such an admission seemed to her to be incredible. That it was honest, she believed she could read from his expression. She must interrupt.
“Mr. Darcy, please. I owe you an apology as well. My behaviour that night deserves much censure also. I abused you in the most abominable manner. I, who prided myself on my ability to discern people’s character, allowed my judgement to be prejudiced by an errant comment of yours on very first acquaintance. I was angered by that comment and allowed it, unconsciously, to prejudice me against your character in all of our subsequent dealings. I never would have believed Mr. Wickham’s lies, nor would I have been so insensitive as to your regard, if I had not been so determined to dislike you. It took me considerable time also to understand my folly and misjudgement of your character. “

“Miss Elizabeth, I owe you a most particular apology. I can now see that at our very first acquaintance, you overheard something I said to Mr. Bingley. It was not only offensive and incorrect; it was wrong of me to utter such words in public. A most ungentlemanly thing to do. My reason, that Mr. Bingley was plaguing me badly on the occasion, does not excuse my behaviour.”

“It was wrong indeed, sir, and I fear it coloured my attitude towards you for months. For that I fear you paid a heavy price.”

“Did my letter help you to better understand my character?”

“Truly it did......and I appreciate the concern and consideration which led you to write it. It was a most gentlemanly thing to have done.”

"I was very angry when I wrote it. I can only hope that it did not disturb you too much. I know I wrote such as to cause pain, though that was not my intent.”

"It was an angry letter, to be sure, at the beginning. Its conclusion was most charitable and, if parts did pain me, I eventually could recognize the truth and honesty they contained.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I beg you not to be too harsh with yourself about Mr. Wickham. He is a practiced deceiver and you had not the experience or knowledge to recognize his character. My cousin, the Colonel, was most upset to learn that Wickham was in your area and was quite harsh with me about my failure to protect you and your neighbours from him. He believed I had an obligation to make known his misdeeds. I cannot fault his concerns. I should have done something.”

Elizabeth paled at this reference to Wickham and was tempted to confess his wickedness towards Lydia. She repressed it since she saw no useful purpose. She simply answered, “Mr. Darcy, shall we concede that both our behaviours were not above reproach. I know I have learned much from the experience and, I believe, you have done likewise.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I will not argue with you as to who bears the greatest fault. I feel that you have much less cause to reproach yourself than I.”

“Come, come, sir. Let us put this behind us. If we continue in this manner, we will be unable to discuss those other matters you mentioned.”

“Very well. Miss Elizabeth,” replied Darcy. He thought for a moment, “it seemed to me last night that Captain Stovall was quite attentive to your sister.”

“Yes, in fact he is courting her.”

“She seems happier than I can remember ever seeing her.”

“I think she is. She has told me that her heart has fully mended. “

“I am very glad to hear that.” Darcy debated whether to reveal his discussion with Bingley but decided that if he was to be truthful, he must do so. “Miss Elizabeth, last summer after my anger had
abated, and I could consider your words more carefully, I realized that the opinion of a sister with intimate knowledge of Miss Bennet’s affection was almost assuredly more accurate than mine could hope to be. I decided to confront Bingley with this knowledge and that of my interference. I did so when Bingley was visiting Pemberley last August. His response, I admit quite surprised me. You see...."

As Darcy described his meeting with Bingley and the latter’s subsequent actions, he was watching Elizabeth’s face, trying to understand her feelings and thoughts about his confession but he could not decipher them. If anything, she looked surprised. When he had finished, she appeared lost in thought and then, shaking her head, she looked at him with a rueful smile. “Jane and I had quite come to the opinion that Mr. Bingley was sadly lacking in this whole affair. In fact, Jane became quite angry with him – and, Mr. Darcy she read your letter after finding it by accident and knows of your involvement. She does not hold you to blame. I do believe that her anger mended her heart quite thoroughly. She is, indeed, much happier now and I would think Captain Stovall could make her very happy indeed.”

“I am very glad to hear it.”

“Therefore Mr. Darcy, I am quite prepared to overlook, indeed forgive, your officious interference in the matter of my sister and Mr. Bingley.” This was said with a smile that Darcy could not possibly misinterpret and robbed the words of any attempt to cause pain.

“Thank you Miss Elizabeth. I believe that I should apologize to your sister as well.”

“Perhaps, although I do not see that much would be accomplished by doing so.”

“My honour, I think, requires it. But, that is for later. Miss Elizabeth, there is one more matter I wish to discuss and it is really the reason I am here today. If I had not met you last night, I fully intended to travel to Hertfordshire to call on you. I told you the simple truth last night. I had but to see you again and I found myself as much, if not more, in love with you than ever. My feelings are unchanged. I think your opinion of me has changed and I hope that you think better of me now than when I first proposed. I also came to understand that neither of us really knows the other. That was largely my fault stemming from a desire to hide my interest while in Hertfordshire. I would like to get to understand you better and to have you better understand me. Will you allow me to continue to call on you?”

Elizabeth trembled. The tension that had permeated their meeting seemed to peak. “Breathe!” She thought and took a deep breath. She looked Darcy and saw his face pale as she did not respond immediately. “He is expecting me to refuse!” She thought and immediately raised her hand to forestall his words. “Mr. Darcy, there is something you need to know before I can give you an answer.” She looked at Darcy and then, unable to face him directly, focused her gaze on the window behind him. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and her voice, and continued, “Simply put, Mr. Darcy. My youngest sister, Lydia, eloped last summer with George Wickham. My father and uncle traced them as far as London but have not recovered her, nor have we heard from her since. My family has been shunned by its neighbours, to the extent that Jane and I have taken residence with my aunt and uncle since Christmas. It is, in every way, too horrible and painful to contemplate.”

Darcy was stunned by the magnitude of the disaster facing him and Elizabeth. He could see the pain in her eyes as she rose and, with an obvious effort at self control, spoke, “Mr. Darcy I will quite understand should you wish to reconsider any interest you might harbour. Your family should not, could not be expected to bear the taint...”

“Please, Elizabeth, do not say such.” He interrupted. It is doubtful whether either of them was sensible of his breach of propriety. He tried to gather his thoughts. Wickham again! He needed to
think. Elizabeth could only see his countenance. It seemed frozen and hard; a frown suggested his
disapproval, disdain. Finally, words seemed to be wrenched from him. “Miss Elizabeth, please sit. I
need to collect my thoughts which are all confusion at the moment. I know not what words to offer
you for comfort and would not wish to burden you with my hopes for a better resolution that would
seem to require your thanks. I must depart now but would like to call on you Monday next. I am to
Portsmouth today to see off my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, whom you met at Rosings Park. He and
his regiment are to sail tomorrow to join Wellesley in Portugal.”

Elizabeth remembered the amiable Colonel and, gathering her composure, much shaken by his
indication of a further call, answered, “I would be pleased to see you again Mr. Darcy. Please extend
my wishes to Colonel Fitzwilliam for a safe voyage and that he return to his family alive and well.”

Darcy assured her he would pass her message to the Colonel, after which he took his leave. Once he
was out of the door, Elizabeth collapsed on her chair. Mrs. Gardiner entered the room and perceiving
Elizabeth’s distress, instructed a maid to bring tea and some biscuits. While awaiting the
refreshments, she directed the conversation to a discussion of her children’s antics so as to dissipate
the tension. Finally, tea was delivered, the door closed and privacy ensured. She then turned to
Elizabeth and asked, “I am here now, Lizzy. What is the matter?”

“Aunt, Mr. Darcy has asked me to be allowed to call on Monday.”

“Do I assume that you both have resolved the many issues between you?”

Elizabeth was thoughtful before replying, ”I do not know if we have resolved all the issues, but I
think we have made a start. Before I told him about Lydia, he expressed a desire for us to come to
know each other much better,” Elizabeth looked at her aunt in some confusion. “Then I told him
about Lydia and expected him to express his regrets and depart as soon as possible. Instead, he asked
to call on Monday. I do not understand him at all. His features seemed hard, disdainful when I related
the news but he asked to call. But he did not reject me. I do not understand.”

Her aunt looked at her and replied, “I think there is much more to that young man than you give him
credit for, Lizzy. Could it be that he was thinking about Wickham's role? You must appreciate his
feelings toward him. Now I must apprise your uncle of these circumstances. I am sure he will want to
be here when Mr. Darcy calls on Monday. It was all I could do to get him to go to his office this
morning. He was quite interested in your young man.”

“He is not my young man, Aunt!”

“I beg to differ, Lizzy. If he was not, he would have made polite excuses and you would never see
him again.” With this, Mrs. Gardiner left to arrange lunch and send a note to her husband.

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Darcy returned to his house and began the process of discovering Lydia. He had determined on
doing so during his ride home. Lord ______ was chairman of the organization which collected and
disbursed funds to homes that assisted young women left destitute, unwed mothers and other
distressed, unprotected young women. Darcy and his father had contributed to the organization for
years. He should be able to get a list of the homes to which funds had been supplied. He had no idea
how many such places existed, but, with the address and the name of the director of each, he would
canvas them all, though it could take some time. A note to Lord _____ was quickly drafted and
given to a footman to deliver.

That task completed, he considered calling on Mrs. Younge, but it was now too late for that. He
would call on her tomorrow. For now, he would have to consider how he could be in Elizabeth’s
company other than calling on the Gardiners.

His mind then turned to how he would conduct the search. Secrecy was necessary. No one could know for whom he was searching nor, if he found her, could Lydia’s presence be known. He would have to secrete her here at Darcy House. As his thoughts continued along these lines, they gradually became focused on Elizabeth. His desire, his need for her, was unabated. Lydia must be recovered, else it might be a year or more before he could pursue her and would she be willing to wait after he had treated her so abominably?
Chapter 20

Saturday, January 30, 1813 – Royal Navy Dockyard, Portsmouth

The peculiar smell and sounds of the sea became sharper as the Darcy carriage swept through the gates of the Navy Dockyard and onto the dock. Screaming seagulls mingled with the sound of waves slapping against the dock and the unique smell of seaweed. A stiff breeze was blowing, as evidenced by the straining hawsers of anchored ships and whitecaps dancing on the surface of the Solent. A steady stream of lighters were still ferrying men out to their ships in a frantic race to take advantage of a rising tide and a favourable wind.

As Darcy alighted from his carriage, he could see the Matlock family some distance down the wharf. After helping Georgiana to step down, they walked rapidly towards them. The Colonel was standing in their midst and looked up as Darcy and Georgiana neared.

“I was beginning to worry you would not make it.”

“We would definitely not miss saying our farewells, Richard!” replied Darcy.

“Oh Richard” cried Georgiana hugging her cousin and trying to control her watery eyes, “you must come back.”

“I certainly plan to do so, Georgie. I have to dance at your coming out ball, you know!”

A naval Lieutenant walked up to the Colonel, saluted and informed him that the skiff transporting him out to his ship was waiting for him to board. The Colonel said his final good-byes to his family and began to follow the Lieutenant. Darcy seized the opportunity to walk alongside and quickly murmured. “I thought I should tell you that I met Miss Elizabeth a couple of days ago. She has agreed to see me again but there are complications. This letter should explain it all.” Darcy passed his cousin a letter. “Read it later when you have time. She also asked me to extend her wishes for your safe return.”

The Colonel stopped, clapped Darcy on the shoulder saying, “Excellent! That is good news. You have my best wishes.”

They reached the waiting skiff and Fitzwilliam descended and settled himself. He and several other officers were rowed swiftly to the waiting ship. Darcy rejoined the Matlock family, receiving a questioning glance from Lady Eleanor which he carefully pretended not to notice. They all waited and watched as one ship after another weighed anchor and headed out of the Solent, only turning to depart for London when Richard’s ship disappeared from view amongst a melee of sails.

The trip back to London was quiet, both Darcy and Georgiana thinking of Fitzwilliam’s departure which neither really wanted to discuss. Finally, Darcy looked over at his sister and considered whether this was a good time to discuss his courtship with Elizabeth. It was not truly a private setting but the noise of the wheels on the road surface should mask their conversation quite effectively, provided they did not speak too loudly. He leaned forward and looked at his sister, “Georgiana, I have some news for you. Do you remember my talking about Miss Elizabeth Bennet last summer?”

Georgiana looked up in some surprise, “I remember quite well, Brother. You never talked about another woman so. It would be difficult to forget.”

“I met her again the other night. She was also a guest at the dinner. We spoke and she was much changed towards me. I was encouraged enough to ask to call on her the next day. There were some
issues between us that I thought we had to resolve. She agreed to meet me. We talked for hours and I will be seeing her once again on Monday.”

Georgiana literally bounced on her seat, “Did you propose again, Brother?”

“No, she needs to know me better first.” He paused, and gathering his courage, began again, “There is a major problem we face, Georgiana.”

At her look of surprise, he said, “Yes, well….it seems her youngest sister ran off with Wickham last summer, was taken by him to London and then deserted. Her family has not been able to recover her.”

Georgiana’s face paled, “Wickham?”

“Yes, and to make matters worse, I paid him to leave the country last fall. He is now somewhere in the Americas. I did not know at the time that Miss Elizabeth’s sister was involved.”

“But will you be able to help them?”

“I do not know. I will try.” He looked at Georgiana. Obviously the implications of Miss Lydia’s behaviour had not occurred to her. He would have to explain. “Georgiana, this is quite serious. Miss Lydia and Wickham lived together as man and wife but were never married. Now he has deserted her and her virtue, her reputation is lost. Her family in Hertfordshire are being shunned by their neighbours and Miss Elizabeth and her elder sister have come to London to escape the censure.”

“I am not sure I fully understand what you are saying. How does this bear on us?”

“If I offer for Miss Bennet, or even publicly court her, many people might believe that the stigma is also attached to the Darcy name, to you and me. If I were to marry her, her family would become my family and we also would face censure.”

“How can that be? Is not Miss Bennet a respectable young woman?”

“Indeed she is, but society will act as though her behaviour would be the same as her sister’s.”

“Do you think so, Brother?”

“No! Definitely not.” Darcy was emphatic on this point. “I have absolutely no doubts about Miss Elizabeth’s respectability. None! Nevertheless, the problem remains. I cannot court her as long as her sister is missing and unwed.” Darcy proceeded to describe to his sister all the concerns that he faced. He wasn’t sure if she fully comprehended how this could affect her. The issue of her marriage prospects had to be addressed.

“Georgiana, there is one aspect of this that bears most heavily on you.”

“My prospects for a good marriage?”

“Yes. It would be foolish of me to ignore the fact that many families will not want to attach themselves to us, if I were to marry Miss Elizabeth. There could be very eligible suitors amongst them who would otherwise be eager to attach themselves to the granddaughter of an Earl. As well, we are more likely to draw the attention of the more mercenary suitors who think us desperate to marry you off and who are attracted only to your dowry.”

“What is a good suitor, Brother?”
As you probably have guessed, my opinion has changed quite a bit over the past months. Now I believe a good suitor to be one who is respectable, will treat you, and any children you have, with care and respect and will be able to provide you with a comfortable life such that your dowry is not an important consideration. I would hope for mutual esteem between you.”

Georgiana sat quietly thinking for several minutes. Darcy could not tell which way her thoughts were tending. Finally, she answered, “I have only lately begun to consider such matters and I find my opinion does not differ greatly from yours. I cannot envision spending thirty or forty years married to a man I do not esteem. I would rather wait or not marry at all if such is my only choice.”

“Georgiana, I cannot undertake anything that would damage your opportunities for a good and happy marriage and the loss of all, or even some, of our connections would greatly damage your opportunities.”

“I understand, Brother,” replied Georgiana with a distinct shake of her head. “When can I meet Miss Elizabeth? You know how much I want a sister.”

“I hope to introduce you to her in a few days. We may call on her at home. I know you will love her as much as I.”

The remainder of the carriage ride was spent in desultory conversation. Both were tired from the morning travel and napped as much as was possible.

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Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam collapsed onto his bunk, weary from checking the condition of his troops. The fact that he had just spent a half hour with his head hanging over a railing and casting his last meal into the sea had more than a little to do with his fatigue. At least it was better than where his men were quartered. The smell down there would induce nausea, even if one was not seasick.

He remembered Darcy’s letter and retrieved from his greatcoat where he had stored it. Pouring himself a whiskey, he broke the seal and began to read,

Richard,

I was fortunate to meet Miss Elizabeth Bennet at a dinner party the other night. She and her elder sister have come to London to live with their aunt and uncle. The meeting was a shock to us both but I was able to talk with her briefly at the party. She was most amiable and pleasant. I asked for and received permission to call on her the next day. We were afforded some privacy to try and resolve those issues that separated us. I think we did so. However, a new problem has arisen. Miss Elizabeth’s youngest sister, Lydia, eloped with Wickham last August. They obviously did not marry and I suspect Wickham deserted her when I paid him to go to the United States. Unless I can recover her, any attachment with Miss Elizabeth will exact a penalty. For myself, I am not concerned but I cannot form any attachment while her youngest sister is missing or while Georgiana is not married.

As you are also Georgiana’s guardian, I deemed it essential that you be made aware of the particulars of the situation. For Georgiana only, am I concerned.

I will continue to call on Miss Elizabeth, but discretely, hoping to avoid public attention. In the meantime I will be searching quite assiduously for Miss Lydia. I must ask a special favour which is that I would have you keep your parents unaware of my interest and dealings with Miss Elizabeth at this time.

I will apprise you of any new developments should such occur.
Fitzwilliam groaned, "can nothing be simple between those two?" There was nothing he could do at the moment. He had more pressing problems, such as, did he have enough time to get to the railing again?
Monday, February 1, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

Darcy had arrived shortly after dinner was completed and was requested by Mr. Gardiner to join him in his study almost immediately. He was confused as to the reason for the interview but could see that Mr. Gardiner did not appear unduly worried or concerned. After accepting a glass of port, he waited for his host to reveal the reason for their meeting. Finally Mr. Gardiner, with obvious reluctance, began,

“Mr. Darcy, you are I am sure wondering why I asked to speak with you tonight. To be very honest, Mrs. Gardiner and I are both aware of your interest in Elizabeth. From what we can determine based on your previous meetings, her interest may also be engaged.”

At this Darcy sat upright with a pleased smile and exclaimed, “Really? I had thought so but was not certain.”

“Oh yes, and that is why we are concerned. For Elizabeth’s sake, her aunt and I must know your intentions. In normal circumstances, I would let matters develop at their own speed. However, the circumstances are far from normal and I suspect that you are not in a position to attach yourself to Elizabeth. You have said nothing of your intentions so far, but now Mrs. Gardiner and I must know … for Elizabeth’s protection.”

Darcy sighed. He had expected this moment to arise but wished that it had been delayed in the hope that he might find Lydia first. “Mr. Gardiner, you are quite within your rights to demand to know my intentions in this case. I would do exactly the same under such circumstances. Let me assure you that my intentions are honourable. I hope to make Miss Elizabeth, my wife. But I cannot offer for her until my sister is married. My duty to her as her brother and guardian precludes it. The impact on the Darcy reputation of marrying Miss Elizabeth right now is only relevant to me insofar as it damages my sister’s ability to make a suitable marriage. The loss of connections that most probably will occur could dissuade some eligible suitors for her hand which is, of course, my primary concern; however, I am not prepared to wait indefinitely for my sister to marry. If she is not married by the end of the season next year, I will be proposing to Miss Elizabeth. I only hope that she has not accepted another offer in the interim. If my sister marries earlier, I will be making my offer sooner. Sir, you can be assured there will be an offer, unless Miss Elizabeth decides against me beforehand. You can appreciate my reluctance to speak of this to Miss Elizabeth. I do not want her to feel obligated to me should she receive another offer.”

Mr. Gardiner considered the young man sitting in front of him. He had grown to quite like him and thought him an excellent match for Elizabeth. He made a decision, “I would like to invite Elizabeth to join our discussion. She is a sensible girl and I think would understand your position quite well.”

Darcy was not sure that he completely agreed with the idea of inviting Elizabeth to join the discussion but her uncle probably knew her much better than he did. He nodded his head in acquiescence and Mr. Gardiner left to get Elizabeth. Returning only seconds later, he bade her sit beside Darcy and seating himself once again, considered them both.

“Lizzy, I asked to speak to Mr. Darcy this evening to determine his intentions towards you. Your aunt and I became concerned because it was quite obvious to us last Saturday evening that your affections had become engaged. Mr. Darcy has made it clear to me tonight that only his duty, as his sister’s brother and guardian, has prevented him from making an offer for you.”
Seeing Elizabeth about to burst into tears and leave the room, he quickly circled his desk and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Please child, let me finish.”

Returning to his seat and, noting the handkerchief being handed to her by Darcy along with a murmured comment which caused her to glance at him quickly, he smiled and continued,

“Now before I was so rudely interrupted, Mr. Darcy also was quite firm that he would be making an offer following his sister’s first season, which will be next year, regardless of whether she is married or not.”

At this Elizabeth turned to look at Darcy. Her mouth worked but only a squeak was uttered. Darcy looked at Mr. Gardiner and, smiling, said, “That is odd, I have never seen her bereft of speech before. Does this happen often?”

Not waiting for answer, he continued in a more serious vein. “Miss Elizabeth, I will not ask you for a commitment. It would not be fair to ask you to wait for over a year until I consider myself free to make an offer. But be assured of this. If you are unattached and have not sent me away, I will make that offer next June.”

Mr. Gardiner looked at Elizabeth, "Do you want to say anything, Lizzy?" Her shake of the head he accepted and then suggested they join the others in the drawing room. As Elizabeth left the room she stopped and glanced up at Darcy with a somewhat confused expression, "You are very certain of this?" That he was willing to pursue her, despite her circumstances, was difficult to accept. His need to protect his sister, she could well understand; but for him to be prepared to put aside all other considerations and court her, was not something her mind could readily accept right now.

"I am very certain, Miss Elizabeth! Now shall we join the others?"

"I admit I am having a great deal of trouble comprehending."

"Miss Elizabeth, perhaps we should join the others. If we can find a somewhat private spot, I will attempt to explain."

However, when they entered the room their attention was immediately sought by the others and no opportunity was created for them to converse privately for the rest of the evening. When it was time for Darcy to leave, Elizabeth saw him to the door and expressed her regret that they could not talk privately. Darcy simply shook his head and murmured, "We shall have other opportunities to do so. Be assured that you will see me most regularly; my chief fear is that you may grow quite tired of me."

"I think, sir, that I might enjoy trying to get tired of you."

Elizabeth could observe a small grin on his face as he bowed over her hand and took his leave.

Wednesday, February 3, 1813 – Darcy House, London

A discrete rap on his study door captured Darcy’s attention. Hodgkins entered bearing the day’s post and a very thick letter was handed to Darcy. Breaking the seal, he quickly determined it was from Lord _____ and contained the asked particulars of the homes for distressed women. “I did not realize there were so many. Obviously this problem is much greater than most of us realize.” It was too late to visit any homes today. He would start tomorrow after noon. He would have to carry out the visits himself to preserve secrecy. Given the number of homes, he thought it could easily take a fortnight to visit them all.

His visit to Mrs. Younge had not proven particularly productive. She had had little contact with
Wickham after Ramsgate other than to hold his letters until such time as he retrieved them. Darcy had inquired as to Wickham’s favourite brothels. Here Mrs. Younge had been more helpful and one of the places listed, Mrs. James, had been where Wickham left Lydia. Mrs. James asserted that Lydia had left her establishment the same day and she had heard or seen nothing of the girl since then. Darcy had no reason to doubt her words. The offer of £50 would have induced Mrs. James to release Miss Lydia if she were there at all.

Friday, February 5, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

Captain Amos Stovall arrived at Gracechurch Street with a purpose in mind. During his trip down to Portsmouth on Monday he had determined to ask Jane to marry him. He was sure of his affections and she had, it seemed to him, to have given him assurances of hers. He had been impatient to return to London and had forced himself to deal with the problems attending the repairs to his ship. Fortunately, work seemed to be proceeding apace and it was with a real eagerness that he had returned to London. Only the self-control and forethought that had enabled him to reach the rank of Captain, made him aware that he was in sad need of a bath and clean clothes.

He had sent a note to Mrs. Gardiner advising of his return and his intention to visit the next afternoon at three. He then headed to Bond Street to visit a jewellers shop to select an appropriate ring. Now, armed with intent and ring, he was ushered into the drawing room where Mrs. Gardiner and Jane and Elizabeth were receiving calls. Unfortunately for Captain Stovall, there were two other callers when he arrived. One, a young gentleman calling on Elizabeth and the other a very genteel looking woman about Mrs. Gardiner’s age who, from the conversation, appeared to be a familiar acquaintance.

Captain Stovall forced himself to be patient. It was with some amusement that he considered the young man who was being attentive to Elizabeth. From his conversation he appeared to be a clerk in a local company and thought well of his prospects. Elizabeth was encouraging his conversation with quiet civility, evincing no particular interest in the gentleman such as would encourage his further interest. Stovall had been in her company sufficiently to gauge that she was restraining the exercise of her wit at the gentleman’s expense. Finally, his half hour up, he was not encouraged to stay and departed. The lady caller left shortly thereafter.

Stovall turned to Jane and requested a private interview. She consented and quietly Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner left the room, closing the door behind them. He rose and approached Jane who had remained sitting, a very noticeable blush spreading rapidly and her eyes looking at hands in her lap. He found himself extremely nervous, having to restrain his own hands from seeking hers. Finally, he managed a few words through a throat that was suddenly dry and bending to one knee in front of her, spoke clearly but softly,

“Miss Bennet, I know I have known you but a month but in that time I have come to regard you with the greatest affection. Your kindness, your smile, your love for those around you cannot help but inspire in me a love that I had not believed possible. I had not thought to marry until this war had ended and I sought to retire. But it will not do! I cannot take the chance of losing you to another man. You must allow me to tell you how much I admire and love you and to ask that you become my wife.”

Jane finally looked at his face. Such a dear face in such a man. Her heart felt overfull, she could barely utter the words, “Yes, I will most gladly marry you.”

“Truly?”

She laughed, “Oh yes, most truly. I have never been happier nor has anyone touched my heart as you have done. So, YES! YES!”
Stovall grasped her hands in his and standing up, raised both to his lips. “Jane, you have made me the happiest of men.” Reaching into the pocket of his jacket, he took a small box and opening removed a gold ring set with a sapphire and a small diamond on either side. He slid it on her ring finger and then, releasing her hand, he framed her face with his hands and asked softly, “May I?”

“Oh yes, please.”

For Jane, her first kiss was nothing like she expected. The soft pressure of his lips on hers was, she thought, rather nice. As the kiss continued, his lips moved gently against hers and she brought her hands up to rest her palms on his chest. She gave a small sigh of displeasure as he seemed to remove his lips from her and grasped his coat as if to prevent his leaving. He reclaimed her lips and deepened the kiss and suddenly she felt something warm and soft and wet brushing against her own lips. Unconsciously she moved her body closer and felt his hands leave her face and move to her back pulling her even closer and then move to her shoulders and felt his body and lips gradually withdrawing.

Sighing, she murmured “how very nice!” and, looking up at him, said, “I never thought a kiss could be so delightful. Why did you stop?”

“My dearest Jane, that is but a small portion of what awaits when we are married. Now, I think we have trespassed on your aunt’s courtesy quite enough. We should acquaint her with our news, although I doubt we will surprise her.”

When they opened the door and stepped into the small parlour on the opposite side of the hall, the two occupants looked up. The joyful smile that Jane wore told the story and both Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner quickly stood and moved towards them. Elizabeth wrapped Jane in a huge hug saying, “Oh Jane, I am so happy for you.” Elizabeth loosened her grip slightly and holding Jane at arm’s length and looking at Captain Stovall, quipped, “And you have brought me the fine brother I always wished for.”

Mrs. Gardiner hugged Jane and was generous in her congratulations to the couple, saying, “I think you will do very well together. I hope you will stay for dinner, Captain?”

“I would be delighted.”

After they returned to the drawing room, Mrs. Gardiner ordered tea and cakes. Turning to Jane and Stovall, who were sitting together on the settee, she asked, “I realize that you have barely got used to the idea of being engaged but here are some practical issues that you both need to think about. You, Captain, will have to return to duty in several months. That does not leave a great deal of time for an extended engagement, a wedding and honeymoon and, I believe, a trip to visit the Captain’s family. You both might want to consider a wedding date first.”

Stovall was quick to answer, “I would prefer as short an engagement as possible.” To which Jane nodded her agreement, saying, “I think three weeks is long enough. I do not want to wait any longer to start our life together. It will be hard enough to have you return to duty and I do not wish to waste any time between now and then.”

She thought a bit longer, “Three weeks would allow the banns to be read in Longbourn and provide us with time to prepare my wedding clothes in town. I see no need for us to depart for Longbourn until two or three days before the wedding. I know Mama will want to show Amos and me around to our neighbours; but I am of no mind to give consequence to people who shunned me for months. Mama will invite who she likes to the ceremony and to the wedding breakfast.” She paused and with a rueful smile, continued, “I know that is uncharitable and unkind of me, but I cannot easily forget their behaviour towards us.”
Stovall nodded, “What you have suggested is no burden to me; however, I do believe I must visit your father tomorrow to obtain his blessing. Do you wish to come with me, Jane?”

“No, I cannot claim that I do.”

The conversation continued with the newly engaged couple discussing plans for the wedding, travel, the location of their honeymoon and Stovall’s plans to visit. Darcy, who had been invited to dinner, arrived and, being apprised of the happy news, quickly extended his best wishes to them both. Listening quietly to their discussion, he was inspired to invite them to stay at Pemberley on their way to York.

“After all, I must travel there in March to talk to my steward about the spring planting. You could easily stay for a fortnight or more should you wish to do so. There are several suites which afford complete privacy and you could come and go as you wish. In fact,” looking at Elizabeth, “I could also take Georgiana and yourself. Mrs. Annesley can chaperone you and Georgiana, Miss Elizabeth.”

Turning to Stovall, he asked, “Am I correct that you plan to visit your family in York afterwards?”

“Indeed, those were my thoughts. I want to introduce Jane to my mother and sister. I thought to stay a month and return to London to take up my duties again. I thought to look around Yorkshire for a small estate although I don’t intend to purchase until the war is over.”

Elizabeth was very surprised at Darcy’s offer. She could see her surprise mirrored on the faces of Jane and her aunt, although her aunt was much quicker to recover. Elizabeth could not help but exclaim, “That is a most generous offer, Mr. Darcy.” And Jane was quick to extend her appreciation also.

Elizabeth could see Darcy’s struggle to hide his embarrassment. She suspected that guilt over his interference between Jane and Bingley had prompted the offer. Nevertheless, it was most generous and to have it extended to herself even more so, although there she suspected the gentleman of a more personal motivation such as to have her company for a month.

She observed Darcy begin to say something and then hesitate. He began again cautiously, for reasons which quickly became apparent.

“I had planned to travel to York to visit a good friend of mine and his family. This friend has lately taken up residence in York and invited me over Christmas to come and stay for a fortnight or so. I had planned to do so in June but April would be equally acceptable to me. While there, I could assist you in your search if you would wish for such help. I was hesitant to mention this to you since the gentleman I plan to visit is known to both Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth - Mr. Bingley.”

Jane’s response was quite calm, “I see no reason why we should not meet Mr. Bingley. He is an acquaintance and, if indeed he has moved to York, we cannot help but meet should we move to Yorkshire. Amos, do you agree?”

“Most heartily and I would gladly accept your help in looking at various estates, Mr. Darcy.”

Conversation continued around the proposed trips to Pemberley and Yorkshire with Elizabeth, in particular, most interested in the scenic sites that could be found. Dinner did not stifle the conversation as Mrs. Gardiner and Darcy began to talk of their favourite places in Derbyshire.

After dinner, Stovall sought a private audience with Mr. Gardiner who readily gave his approval to the engagement after satisfying himself as to the Captain’s financial position. He had been authorized
by Mr. Bennet, upon their departure from Longbourn, to act as a father in all matters pertaining to both Jane and Elizabeth; in this instance, to deal with the marriage settlement. After discussing the Captain’s wishes, Mr. Gardiner agreed to have his solicitor draw up the papers for their consideration. Stovall also sought out Darcy for a private conversation to request that Darcy acts as his groomsman. Darcy was pleased to accept, having formed a liking for the Captain.

Elizabeth had been prevailed upon to play several pieces that she had been working on but ceased upon Mr. Gardiner and Stovall entering the room. Darcy took the opportunity to approach and ask, “Miss Elizabeth, did my invitation to Pemberley make you uncomfortable? I admit to a great delight in thought of walking and riding the grounds with you to show the beauties of Pemberley.”

“I am not uncomfortable at all, sir. My only concern is the message that might be sent but, if Jane is there, it can be thought that I am attending her. So, I propose to take my fill of such delights as Pemberley has to offer.”

Saturday, February 6, 1813 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire
Stovall was very pleased that Mr. Gardiner had lent him his carriage for the trip Longbourn. A hired carriage would have served as well but would have been nowhere as comfortable. The four hour journey was tedious but finally over as the carriage drew up in the courtyard fronting Longbourn which, to his relatively unschooled eye, looked to be of a comfortable size. The grounds were well kept and neat and the overall appearance was pleasing to the eye.

Presenting his card at the door, he was immediately shown to Mr. Bennet’s study. The house seemed unnaturally quiet but he thought perhaps most of its residents were out. He had sent an express post to Mr. Bennet yesterday advising him of his intention to call so he was certain that he, at least, was at home. Entering the study, he was welcomed by Mr. Bennet.

“Captain Stovall, I am pleased to finally make your acquaintance.”

“Mr. Bennet, while I also regret the delay, I must confess that if Miss Bennet had not moved to London, I would never have had the pleasure of meeting her.”

“Well sir, now that you are here perhaps you could reveal the purpose of this meeting.” Mr. Bennet knew quite well why Stovall was here in his study, but was not prepared to make his task easier.

Stovall had been advised by Mr. Gardiner as to Mr. Bennet’s inclination to tease and make sport of others. He was not of a mind to be the subject of such teasing from a man who had so egregiously failed in his responsibilities to his family. He had considered his words carefully during the journey to Longbourn.

“It is quite simple, Mr. Bennet. Your daughter, Miss Bennet, has accepted my offer of marriage. I have come to ask your blessing on the marriage. I realize that Miss Bennet is of age and your consent is not required but I am sure she would wish for that as well.”

Mr. Bennet was rather taken aback. He had not expected such a firm statement from a suitor. “If I appear hesitant, sir, you must understand my position. I know very little about you.”

“I was under the impression that Mr. Gardiner had kept you well informed of my attentions to your daughter. I have already discussed the marriage settlements with Mr. Gardiner and they will be completed in the next week. I believe Mr. Gardiner has the authority to sign them on your behalf. What information do you wish me to supply, Mr. Bennet? I am quite willing to comply.”
Mr. Bennet was not happy at the rather brusque manner of Jane's betrothed “I wonder, sir, at your even bothering to visit.”

“Mr. Bennet, your daughter wishes for your blessing. I am here simply because I wished to meet her father and the rest of her family.”

“I see. Well, if you can stay for luncheon, I will be happy to introduce you to Mrs. Bennet and Jane’s other sisters. Have you set a date for the wedding?”

“Indeed we have. Three weeks from today at your church. I may as well advise you now as to our plans. Miss Bennet plans to remain in town until the Wednesday prior to the wedding ceremony at which time she and her sister and the Gardiners will travel to Longbourn. I will join them on Thursday when I return from Portsmouth.”

Mr. Bennet’s surprise was obvious. “So little time before the ceremony! Whatever was Jane thinking?”

“I believe, sir, that she realized her mother would want to display her to all her neighbours. Miss Bennet was not of a mind to give consequence or recognition to people who have spurned her and her family for months. She is desirous of visiting her Aunt Phillips and a Lady Lucas. If anyone else wishes to call at Longbourn, she is willing to meet them. I suspect, from your daughter’s comments, that her mother will not be best pleased with these arrangements.”

“Captain Stovall, you have just made a classic understatement but I will leave it to Mrs. Bennet to prove it so. I will satisfy myself with arranging for the bans to be read. There is one issue of concern. You are a naval officer I comprehend and will be returning to duty this summer. What provision have you made for Jane once you have left?”

“Jane and I have not discussed this as yet. She may prefer to remain with her aunt and uncle, I could set up a separate establishment for her in London or elsewhere or she could join my mother in York. We will be discussing this over the next few months. Regardless of where she chooses to live, I will ensure her comfort, sir.”

The two men then spent a relatively quiet hour together and, after Stovall indicated his desire to eventually acquire a small estate, Mr. Bennet undertook to show Stovall around the property explaining many of the features and purposes of the buildings and farms. The return of Mrs. Bennet and her two daughters from shopping in Meryton coincided shortly thereafter with luncheon being ready. Mr. Bennet introduced the Captain without explaining his purpose in visiting since he, Mr. Bennet, wished to enjoy his lunch before the tumult erupted.

As a consequence, the meal was rather quiet as Mrs. Bennet had grown apathetic to the behaviour of her neighbours and no longer made an effort to engage them publicly. When Mr. Bennet stood at the conclusion of the meal and cleared his throat preparatory to announcing Jane’s engagement, he drew little attention from any of the ladies at the table. Clearing his throat once more, “Mrs. Bennet, Mary, Kitty, I have an important announcement. My daughter, Jane, has accepted an offer of marriage from Captain Stovall who has travelled down from London this morning to let us know. They will be married from Longbourn three weeks hence. I am sure you have many other questions for the Captain and I will leave him to answer them.” With a smirk at Stovall, Mr. Bennet retired to his study.

Mrs. Bennet was not to be consoled. Only three weeks to the marriage ceremony and no grand procession of calls on the neighbours. It was not to be borne. Captain Stovall now fully appreciated Mr. Bennet’s strategic retreat and viewed it with reluctant admiration. By dint of sheer repetition, he was able to finally convince Mrs. Bennet that the arrangements were fixed; however, he was unable
to prevent her from planning a dinner party that would encompass most of the leading families and a wedding breakfast. He suspected Jane had anticipated such endeavours on the part of her mother. How many of the neighbours would accept the invitation was an interesting question which he did not raise with Jane’s mother. Under the circumstances, he hoped that enough families did attend to restore the Bennet family to some degree of social acceptability. If the price was two meals in the company of strangers, he could well bear it.

Mrs. Bennet’s plans to come to London to prepare Jane’s wedding clothes was a matter he left to Jane and Mrs. Gardiner. It was with no little relief that he was able to take his leave of them all and return to London. That Yorkshire was well removed from Longbourn was a source of no little comfort to him.
Chapter 22

Monday, February 8, 1813 – Gracechurch Street. London

Elizabeth settled into the overstuffed armchair, tucked her feet under her and wrapped her robe more closely around herself. Her thoughts were increasingly coalescing around one central realization. Fitzwilliam Darcy was indisputably in love with her and she had suddenly realized that she very much reciprocated those feelings. She could not identify the moment or the setting when she knew her feelings. She was there almost before she knew she had begun. That he was, in fact, the best man for her to marry was something she was only beginning to accept tonight.

It had not been an exceptional evening, rather they had spent it in quiet conversation. She and Mr. Darcy had been permitted to sequester themselves somewhat in a corner of the drawing room and had spent over two hours just talking.

She could not remember how the conversation had begun but it had not been long before she had inquired about Pemberley. When he began to describe its features, his natural reserve seems to fade away and his face and voice took on an animation she had never seen him display. Questions about its scenic attractions had led to a discussion of his favourite paths and trails most of which were most accessible on horseback. His enquiry as to whether she rode, elicited the answer “Yes, but poorly.” which was subsequently found to be caused by having to learn on farm horses rather than a riding horse of a size appropriate for her. While Darcy did not outright suggest that he would teach her to ride a proper horse, Elizabeth was sure she could hear that thought about to be expressed but nobly suppressed. When queried about trails and paths that could be walked, Darcy was quick to mention the gardens and the paths surrounding the house and leading into the hills and was most eager to show them to her.

But it was when he began to talk of the tenants and their families, the crops they planted or sheep flocks tended that she was able to discern his pride, respect, love and care for Pemberley. It was clear he recognized his responsibilities and from the manner in which he discharged them, Elizabeth was sure that he would discharge his responsibilities as a husband and father with just as much love, respect and care. It was at this point, she realized, “I am falling in love with this man.” The expression on her face must have changed because Darcy had stopped speaking and was looking at her with a questioning look. She shook her head as if to say “It is nothing.” and immediately began to speak of Longbourn, drawing some parallels with her activities there. Darcy accepted her reluctance to explain and was quick to acknowledge her understanding of the problems of managing an estate. This led to a discussion of those aspects with which Elizabeth had little experience such as crop rotation, arranging contracts to sell Pemberley’s production, management of the various components of the estate such as the grounds, stables, and household. She only then began to understand how much responsibility he had assumed at the age of two and twenty. She could, however, remember his words, “I do not think I could have survived those first two years after my father’s death, if he had not hired very good people at key positions. It took me that long to learn the tasks I faced and to gain the confidence of those who reported to me.” She realized this was a very pointed statement on his part because she had just finished asking about the duties that his wife would expect to face. He had concluded those remarks with another very deliberate statement, “Mrs. Reynolds is one of those people. I have basically turned over management of the house to her. But she very much wants a Mistress to take on the role and has been hinting rather frequently for a year or so about my need to find a wife. I am quite sure she is looking forward to having a Mistress.” Elizabeth knew he was attempting to allay any fears she might have about becoming his wife but oddly enough she felt confident that she could learn those duties.
Her reserve with him was falling and her trust, rising. He had, with some hesitancy, asked about life at Longbourn once news of Lydia’s behaviour was made public. She had shown some reluctance in relating the actions of her neighbours but did not dwell overmuch on the forces which had driven Jane and herself to move to London to live with her aunt and uncle. Her initial reluctance to discuss her family and its situation was somewhat eased by Darcy’s quiet sympathy and understanding. She admitted to dissatisfaction with her father’s abdication of responsibility for his family while acknowledging that she owed much to his kindness and consideration for her. She acknowledged to him the validity of his criticisms of her family, but also the pain that criticism had caused because she loved them despite their flaws. His acceptance of them she knew to be critical since she would always want to maintain her ties to them.

Her thoughts continued to wander and she could not help but smile when they centred on the dinner party to which they both had been invited the previous Saturday. Darcy had been a fairly regular visitor to Gracechurch Street but this was the first occasion, since their meeting at the Johnsons, which was not simply a family event. She knew he had decided to attend because of her presence and could not help be a little flattered. When they arrived, he was already there and in conversation with another guest. He recognized her arrival immediately and she felt his gaze almost before she saw him. She now knew it contained nothing but admiration and it warmed her rather nicely, she thought to herself. If he was somewhat circumspect in his attentions, it did not take him overly long to greet her party. His reserve was very much in place but it no longer hid from her his pleasure and happiness in her company.

That evening they were able to sit together at the dinner table and it was probably only the size of the party, some ten couples, which failed to make their increasing absorption in each other obvious to one and all. Nonetheless Mrs. Johnson, sitting almost across from Elizabeth was observing them with a small smile. Leaning towards Mrs. Gardiner who was sitting next to her, she murmured, “I believe Mr. Darcy is quite interested in your niece.”

Mrs. Gardiner knew she had to be very cautious in her response, “They became acquainted more than a year ago when they met in Hertfordshire. They are but friends, I believe.”

“It would be an excellent match for her.”

“Undoubtedly, but I do not believe Mr. Darcy is looking to take a wife.”

Mrs. Johnson looked somewhat disbelieving but did not press the subject further and Mrs. Gardiner thought she had better warn Elizabeth to be more circumspect in her attentions to Mr. Darcy. When the ladies did move to the drawing room following dinner, she was able to caution her niece; however, it proved to be a case where excellent advice was adhered to in a manner that was most wanting. Their hosts had decided upon some dancing and had hired musicians for that purpose. Darcy was not slow to request the first and last dances from Elizabeth who was pleased to comply. He then secured Jane, Mrs. Gardiner and the wife of their host for subsequent dances.

As he lined up across from Elizabeth, he thought back to their dance at Netherfield. Tonight, he vowed, would be different. At their first coming together, he leaned slightly toward her saying,

“Shall we have conversation, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Do you plan to talk about the size of the room or the number of couples, sir?”

“Only under duress, I assure you.”

“What say you about books, then?”
“I thought you could not think about books at a ball.”

“True, true. ….. Well perhaps we can be silent and enjoy the dance, sir.”

“I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours, Miss Bennet.”

And so it proved, to the pleasure of both. They were, each of them, excellent dancers in terms of grace and timing and could appreciate the skill of their partner. The touches of their hands when they came together tended to linger a little longer than necessary and their smiles, small though they were, could be detected by a dedicated observer. Their enjoyment in each other did little to stifle Mrs. Johnson’s suspicions but, upon mentioning those suspicions to her husband, was admonished to not give further voice to them. She was advised that Mr. Darcy set great value on his privacy and his marriage prospects was an area to which he was particularly sensitive. This proved no hardship to her since she was not a gossip by nature. In this case, she was quite satisfied to observe and wait.

For Elizabeth, if the first dance was pleasurable, the second was an exquisite torture. She was acutely aware of the male with whom she was dancing. His size was impressive, he was indubitably handsome and he moved with an assurance that she had rarely seen. His touch was firm but there he left no doubt that the pressure was intentional. Not a word was uttered between them from start to finish but they moved in perfect harmony, each with a focus solely on their partner. Even when separated, that focus remained fixed. It was only when Elizabeth thought about dancing the waltz with Darcy that her attention lapsed. The thought discomposed her to the point where she missed a step causing Darcy to look at her with a raised eyebrow. A grimace and a shake if her head was all she would acknowledge. Fortunately, they were both sufficiently skilled such that her lapse was unnoticed. When the dance ended and Darcy was returning her to her aunt and uncle, he leaned down and whispered, “What caused you to misstep?” Her reply of, “I thought of us waltzing” caused a deep chuckle from Darcy, which she found rather intriguing and disturbing as her complexion took on a rosier hue.

Her aunt and uncle were watching them as they approached. During the last dance, Mr. Gardiner had murmured to his wife, “I think there is no longer much doubt of the feelings of our niece. I hope there is not too much heartache ahead but I fear the worst.” Mrs. Gardiner only shook her head, “I warned Lizzy to be more circumspect. Obviously she is unaware of how open her countenance is to the experienced observer. Already Mrs. Johnson has made her suspicions clear to me. They will only be made more solid by now.”

“Shall I talk to Mr. Darcy, do you think?”

“I think you may have to. And soon.”

After Darcy and Elizabeth joined the Gardiners and Jane and Stovall, they made preparations to leave. Calling for their carriages and taking leave of their hosts, they collected their outerwear and waited for the carriages. Mr. Gardiner took the opportunity to ask Darcy when he planned to call again.

Darcy replied, “If Miss Elizabeth is not otherwise engaged, I plan to call Tuesday evening next.”

Mr. Gardiner looked over at Elizabeth who gave a slight nod and responded, “Tuesday will be fine. Perhaps you could dine with us. I do wish to speak with you in private that evening?”

Darcy was puzzled and could see no particular need for a private meeting but was not prepared to take issue with it, answering, “Most assuredly. I will attend you when I arrive.”

With the arrival of their respective carriages, Darcy and the Gardiners took their final leave of their
Tuesday, February 9, 1813

Darcy had arrived shortly before dinner and was shown into Mr. Gardiner’s study almost immediately. He was still ignorant as to the reason for the interview but could see that Mr. Gardiner did not appear unduly worried or concerned. After accepting a glass of port, he waited for his host to reveal the reason for their meeting. To his surprise, Elizabeth entered and sat in the other chair fronting Mr. Gardiner’s desk. Finally Mr. Gardiner, with obvious reluctance, began,

“Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, you are both, I am sure, wondering why I asked to speak with you tonight. Mrs. Gardiner and I are obviously aware of your interest in Elizabeth. From what we can determine based on Saturday evening, our niece is definitely not disinterested in you.”

Darcy found it hard to control his expression of obvious pleasure in these words and the blush colouring Elizabeth’s face and satisfied himself with a restrained, “Really?”

“Oh yes, and that is why Mrs. Gardiner and I are concerned. It was becoming increasingly obvious to us and others that the affections of both of you have been engaged, to the point that Mrs. Johnson commented on it to my wife.” Mr. Gardiner considered the young man sitting in front of him. He had grown to quite like him and thought him an excellent match for Elizabeth.

Mr. Gardiner nodded his head in some satisfaction but knew he had to admonish the two young people in front of him. “This is all well and good but you both must learn to regulate your behaviour in front of others else your affections for each other will be the subject of gossip and that, most assuredly, will not serve your purposes at all. Mr. Darcy, you are a well known public figure and your attentions to any eligible young woman will most likely be noted in the gossip sections of the daily papers. You must be more circumspect for Lizzy’s sake as well as your own. Am I understood?”

Darcy and Elizabeth acknowledged the truth of Mr. Gardiner’s warning and agreed to be more circumspect, a promise Mr. Gardiner did not expect to survive their next public encounter. He sighed and excused them from his study.
Chapter 23

Friday, February 12, 1813 – Darcy House, London

Darcy’s expectations regarding the difficulties he would face in recovering Miss Lydia were proven to be very accurate. Since he could not assume that Lydia had given her real name at any shelter, after confirming with the Director of the establishment that they had no record of a Lydia Bennet or a Lydia Wickham, he then had to meet every resident in the shelter. His business responsibilities did not disappear and decisions there were required. Consequently, he conducted such business in the mornings and only when that was complete did he consider himself free to search for Lydia. His list included some fifteen ‘homes’ which sheltered unwed mothers, former prostitutes and other young women of similar misfortune. It was taking him about a day to search each home. His evenings were kept free for normal social activities, visiting Elizabeth and Georgiana. He wished to maintain an appearance of regular, unexceptional behaviour so as to avoid any undue notice from family or friends. It was not easy since he wanted nothing more than to visit Elizabeth every day.

When he had begun his search, Darcy had sent a maid to request Mrs. Hodgkins, his housekeeper, to come to his study. When she appeared, he asked her to close the door and then, after ensuring she realized the need for strict secrecy, revealed that he was going to try and recover a young girl who had been debauched by Wickham. He needed a room prepared on the third floor, quite apart from the family rooms. Mrs. Hodgkins had been in service with the Darcy family for over thirty years and was a trusted employee. Her reliability was unquestioned.

Today, after nearly a fortnight of searching, he was at the St. Francis Home for Distressed Women which was located on the edge of Spitalfields. It was a respectable looking building, considering the area. Darcy approached the building and asked to see the Director to whom he was quickly taken. The Director, after being apprised of his mission, checked his record journal and searching for several minutes was able to state that a Lydia Bennet had indeed been taken in by their shelter and was still a resident. He sent for Lydia and while they waited, retrieved such information as they had on her. “Miss Bennet arrived here on November 5 of the past year. She was quite ill at the time and we think had been with child but lost it. She has since recovered. She has said little of her background, and would not divulge the names of her parents and definitely did not want them to be contacted.”

A knock on the door announced Lydia’s arrival. She was ushered into the room and requested to sit. Her surprise at seeing Darcy was obvious but her manner lacked the insolence that characterized her previous behaviour. There was, in fact, a touch of fear, or reluctance, as well as shame in her greeting, “Mr. Darcy, what are you doing here?”

“I have been searching for you. Your family is quite worried.”

“You have not told them I am here, have you?”

The alarm in her voice was obvious and Darcy immediately tried to calm her, “No, indeed. I am the only one who knows where you are.” He paused and looking at her as calmly as he could manage, repeated himself, “They are very concerned about you. Will you not let them help you?”

"I cannot! I cannot go home!"

Darcy thought for a moment and said, “I understand. Would you allow the Gardiners to help? Your two eldest sisters are living with them now. I know they would want to see you. Your parents need not know.”
“I don’t know. What would become of me?”

“I think that is something you and the Gardiners will have to discuss. Could I suggest a simple solution until such time as you and the Gardiners can decide what is best? I would like you to stay at Darcy House in secret. If you go to the Gardiners, it will be much more difficult to hide your presence than at my home. Under the circumstances, we need to prevent anyone else from knowing where you are. You do understand the need for such secrecy, I hope.”

“Oh yes, I have listened to the stories the other girls tell and my situation has been made very clear to me. I do not know what you plan, Mr. Darcy but I seem to have few choices left to me. George Wickham used me very ill indeed and I have to believe, used you so as well. He was lying about you, was he not?”

“Yes Miss Lydia, he was.” Darcy was rather surprised that this girl had reached this conclusion. He had not thought her to be that sensible.

“Why are you doing this? I am nothing to you and you don’t even like us.”

“If I had warned people about Wickham when I was in Hertfordshire, it is possible that he would have been banned from most places and you might not have been fooled by him.”

“I am not sure that I would have listened or believed you. He was most persuasive and I wanted to be convinced.”

Turning to the Director, he requested that someone help Lydia gather her few possessions and take her to the carriage. Once Lydia had left to go to her room, Darcy turned to the Director and extending his hand, shook that of the Director and vowed to inform Lord ______ of his assistance and his appreciation of such.

Once they returned to Darcy House, the carriage was driven around to the servants’ entrance and Lydia hustled inside. Once he had turned her over to the ministrations of Mrs. Hodgkins, Darcy immediately wrote a note to his doctor requesting his presence as soon as possible. The footman who would deliver the note was told to wait for a response. Darcy had now to inform the Gardiners.

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The Gardiners were just finishing dinner when Darcy’s messenger arrived at the door and delivered Darcy’s message to Mr. Gardiner as he sat at the table. Tonight the only guest was Captain Stovall. Mr. Darcy had been expected. He had sent his regrets since urgent business would prevent his attendance. Mr. Gardiner looked at the outside and said with some surprise, “It is from Mr. Darcy!” He read it quickly and his explosive “Good Lord!” startled everyone. He read it again and then looked at everyone and before speaking, quickly stifled what he was going to say. Instead he looked at his wife and asked her to request their governess to see the children to the nursery. He then asked everyone to join him in his study.

As Captain Stovall made to leave the room, he was detained by Mr. Gardiner who looked at him saying, “Captain, this is a family matter involving my missing niece. You are very soon to be a part of this family and are welcome to join us, should you wish to do so.”

The Captain simply said, “If I can be of service, I will.”

Mr. Gardiner nodded and followed him into the room and then, looking at his wife, two nieces and the Captain, he answered their inquiring looks by saying, “I will read you Mr. Darcy’s note,”

Mr. Gardiner,
I must request your immediate presence at Darcy House. I suggest that Mrs. Gardiner accompany you along with your two nieces but that I will leave to your discretion. Simply put, I have recovered your youngest niece. She is currently here at my home. I am awaiting a visit from my doctor to examine her but to my eyes she seems healthy, although much restrained in behaviour. I have sent my carriage to bring you as quickly as possible. I have attempted to bring her here without any attention. I suggest the reason for your visit here be kept secret as well.

F. Darcy

Mr. Gardiner gave everyone a few minutes to comprehend the message and then, looking sternly, said, “The reason for coming into my study is to ensure that no word of what is happening is heard by a servant. Unless anyone thinks otherwise, I suggest we ready ourselves to leave immediately.” His suggestion finding nothing but eager compliance, the carriage departed within a quarter hour for Darcy House.

Elizabeth could hardly comprehend the speed with which Darcy had recovered Lydia. “Uncle, I am all amazed at Mr. Darcy’s success. You and my father searched for weeks and weeks without success and yet he has found them in a fortnight. I do not understand how this was possible.”

“No more do I, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy must have resources that we did not possess but this truly amazes me.”

The paucity of information precluded any significant discussion about Lydia other than the facts that she was alive, healthy and somewhat restrained in manner. Finally, the carriage drew up in front of Darcy House and everyone was ushered inside, divested of their outerwear and shown directly to Darcy’s study. He stood when they entered and went directly to Elizabeth. Taking her hand, and motioning to the others to find a seat, he led her to sit beside him on the sofa and then looking at them all, he began, “First, I have ordered tea and coffee. It should be here in a few minutes. I have also arranged for my doctor to visit Lydia. He arrived a few minutes ago and is with her now. He will join us when his examination is complete. Once the tea and coffee is delivered, I will explain how I discovered Miss Lydia.”

A maid delivered the tea and coffee within minutes and departed, closing the door behind her. Once he saw that everyone had been served, Darcy began, “I have a confession of my own which I must make first. I was not in enough control of myself when I first learned of Miss Lydia’s loss to risk talking about it. You see, around the end of September last, I received a letter from George Wickham…..”

When Darcy finished, he looked down his hands and quietly said, “You have no idea how many times over the past days I have reproached myself for my actions. I thought only of my family and protecting Georgiana. I thought I was honouring my father’s wishes for the last time in this regard. I knew I was only changing where George could exercise his propensities but I thought that society there would deal with him more harshly than ours. I had no idea that he had become so callous. In the past, his victims were left in the care of their family. I did not expect such behaviour.”

"Mr. Darcy, I think you take too much upon yourself,” responded Mr. Gardiner.

“I agree!” echoed Elizabeth, “you could not have known about Lydia.”

Darcy just shook his head, “Nevertheless, I should have made it impossible for any young woman to be left in his company.”

“Mr. Darcy, none of us had any idea of an attachment between Lydia and Mr. Wickham. You could not; we did not anticipate such an event.”
Darcy then explained his search for Lydia, touching on Mrs. Younge, Mrs. James, and the Chairman of the charitable organization and finally finding Lydia at the St. Francis home. When he was done, he simply said, “I was incredibly lucky. Miss Lydia could easily have been in a hospital or dead. There are many young girls who never make it to one of these shelters and according to the Director at St. Francis, she was quite ill when she arrived. She is safe here and I think I can protect her secrecy here more so than at Gracechurch Street but that is something for you to decide. Now that she is found, the question you face is what shall be done with her. I must add she seems adamant that her father and mother not be told of her whereabouts. Mr. Gardiner?”

“I started thinking about this problem when I entered the carriage. The usual approach is for the girl to be sent away to a distant relative in Ireland or Scotland or somewhere equally remote. I have no relations in those countries. I have never heard Thomas speak of any such either. I would very much agree that my sisters not be made aware of any of the particulars else it will be all over Meryton within hours.

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head but said nothing. Both Jane and Elizabeth remained silent although Darcy could see Elizabeth wanted to say something and looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She shook her head in response but gave him a faint smile. Darcy looked at Mr. Gardiner and with some caution began to speak, “I have a proposal but it obviously requires your approval and Lydia’s compliance. As soon as I began to search for her, I realized that, if I were fortunate enough to discover her, the problem of where she would go must arise. I had a possible solution in mind which could retrieve the reputation of the Bennet family and, I admit, serve my purposes as well. The seeds of the idea came from a letter I received from the steward of my Scottish estate. One of the crops my tenant farmers there grow well is sons. Land is scarce and unattached farms rare indeed. Every year it seems I am approached by second and third sons enquiring about the possibility of a tenant farm on one of my estates. I almost always have to inform the majority of them that I have nothing available. There are many more young men in this situation than I have farms available. Many of these young men wind up here in London but some travel to the new United States or our Canadian colonies or India.”

He paused, took a sip of coffee and then continued, “My thought was to offer one such young man enough money to buy land to build a farm in the Canadian colonies if he married Lydia. I have the names of several possible young men and could write my steward to fix upon one and send him to London. He and Lydia would sail secretly from here, or perhaps from Glasgow or elsewhere. We could attempt to save Lydia’s reputation by having them write to us saying she and Wickham sailed last September but failed to post the letter until they reached the Americas.”

He looked at Mr. Gardiner who was sitting leaning forward, elbows on his knees and looking discouraged as he asked, “How much would a decent farm cost over there?”

“I am sure I do not know but I was thinking of gifting them with £5,000 for the purpose. I have talked with several people in the past who are considering investing in Upper Canada which apparently has much good farm land. My investigations suggest buying enough land for a large farm of about four miles in circumference would cost about £3,000 and there would be more than enough funds left to build a decent house and hire labour. It would be a rough life for some years but it could be a good one eventually.”

“But such a sum!” burst out Elizabeth. Even Jane seemed stunned by the amount.

“I would have willingly expended as much or more to force Wickham to marry Lydia last fall. At least in this case I can be sure that funds will not be spent on gambling or debauchery.”

“Lydia is the responsibility of my family, Mr. Darcy. I will provide the funds.” insisted Mr. Gardiner.
Darcy shook his head saying, “Mine is the responsibility. If it were not for my mistaken pride, no decent family would have allowed their daughters in his presence. No! Mine is the fault and so must the remedy be.”

“I think you take too much upon yourself once again, Mr. Darcy,” answered Elizabeth.

The argument continued in this manner until all recognized that Darcy would not be denied. Fortunately, the doctor timed his entrance to bring that discussion to a close. He was able to assure them that Lydia was healthy, not with child and free of any disease to the great relief of them all. Accepting the thanks of them all and assuring them that he would respect their desire for secrecy, he excused himself and left. Mrs. Gardiner and her nieces were then taken by Darcy to talk with Lydia. As they walked upstairs, Mrs. Gardiner dropped back to whisper to Elizabeth, “I have heard that he is very proud but it seems to me that his real fault is obstinacy.” Elizabeth just shook her head and smiled.

While the ladies met with Lydia, the three gentlemen further discussed Darcy’s plan. While there was general agreement that it was workable, it did depend on Lydia’s compliance and that was not assured.

“I thought to have the couple travel to York, the capital of Upper Canada, under the name of Wickham. Then Wickham would “die” and Lydia would marry our young farmer and begin a life there. It would not be anything like what she is used to but they could build a good life there with hard work.” Darcy considered the problem further, “We would need a letter, written by Lydia before she leaves England but posted from Portsmouth or London that would address the elopement, where they are going, everything.”

“There is one major advantage to the Canadian colonies as a location,” offered Captain Stovall. “I was situated at the Halifax station for a year. To reach York one must travel up the St. Lawrence River to Montreal. The river is closed to all ships from December to May most years. A letter sent from York in November might not reach England until June next. So we could have a second letter to be sent when they reach York which tells of Wickham’s demise and Lydia’s remarriage.

“Who shall talk to Miss Lydia?” asked Captain Stovall looking at Mr. Gardiner.

"I suggest Madeline and I and Mr. Darcy. She knows us and, I hope, will trust us to enough to accept the realities of her position.”

“May I suggest we do that tomorrow morning when we are more rested? I am sure everyone is quite tired by now,” suggested Darcy. This met with general approval and Darcy provided the other gentlemen with a glass of port while they awaited the ladies’ return. Conversation was desultory until the ladies rejoined them. Mrs. Gardiner related the little information that Lydia would impart, saying, “Lydia was not very informative. Wickham apparently left her at a brothel telling her he was going to get a carriage to take them to the living you, Mr. Darcy, were now giving him. He never returned. I suppose that is when he took passage. He had convinced her that they would marry but now she believes he only took her along because she had £50 and never intended marriage at all. She is quite bitter about him. The brothel keeper gave her the choice to stay and work or she could leave. Lydia chose to leave and tried to come to us. She had no money – Wickham took it all – did not know where she was and got lost. She would not tell us what happened then but only that she eventually found the home where Mr. Darcy discovered her.”

Darcy interjected, “She did not arrive at the home until November! There is at least a month she has not accounted for.”

“I know. She refused to discuss what happened during that period.”
“She seems very different,” offered Jane. “Cautious, watchful and missing that exuberance that seemed such a part of her. I do not know her at all.”

“Not surprising at all really,” muttered Mr. Gardiner. “Not surprising at all.”

Elizabeth looked at Darcy with a quizzical look, “Mr. Darcy, I have one further question. You were, by your own admission, looking for my sister for a fortnight before you found her. Yet, at no time did you tell any of us that you were searching. Why, sir? Why did you not tell us?”

“I simply did not want to raise hopes or expectations that I could not fulfill. I had no great expectations of success and did not want to raise yours only to dash them later.”

With that it was agreed that they all needed some rest and the Gardiners decided to return the next morning to discuss their plans for Lydia with her. As they readied themselves to leave, Elizabeth stepped back towards Darcy and placing a hand lightly on his arm, said a soft, “Thank you for finding my sister.” Darcy took her hand in his and gently kissed her knuckles, “Do not thank me for something I did willingly.” He paused and continued, “I know not when we shall meet tomorrow. Perhaps you could come with your aunt and uncle and I could introduce you to Georgiana. I know she wishes to meet you very much.”

“I would like that. Does she know about Lydia?”

“She knows only that she eloped, not that she is presently here at Darcy House.”

They walked to the front door and entered the carriage. It was a very quiet ride back to Gracechurch Street. All of them were consumed with their own thoughts.
Chapter 24

Saturday, February 13, 1813 – Darcy House, London

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner accompanied by Elizabeth arrived at Darcy House shortly after luncheon. They noticed the knocker was not up indicating Mr. Darcy was not receiving callers. Nevertheless, the door was opened immediately and they were ushered into Darcy’s study after handing their outerwear to footmen. Darcy was waiting for them and settled them all comfortably in front of the fireplace.

Looking at the Gardiners, Darcy asked, “Have you thought further on my suggested plan, Mr. Gardiner?”

“Yes, indeed I have, sir. I think it is workable and could produce the results we wish for; however, I admit to being concerned that our niece would prefer to settle nearer her family. Ireland perhaps? Yet if she does so, I cannot see us hiding how long it took to effect the marriage.”

“That was my concern also. As well, it would be much more difficult or hazardous to talk of a marriage to Wickham. Others may be aware he sailed for the Americas. Are there any inducements we can offer Miss Lydia to encourage her to accept?”

Elizabeth could restrain herself no further, “I suppose we could offer a new dress and some lace and ribbons.” Elizabeth’s anger at the thought of having to bribe her sister to act in a manner which resurrected her reputation as well as that of her sisters was fierce. That she would receive a dowry of £5,000 when her sisters had only £1,000, only fuelled her anger further.

Mrs. Gardiner looked at Elizabeth and shook her head, “Lizzy, please. We do not know if she has been changed by her ordeal.”

“I am sorry Aunt. If it has changed her, I hope it is for the better. Her ordeal has not been so beneficial for her sisters.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth and asked, “Miss Elizabeth, may it introduce you to my sister?”

Elizabeth put her anger and thoughts of Lydia aside and answered with a smile, “I would be delighted, sir.”

“Come then, she is in the music room.” Saying this, Darcy rose and led Elizabeth in the direction of the music room. As they walked, Elizabeth took the opportunity to look at the furnishings and furniture she could see. There was nothing ornate in the decorations or furniture and yet the impression of true elegance prevailed. An elegance based on quality and simplicity that did not exclude functionality. Elizabeth instinctively knew she could feel comfortable here. Darcy led her up the stairs and passed a set of doors to the right. “That is the drawing room and next to it, and connected, is the music room.” He opened the next set of doors to reveal a young woman seated at a small table looking through several sheets of music. An older woman was sitting on a settee in the centre of the room. The young woman turned and rose quickly at the sound of the doors opening. Darcy led Elizabeth towards her and made the introductions.

“Georgiana, may I introduce you to Miss Elizabeth Bennet? Miss Bennet, my sister Miss Georgiana Darcy.” Turning to the older woman, he continued, “Miss Bennet, allow me to introduce Mrs. Annesley, Georgiana’s companion. Mrs. Annesley, be known to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

The ladies made the ritual curtsies and the young ladies moved to sit together on the large settee
behind the pianoforte. Elizabeth had some reservations about this meeting. She could not credit Wickham’s assessment of Georgiana as being “exceedingly proud” and yet she knew that Mr. Darcy was reserved and, at one time, gave the appearance of great pride. She had not talked with Miss Darcy for very long before she realized the young woman was reserved but it was the result of shyness. Elizabeth began to try and make her comfortable such that conversation would flow more naturally.

Darcy watched quietly and with great satisfaction, then made his excuses to withdraw and rejoin the Gardiners. Both Elizabeth and Georgiana smiled in dismissal and returned to their conversation.

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Darcy sought out Mrs. Hodgkins and requested her to bring Lydia to his study and then he rejoined the Gardiners. Once Lydia was shown into the room, he directed Mrs. Hodgkins that he was not to be disturbed. Lydia was sitting in a chair between her aunt and uncle. Darcy pointed to a sideboard where tea and coffee was available.

Mr. Gardiner looked at Darcy and suggested that he begin. Darcy nodded his acceptance and, looking at Lydia, realized that while her behaviour appeared more reasonable and controlled than he had ever seen previously, he could not assume that the wild, unruly part of her with which he was most familiar, had been banished. A slow cautious approach was necessary.

“Miss Lydia, what do you expect to happen to you?”

She looked at him in surprise, and then at her aunt and uncle, before replying, “I am sure I don’t know. The girls in St. Francis talk about being sent out to the country, to some place where no one knows you.”

“How do you feel about that? Would you prefer to return home?”

“I cannot go home! I do not want to go home! I could not face anyone. I think almost anything might be better than that.”

“We would like to retrieve your reputation and that of your sisters and have, I think, discovered a way to do so. It will involve a very great change for you and, quite possibly, a great opportunity as well.”

Lydia looked at Darcy and smiled ruefully, “Mr. Darcy, after the past months I am inured to change. As long as it does not involve George Wickham, I will not gainsay you.”

“How do you feel about marriage? A husband?”

“I don’t know. My…experiences have not led me to think well of most men. Yet I also know that if left on my own, my future is not hopeful. It will be difficult to put my trust in a man again.”

“I think I comprehend your fears Miss Lydia. Unfortunately perhaps our plan must encompass marriage to a man. Simply put, we propose to arrange a marriage between you and a young man from my estate in Scotland. He will be a decent, hard working young man from a good farming family. Your basic circumstances will be made known to him before you meet and his acceptance secured. You both will travel to our Canadian colonies and wed there. However, we will pretend that you and George Wickham were married in Gretna Green and traveled to the colonies where George died over the winter. The young man I will select will be given sufficient funds to acquire land to build a large farm in the colonies and you both will make your lives there. We will require you to write two letters. One will be dated from last October announcing your marriage and arrival in the
colonies. It will be mailed from Portsmouth or London when you depart. A second letter will be sent when you arrive in the colonies telling of the demise of George and your marriage to the young man selected. People will attribute the delay to the distance between the colonies and here.”

Darcy paused, “I know that we tend to consider the colonies to be savage places but the reality is somewhat different. From reports that I have received, much of the society is not dissimilar to our country life, although a little rougher perhaps. Some of the amenities are lacking but they have dances, parties and social events. Your life will be quite different but, as I said, the young man you marry will be decent, hard working and will treat you well. He will have to know somewhat of your past – we cannot hide the fact that you lived with Wickham without benefit of marriage. It should not signify to him. What else you impart to him is a matter for you to determine.”

Lydia had listened to Darcy but he could not tell where her thoughts were tending. When she spoke, it was very quietly, “Why not Ireland or Scotland instead of the colonies? It is so very far.”

“The main reason is that George Wickham left England for our colonies at the end of September last and we don’t know who else may have knowledge of that happening. We can pretend a Gretna Green marriage and his subsequent death in the colonies. But it only signifies if you are there also.”

Darcy paused, “I am prepared to provide sufficient funds for you and your husband to establish yourself well in the colonies. We do need to act quickly.”

“May I meet and talk with this young man?” asked Lydia.

“Yes, but it will have to be on the basis of your acceptance of our plan.”

Mrs. Gardiner’s plea was heartfelt, “Lydia, I would urge you to accept Mr. Darcy’s offer. You will not be as well looked after should you decline it, since we will have to send you away and will be able to provide much less in the way of support. You may well have to accept work as a servant or in one the mills that are being formed. Marriage might be possible, but I doubt you will be able to find a man as good as the one Mr. Darcy is offering. Your life in the colonies may require much from you, but it could provide you with a much better life; and it will ensure better lives for your sisters who have suffered from your actions through no fault of their own.”

Lydia looked reluctant. “Why should I not have the funds that Mr. Darcy is offering?”

Darcy just shook his head, “That offer is being made to arrange your marriage and the restoration of the Bennet family reputation. To be very honest, giving you the money without a marriage that appears respectable will not help anyone but you. That is not an option.”

Mrs. Gardiner could see his words had caused Lydia some distress but felt no remorse in his speaking so plainly. Lydia’s bowed head suggested she recognized the truth being imparted. Lydia had a number of other questions which were answered as much as possible and Mr. Gardiner found himself agreeing to help her acquire a decent wardrobe since she had nothing but the clothes she wore. Darcy was able to provide some information about the colonies and did advise the purchase of warm clothing since winters there tended to be slightly harsher than in Hertfordshire. Eventually, Lydia consented to the plan, and all were relieved that the Bennet family reputation could be repaired.

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In the music room, Georgiana and Elizabeth were finding that conversation was not as difficult as expected. Each was desirous of having the good opinion of the other and so a mutual appreciation seemed a foregone conclusion. Elizabeth, from comments by Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine
DeBourgh, knew that Georgiana was very talented on the pianoforte. Seeing the table with sheet music, Elizabeth queried Georgiana, “I noticed when your brother introduced us that you were looking at some sheet music. Are these new pieces?”

“Yes they are. I bought them about a fortnight past and I am struggling with a few pieces. I admit to having difficulties with the Beethoven piano sonatas and this piece by Haydn is only now starting to sound correct. I have real problems mastering the fingering.”

“Could you show me? I admit that I have avoided such difficult works in the past.”

The two young women sat at the pianoforte and Georgiana began the Haydn piece. As she played, Elizabeth was impressed at the concentration she displayed and, after she had completed the piece, remarked, “That was excellently done. I have rarely seen technical skill and feeling brought together so very well.”

Georgiana blushed deeply. “My brother says you play very well.”

Elizabeth smiled, “Miss Darcy, he exaggerates my abilities undoubtedly for some nefarious purpose of his own.”

“Oh no! My brother never lies, except I sometimes think he is too kind to me.”

“The perfect older brother then. You have no idea how much I envy you. I do not have a brother, only four sisters. I should very much like to have had a brother.”

“And I would have liked a sister.”

Elizabeth laughed, “I admit it is nice sometimes. I am very close to my eldest sister, Jane. We have few secrets between us.”

Georgiana looked at Elizabeth, began to speak and then blushed and returned to playing once more. Elizabeth recognized the signs of someone wishing to bring up a topic that might prove upsetting. She rather thought she could guess the general topic, and decided to encourage an exchange of confidences. This young woman could well become her sister in time. If they were going to establish any kind of relationship, it should probably start now. “Miss Darcy, you were about to say or ask something but thought better of it. If you were concerned that you might offend, do not be so. I am not easily offended and I seriously doubt that you could do so.”

Georgiana’s embarrassment was obvious. “Miss Bennet, I ….”

Elizabeth laughed and interrupted “I think if we are going to exchange confidences, we should be less formal. Please, call me Elizabeth or Lizzy. Miss Bennet is my older sister, Jane.”

“Miss…Elizabeth, please call me Georgiana”

“Very well Georgiana, you were going to ask me something?”

“I know….my brother told me….you rejected his proposal of marriage a year ago. Yet you are here now and seem to be comfortable with my brother. I know I have not seen him this content for a long time. I don’t understand.”

“I am not sure how much your brother has told you and some, I cannot share. I can tell you that our relationship began with some ill behaviour by both your brother and myself which we both now heartily regret. I allowed myself to believe untruths about your brother that increased my dislike and your brother made a mistake that I deeply resented. When he made his offer, his behaviour was such
that only a woman of a mercenary bent could have accepted it. My anger … well….suffice it to say I abused your brother most abominably. Since then, we both have tried to correct our mistakes and attitudes. For myself, I now consider your brother one of the best men I know.”

“Will you marry him?”

Elizabeth was taken aback by the blunt question.”What happened to the rather shy young girl I was just talking with?” Her laughter took the offence from her words, but Georgiana coloured regardless and immediately tried to apologize.”I am sorry. That was impertinent of me. Please ignore it.”

“Georgiana, I suspect your question tends from a concern for your brother. How could that offend me? I cannot answer because he has not asked me and I do not know when or even if he will be able to do so. I believe your brother has told you of the situation of my family. All I can say is that I esteem him highly, although I must insist that you not let him know my feelings.”

Elizabeth could see that Georgiana wanted to explore the topic further but it was not one of which she, Elizabeth, could provide the particulars. A change of topic was necessary and, since Pemberley was a favourite subject for her brother, perhaps his sister was of a like mind.

“Georgiana, I have talked to your brother about Pemberley and was wondering what and where your favourite places are.”

This proved to be a wise choice and they spent the remainder of their time together that day talking about walking trails, places to visit on horseback and sleigh rides in winter. Some gentle questioning led Georgiana to talk about her memories of her father and the few that she had of her mother. They parted with plans to have Georgiana come with her brother the next time he was to visit Elizabeth.
Chapter 25

Monday, February 22, 1813 – Darcy House, London

Lydia had been installed in Darcy House for over a week and was becoming increasingly restive with the confinement. Darcy could not hope to hide her presence from Georgiana and had, reluctantly, informed her that Lydia was being held there in secret. The particulars of their plans had not been vouchsafed to Georgiana; however, the need for secrecy had been strongly impressed upon her. Lydia’s only outing had been an afternoon with Mrs. Gardiner to a modiste to acquire her new wardrobe. None of the staff at Darcy House knew Lydia’s name and most supposed her to be a Darcy connection. Darcy did nothing to disabuse anyone of that supposition.

Hodgkins knocked on the door of Darcy’s study and, upon being told to enter, stepped into the room and said, “The young gentleman you are expecting is here, sir.” He then ushered a young man of about three and twenty into the study. Darcy rose from behind his desk and greeted him with a short bow, “you must be James Simpson?” and directed him to the chair fronting his desk. “Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee, please and yes, my name is James Simpson.”

Darcy considered the young man carefully. He was stockily built, about average height, not at all ill-favoured – in fact, he would probably be considered good looking by most women – and his hands showed evidence of hard work. His gaze was quite direct and, if he was discomposed by Darcy’s scrutiny, he hid it fairly well. He spoke with a distinct Scottish accent but it was not unpleasant. According to Higgs, his steward for his Scottish estate, James Simpson had a good reputation in that area, no known predilections for drink or women and was reputedly a good worker.

“James, how much has Higgs told you about my offer to you?”

“He basically asked me if I were willing to marry a lass that had been seduced and left unmarried. In return, I would get sufficient funds to establish a large farm in the colonies – Canada. My answer was that I would be willing, if the lass were.”

“There are a few more details we have to make clear to you. First, you and the young lady will travel to the colonies as soon as possible, but under assumed names. You will marry in York in the Upper Canada colony when you reach there. The young lady will be assumed to be a widow by the name of Lydia Wickham, her husband, George Wickham, having died during the previous winter. The funds mentioned will be released, to you, following the marriage. The young lady will write to her parents explaining the marriage, and the events leading up to it. You will be portrayed as a young man of some substance who needed a wife and met and fell in love with Mrs. Wickham.”

Darcy thought for a minute, “I am sure you have some questions.”

Simpson considered what he had been told for a few minutes before responding, “Farming is not an easy life. How much does the young lady know about it?”

“Virtually nothing, as far as I know,” Darcy paused, “she is a gentleman’s daughter and is, or was, rather spoiled. I don’t know how much that has changed. I do suspect that she will struggle at first.”

“Ah well, that is as may be. I must talk to the lass first. If I am to marry her, she must be my wife in all particulars.”

“That reminds me, what do your parents know and think of all of this?”
“They are not too happy with my choice of a wife but recognize that I could not get a better opportunity to establish myself. She is a gentleman’s daughter, after all. They will support me.”

“Are they accepting of the need for secrecy?”

“Yes. They will simply say I am going to the colonies as your agent and will announce the marriage locally, only when I write them.”

Darcy considered the young man. There was something that puzzled him and he very much wanted an answer. “Simpson, you puzzle me. You are a farmer’s son but your words and manner of expression sound like that of an educated man.”

Simpson laughed. “I must credit my mother. She was a governess for an English family for ten years before she met and married my father. She was most particular about our education and schooling. She taught us, as much as possible, and saw that we attended school.”

“Ah, that explains much. I am a little surprised that a young man with your attributes is not looking to make a future here in London, instead of which you are heading to the colonies.”

“I have no great liking for cities. The air is foul, there too many people, it is noisy. I cannot think of much to recommend them. Besides, I like farming and I think my chances of prospering are better in the colonies with your funds to support me, than here in London Town with only my wits.”

“Perhaps you are correct. I suspect that opportunities will exist almost anywhere for men with some education. Now, before I have the young lady brought down, there is something you must know. How familiar are you with the situation between England and the Americans?”

“Not very familiar at all.”

“You have to know then that war has broken out and that American forces are attacking our Canadian colonies. The area into which you are venturing is close to the border with the Americans and could, even now, contain fighting. I do not know more than that at the moment. You will have to be cautious but, at the same time, there may be opportunities for a young man with funds.”

“I see, I think.”

Darcy could understand Simpson’s concern. “I think it should be safe enough. I understand that additional troops are being sent to bolster our forces there. Now, shall I send for the young lady?”

“Please”

Darcy left the room and Simpson could hear murmurings from the hall outside and Darcy returned. “She shall be along shortly. Let us move to the library, and await her there.” Saying this, he led Simpson the short distance to that room, stopping on the way to instruct a maid to have tea and coffee brought there. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Simpson was awed by the volume of books contained in the library. “You are truly blessed, sir. I love to read and my mother would want to take up residence here. It was always a happy day for her when she could get a new book.” He wandered around the room, running his hand over the backs of the books as he considered them. He was interrupted by the sound of the door opening, and a young woman being ushered in.

Darcy, who had been following Simpson’s wandering about with a small smile, also turned towards the door and immediately moved to Lydia. Taking her hand, he brought her to face Simpson. “Miss Bennet, may I introduce Mr. James Simpson. Mr. Simpson, Miss Lydia Bennet.”
Simpson’s bow and Lydia’s curtsy were all that was proper. “I believe that you both need to discuss your possible life together. I will return to my study and leave you to do so. There will be a footman stationed outside the door, Mr. Simpson. When you are done, please let him know, and he will bring you both to my study. Is this acceptable to you both?”

Receiving their acknowledgement, Darcy returned to his study and awaited events. Some half hour later, he heard a knock on the door and Simpson and Lydia were shown in by a footman. He considered them both, as he bade them sit in the chairs fronting his desk. Lydia looked a little unhappy, but not unduly so. “Am I to understand that you both have agreed to the proposal?”

Simpson looked at Lydia, before answering. “Yes, I believe so. Miss Lydia is not too happy about the prospect of being a farmer’s wife but I have assured her that the funds we have will most likely allow us to hire someone to help in the house while she learns what must be done.”

“Excellent! Simpson, how soon can you be ready to leave? Miss Bennet has acquired all her clothing and is ready to leave now. Is this not true, Miss Bennet?”

After Lydia mumbled her agreement, Darcy continued, “There are two letters that Miss Bennet must now write. We have drafted them for her to copy.” Turning to Lydia, he handed her several sheets of paper. “Here are the letters we have drafted. We need you to copy them in your own hand. You may write here at my desk.”

While Lydia undertook to write the two letters, Darcy and Simpson moved to the chairs by the fireplace. “So, when shall you be ready to leave, Simpson?”

“I came fully prepared, sir. All my belongings are with me in my trunk. I suppose I could leave tomorrow.”

“No need to be quite that precipitous. I have tentatively booked passage on a ship departing several days hence. I was not quite sure when you would arrive but I can now confirm those arrangements. You have some few days if you need to supplement your clothing, although I would recommend waiting until you arrive in York to do so. You could visit a bookstore or other shops perhaps. I will provide you with an advance of £200 to cover such costs as may arise during your trip.”

Conversation continued in this fashion as Darcy outlined the arrangements he had made with respect to the funds, letters and secrecy. “One thing must be made perfectly clear to you both. No hint of these arrangements must ever arise in any communication with Miss Bennet’s family. The story we have constructed must become the reality. Your respectability and that of Miss Bennet’s family depends upon it. You may, however, write to me in fullest confidence, should the need arise.”

Lydia then approached them, handing over the transcribed letters which Darcy scanned quickly. “I will seal this and have you address them. This letter,” and he handed one to Simpson, “you will post from York when you arrive. The other I will keep and post after you sail. Now, I will have someone show you to your room, Mr. Simpson. If you wish to borrow a book from the library, please feel free to do so. You may do likewise, Miss Bennet.”

A footman was summoned and led the young couple to their respective rooms, as Darcy moved to put the finishing touches to his efforts. A note was written, to be delivered to the captain of the ship, confirming the passage arrangements. He would visit the Gardiner residence this evening to advise them of the progress in the arrangements. He was looking forward to seeing Elizabeth since he had been circumspect in his attendance for much of the past week. The presence of Mrs. Bennet, in town to help Jane buy her wedding clothes, had absorbed a lot of Elizabeth’s time and, as well, Darcy did not want to make himself too obvious such that Mrs. Bennet’s match-making instincts would focus on him. At the moment, she seemed to accept him as associated with Captain Stovall, and had made
only one or two passing references to the perfidy of his ‘friend’ Mr. Bingley. She was back at Longbourn now, and he could enjoy Elizabeth’s company once more.
Friday, February 26, 1813 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The drawing room at Longbourn was suffering a surfeit of people tonight and the surplus had overflowed into the music room and was threatening the small parlour. Elizabeth had managed to create a small oasis of calm in one corner of the drawing room with Darcy and the Gardiners in company. She had been watching Jane and Stovall who had commandeered a small settee which did not allow for a third person and thus ensured that they would not be separated. Watching Jane’s countenance and manners, Elizabeth could describe it as, at best, a cool civility. She was not greeting anyone with particular pleasure. Turning to her aunt, Elizabeth noted, “I never quite realized how wounded Jane was by the treatment we received from our neighbours. I expected it but Jane has such a sweetness of temper that she could not envisage treating anyone so poorly and hence was, I believe, severely wounded. I don’t think she has forgotten or quite forgiven them.”

Mrs. Gardiner looked at Jane and nodded her head. “I think you are right. Fortunately, she has never been a very demonstrative person and it is quite possible that most of the guests do not notice a difference.”

Elizabeth agreed and then, looking at Darcy, who appeared lost in thought, smiled and teased, “Mr. Darcy, you are very quiet, sir. Even a reticent person such as yourself should be counted on for more than two words in a half hour.”

Darcy visibly recalled his attention to his company, “My apologies. As you have observed Miss Elizabeth, my attention was elsewhere. I was contemplating the activities that took much of my morning today.”

Given the press of people, none of them wished to mention the particulars of those activities and Elizabeth was looking forward to spending time with her aunt later tonight to get a first-hand account. She would rather have talked to Darcy about it but could not anticipate having any occasion to speak with him privately. As she watched the press of people around Jane, she noticed her father leading a couple and a young woman towards them. The gentleman was vaguely familiar to her.

Mr. Bennet arrived and looked at his daughter, “I believe all the sense and sensibility is gathered in this one small corner.” He then proceeded to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and their daughter Miss Janet Thompson to the others, noting that they had taken the lease on the Netherfield property. Elizabeth acknowledged the Thompsons with a minimal civility, mindful that this was the first time that her family had met the Thompsons since they came to Netherfield. Her polite inquiries as to how they were enjoying the neighbourhood elicited equally polite responses. That the Thompsons were slightly uncomfortable was obvious and that neither Mr. Bennet nor Elizabeth were inclined to alleviate their discomfort was obvious to Mr. Gardiner. He engaged them in conversation about Netherfield and was assisted by Darcy, who was familiar with the Netherfield estate from his time there with Bingley. Mrs. Gardiner endeavoured to engage Mrs. Thompson on her family, in which effort she was eventually assisted by Elizabeth who determined the couple to be both sensible and comfortable in manner. Mrs. Thompson was more than willing to talk about her two sons, their wives and children. Miss Thompson was very quiet and did not attempt to join the conversation and Elizabeth could not discern whether she was reserved, or shy, or disdainful of the company.

Looking at Mrs. Thompson, Elizabeth smiled pleasantly stating, “I am glad to see Netherfield settled by a family. For too long it has been empty. I realize that you are only leasing the property but it would be good for the neighbourhood to have a family settled there with some permanence.”
Mr. Thompson happened to overhear her words and responded with some pleasure, “I am pleased to hear you say as much, Miss Elizabeth. We do plan to purchase the property. My youngest son has taken a great interest in the property and looks to manage it for me. He and his family prefer the country life and the situation here is very much to his liking.”

Miss Thompson looked at Elizabeth and quietly asked, “Miss Elizabeth, will we be able to have the pleasure of your company when the wedding is over?” Her manner was quite pleasant and Elizabeth was inclined to believe her reserved rather than otherwise and attempted to be as civil as was possible.

“I am sorry but I will be travelling to Derbyshire with my sister and her husband in company with Mr. Darcy and his sister. I cannot say when I will return but, when I do, I expect to be residing with my aunt and uncle in London.”

“Perhaps then, we might call on you and your aunt there?”

“We would be delighted to receive you.” Elizabeth considered the young woman in front of her, “Miss Thompson, I assume you will be returning to London shortly to partake of the Season. Are you looking forward to it?”

A slight moue of distaste crossed Miss Thompson’s face as she answered, “This will be my second season and I expect as much pleasure from it as I had last year, which in truth was very little.”

Elizabeth’s obvious surprise caused Miss Thompson to smile briefly. “The curse of a substantial dowry for a tradesman’s daughter is the prevalence of mercenary motives in those men willing to enter a courtship. I encountered only pop-in-jays or the mercenary. It is really most discouraging and I expect my patience will not survive the whole season.”

“You are fortunate that your parents do not appear to feel compelled to see you married.”

Mrs. Thompson had been quietly listening to this conversation and thought to interject. “Mr. Thompson and I wish that our daughter be settled happily and see no reason for her to rush into an attachment.”

Miss Thompson smiled at her mother, "Indeed, they have left this decision in my hands. My father frequently says he cares not if I ever marry.” They all enjoyed a quiet laugh at this.

It was settled that the Thompsons would call on the Gardiners when Elizabeth returned and they took their leave shortly thereafter. Mrs. Gardiner, who was feeling fatigued, decided that she needed to rest and left for her room. Elizabeth accompanied her, ostensibly to help her aunt but in reality to be free to discuss the day’s events. Once in Mrs. Gardiner’s room, she wasted no time in asking for a full accounting of the morning’s activities.

“Well Lizzy, it was really very tedious. Mr. Darcy arrived very early at our house with Lydia and Mr. Simpson. Their trunks had been sent aboard the ship the night before. It was not long before we arrived at the docks. Mr. Darcy gave Mr. Simpson a couple of letters, one of which is to be posted from York when they arrive. The other I gather contained the introduction to the bank in York to access the funds Mr. Darcy has provided. I must say Lydia appeared reconciled to the trip. I kept expecting the old unrestrained, headstrong Lydia to show herself but she did not. She was not as lively as in the past and that could be a good thing indeed. She and Mr. Simpson may do well together. He was most respectful but quite firm in dealing with her and I saw no evidence of displeasure from either. In any event, they boarded and the ship sailed with nothing untoward happening. As we began to return, Mr. Darcy entered the post office to have Lydia’s first letter delivered. I would expect it to arrive here Monday next. Your uncle and I plan to remain until
Tuesday next in order to be present when it arrives. I suspect we may also call on the Thompsons to develop that acquaintance, if possible. It could be useful in terms of your uncle’s business. I will not be slow to apprise you of events here.”

“The letter will occasion great pleasure here I am sure. I just hope that it will be sufficient to satisfy our neighbours and restore our respectability. It is a threadbare strategy to be sure.”

“Yes it is, but then all such marriages are meant only to lend a façade of respectability to that which is most reprehensible. It is no better or worse than other such endeavours.”

“Not to change the topic too much but I was rather surprised at Miss Thompson’s wish to get better acquainted.”

“As was I. The young lady is about Mary’s age I believe. I understand she has a very generous dowry of £40,000. She appears to be a very amiable young lady although perhaps somewhat reserved. She is undeniably quite handsome. If she wishes to further your acquaintance, I would certainly suggest you do so. It can do no harm to be on congenial terms with your family’s nearest neighbour.”

“We did not converse long enough for me to even begin sketching her character but the little I observed did suggest she might be someone I would like to know better. Her reaction to the season and potential suitors was quite interesting. I am glad for her sake that her parents are not pressuring her to make a match. With her dowry, of course, she can be selective. A large dowry offsets the supposed inferiority of her position in society.”

At this point Mr. Gardiner knocked on the door and pointedly suggested to Elizabeth that his wife needed her rest and that Jane was apparently awaiting her sister in their bedroom. After Elizabeth left the room, Mrs. Gardiner removed her robe, revealing a very enticing silk nightgown that left her shoulders quite bare and sliding under the bed sheets, raised an eyebrow at her husband and asked, “Are you planning to rejoin your brother downstairs?”

“No indeed. I have much more pleasurable thoughts and activities in mind. I will be with you very, very shortly. Do not go to sleep!” With a delighted grin, he made a brief visit to his dressing room before rejoining his wife in bed. Their subsequent activities provided much pleasure to both since they were both firm believers that true proficiency requires much practice.

Elizabeth and Jane spent their last night together as unmarried sisters and Elizabeth, more than Jane, realized that they would never again be quite as close. Jane’s loyalties would henceforth be to her husband and children. They talked into the night of memories of the past and hopes for the future. It was nearly dawn before they fell asleep and yet neither would have the night be otherwise.
Chapter 27

Saturday, February 27, 1813 – On Route to Pemberley

It was growing dark as the caravan of travelling coaches moved slowly towards their first overnight stop at the ______ Inn some four hours travel from Longbourn. Stovall and Jane were allowed the privacy of the first coach given their status as newlyweds. Darcy, Georgiana, Elizabeth and Mrs. Annesley shared the second coach while the maid for Jane and Georgiana and the man-servants for Darcy and Stovall travelled in the third coach. A fourth coach carried nothing but the extra baggage required for people travelling for several months.

Darcy looked at the inhabitants of his coach. Both Elizabeth and his sister were sleeping. Mrs. Annesley was quite alert and reading comfortably despite the movement of the carriage. Darcy was not sure how she could do so since trying to read while travelling always gave him a serious headache. Since he also had trouble sleeping, he could either engage his companions in conversation or admire the scenery through the window. Neither was possible at the moment which allowed his thoughts to reflect on the day’s events. He honestly could not remember much of the marriage ceremony. He rather thought Jane had been beautiful. Certainly, he saw that Stovall had eyes for no one else. Darcy himself, though, was so conscious of Elizabeth’s presence and his desire for her to be taking the vows with him that he could think of little else. Without any intention on his part, he thought he had not taken his eyes from her throughout the ceremony and when the registry was signed and the bride and groom made their way out of the chapel, the feel of Elizabeth’s hand on his arm, the scent of her perfume – lavender he thought – and the rustle of her gown caused a very great sense of rightness. She belonged on his arm, that he knew for a certainty. He was quite unconscious of the small smile that graced his features and of the pleasure that it gave the woman on his arm. To those residents of Meryton who had little knowledge of Darcy except by rumour as a proud, disdainful gentleman, his demeanour gave the lie to such rumours.

Stovall and Jane had received the congratulations of their family and neighbours with ease and pleasure. Jane herself seemed so happy that when he approached her to offer her his congratulations, she shook her head saying, “No, I should thank you. I am the happiest of women!” The press of the crowd was such that it was a quarter hour before the wedding party was able to begin the short walk to Longbourn for the wedding breakfast.

The wedding breakfast had been a trial to be sure. Mrs. Bennet was at her fluttering best although he had to admit that she had set a fine table. To her credit, she did appear to be less voluble than he remembered. Perhaps being shunned by her neighbours had effected a major change in her behaviour. Elizabeth, for some strange reason, remained as close as possible for much of the meal seemingly to ease his comfort with so many strangers. If that was her purpose, it surely worked because, even when accosted by Elizabeth’s aunt Phillips and informed that he was ‘exceedingly tall and handsome’, he had been able to nod graciously. Overall he thought he had survived the ordeal quite well. In fact, even Mr. Bennet had observed quietly to him that ‘should he venture into the area in the future, he might drop by for another game of chess.’ The fact that Darcy had bested him in the game they played last night and Mr. Bennet desired a measure of revenge might have something to do with that. His own response of ‘You may count on it, sir!’ had elicited a rather odd look from Mr. Bennet, followed by a glance at his second oldest daughter standing beside Darcy. A quirked eyebrow as he leant towards Elizabeth saying, “I shall, of course, say nothing to your mother.” Was his only comment as he strolled off to speak to Mr. Gardiner.

Elizabeth had looked at Darcy with a small grimace. “I think he suspects something. Uncle will probably share some of the details but I will ask my aunt to withhold any of the details about Lydia,
at least for now.” Fortunately, Georgiana had arrived with the extra carriages about then and since Jane and Stovall had changed into their travelling clothes, they began the process of saying their farewells.

The entire trip would normally only require two overnight stops but under the circumstances Stovall and Darcy had agreed on a more casual pace and three stops, allowing the newlyweds to stay abed a little later in the morning. Each of the carriages was equipped with extra blankets, warming pans for feet, a basket of consumables and such books and activities as might entertain the travellers.

Wrapped in his thoughts, Darcy was hardly aware that the coach was slowing down and had come to a stop. Looking out the window he could see the inn where they would spend the first night. Mrs. Annesley woke Georgiana and Elizabeth while Darcy left the coach and prepared to help the ladies descend. As he was doing so, the innkeeper and his wife bustled out to greet their customers. Darcy had arranged for the use of most of the inn’s rooms with a separate suite for the Stovalls. Staff came and helped carry baggage to the appropriate rooms while hot water for baths was arranged for the travellers. Stovall and Jane had, with eyes only for each other, quickly made their way to their rooms followed by the eyes and smiles of their fellow travellers.

Darcy turned to Georgiana, Elizabeth and Mrs. Annesley, “Hot water should be delivered to your rooms shortly. I have also arranged for a meal in a private small dining room an hour from now. I shall await you there.”

Darcy was indeed waiting when the others entered the dining room. A glass of port in his hand, freshly bathed with clean clothes, he felt invigorated. Mrs. Annesley was the next to arrive, followed very shortly by Georgiana and Elizabeth. A very simple meal of an excellent beef stew with bread and cheese was provided. Since all of the travellers were somewhat tired, none were inclined to linger too long after the meal was completed. Darcy wished to keep Elizabeth with him for a while longer but could see from her eyes that she was quite tired and propriety would require that either Mrs. Annesley or Georgiana be present. Their plans were to depart about nine the next morning so they agreed to meet to break their fast at half past seven. Elizabeth’s hopes to stay and talk with Darcy came to naught when he looked at her closely, “you look exhausted. You spent most of the night talking to your sister and you really could not sleep well in the coach. You need to get some sleep.” Saying this, he sent them all off to their rooms and himself as well.

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Stovall and Jane followed the innkeeper’s wife up the stairs to their rooms where she said, “Your bedroom is here, sir. There is a dressing room on either side and a small sitting room here across the hall.” Stovall looked at Jane “I would like to wash the dirt off from our travel. Shall I meet you in the sitting room in a half hour to have something to eat?” Upon Jane’s consent, he requested a light meal of cold chicken, bread, cheese and wine to be prepared and served in the sitting room.

When a half hour had passed, Stovall knocked on the door to Jane’s dressing room which was quickly opened by his smiling wife. “I am a little hungry, husband. Shall we eat?”

Taking her arm he led her to the sitting room and seating her at the table whispered in her ear, “I have a huge hunger tonight!” and then bestowed a kiss under her ear. Her shiver and instinctive reach to draw his lips to hers led to a long slow kiss. As he deepened the kiss, she could feel his tongue trace her lips and she opened them and met his tongue with her own. His hand left the back of her chair and came to cup her face and hold her lips to his and then gradually moved to stroke her shoulder and arm. He gently broke the kiss and, with some effort at self control, said “we should eat.”

Neither had been able to eat much at the wedding breakfast. Nor had they more than sampled the
consumables provided in their coach. As a consequence, they found themselves addressing the meal provided with considerable enthusiasm. It was not long before they had finished all that had been provided and were sitting back in their chairs, quite replete. Jane rose to her feet and, taking her husband by the hand, led him to the settee and gently pushed him to sit. She then turned and sat herself leaning back against him and when he wrapped his arms around her, murmured “You have no idea how long I have wanted to be able to have you do this.” Leaning her head back against his shoulder, she laid her hands over his. He could not keep his hands so idle. “I have wanted to do this for weeks” he said, and began to caress her face, arms, belly and breasts gently. Finally he sat up and rose off the settee. “I think it is time we retire to bed.” and he carefully lifted her in his arms and carried her to their bedchamber.

Jane had cause to remember her aunt’s words prior to the wedding. She had not talked of pain or enduring the situation, but rather that she was going to be married to a man who loved her and would be gentle and kind. Most disconcerting was her suggestion that, in the privacy of the bedchamber, nothing between a husband and wife was truly wrong. That had discomposed her more than anything her mother had said.

They joined together as husband and wife and Jane realized her aunt was right. He was kind, gentle and loving and she fell asleep in her husband’s arms knowing that they had taken the first of many steps together as husband and wife. As he gazed at her, he took as much pleasure from the smile on her face as she slept, as from the cries of pleasure she emitted during the night.

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Stovall woke the next morning feeling quite disorientated. He could not move his left arm, something warm was pressed against his chest and his hand had closed on something warm and soft. As he swam up to consciousness, memories of the past night came alive. He treasured the pleasures of their first joining, the tenderness of waking in the middle of the night and sharing their pleasure once again. Now he felt himself becoming aroused once more and began to stroke and caress his wife’s body. Half awake she turned on her back and gave him greater access which he was not slow to enjoy for her pleasure and his own. Their eventual fulfillment left them exhausted but delighted with each other and as they drifted back to sleep, he heard her murmur “So very nice.”

The newlyweds were the last to break their fast the next morning and were greeted by studiously bland faces by the other members of the party. Apart from an “I hope you slept well!” from Elizabeth, conversation was deliberately non-consequential focusing on the food and the travel plan for the day. Stovall and Jane managed to partake of the meal with admirable composure, although Jane’s blushes were telling every time she looked up and saw Elizabeth’s smirk. Fortunately for all, the weather continued to be reasonable for the time of year and they only required one further overnight stay at an inn before arriving at Pemberley late in the evening of the third day of the trip. As they travelled through the woods after turning off the road to Pemberley, Georgiana pointed out the window to a small building by an impressive set of stone pillars, “Look Elizabeth, there is the entrance to Pemberley!”

“Where is the house?”

“We cannot see it from here. We have to climb to the top of a ridge. The house is located on the other side of the valley. There is a spot on the ridge that has an excellent view of Pemberley.” explained Darcy. “We should get there in a quarter hour or so.”

Elizabeth continued to gaze out the window at the passing trees as the coach continued to climb. Finally, the road levelled and the carriage came to a stop. The carriage containing Stovall and Jane, which was following close behind, also stopped. Darcy was quick to exit and help the ladies to
descend. Stovall did the same for Jane. Darcy led them all to a break in the trees which overlooked the entire valley.

Pemberley was a large stone house, bathed in a golden colour of the late afternoon sun, located on the rising ground on the opposite side of the valley. Heavy woods covered the slopes of the ridge behind the house. In front of the house gardens sloped down to a small, man-made pond fed by a stream that wound its way down the valley. Snow still dotted the woods although the grounds were clear with only faint tinges of green showing signs of an approaching spring.

Elizabeth could only gaze in admiration, “How well the house blends into the landscape. It looks so natural, so much in keeping with its surroundings.” She whispered almost too softly for Darcy to hear. She turned to him, “I like your home very much, sir!”

“And that is how I feel. It is my home. The place where I would spend all my days if that were possible.” Darcy’s voice was rough with emotion. He let them gaze for another minute and then shepherded them back to their carriages. “Let us be going, I suspect they await us and I, for one, would enjoy a hot bath!”

As the carriages came into view of the house, Elizabeth could see people pouring out of the house. When her carriage came to a final stop, Darcy again was out of the door before a footman could open it. Offering his hand to Elizabeth, he smiled “Welcome to Pemberley, Miss Elizabeth.” and helped her to descend. Turning to Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley, he assisted them out of the carriage and then ushered the whole party forward. “Miss Bennet, Captain Stovall, Mrs. Stovall I would like to introduce you to the Pemberley housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who has been filled that role for almost five and twenty years. Her husband, Mr. Reynolds, has been our butler for almost as long. Mr. Reynolds, Mrs. Reynolds, please welcome Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Captain Amos Stovall and Mrs. Jane Stovall. Now, let us move indoors out of this cool breeze.”

Once inside, he turned to the Stovalls and grinned, saying, “Your rooms are located on the third floor on the west wing. You have that wing to yourselves with complete privacy. No one will bother you and you may ignore the world around you. Ring, if you wish services. You can have your meals in your rooms at your convenience or eat with us should you so desire.” Mrs. Reynolds directed a footman to lead them to their rooms.

Turning to Elizabeth, Darcy informed her, “Mrs Reynolds will show you to your rooms. I thought we might dine at seven and I could give you a brief tour of the house. I am sure you are eager to explore our library.”

The Stovalls did not come down for dinner and, in fact, were not seen by anyone for several days. After dinner Elizabeth was given a tour of the public rooms ending at the library, from which she could not be budged until it was time to retire for the evening. She and Darcy browsed happily, selecting a few volumes for her to read. When they eventually left the library, she accepted Darcy’s offer of his arm and he began leading her towards her room. As they climbed the stairs, he stopped when they reached to top and turned to her, “I expect that you will be rising early. If I remember correctly, you like to rise with the sun to walk for an hour or two before breaking your fast. Am I wrong?”

“No sir, you are quite correct. I cannot wait to explore the grounds around Pemberley.”

“I do not wish to impose on you but would like to join you on these walks. I prefer to rise early also and would like to enjoy them with you. However, I will understand if you prefer your solitude.”

Elizabeth took a minute or two to consider. “I admit to a preference to walking alone but that is mostly because I walk faster than others. I suspect that you should have no trouble keeping pace with
me. As I remember our walks at Rosings, we were well matched in that regard.” She forbore to add “at least”

Darcy gave a rueful grin, “I suspect I did not show too well there. I thought you knew I was seeking you out but I have come to conclude that you did not.”

“Truly sir, I thought you disliked me and that telling you it was a favourite path would lead you to avoid the route and myself.”

“Yes, so I now comprehend. I must conclude then that my presence now will not be unwelcome?”

“I would much enjoy having you show me the pathways.”

“I will leave you here then. Your rooms are down that hall. Shall we meet at half past six?”

Elizabeth agreed and went to her rooms. As she opened the door she could see Darcy watching her. He bowed when he realized she was observing him. She nodded and entered her room after which he turned and walked to his bedchamber. Tomorrow he would begin courting Elizabeth Bennet in earnest.
Monday, March 1, 1813 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Mrs. Bennet was still basking in the glow of Jane’s wedding and had hied herself off to Meryton to relive the day with her sister. Her hopes that she might encounter a neighbour or two who wanted to congratulate her once again were more than satisfied with the invitation to stop and visit by a woman who had largely ignored her for months. She returned for lunch tired but satisfied. The Gardiners had a more practical purpose in hand. Having decided to be present, if possible, when the letter from Lydia arrived they had remained at Longbourn for the morning with the intention of calling on the Thompsons after lunch even if the post had not arrived. As a consequence, when the Bennet servant returned with the day’s post, they were at Netherfield.

The housekeeper delivered the post to Mr. Bennet who, in his usual dilatory fashion paid it little heed until an hour had passed. There was only the one letter and the handwriting was poor and not immediately recognizable. Seeing it was addressed to his wife, he summoned the housekeeper and had her deliver the letter to her and then forgot about it entirely. Mrs. Bennet was in the parlour when she received the letter. Opening and reading it left her speechless for minutes. Her silence was broken by a screech that brought Mr. Bennet, Mary and Kitty to the room, with concern written on all their faces. Waving the letter in one hand and her handkerchief in the other, she was as incoherent as anyone had ever witnessed.

“Oh my dear girl, married! Canada, Mrs. Wickham, why did she not write? Married! Oh my nerves! Mr. Bennet, she is married! Oh, my dear, dear Lydia!”

Mr. Bennet could take no more.”Madame, cease this caterwauling!” he bellowed. Grabbing the letter from her hand, he began to read. It rendered him speechless and he collapsed into the nearest chair. The remonstrations of his daughters to explain he waved off as he read the letter a second time.

“Quiet, everyone! I will read the letter so you may judge for yourselves.”

Halifax, Nova Scotia
November 14, 1812

My Dear Mama,

You will never guess where I am. My dear Wickham has brought me to the colonies where he has hopes of making his fortune. We were assisted in this by Mr. Darcy although my husband, how droll that sounds, says that he had no knowledge of it. George had a good laugh at Mr. Darcy’s expense. What a joke! I can hardly write for laughing! He gave George £1,000 to go to the United States by himself but instead he brought me to Canada. We plan to travel to a place called York in Upper Canada. La! These colonies seem to have so many places with English names. It almost seems like home.

We went to Gretna Green as planned and were married there. We had stopped in London for me to buy some wedding clothes and then to Gretna Green. I am the first of my sisters to be married and Jane must now come after me. I was so proud to be standing next to my dear George in his regimentals. Unfortunately he has had to resign his commission but perhaps he can join the militia in Canada. I am sure his experience in the militia in Hertfordshire will make him a Major or Colonel.

We wished to visit Longbourn before we left but Mr. Darcy apparently would not allow George to delay the trip. I so wanted to show my handsome husband to all our neighbours. How they would
envy me.

I meant to write before we sailed but in the hurry I forgot. We are sending this via a ship that will stop in London sometime in the next few months. It must go to the West Indies before heading to London. I am sure it will get to you eventually unless the ship is captured by those Americans. I do not understand why they wish to fight us.

Anyway, I must hurry to complete this letter as we are preparing to leave for a place called Montreal and then on to York. George is calling me to come. I don’t know when I will meet you all again. Perhaps my sisters can come and visit me. I am sure I can find husbands for them here.

Your Loving Daughter,
Lydia Wickham

Kitty and Mary could hardly comprehend the letter and had to read it themselves before it could be believed. Their mother could not wait to spread the news and commandeering the carriage and the letter from Mr. Bennet was quickly on her way to visit her sister. As he watched her leave, Mr. Bennet was certain that the glad tidings would be spread the length of Meryton before nightfall. It was at this point that the Gardiners returned from their call on the Thompson family.

Mr. Gardiner looked at his brother, “Why was Fanny in such a hurry?”

“My youngest daughter has finally proven she is truly the silliest girl in the country. We have just now received a letter from her saying that she has married Wickham and they have gone to the colonies. Canada, can you believe that? Of all the countries they could have chosen…..Canada!”

“Married? … Lydia?”

“Apparently they went to Gretna Green after all! The trip to London was for wedding clothes for Lydia. Wickham must have had more funds than we knew if he could go there for such a purpose.” Mr. Bennet was clearly still grappling with the fact his youngest daughter was married, safe and had left the country.

“You are sure it was from Lydia?”

“Who else could it be from? I recognize her hand. She is as poor a writer now as ever she was.”

“This must be a great relief to you all. I can see my sister has wasted no time spreading the news.”

“I expect everyone in Meryton will know that she has another daughter married. I will hear nothing but complaints now that she wasn’t married at Longbourn or that I did not purchase her wedding clothes. However, if she asks to visit Lydia, I might just agree.”

Mrs. Gardiner had listened quietly to all this, “I must write Lizzy and Jane with this news. I know they will be much relieved.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “There is one aspect that puzzles me sorely. Lydia mentioned that Mr. Darcy had paid Wickham to leave the country. He must be aware of Wickham’s connection to Lydia. I am surprised and puzzled that he said nothing to me. Has he said anything to you, Brother?”

Mr. Gardiner had expected some such question, “Yes, he did mention it. He was not aware that Lydia was involved. In fact, the funds were given to send Wickham to the United States, not Canada. As far as we were concerned, Wickham had deserted Lydia. This will be quite a surprise for Lizzy and Jane.”
Mr. Bennet regarded Mr. Gardiner carefully. It seemed to him that neither he nor his wife was as shocked by this development as was he. But was there any reason he should question the news? He could think of none. Nor was he inclined to dispute that which appeared to salvage his family’s reputation. Nevertheless, there seemed to be several oddities that he was having trouble understanding and reconciling.

“Brother, would you and Madeline join me in my study? I have a few questions for you and privacy seems indicated.” With this, he led them there and, once everyone was properly settled, began to express his concerns. “I have been given to understand that Mr. Darcy was simply here in the role of a groomsman for Captain Stovall but, unless I am completely imagining things, he appears to have been very attentive to Lizzy.” Mr. Bennet did not miss the quick exchange of glances between the Gardiners. “Ah, so I am correct then. What can she be thinking? I believe her to dislike him greatly. Am I wrong? He is rich to be sure but I would not think that counts much with Lizzy.” He paused and, without giving either of the Gardiners a chance to interrupt, continued “Then there is this trip to Pemberley and now this letter from Lydia. And he is involved in it all.” As he expressed these seemingly unrelated events, it became clear to Mr. Bennet that they were not unrelated at all. “I must have some answers! There are too many oddities for me to ignore and Mr. Darcy is in the centre of them all.”

Mr. Gardiner looked at his wife and, receiving a slight nod from her, turned to his brother saying, “I will tell you all but first I must have your promise of complete secrecy. Neither my sister nor Kitty nor Mary must ever be told what I am about to relate. Do I have your word?”

“You have it!”

Mr. Gardiner considered his brother carefully and smiled. “Be not so grim, Thomas. This is, in truth, rather a happy story.” He then proceeded to tell Mr. Bennet about Darcy’s dealings with Wickham, their meeting in January and subsequent meetings and, finally, his efforts to discover Lydia and the plan to see her married.

Mr. Bennet shook his head in amazement. “I can hardly credit it. So this young man has taken it upon himself to restore my family’s respectability in order to marry Lizzy. He must care a great deal for her. I know I teased Lizzy about him but I was far from certain about his interest. I must say he has been much more amiable than when he was here last. Reserved but amiable and a good chess player as well! Can I assume that those rumours of his poor dealings with Wickham are as false as that man?”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled, “Yes, I am quite convinced of that. He has made Lizzy fully aware of those dealings. He has a reputation as a man of integrity and honour. There is no reason to believe he dealt with Wickham in any other fashion. In regard to Lizzy, if you saw them in a more familial setting, you would be quite assured of his affections. We also believe Lizzy may have had some effect on his manner but he has certainly been very amiable when in our society.”

“So, shall he propose then on this trip? Is that its purpose?”

“I suspect it is one of them, yes. But I also think it is a chance for Mr. Darcy to recompense Jane for his interference in separating her from Bingley.” At Mr. Bennet’s quizzical look, Mrs. Gardiner explained further. “Mr. Darcy believed that Jane was largely indifferent to Mr. Bingley and advised him accordingly which convinced Mr. Bingley to break off his attentions. Mr. Darcy attempted to correct his mistake last summer but at that point, Mr. Bingley had decided his interest was not strong enough to consider marriage and chose not to return to Netherfield.”

“Why would Mr. Darcy try to correct his error?”
“He and Lizzy had a serious argument while she was visiting Charlotte last spring. She apparently made him aware of his error and, from her report, not too gently.”

“Given her affection for Jane, I can easily imagine her anger. So where does this leave me? Should I order Lizzy to return? I am not sure I would have approved her presence on the journey if I had known of Mr. Darcy’s interest.”

“I would not order her home, brother. I believe Mr. Darcy to be an honourable man and to behave appropriately. She is properly chaperoned after all. Nevertheless, I would not be surprised if he writes to seek your consent and blessing to his offer of marriage to Lizzy within the next fortnight or so.”

“So I can impart none of this to Mrs. Bennet? A wise move, I am sure since it would be all over Meryton in an hour or two.” Mr. Bennet considered all that he had been told. “I must admit I am still struggling to understand all of these developments. You say that Mr. Darcy is giving this young Scottish lad £5,000 to wed Lydia? I cannot hope to repay him and yet, must I offer?”

“Brother, do not expend the effort. If I could not convince him that it was my responsibility, I doubt you will.”

Mrs. Gardner then excused herself to write to Elizabeth to inform her of all the doings at Longbourn. The two gentlemen continued to chat until Mrs. Bennet returned home, well satisfied that the news of Lydia’s marriage was fully appreciated by all her neighbours. Her only complaint was that Mr. Darcy had been so inconsiderate as to prevent Lydia and her dear Wickham from visiting Longbourn before they left for the Americas.
Tuesday, March 2, 1813 – Pemberley

As Elizabeth came trippingly down the stairs, she could see Darcy waiting for her by the main entrance. “I hope you are dressed for the cold, Miss Elizabeth. It can be quite chilly this early in the morning.”

“I am, and the chill will not be a problem if we walk briskly.”

“Where would you like to walk first?”

Elizabeth looked around and pointed to a path that appeared to lead down to the pond and then along the stream. “That appears quite interesting.” At which she set off at a brisk pace, her breath visible in the cold air. Darcy was quick to catch up and walk beside her. They continued this way for several minutes and let the exercise gradually warm their bodies. Conversation seemed unimportant and Darcy was content to let the silence continue. After a quarter hour had passed, he ventured to say, "Miss Bennet, one of my mistakes at Rosings was, during our walks, to fail to take advantage of the opportunity they provided to get to know you better and to allow you to know me better as well. I would like to avoid repeating that mistake if you are willing." Elizabeth looked at him with a question on her lips but he continued before she could utter it. “What I had in mind was for us to take walks like this daily and talk about those things that have created misunderstandings in the past and perhaps about our own past. I am willing to try and answer honestly any question you might have, as hard as that might be on occasion. In essence, I want to get to know you and have you know me.”

Elizabeth pondered his words. She knew her feelings for the man beside her had changed markedly over the past year. She believed herself to be falling in love with him and certainly her uncle and aunt seemed to think so. She had come to know him better through his letter, her observations and their few talks. But did she really know him well enough to be confident that the changes she could see would last? The difference between the man at the Meryton assembly and the man who walked beside her were such that the opportunity to explore his character must be taken. “I indeed would like the opportunity to get to know you better, Mr. Darcy.” She paused and asked, “How do you propose we proceed, sir?”

Darcy grinned at her, "I had in mind giving you the opportunity to expose my faults first. Each day we will seek the answer to a question from the other. Since a single question may be insufficient to explore the issue, additional questions as necessary seem reasonable. I will allow you the privilege of asking first.”

“May I suggest we start this tomorrow? I would like to consider my questions carefully.”

“By all means, tomorrow is quite satisfactory. Let us enjoy this walk. I would also hope that our discussions do not prevent us from enjoying the grounds. I could only wish that it were May or June when the paths are truly beautiful.”

They walked briskly for an hour with Darcy showing points of interest or describing alternate paths that could be of interest.

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That evening Jane and Amos joined them for dinner. Conversation was cheerful and plans for the following day were discussed. Darcy would be required to meet with his steward for several hours
following breakfast but promised to conduct them on a tour of the grounds after luncheon. When they had finished the meal, they moved to the music room where first Elizabeth and then Georgiana were induced to play for them.

Elizabeth played for a half hour with Darcy turning the pages. She found it difficult to concentrate due to his closeness, and the casual brush of his arm as he turned the pages seriously discomposed her. She hardly knew whether he was deliberately brushing her shoulder or whether she was leaning towards him and encouraging the contact. She did know she wanted it to stop and yet to continue. With no conscious action on either part they reduced the space between them until they were sitting nearly hip to hip with Elizabeth occasionally brushing against him as she swayed while playing.

Darcy found himself wishing for her full attention and abruptly rose from the bench when Elizabeth finished the piece she was playing. Taking her hand, he softly suggested, “Come, let us sit over there,” nodding towards a settee behind the pianoforte. “Georgiana, would you favour us with some music?”

“Of course, Brother.” and a smiling Georgiana moved quietly to the instrument. Before she had begun however, Amos whispered in Jane’s ear and then observed to the room, “Jane is rather tired. I think we will retire early.” They rose and quickly left the room to hidden smiles from both Elizabeth and Darcy. As Georgiana began to play, Darcy took Elizabeth’s hand and murmured softly, “You have no idea how much I enjoy listening to you play. To sit beside you while you do so, just enhances my pleasure.”

“You derive pleasure from discomposing me, sir? That is most unkindly done.”

“So my presence discomposes you. I find I can tolerate your censure quite well while enjoying your blushes.” As he spoke his thumb was stroking the back of her hand causing her to shiver as goosebumps ran up her arm.

“Are you chilled? Let me get you a shawl.” Darcy made as if to rise but her grasp of his hand tightened. “No sir, I am fine. Please do not bother yourself.” As he settled back beside, she relaxed and placed her other hand atop his and intertwined their fingers. “Please, let us listen to your sister. I have so rarely heard anyone play so well and with such feeling. It is a joy to listen to her perform.”

They sat in a comfortable silence, hands entwined, with Elizabeth gradually relaxing and her head resting on Darcy’s shoulder. He realized the impropriety of their position but could not bear to disturb her comfort, or the feel of her body against his, or lose the scent of her hair. He was very aware of his arousal and only his strictest control and Georgiana’s presence prevented him from kissing those lips that were so close to his own. He shifted slightly to ease the discomfort. Elizabeth felt the increasing rigidity of his body and thought he was uncomfortable with the contact. She knew it was most improper but it felt so comfortable that she was reluctant to move, but murmured to him, “I am making you uncomfortable. I should move.”

“No, please. I do not wish you to move. If I am tense, Miss Bennet, it is simply to avoid doing that which would merit your strongest reproofs. You do not know the effect that you have on me and I cannot tell you.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth blushed deeply. She was pretty sure she knew exactly what Darcy wanted to do and was also sure she should disapprove even as she wished for him to act on his desires. She simply squeezed his hands gently and straightened her body a little without breaking contact with his.

Darcy recognized her desire to maintain contact but reduce his tension and chose to change the subject of conversation. “Miss Bennet, I was planning to visit some of my tenants over the next week or so and was wondering if you would be interested in joining me. Georgiana would accompany us
and it would give you a chance to see more of the estate.”

“I think that would be most interesting.” She looked at him with a question in her eyes, “How would we travel? Surely it is too far to walk.”

“Most definitely! I have a gentle horse that you could ride or we could go by carriage. I think the horseback ride would be more enjoyable for you since we would not be restricted to the roads.”

“I have ridden very little and not for some time. Perhaps a carriage would be best.”

“Would you allow me to give you a few lessons before we venture off?”

Elizabeth thought for a minute or two, “I suspect you are quite determined on this, are you not?” Her smile robbed her words of any censure.

“I am, but your enjoyment is my first concern. I truly think you would enjoy the ride.”

“I have no riding clothes.”

“I am sure Georgiana can find some that might not fit you too ill. Shall I ask her?”

“Very well. When are these lessons to begin?”

“We are engaged to tour the grounds tomorrow after luncheon. Perhaps the following day, should the weather permit.”

“Very well, sir. You shall walk with me in the mornings and I shall ride with you in the afternoons. You will grow tired of my company quite quickly, I fear.”

“Who is fishing for compliments now?” Hearing them laugh together drew Georgiana’s attention and she left the pianoforte to join their conversation. Apprised of their plans, she readily agreed to find a riding outfit for Elizabeth and to accompany them on their rides to visit the tenants. She also assured Elizabeth as to Darcy’s competence as an instructor.
Chapter 30

Wednesday March 3, 1813 – Pemberley

The morning was overcast with a grey sky but somewhat milder temperatures. It had rained overnight but the pathways did not appear to be unwalkable. As they began their walk, Elizabeth considered her thoughts from the previous night. Speaking carefully she began, “The first time I saw you, I thought ‘what a handsome man’ and then when we were first introduced to Mr. Bingley and yourself, you barely acknowledged our existence, turned and walked away from us. Later you insulted me personally and then, by implication, every other woman in the room except Mr. Bingley’s sisters. Do you remember your words because I cannot forget them – ‘She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.’ And ‘there is not another woman in the room with whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up.’ As the evening progressed, you gave every impression of holding all of us in contempt, as below you, unworthy of even the slightest consideration from you. That evening laid the foundation for my disapprobation and coloured all of our subsequent dealings. I have managed to look past your behaviour but it still puzzles me exceedingly, even now. Why? How could you have been so arrogant, disdainful, even cruel to people who wished only to think well of you? On a personal basis, I suspect you have no idea how hurtful your words were to a young woman of just twenty years who, by no means, believed herself to be a beauty! I am concerned, if you will, that that man will somehow reappear.”

Darcy could sense the hurt that underlay Elizabeth’s question. She may have been able to forgive his behaviour but clearly she had not forgotten. First, he had to apologize for the personal insult, “I was wrong to speak so. Very wrong! It was not long before I found you to be one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance. I also owe you an apology for the incivility of expressing such sentiments in such a public setting.”

Darcy walked on, head bowed in thought. He spoke not for several minutes until Elizabeth feared he would say no more. She could feel a twinge of anger and tried to suppress it. Fortunately, Darcy continued as though there were no interruption.

“The question of ‘why’ speaks to the heart of my character. The easy answer is that I was worried about Georgiana, since Ramsgate was only a month or two in the past and she was still suffering from Wickham’s cruelty. Another factor is that I have always been extremely uncomfortable in crowds, particularly when I know few, if any, of the people – I simply did not want to be there that night. Also Bingley, who is like a brother to me, can be, on occasion, the most annoying and persistent individual and that night, given the first two conditions I mentioned, I spoke with no intent, no consideration other than to get him to desist in bothering me. That would be the easy answer.” He paused and looked at Elizabeth. He saw no absolution in her eyes and he shook his head, “That would be the obvious answer and one that contains some truth but it would be a very incomplete one.”

His walking pace had slowed as he considered how best to express his thoughts. He looked up and noticed that the path divided up ahead. “I think we should take the left fork since it will keep us in sight of the house. For your protection, we need to observe the basic proprieties. I would not have your reputation harmed in any form.”

“I thank you, sir, but hope you are not trying to deflect my question.”

Darcy laughed, “Hardly, Miss Elizabeth. I know well enough that you will not be persuaded to relinquish it. I am simply trying to find the proper words. Last summer I faced this same question
from my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. The answer I found then is, I believe, still correct. I had been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son, and for many years an only child, I was spoiled by my parents who, though good themselves (my father particularly was all that was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared to my own. Such I was from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still be, if not for you. You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled. I came to you in Hunsford without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased.”

“Had you then persuaded yourself that I should accept?”

“Indeed I had! What will you think of my vanity? I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses.”

“My manners must have been at fault, though not intentionally, I assure you. I never meant to mislead but my spirits oftentimes lead me wrong. How you must have hated me after that evening.”

“Hate you! No! I was angry at first perhaps but my anger very soon took a proper direction.”

“Mr. Darcy, I am puzzled by one aspect of your behaviour. Do you present as forbidding a countenance when attending balls or in society when in London?”

Darcy considered her question carefully, “Truly Miss Bennet, it depends. When I am in company of friends I suspect my behaviour is a little more amiable. After all, I was not too forbidding at Netherfield during your sojourn there, was I?”

“Except when I and Mrs Long shared a similar experience, I would admit you were not quite as forbidding.”

“Mrs. Long?”

“We both were in your company for a full half hour without a word being said, she at the assembly and I in the Netherfield library.”

“I have no recollection of Mrs. Long but I can assure you that not only did I spend the half hour not speaking, I don’t believe I read a single page of my book.”

“Why did you not speak?”

“I was trying to ensure that you had no expectations. Little did I know you probably welcomed the silence and would have been even happier if I were not there at all.”

“Let us not relive such poor memories.” Elizabeth looked at Darcy, “on what does your behaviour at balls depend?”

“I am required to accept invitations to many balls held by family or friends. In their company I tend to find it much easier to converse; however, one cannot be forever in such company at a ball. I came into society at about the same time my father died; I became one of the favourite objects of every match-making mother in society. If you remember the Meryton Assembly, I doubt I was in the room for a quarter hour before I heard the words ‘ten thousand a year’ and ‘Pemberley estate’. I have been pursued in this fashion for over five years. I adopted that countenance to discourage such advances
where possible."

They walked on in silence for a short distance until Darcy turned to face Elizabeth, “I trust, Miss Elizabeth, that I have answered your question satisfactorily. As to whether that man who first made your acquaintance will re-emerge, I should not speak on my own behalf. Truly, I believe he has vanished.”

Elizabeth found her anger had dissipated completely. “I believe, Mr. Darcy, that you have indeed answered all my questions. Perhaps more fully than I had anticipated. I know it could not have been easy for you to do so. “

Darcy nodded and they walked in silence for a few minutes until Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow at him, “I believe sir, that the opportunity to ask a question is now yours. Ask away, sir and I will endeavour to answer.”

“While I was delighted to encounter you most unexpectedly in London, I admit I was also puzzled. It appeared to me that you and your sister were living with the Gardiners, rather than simply visiting. I cannot tell you why I reached that conclusion but you seemed more like their daughters than guests. If my conclusion is correct, how and why did it come about?”

“You would not accept the simple answer that we had long desired to partake of London society?” Seeing Darcy’s negative shake of the head, she gave a rueful smile, “I thought not.” She rubbed her hands together as though to get some warmth into her fingers. “I think we should begin to return now.” With which she abruptly turned and began to retrace her steps. Surprised, Darcy was quick to catch her up.

“When we received the news that Lydia had eloped, my family expected to hear from her shortly about her marriage. Even Jane, to whom I had imparted your dealings with Wickham, had such hopes. I did not and knew our family’s reputation was ruined. My expectations were met, unfortunately. I anticipated the censure that we experienced and the extent to which my parents had failed us was borne upon me. The criticisms in your letter were hurtful but true. The behaviour of my mother and two youngest sisters was such as to warrant the greatest concern. It was my father’s duty, his responsibility to control such behaviour and he would not, preferring to tease, ridicule and laugh at them and be concerned with his own peace and quiet rather than his family’s reputation. I had begged him to keep Lydia home, to not allow her to go to Brighton, but he would not. He would not see that her behaviour, her want of sense – indeed her wildness - could lead to a wanton disregard of propriety. If not with Wickham, then with some other man - equally unprincipled.”

She looked at Darcy. “Our lives became a torture to bear, particularly for Jane and myself. Our father, who perhaps should bear the greater part of the responsibility for our distress, was the least affected, since society had never held much of his interest. He simply retired to his study and ignored the world as he had always done. I think I began to resent him. I know I could no longer enjoy sharing the privacy of his study and I suspect he knew why, although he said nothing. Nor could I pretend to share his disparaging comments of my mother and sisters. The cost of his negligence had become much too dear.”

Elizabeth considered how best to explain her feelings. “I had two examples of men who accepted and acted upon their responsibilities, yourself and my Uncle Gardiner. I was, of course, much less familiar with you but from what little I could observe, you were assiduous in handling your business concerns (as Miss Bingley once noted), you are obviously a concerned and devoted brother to your sister, and finally, I sense a dedicated and careful manager of your estate. My uncle I am much more familiar with and he possesses those attributes that I would wish in a father or a husband. He would not neglect his estate such that it was less productive than it could be, does not permit my aunt (if she
were so inclined which she is not) to overspend and waste the family income, he does not neglect the upbringing of his children, nor does he slight or disparage his wife. Quite the contrary, in fact. My father is not responsible for the entail that binds Longbourn, but he is responsible for the fact that his daughters have no dowry and most have less sense than the veriest goose. He could not take the trouble to economize and provide for his wife should he die before her, nor would he ensure a proper training of his daughters instead of leaving it in the hands of a woman of little education and poor understanding. As a consequence, she has felt the fiercest need to find husbands for her daughters and to provide for herself should she be widowed. My mother has little sense but I doubt she would have pushed a match between Mr. Collins and me, if it were not for a fear for her future. My father supported my refusal but it should not have been necessary in the first instance, if he had taken the least trouble to redirect Mr. Collins’ attention to my sister Mary who might have made him a decent wife.”

“You were always close to him though, were you not?”

“Yes, I was his favourite. Perhaps most like him in those respects that he cherished, intelligence, love of books, and a willingness to discuss the import of what we read. He taught me, guided me as I grew up. I love my father, but it is difficult now to respect his behaviour.” She looked up at Darcy. “I tell you this in confidence. I would never want to say as much to my father.”

“Of course.”

“The censure of our neighbours was a concern of course. You must understand the position in which Jane and I found ourselves. We were both of marriageable age and had come to realize that there were few, if any, eligible gentlemen amongst our neighbours to whom we could wish to be attached. We both wished to be married to men we could respect and esteem and who would return that respect and esteem. We did not expect such as this.” And she waved her hand to indicate Pemberley and its grounds. “A modest but respectable living would suffice. But even that seemed to be denied us in Hertfordshire. When our Aunt and Uncle Gardiner visited us last Christmas, we asked if we could move to live with them. They understood our distress and persuaded our father to let us join their household. None of us really anticipated that Jane would marry so quickly nor so well. She is truly happy, I think.”

They walked on in companionable silence for several minutes until she looked up at Darcy. “Well then, Mr. Darcy, have I answered your question?”

“Indeed Miss Bennet. I presume then that you were not chasing me to London?”

Elizabeth glanced quickly at him and the small smile on his countenance sufficed to tell her that he was teasing. “Vanity, sir! Vanity!” They both laughed and continued to walk towards the manor house. “Truly, I had no expectations whatsoever of ever meeting you again. I thought the societies in which we each moved to be so very far apart as to preclude such an encounter. I hope that I do not feed your pride too greatly when I admit that our meeting has given me much pleasure.”

“What did I once say ‘pride – where there was a real superiority of mind – will always be under good regulation.’ How insufferably pompous I was then.”

“I will not dispute your conclusion, Mr. Darcy.” With a smile she ran up the steps to the entrance and into the main hall. Handing her outerwear to a footman, she turned to Darcy and inquired, “Now sir, you must direct me to the dining room. I have a hunger that is barely under good regulation at the moment.” Darcy laughed - drawing a surreptitious and surprised glance from Reynolds, his butler - and offered Elizabeth his arm saying, “Let me be your guide then. I find I have a hunger that exceeds even my pride.”
They entered the dining room in good spirits and found themselves to be the first to partake. Georgiana joined them shortly thereafter and they planned those activities which would occupy their attention for the remainder of the day.

Elizabeth had spent the morning after breakfast exploring the house in company with Georgiana and Mrs. Reynolds who, by virtue of more than twenty years experience as housekeeper, had conducted countless tours for visitors and knew much of the recent history. Georgiana added a personal perspective from incidents related to her by her brother and father. If Mrs. Reynolds was particular in her attentions to Elizabeth as the prospective future Mistress of Pemberley, it was not readily apparent to either young woman. Elizabeth, for her part, found little to criticize and much to admire in respect of furnishings. As was the case with Darcy House, an elegant simplicity in style was married with functionality and quality to produce a comfortable place for people to live and, if some rooms were a little dated in style, the defect was not such as to necessitate urgent changes. Elizabeth noted and commented accordingly and her sensible attitude was clearly appreciated by Mrs. Reynolds, who could find no fault with her master’s apparent choice of a bride.

Darcy joined them for luncheon and solicited Georgiana’s help to outfit Elizabeth with a riding habit. Georgiana’s enthusiasm was infectious and as soon as they finishing eating she and Elizabeth repaired to Georgiana’s rooms to search through her wardrobe. After a search of an hour they were able to find garments that would fit Elizabeth. Darcy was informed that they would join him in a half hour at the stables.

While awaiting the ladies, Darcy consulted with the Stable Master to select an appropriate horse for Elizabeth. They settled on a mare of eleven years and fourteen hands high. She was of a gentle disposition and suitable for an inexperienced rider and had, in fact, been Georgiana’s first full sized horse after graduating from ponies.

“Oh, you are going to have Elizabeth ride Sugar.” Georgiana turned to Elizabeth, “I rode Sugar for several years and you will love her. Give her a carrot and she will follow you everywhere.”

“She is smaller than our farm horses. I won’t have so far to fall at least.”

Darcy smiled encouragingly, “Rest assured, I will not let you fall. We will spend the first little while letting you get used to riding her and will stay here in this paddock.” Getting Georgiana’s attention, he suggested, “Georgiana, why don’t you saddle Susan to accompany Elizabeth while I walk and guide Sugar. Have Mr. Henson saddle Ben for me.”

Darcy turned to Elizabeth, “I have a carrot. Why don’t you introduce yourself to Sugar before we get you mounted.” Elizabeth approach the horse with a carrot in her palm and, after it had been gobbled up, stroked the horse’s nose and patted her neck. Sugar snuffled and then gently butted Elizabeth in the chest. “Asking for another carrot.” laughed Darcy. “Maybe tomorrow, Sugar.”

Darcy led the horse towards the mounting block and assisted Elizabeth to mount, adjusting the stirrups as necessary. Handing her the reins, he led the horse towards and into the paddock, noting Elizabeth’s posture and suggesting such changes as were necessary to ensure her comfort and feeling of security. Georgiana joined them, riding a grey gelding and leading a tall black gelding. Releasing his grasp of Sugar’s reins, Darcy mounted his horse and with Elizabeth on Sugar between them, Georgiana and Darcy completed several circuits of the paddock at a walking pace.

"Elizabeth, you look fairly comfortable on Sugar. Your posture is good which is most important. Are you ready to go a little faster?"
Elizabeth was indeed feeling comfortable and rather bored by the slow pace. “I think a slightly faster pace would be delightful.”

Darcy and Georgiana increased the pace to a slow trot after instructing Elizabeth on the appropriate signals to get Sugar to respond. Seeing that she was doing quite well, Darcy led them out of the paddock and on to the grounds for a short distance, letting Elizabeth get familiar with handling her horse.

Darcy was keeping a careful watch on Elizabeth and could see that her posture was showing signs of fatigue. “I think we should return now, Elizabeth. You have been riding for about an hour and I suspect you will feel some soreness tonight.” They returned to the stables. Darcy assisted his sister to dismount and turning to Elizabeth, placed his hands around her waist and lifted her down. Elizabeth had instinctively placed her hands on his arms and was disconcerted by the contact and his nearness once her feet touched the ground. Never had a man held and lifted her in this fashion and she wondered if she would ever stop blushing when in close proximity to Mr. Darcy. Looking up, she was frozen by the look in his eyes and they stood there, gazing at each other until Georgiana’s cough brought them back to reality. Darcy quickly dropped his hands and stepped back. Obviously embarrassed at his behaviour in front of his sister, he gestured to them to walk to the house and deliberately ignored Georgiana’s smirk. “Miss Elizabeth! Please excuse my behaviour just now. It was most improper.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “If my pardon is required, sir, it is most willing given.” A most unladylike snort was heard from Georgiana which prompted a teasing response from Elizabeth, “Georgiana, are you feeling well? You have been coughing and snorting. I hope you are not ill.” This was vehemently denied by Georgiana who quickly changed the subject and praised Elizabeth’s riding. “I think you should not need too many lessons, to become a competent rider, Elizabeth. Will we ride again tomorrow, Brother?”

“Yes, weather permitting. I would like to venture a little further afield if Miss Elizabeth is willing.”

Chatting comfortably they proceeded into the house and to their respective rooms to bathe and rest. The meal and evening passed in quiet comfort. Jane and Stovall joined them for dinner and Darcy and Stovall repaired to the billiards room afterwards for a quiet hour before rejoining the ladies in the music room. The newlyweds again retired early while Elizabeth and Georgiana amused themselves and Darcy with a wide ranging medley of Irish, Scottish and English ballads. Even Darcy was persuaded to join in singing Greensleeves. Elizabeth accompanied Georgiana to her rooms for girl talk, leaving Darcy feeling quite deserted. However it only took Elizabeth’s smile and expressed wish to see him in the morning for their walk to buoy his mood and he wished them pleasant dreams.
When Elizabeth looked out her window, it was obvious that walking outdoors would not be an option today. A brisk wind was blowing and the rain almost looked like ice. She dressed and wandered downstairs anyway and found Darcy waiting for her as he had the past two days. “Good morning Miss Elizabeth! I think you will agree that a walk outdoors is not to be pursued this morning. I was going to suggest we stroll around the conservatory instead. Does that suit?”

“It suits very well indeed, Mr. Darcy.”

Offering her his arm, he led her through a circuitous route which prompted her to exclaim, “I see you are trying to ensure I cannot find this conservatory without your direction, sir!”

“You have uncovered my plan, Miss Bennet. Having seen it once, I know you will want to visit it often and will have to call on my services to guide you there.” Saying this, he then led her through a passage way and into the conservatory. It was a very large building and quite warm even in the early morning. Elizabeth released his arm and began to walk by herself stopping every few steps to admire another flower or smell a blossom. Darcy explained that they grew mainly flowers and fruit in the conservatory. Greenhouses, which lay just beyond the conservatory, were where they grew vegetables and greens for the kitchen. Their wanderings eventually brought them to an area with a fountain and several benches and a table. Darcy invited her to sit and joined her in listening to the sound of the fountain in a companionable silence. Finally she turned to him, “I believe I have a question for you, Mr. Darcy.”

“Indeed, I await your interrogation Miss Bennet.”

“There will be no interrogation this morning, sir. I am requesting, not questioning. Speak to me of you childhood, what manner of boy were you? What did you do? Who were your friends? I would know the young Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy felt acutely uncomfortable. His habits of privacy were such that he had rarely talked of his childhood with anyone. He could see Elizabeth watching him closely and was quite certain that his reluctance to disclose this part of himself was obvious to her. Yet if he expected to win her affections, he knew he could have few secrets from her. Not that there was anything particular bad about his childhood, it was simply that he was not comfortable talking about it. “Miss Bennet, I am sure you can see that I am uncomfortable talking about my past. At the risk of boring you to tears, I will attempt to do so.”

“Thank you Mr. Darcy. I am not that easily bored.”

“So be it. Never accuse me of not warning you.” He paused for a few seconds, “I do not have any memories until I suppose I was about four or five years of age. My parents were very traditional and I was in the nursery until I was twelve, I think. My earliest memories are of Christmas. I do not remember if it was at Pemberley or Matlock, since we spent alternate years at each. I can remember the Christmases mainly because my cousins were there and I had someone to play with.”

“You had no others to play with?”

“Not that I remember. Wickham was a playmate, though a year or two younger but not always available. During the summers my parents and I would visit the Matlocks for extended periods or
they would visit us. I seem to remember spending whole summers in their company. James was three years older than I and Richard, a year older. Frances was three years younger and a proper hoyden as I remember her as a child. We all would roam Pemberley or Matlock on horseback as we got older.”

“When did you learn to ride?”

“I believe my father began my lessons – he taught me himself – when I was breeched at about six years of age. He and my mother both loved to ride and as soon as I could stay on my pony they often took me with them. I can still remember how proud I was to be allowed to ride by myself – well, almost by myself, since a groom always accompanied me – it was freedom to roam Pemberley where I willed. I think I may have spent most of my time, when not being schooled, on horseback. I did not realize it at the time but my father began schooling me about Pemberley as soon as I could ride.”

He became lost in thought and his contemplation lasted for several minutes before Elizabeth gently returned him to the present. “And how did he do that, Mr. Darcy?”

“Ah, sorry. I was just remembering. My father rode out regularly to inspect the estate – probably two or three times a week. Unless there was a matter of great urgency, he would bring me along. I rode in front of him on his horse when quite young and then beside him on my own horse as I became more proficient. We would visit the tenants, inspect fences, I even remember visiting the grist and saw mills. I did not realize it at the time but he was tutoring me about Pemberley just as my governess was teaching me my school lessons. He would talk to me about Pemberley, its history, my ancestors. As I grew older, he would talk to me more about the estate proper: the people - I believe he knew the history of every tenant and their family - the crops, the land – which areas were best for grazing and which best for crops, which areas always had drainage problems - the minutiae of managing an estate. He was an amiable man. I can remember him getting down off his horse and talking for an hour or more to a tenant farmer about his problems.”

“Do you do this?”

“Of course, how could I not? They must know me and be confident in my abilities and concern for their welfare. I believe my father must have known that he was quite ill since he gradually turned most of the management of the estate over to me the summer before his death. I was to have a Grand Tour after I finished Cambridge but my father put it off for a year, citing a concern about war in Europe. Since he died that year in the fall, I suspect he wanted to prepare me as much as possible.”

“What were your parents like?”

“My mother was quite beautiful. Georgiana looks much like her but mother was even more attractive. I think Georgiana and I both received her shyness, her reserve. She was most unlike her brother and sister. You have met my Aunt Catherine and can attest to her lack of reserve.”

“Indeed, I can. She bears comparison to my mother in that respect,” laughed Elizabeth.

“I had not thought of that. I think I prefer your mother’s silliness to my aunt’s proclivity to advise and importune every one she meets.”

“What memories do you have of your mother? You were twelve or so when she died were you not?”

“I was thirteen, I think. I had been sent to school – Eton – Georgiana had been born but it apparently was a difficult birth and my mother developed a fever and died shortly thereafter. I was at school at the time. I can remember my father coming to the school and bringing me home.”

“Were you close to your mother?”
“Oh yes. I can remember, if there was not company for dinner, she and my father would eat with me and include me in their discussions. Those are probably my fondest memories of her....oh and Christmas, of course. She loved Christmas. Decorating the house, her family visiting or visiting them. It was always a happy time. I remember her playing the pianoforte and people singing and playing games.”

“What was your father like?”

“He was quite amiable. He had no problem talking to anyone. Both he and my mother were quite conservative. Theirs was an arranged marriage but one of the better ones. A truly strong attachment, affection developed between them and my father was distraught at her death. I sometimes wished he had remarried, Georgiana and I really missed a mother. He was an excellent father but could not replace our mother. Georgiana never knew our mother and my memories are a poor substitute. She was but nine when father died and he did not talk to her much of our mother. Perhaps the memories were still too painful.”

“What are some of your best memories of your father?”

“There are quite a few. The times we rode the estate tend to blur together and, as I got older, created a great bond between us. Even now I can be riding the estate and recall my father and me at a particular spot and discussing something, sometimes a problem but often not. There is one thing we did every year and that was to travel to our estate in Scotland for the salmon fishing. We would stay a fortnight and often my uncle and cousins would join us. The manor house is quite a bit smaller than Pemberley, more akin to Longbourn perhaps. I truly enjoyed those times. I would like to take my son there and perhaps Mr. Gardiner could join me. I know he loves to fish and there is nothing to compare to fighting and landing a ten pound salmon.”

“I am sure nothing would give him greater pleasure. I never thought to ask but do you have any other estates?” Elizabeth did not mention her thought that she and her Aunt Gardiner would enjoy the trip also even if fishing were not their object.

“I have a small estate in Ireland which is where our horse breeding takes place. I have not visited it in a couple of years and will probably have to do so soon. I also have a house in Ramsgate which is being let at the moment. I will probably sell it because of the poor memories attached to it.”

Elizabeth nodded in understanding and thought to divert his attention. “I have met your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Was your mother much like her and is your uncle much like her?”

Darcy paused and thought for a moment, “Is your mother like your uncle, Mr. Gardiner?”

“Point taken.....but my question remains.”

“My mother was shy, reserved and not greatly fond of large crowds. She was, I think, rather position or status conscious. She would not, for instance, have befriended your Aunt Gardiner but would have been polite in her company. She was conscious of social rank but not to the extent of my Aunt Catherine. My father was probably more conservative and more conscious of rank. He was truly amiable amongst his peers and to those for whom he had a responsibility but since I rarely saw him outside that circle I cannot say how he responded. In the Derbyshire society, he seemed comfortable and got on well but that society did not encompass a large number of families. That he was quite conservative I know, much more so than I. He probably would be quite disturbed at some of the changes I have made here at Pemberley and in the management of the Darcy fortune. He was a staunch believer in the primacy of land as the only solid measure of wealth and prestige.”

“I do not understand. How do you differ?”
“Well, without getting too deep into the subject area, I have introduced crop rotation which he was reluctant to do and I have taken much of the Darcy investments out of the Funds and into manufacturing and trade where the returns are much greater. Georgiana’s dowry is the only portion still retained in the Funds.”

“Is it the returns alone that have dictated your decision to invest in trade? Or are there other reasons? Do you mind my asking?”

“I am delighted you would ask. Not many women would think to inquire. The change simply makes the most sense. I believe the future will depend more on manufacture and trade than land. I have read the treatises of a number of political economists – Smith, Ricardo – and when you consider the amount of wealth being accumulated by people in trades, one would have to be wilfully blind to ignore what the future portends. As well, the wars have inflated the value of everything including agriculture. I have concerns for the future of landowners.”

Elizabeth really did not want to get diverted to a discussion of political economy, as interesting as that might prove with someone of Mr. Darcy’s intelligence, “I know only your cousin, the Colonel, and your Aunt Catherine. What are your other relatives like?”

“The Darcy family is quite limited. My father was an only son and I have but two aunts, who were much older than my father, and only a couple of Darcy cousins. One of my aunts was quite estranged from my father. She married poorly in his opinion and I don’t remember ever meeting her.”

“Poorly?”

“Yes, although I do not know all the particulars. He was a gentleman, I believe, but with a very small estate in Cornwall. I believe she married against the wishes of her family but don’t know the particulars, as I said. My other aunt had but two children, both girls, and I have not seen them for ten years or more. They are both much older than I.” He thought for a moment or two. “Perhaps I should attempt to reconnect with my aunts.”

“And your mother’s family?”

“My Uncle, Henry Fitzwilliam, Earl of Matlock is very like my father in most respects. They met at Cambridge and it was probably that connection which led to my father’s marriage to his sister. I respect my uncle greatly, he has been very supportive since I took over responsibility for Pemberley. I doubt he would agree with some of my initiatives but also suspect he will adopt those that he believes will work. I know he is planning to introduce crop rotation as an example. The results at Pemberley have been too good to ignore. My investment advice, he is less likely to follow since it would necessitate more contact with people in trades.”

“His first son, James, is much like him. He was married several years ago and has two children although I have had little contact with them. His wife is a product of the ton and not someone I enjoy meeting. Again, theirs is an arranged marriage but not one in which I can detect much affection. The Colonel, Richard, you know. I believe him to be the best of the Fitzwilliams and he is like a brother to me. I suspect his career in the army has rubbed most of the conservatism from him. He is truly one of the best men I know. I just wish he did not have to continue in the army. We fear for his safety now that he is with Wellesley.”

“What is your Aunt like?”

“Countess Matlock? She has been the closest I have to a mother since my own died. She is truly a lovely woman and would like you a great deal. Her background is rather similar to yours in that she had little exposure to London society before her marriage. She has been trying to find me a wife for
several years now. Her daughter, Frances, is very much like her and I have asked her on a couple of occasions to act as hostess for me. She has no discomfort in meeting people from trade and has all of Richard’s amiability.”

There was one question that Elizabeth longed to ask “Will your family accept me?” But she knew that this was not the time to ask that question. Given the little that Darcy had told her of his relatives and her experience with his Aunt Catherine and himself in Meryton, she was not sanguine that they would ever accept her. That question would have to wait and instead she grinned, “Tell me, were you ever punished? Did your father ever take a hairbrush to you?”

Darcy started to laugh, “Oh yes, I could get into my share of trouble particularly when my cousins were around although I never remember a hairbrush being involved. I think the harshest punishment I received was when I spoke meanly to one of the servants. I don’t remember the particulars but I think he did not do something I asked of him and there was a good reason for his response. Anyway my father first gave me a lecture on the proper treatment of servants and then had me muck out the stables for the next five days. That lesson stuck.”

“Did you ever get into mischief type trouble?”

“You mean the kind of trouble one gets into by bringing a frog to the dining table?”

“Exactly! What happened?”

“I must have been seven or eight and vastly interested in frogs and snakes. I probably caught the frog down by the lake and, I presume, thought it would be a fine idea to share it with my parents. Bringing it out and displaying it on the table did not go over too well. I believe it jumped into my mother’s lap. She shrieked and it went flying. I was so busy trying to capture it, I missed what happened next but I think some china hit the floor. Anyway by the time I captured it again, my father had me by the scruff of my shirt and the frog, I, and my father proceeded outside. The frog got his freedom and I, a dozen of my father’s best on my bottom. I do not think I was allowed back to table for a week, not that I could sit well anyway.” He chuckled. “I believe my parents eventually got a great laugh out of it.”

Elizabeth laughed. “It is good to see you do something that I might have done.” She sobered and looked at him carefully, “You know, apart from your cousins, I have not heard you mention friends. Did you not have any?”

A rather pensive came over his face, “I have friends, of course, but not a great number of them. I may have made several at Eton and quite a few more at Cambridge but I was generally very reserved and did not enjoy many of the activities of my peers. Those friends I did make, I still have today. I would like them to meet you; they would like you and envy me. Wickham, of course, you know about. We were rather close as children but as we got a little older I sensed a change in him which I failed to understand at the time. It is now clear that, perhaps due to his mother’s influence, he began to resent our relative positions. I found him to be increasingly spiteful and inclined to disparage me when the opportunity arose. When we entered Cambridge, he quickly adopted the more dissolute ways of the richer students. Of course he did not have the income to support his endeavours and frequently used his Darcy connection to incur debt. I was forced on several occasions to pay his debts and, in one case, to indemnify a father for his daughter’s …. ah …. distress. I did so to hide his behaviour from my father who was quite ill and wished to think well of Wickham. Perhaps that was a mistake but it seemed best at the time.”

“I cannot fault your decision, sir. Particularly when your father was ill and additional distress would have made his condition worse. Now I believe it is your turn to question me.”
Darcy consulted his watch, “I think our time has lapsed for today. I will importune you tomorrow morning, if you agree. It is almost time to break our fast.” Offering Elizabeth his arm they strolled back to where breakfast was being served. Georgiana was at the table and greeted them with delight, bubbling with plans for the day. While Darcy had to meet with his steward for several hours, Georgiana and Elizabeth made plans to practice a duet on the pianoforte and for a picnic lunch in the conservatory afterwards. Due to the rainy conditions, riding was not a possibility.

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Dinner that evening was a quiet affair. Jane and Amos did join them for the meal and a pleasant hour was spent afterwards in general conversation. The Stovalls retired early and since Elizabeth wished to visit the library, Darcy and Georgiana joined her to spend several hours in reading poetry and discussing books. It was time well spent, both enjoyable and rewarding as they each became more familiar with the thoughts and opinions of the others. For Georgiana, in particular, it was a revealing insight into the woman she was sure would become her sister and, as well, into her brother who she thought, perhaps because she was getting older, seemed less like a parent and increasingly like a brother. For them all, there was no little delight to be found in their similarities of taste and opinion and, as much again in their differences, which could provoke debate and argument. If the latter flowed from strong opinions, the manner of expression never less than respectful; the winning of such arguments being insignificant compared to the pleasure of the exchanges themselves.
Chapter 32

March 15-21, 1813 - Pemberley, Derbyshire

Elizabeth checked her timepiece once more. Only five minutes had passed since the last time she had checked. “This will never do! I must order my thoughts.” She deliberately made her mind review the past week. She could not remember when she had last enjoyed such pleasant company and interesting pursuits. Her morning walks with Mr. Darcy had continued either on the pathways or in the conservatory and, if they had not been as insightful as the first several, they had provided her with a better appreciation of Mr. Darcy’s character and likes. His knowledge of the world and experience greatly exceeded her own and yet he was willing, nay eager, to share it with her. Her riding lessons were proceeding apace and her confidence in her abilities was growing. She was under no illusions that her skills matched those of Georgiana but she no longer feared falling from her horse. “And my new riding habit looks very good if Mr. Darcy’s reaction was anything to go by!” This produced a satisfied chortle from her when she remembered his eagerness to assist her in mounting and dismounting. Riding could not replace her love of walking but it was one more thing that she could enjoy with Mr. Darcy and the visits to the tenant farms had been illuminating in terms of Mr. Darcy’s character. It was clear from the start that he was comfortable talking to his tenant farmers and that they were equally comfortable talking of their needs and concerns with him. Their relationship was clearly not a new one. As well, the condition of the farms and buildings provided clear evidence of his care for his estate. Buildings were solidly constructed and well maintained; ditches were clear of rubbish; fences, sturdy although hedges were frequently used in place of fences.

She and Jane had also managed to visit all the ladies that their Aunt Gardiner had suggested. Georgiana had, in fact, accompanied them on the visits and had seemed to enjoy the experience. Elizabeth thought their Aunt Gardiner may rue her promotion of those visits since she and Jane had been told some interesting stories about their aunt’s younger days. The one involving their uncle’s courtship would make a particularly effective tease. She looked at her watch once more. “Ten minutes to wait. Perhaps I should make my way to the drawing room now.” Elizabeth could wait no longer. Rising she dipped a cloth in cool water, wiped her face and hands, checked her gown and hair and moved decisively out of her room.

With every pretence of calmness and certainty, she walked through the hall, down the stairs and towards the drawing room. If any of the staff had thought to observe her closely, they could only have discerned her inner turmoil if they recognized that deliberate calmness as the mask it was. Before she entered the drawing room, she spoke to the footman in the hall. “Is Mr. Darcy in the drawing room?” Upon being told that he was not, she nodded and entered the room. She was not about to indicate her eagerness by sending the footman to find him. She took a comfortable chair by the window and tried to make herself relax. She was rather sure she knew why he had requested this private interview but the formality of it rather perplexed her and, she admitted to herself, discomposed her greatly.

She was not so wrapped in her thoughts that Darcy’s appearance startled her. In fact, Elizabeth had become aware of Darcy as soon as he entered the room and crossed to stand before her. He looked oddly disconcerted notwithstanding the fact that this audience was at his request. Striving to maintain her own composure, she greeted him, “Mr. Darcy.”

“Miss Bennet, I … “pausing, he looked around the room and shook his head. “It will not do. There should be no one in the conservatory; I would prefer to hold this conversation there if you have no objections.”
“Since I do not know the subject of this conversation that you have mentioned, I do not know if I should object or not; however, it shall be as you wish Mr. Darcy.” Taking the arm offered by Darcy she strolled in silence beside him. Neither was inclined to talk and the mind of each was too busy to admit idle chatter. He was trying to calmly and logically order the jumbled mass of his thoughts while Elizabeth was sure she knew of what he would speak and her response but even so, it was difficult to control her nervous anticipation. If Darcy’s disastrous proposal a year earlier was remembered, it did not cause undue concern for either. The mistakes and misunderstandings which had led to so much misery were now behind them both. Fortunately, it did not take long to reach the conservatory and their favourite spot by the fountain.

Darcy led Elizabeth to one of the benches where he assisted her to sit down and then, himself. Her hands were clasped in his, the look in his eyes, she now recognized admiration, desire, love. “Miss Bennet you must know how ardently I admire and love you. You are the only woman I have ever loved and while I thought I loved you a year ago, that love was a pale shadow of what I feel today. I wish for you to be my partner in life, to bear my children, to bring love and light into my life and to allow me to love and care for you as long as I live. Will you marry me?”

Elizabeth could not help but compare this proposal with that which she received from Mr. Darcy almost a year ago. The last man she could be prevailed upon to marry had become the one man she most desperately wanted to marry. “Mr. Darcy, I am most happy to accept your offer. There is nothing I want more than to be your wife.”

Darcy stood and pulled her to her feet and releasing Elizabeth’s hands, cupped her face with his hands and she felt him gently pulling her face towards him as he bent to kiss her. Closing her eyes Elizabeth felt the gentle pressure of his lips on hers; she grasped the lapels of his coat and felt his hands move down to her shoulders and then around her back pressing her body closer to his. He broke the kiss gradually and leaning his forehead against hers, he whispered, “I had not intended to ask you so soon but intended to wait until we heard from your sister in the summer. But I could not wait. You are so lovely and I love you so much, I could not wait.” His lips once more sought hers. She could not help herself; it was too delicious and she felt her body getting unusually warm and realized that her hands had somehow found their way around Darcy’s back. With a gasp, she brought them back and pushed herself gently but firmly away from Darcy, breaking contact while trying to regulate her breathing. She could see that Darcy was similarly affected.

Darcy released her but sought her hands to prevent her from moving away. “Elizabeth, I am most sorry. My behaviour was most inappropriate. Please … accept my apologies!”

“Mr. Darcy, I am equally at fault. Truly there is no need to apologize.” With a shaky laugh she continued, “However, I am going to have to watch myself around you. I enjoyed being kissed altogether too much, sir!”

“I know I probably should have waited until we heard back from your sister that she had married Simpson but I cannot wait so long. I have waited for a year to have your love and your hand. I could wait no longer.”

“I, sir, am glad you did not!” She tucked her arm onto his and turning with him began to walk out of the conservatory. “I believe that the others are awaiting us at dinner, Mr. Darcy.”

He stopped, “Will you not call me William now? I want to be able to call you Elizabeth as I have when thinking of you.”

“I think I will like calling you William. Of course, I reserve the right to call you Mr. Darcy when I am annoyed with you or when teasing.”
“As long as I can call you Lizzy when we are alone.”

“How long … have you called me Elizabeth?”

You will hardly credit this, but almost from the beginning. I think it was when you came to Netherfield that you began to haunt my dreams.”

“So soon! I had no idea.” Elizabeth looked at Darcy scrutinizing his face, perhaps more closely than she had ever done before. How could I have been so blind to his feelings? She touched his cheek with her fingertips, “I think we must join the others. We have an announcement to make.”

“Before we do so, first I wish to know when you knew you loved and trusted me enough to accept my offer. You must have known I would make one.”

“I cannot say for certain … but I think the last vestige of uncertainty disappeared during our talks and in particular when we discussed our very first meeting.” That this admission relieved Mr. Darcy was evidenced by the relaxation of his features.

“You have, I suspect, no idea how happy I am to have earned your love and respect.” After a short pause, he continued, “I also think we should discuss when to announce our engagement but perhaps we can leave that for later.”

“Yes, I would like to simply enjoy the pleasure of the engagement before considering the practicalities.”

Their conversation turned to less personal topics as they left the conservatory and walked down the hall towards the dining room. When they entered the dining room, they were the immediate object of everyone’s attention. Georgiana only had to look at Elizabeth entering on Darcy’s arm and was immediately running with a smile on her face to envelope Elizabeth in a hug. “Oh, I am so happy. You will be my sister, truly.” She was literally bouncing with pleasure until finally Elizabeth extricated herself with a laugh, “Gently Georgiana, gently.”

Jane and Stovall were no less eager to extend their congratulations and Darcy could tell from the tears running down Jane’s cheeks that her joy was overflowing. Once they had settled at the dining table and began to eat, the questions quickly turned to the questions of when and where the wedding would take place. Darcy looked at Elizabeth before commenting, “We have not discussed these matters as yet. I would wish to know Elizabeth’s preferences.”

Elizabeth was thoughtful but stated firmly, “I do not wish for a long engagement. I would marry next week if that were possible. As to where, it matters not.”

Darcy grinned, “While I am very much in favour of an early marriage, I am afraid next week is too precipitous. I must, before we marry return to London to inform the Matlocks and visit my solicitor to draft the settlement papers. Since Bingley is expecting me to visit York and you and the Stovalls will be visiting his family, the earliest I could return to London is mid April and you,” gesturing at the Stovalls, “will not be returning until May, if I remember correctly. I am sure you want Jane to stand with you?” He looked at Elizabeth rather tentatively who nodded her agreement, “Would a mid May date be acceptable? That is about two months from now.”

Elizabeth looked rather disappointed which Darcy took some pleasure in observing. “Yes, I suppose that makes the most sense. I really would prefer not to be married in Longbourn…would the Gardiner’s church or yours be acceptable?”

“May I suggest that you write your Aunt Gardiner for her advice. My preference would be for a
small quiet wedding. With a special licence we could be married anywhere…Darcy House perhaps?”

Stovall, in a rather hesitant voice, interjected, “This really is not my business but would not society be more accepting of a large public wedding?”

Both Elizabeth and Darcy considered this suggestion thoughtfully. Finally Darcy spoke, “I think I should discuss this with my Aunt Eleanor and Elizabeth with her Aunt Gardiner. I know we cannot escape some public exposure and, I admit my desire to have Elizabeth on my arm at the theatre and at least one ball.”

Georgiana burst out laughing, “Elizabeth, who is this man? What have you done to my brother? Wanting to attend a ball indeed!” Elizabeth could not suppress a chuckle, not that she tried hard to do so, and even Darcy joined in the general laughter.

The conversation remained good-natured throughout the meal with much teasing of the engaged couple. Afterwards Darcy and Elizabeth retired to his study to write their various letters; Darcy, to Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet informing them of his offer of marriage and Elizabeth’s acceptance, along with the tentative travel plans and another letter to his solicitor outlying the terms of the marriage settlement to be drafted; Elizabeth, to Mrs. Gardiner for which four pages were barely enough to contain her effusions of happiness and to seek such advice as was necessary, and to Mr. Bennet, assuring him of her affections for Mr. Darcy; the latter letter to be enclosed with the letter from her betrothed.
April 15, 1813 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The silence in the carriage was a comfortable quietude and permitted her thoughts to roam. Her brother and his betrothed were resting, attempting to gain such repose as would be needed to weather the activities they anticipated when they reached Longbourn. For herself, Georgiana had much to think on. She would meet the Bennet family for the first time later this day and, if her brother’s cautionary comments were merited, she expected a lively and possibly somewhat indecorous stay. Fortunately, they would be venturing on to London on the morrow. For now, Longbourn was not the focus of her thoughts; her stay, in company with her brother, with Mr. Bingley in York had taken possession of them to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Over the course of their fortnight visit, Mr. Bingley had been in her company almost every day. At first, she had thought it the pleasant coincidence of simply being a guest in his house but, on too many occasions it would, in retrospect, appear that he had deliberately sought her company. His manner was most proper – in fact, he was much less familiar or perhaps more restrained than she had hitherto remembered him to be in such situations. In her memories of him, he was rather boisterous, very amiable and treating her much like he would a younger - much younger - sister. No longer. She puzzled as to the reason for the change and considered whether she could or should discuss it with Elizabeth. The thought of doing so with her brother made her extremely uncomfortable; for what reason she could not discern, but there it was. She thought that Elizabeth would be less … judgemental perhaps. When she had an opportunity, she would confide in her soon-to-be sister.

With that resolved, she let her mind drift to the several conversations that she had enjoyed with Mr. Bingley. She remembered his courtesy and kindness at the dinner party he hosted to introduce her and her brother to his relatives. Recognizing her reserve and shyness, he had made an extra effort to include her in the dinner conversations by placing her at his right hand at the table and engaging her and those near her in talk about music, Derbyshire and her travels. She was sure that it was no coincidence that those surrounding her found such topics of interest and she was able to contribute to them. It had not taken long for her to relax and enjoy the conversations that surrounded her.

She also owed him, and Elizabeth, a debt of gratitude. Elizabeth had warned her that she might be asked to play and that, if she were able to do so, it would be good practice for her ‘season’. Mr. Bingley had indeed asked her prior to the dinner if she would be willing to play and, thanks to Elizabeth’s advice, she had several pieces prepared and was able to comply with his request. When the time came, she felt the usual nervousness but calmed a little when Mr. Bingley offered her his arm to escort her to the pianoforte. If her subsequent performance was not one of her best, the company had certainly not minded and the compliments that followed were more than sufficient to gratify the vanity of any young lady. In fact, several of the other young ladies present had approached her afterwards with plans to visit and play the pianoforte.

While it was gratifying to have been able to perform in such company, it was the quiet conversations with her that Mr. Bingley had somehow managed to hold, despite being always in company, that pleased her greatly. He was interested in her opinions and was not hesitant to seek such out encouraging her to talk about her music, her studies – he had enjoyed histories most when attending Cambridge and found her most willing to engage in discussions of such. They talked of Pemberley and her love of the country life. In the course of their conversations he had managed to let her know about the activities that society could enjoy in York including travelling theatre groups and musical concerts. In fact, he had arranged to escort her brother and herself to a concert and to a Shakespearean play while they were in York. If neither were quite to the standard of a London
performance, she found nothing wanting in either and quite enjoyed both experiences.

She could not say that he had paid her particular attention; if anything, he gave equal attention to every young lady. It almost seemed deliberate, could it be so? His manner was such as to be amiable to one and all and, in fact, the only occasion that he seemed even a trifle ill at ease occurred when he was introduced to Mrs. Stovall. From their conversation, it was obvious that they had met during his time in Hertfordshire but that would not account for his discomfort. Had he been much in her company there? And did it matter? She thought perhaps Elizabeth might be able to clarify that situation. Should she even ask? After all, Mr. Bingley was but a friend of her brother.

She looked across the carriage and became aware that her brother was watching her. Seeing that she had noticed his interest, he murmured quietly so as to avoid waking Elizabeth, “You seem very preoccupied, Georgie?”

Georgiana was careful to moderate her voice and wished to avoid disclosing her thoughts on Mr. Bingley, “I have just been thinking about our visit to York. It was very enjoyable and I quite like York itself. Mr. Bingley though is much changed from what I recollect him to be like. Much more serious and involved in business.”

“Indeed. He is much changed. He has, I believe, a purpose in life beyond simply becoming a gentleman which his father had demanded of him.”

“He is surely a gentleman, is he not brother?”

“I believe so; however, once he acquires that small estate that we visited with him, he will be more firmly established as such in the eyes of society. Did you like the estate?”

“Very much so! The park is beautiful and the hills and valleys remind me of Derbyshire. Will he buy it do you think?”

Darcy nodded his head, “Yes, he intended to offer on it as soon as may be. I think it will suit him well.” Darcy was not unaware of Bingley’s attentions to Georgiana but he also noted how circumspect such attentions had been and saw no reason to be concerned. He rather approved of the new Bingley but was not about to circumscribe Georgiana’s choices before she had even ‘come out’. “I have asked Mr. Bingley to be my groomsmen and I also believe he intends to visit Pemberley this summer to get some advice as to managing an estate. I look forward to his visit since I have seen so little of him this past year.” Georgiana rather thought she would enjoy that visit also but limited her response to a simple, “I would enjoy his visit also.” Darcy was satisfied that her heart had not been engaged as yet and that a visit by Bingley could be safely accomplished.

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Elizabeth had remained as if asleep during the conversation between the Darcy siblings. She had an immediate concern - her father. She had included a note to him when Darcy had sent his letter requesting her father’s permission and blessing to the marriage. Her father apparently did not credit her words if his response was a guide to his thoughts. She no longer need have the letter in her hands to remember it,

My Child,

I do not understand what you are about! I thought you always hated this man! To be sure, you seemed to bear his company well enough at Jane’s wedding but I failed to detect any particular regard.
Do not be afraid that I shall refuse my consent. Indeed, I could hardly refuse such a man, particularly given his assistance to our family. I have no doubt that he will be able to provide you with all manner of material things but I would not wish you to enter a marriage of unequal affections or to see you married to a man you could not respect.

Your letter does give me some comfort but I do not understand how you could change your opinion of Mr. Darcy so radically. I can only hope that you will satisfy my concerns when you visit us on your return to London. Be assured that the news of your engagement will be held in confidence until you arrive. I will leave you with the pleasure of informing your mother.

Your loving and concerned father
Thomas Bennet

She knew that William intended to meet with her father immediately and, if it were not for the need to introduce Georgiana to her family and shield her from the worst of her mother’s flutterings, she would ask to be a part of that discussion with her father. Elizabeth made pretence of waking and looked about. Her companions had fallen silent as she sat up and she grinned at them, “I was awake for most of your talk and would only add that I approve of the new Bingley very much although I saw less of him than either of you.” She looked at Darcy, “William, I would like to be present when you meet with my father. He is concerned about my regard for you and cannot forget how poorly I thought of you at one time. My letter did not assuage his concerns.”

Darcy considered this suggestion, “There is no reason that I can imagine why you should not be present. Your father’s consent and blessing has been given. My desire to meet with him is to assure him of my regard for you and allay any concerns he might have. Your presence and contribution can only help.”

“Thank you, William. I know it is not the custom for a lady to be present but, in this instance, I think my knowledge of my father will be helpful. I would suggest though that we delay a meeting until I can ensure that Georgiana is comfortable.”

Georgiana thought to ease the problem, “Perhaps I could claim a headache and be excused to my room when we arrive? That would allow you to meet with Mr. Bennet then.”

Elizabeth smiled, “I think this an excellent suggestion Georgiana although your brother, who opposes any form of deceit, will probably disagree!”

Darcy suppressed a smile, "I suspect this will not be the last time I regret ever uttering those words with two such duplicitous women in my life. Yes, Georgie, your headache would be most convenient.”

Elizabeth regarded Georgiana with some concern, “I must warn you Georgiana that my mother is unaware of the particulars behind my sister’s ‘marriage’ to Mr. Wickham and will likely mention his name with some frequency. In her eyes, the fact that they married has completely offset the impropriety of his and Lydia’s behaviour. She can only see that another daughter has married and since Lydia has always been her favourite, she sees it as a double blessing. Her only cause for lamentation is that Lydia is an ocean away – too far for even my mother to travel although I am sure my father would not discourage too much any plans she might make to visit them.”

Georgiana nodded, “Please, do not fret about this. I find I can now easily bear the mention of his name.”

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Mr. Bennet looked up from his breakfast of ham and eggs and addressed his wife, “Mrs. Bennet, I should advise you that we are to expect company around noon.”

“Company, Mr. Bennet? Who?”

“Our daughter, Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy will be breaking their journey to London and visiting us until tomorrow.”

“Mr. Darcy! Here! Oh my saints! Hill! Hill!”

Mrs Hill made an appearance and was instructed to ensure that rooms were readied for the visitors. Mrs. Bennet, once that had been communicated began to give free rein to providing an appropriate dinner, “We must invite the Lucas family, the Thorntons and ….”

Mr. Bennet could not let this proceed further, “Mrs. Bennet, we shall entertain as a family only tonight. Mr. Darcy will not appreciate being inundated by local families.”

Mrs. Bennet was sure that her husband quite misunderstood the situation. Surely he must realize the need to impress their neighbours with Mr. Darcy’s presence. How better to accomplish that than with a dinner that included the major families in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, Mr. Bennet did not agree and, after finally establishing that Mr. Bennet’s obstinacy on the matter exceeded hers, she was forced to limit her efforts to providing a meal with two courses as befit someone with ten thousand a year. In the excitement of planning the meal, she quite forgot to ask why they were only staying a single night or even staying at all since London was but an additional three hours further travel. Mr. Bennet, in the interest of sparing himself the extreme effusions of delight that his Lizzy’s engagement would produce in her, did not volunteer that information. As a consequence, Mrs. Bennet was under reasonably good regulation, for her, when the Darcy carriage rolled to a stop in front of Longbourn.

Darcy was first out of the carriage and immediately turned to assist Elizabeth to descend. She wasted no time hugging her father and greeting the others with hugs and exclamations of pleasure. While she was doing so, Darcy handed down Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley from the carriage and then introduced them both to Elizabeth’s family. If Georgiana was overwhelmed by the exuberance that surrounded her, she hid it well. After they were all ushered inside and relieved of their outerwear, the travellers chose to visit their rooms to refresh themselves. When Elizabeth and Darcy joined the others, he excused Georgiana from appearing on account of a headache from travelling. A speaking glance from Elizabeth to her father caused the latter to invite Darcy to his library. He was a little surprised to see Elizabeth accompany them. Mrs. Bennet was equally surprised and was about to remonstrate with her daughter when Mr. Bennet interceded, “Ah, yes I wish to speak with Lizzy also.” He closed the door before Mrs. Bennet could organize her thoughts sufficiently to question it further. Mr. Bennet bade them sit in front of his desk but, before sitting down himself, he opened the door to find his wife outside. This prompted him to dismiss his wife to the drawing room, call Mrs. Hill and station her in the hallway to ensure the privacy of the conversation that was to take place.

Once settled, he looked at the couple in front of him. He made no effort to conceal his concern, “I am not sure of the purpose of this meeting. I have given my consent and blessing since my daughter has accepted the offer of marriage.”

Darcy could see some underlying distress in Mr. Bennet and he knew the cause. “Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth has asked to be included in this discussion because she knows of your concerns. I realize that your opinion of me, and Elizabeth’s at one time, was based on my manner towards the people of Hertfordshire when I stayed with Mr. Bingley. I very much regret my behaviour now and it is a tribute to your daughter that she forced … induced me to change from the man I was then.”

“Forced you to change….” Mr. Bennet's amazement could not be hidden.
Darcy looked at Mr. Bennet and then at Elizabeth. He could see no way to convince Mr. Bennet without divulging all of the history between Elizabeth and himself. He quirked an eyebrow at Elizabeth, “Shall you reveal all?” Receiving her assent, he turned to Mr. Bennet who was obviously taken aback by the last exchange between Darcy and Elizabeth, “Tell me all?”

Darcy nodded, “Yes, it is rather a convoluted and long story.”

“In that case, let me order tea and coffee before you start.” Which direction Elizabeth communicated to Mrs. Hill. Once they were settled with their beverage of choice, Elizabeth began her tale, “It began father, rather to my subsequent amazement, with William finding me quite attractive very early in our acquaintance – which he endeavoured, and successfully I might add, to hide from me in order to avoid raising any expectations on my part. Of course, I was smarting from William’s insult at our very first encounter which caused me, to my embarrassment, to credit Mr. Wickham’s lies and, as a consequence, to most profoundly dislike William. There matters stood until we met again in Kent.”

Darcy had not anticipated her omission of his involvement with Bingley and could not let it pass,”I think you should inform your father of my interference in Bingley’s attachment to your sister.”

Elizabeth was obviously reluctant to do so but conceding that it was pointless to argue now that it had been raised, continued, “You see, when Mr. Bingley first quit Netherfield, he did intend to return ….”

Over the course of the next hour she described in some details all of the events that had transpired with Darcy supplementing some aspects from his better knowledge. Finally Elizabeth looked at Darcy but spoke to her father, “Papa, my opinion of William began to change when I read his letter after his first proposal. I suppose I read that letter a hundred times. It changed how I viewed myself, my family and my expectations; however, I never thought to meet William again and any hopes that he would renew his offer died when Lydia ran away with Mr. Wickham. That I would meet William in London at a dinner hosted by a friend of my uncle was more than I could contemplate. Since then my feelings have grown to the point where I considered him to be the best of men. If you are concerned about my affections, be assured that I both love and respect my future husband.”

Mr. Bennet had largely kept silent throughout the tale spun by his daughter. He could not doubt her sincerity or the depth of the feelings of both. “You say Mr. Darcy’s letter changed how you viewed your family. It did appear to me that you were unhappy with your mother and, to some extent with me. It seemed that we no longer shared the same pleasure in the foibles of our family. Was that the case?”

Elizabeth was reluctant to answer because of the implied criticism of her father. Mr. Bennet, seeing her reluctance, spoke a little more sharply. “I see that you wish not to answer. From that it is not hard to discern that my supposition is correct. You were unhappy with me!”

Elizabeth knew she could no longer avoid the issue and, looking at her hands clasped in her lap, replied, “I was unhappy that my mother and two youngest sisters were not checked in their behaviour. I was quite unhappy that Lydia was allowed to go to Brighton and made my objections known to you at the time. The damage that was done to our reputations by her subsequent actions was intolerable. And yet, I could not forget your kindness and consideration to me and to Jane. Nevertheless I was becoming more bitter every day. I did not want that and our removal to our aunt and uncle was a means to restore my love for you and my family.”

Elizabeth looked up at her father, “Papa, Mr. Darcy’s letter and my own consideration helped me to decide what I wished to find in a husband should I be so fortunate as to find a man willing to live with my impertinence. I believe I have found the best man for me.”
“In that case my dearest Lizzy, I could not lose you to a better man.”

He was silent for a few minutes and Darcy and Elizabeth were content to let him grapple with all that he had been told. Finally, he put his two hands on the desk and looked at them both, “The past is past. Let us now discuss practicalities. My brother Gardiner has offered to discuss and approve the settlement. It will be more convenient thus to avoid the repeated trips between Longbourn and London. The next issue is when do you want to marry?”

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth before answering, “We would prefer a date four weeks from now – mid May. We realize that it allows little time for elaborate preparations but neither of us wants such.”

Elizabeth spoke very firmly, “I know my mother will wish for three months or more in order to show me about the neighbourhood but I am of no mind to comply with her desires in this matter. I would wish for a shorter time period but also wish to have Jane stand with me and she will not return until then. I feel much as did Jane; our neighbours shunned us when misfortune fell upon us. I do not seek or want their goodwill now. I wish only for my family and friends at my wedding. If my mother wishes for others to attend, I will not object but neither will I be overly obliging in the matter.”

Mr. Bennet looked thoughtful, “Your mother will be distraught I am sure. Will you marry here or in London?”

Darcy spoke before Elizabeth could answer, “We have not irrevocably decided. There is much to favour London but we had intended to discuss this with my aunt, Countess Matlock, and with Mrs. Gardiner. There are some valid reasons for holding a more public wedding despite my distaste for such attention.”

Elizabeth shook her head at him, “If William had his way, we would have married at Pemberley the day after he proposed.”

Mr. Bennet laughed, “You would have had a short marriage to be sure since Mrs. Bennet would have hunted you both down with malice aforethought.” He paused for a few seconds, “May I suggest that you leave the matter of where the marriage is to take place open for now and not discuss the London possibility with Mrs. Bennet. She will believe it to be held at Longbourn unless told otherwise. Let her enjoy the prospect of the marriage, she will be unhappy enough that it is to take place in a month.”

With that, Darcy and Mr. Bennet moved to the drawing room while Elizabeth went to find Georgiana to have her join the others and then to see her mother who had retired to her room. Elizabeth preferred that she alone experienced her mother’s initial effusions which were sure to occur. To her astonishment, Mrs. Bennet was silent for several minutes until she could fully comprehend what she had heard. At length she recovered her voice,

“Good gracious! Lord bless me! Only think! Dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it? And is it really true? O my sweetest Lizzy, how rich and how great you will be! What pin money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane’s is nothing to it – nothing at all. I am so pleased – so happy. Such a charming man! So handsome – so tall! O my dear Lizzy! Pray apologize for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Everything that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! O Lord! What will become of me? I shall go distracted.”

Such profusions of delight left no doubts as to her opinion of the match. Even being told that it was to take place in a month’s time did little to dampen her elation. She barely had time to solicit Elizabeth for Darcy’s favourite dishes before the need to inform her neighbours of the happy event took precedence. Upon being told that Elizabeth intended to take her betrothed and his sister for a
walk, she was adamant that Elizabeth must accompany her on the calls she planned to make.

When they rejoined the others her behaviour towards Darcy was so restrained as to cause her husband to look at Elizabeth with a quizzical eye. “I believe we can credit you with such a transformation, Lizzy!”

When Mrs. Bennet outline her plan to call on the neighbours with Elizabeth in attendance, Darcy interjected to say that he had requested Elizabeth to walk with him and his sister in order to alleviate his sister’s headache. Not wishing to jeopardize her now most favoured daughter’s incredibly advantageous engagement, Mrs. Bennet was required to concede the issue with only a few additional complaints. Her displeasure was substantially reduced by the offer of the Darcy carriage with which to undertake her visitations. Kitty, who had been subdued throughout asked to accompany her sister on their walk, citing a desire for exercise and a desire to become better acquainted with Miss Darcy. If she had motives such as wishing to avoid being conscripted to join her mother, no one was of a mind to question them.

After they began their walk with her arm on his and his other hand overlapping hers, Elizabeth looked at her betrothed and teased, “Do not be under any illusions, William. My mother will display us both sometime today. I have no doubt but that we shall be receiving visitors before and after dinner tonight. I suggest we prepare to depart tomorrow morning immediately following breakfast or we might well be inundated by the neighbourhood and might fail to escape for a week.”

Seeing his grimace, she could only laugh, “All those lessons in amiability you learned shall be of use tonight.” Looking back, she could see that Georgiana and Kitty seemed to be conversing comfortably and brought this to Darcy’s notice. “I shall ask Kitty to keep company with Georgiana tonight. Kitty has become much more sensible and restrained since Lydia departed. The consequences of unrestrained behaviour were such as to make her more conscious of propriety and proper behaviour. I think she and Georgiana will get on well.”
April 16, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

To Mrs. Bennet’s dismay, the Darcy carriage pulled away from Longbourn following breakfast and before any of her hoped for callers could arrive. The evening before had gone much as Elizabeth had predicted. Lady and Sir William Lucas called to extend their best wishes – Elizabeth noted to Darcy that her cousin Mr. Collins would shortly be aware of the engagement, as would Darcy’s Aunt Catherine. A shrug of his shoulders conveyed his lack of concern since his aunt’s displeasure was a foregone conclusion. Their most congenial visitor was Miss Thompson who called with her parents and her brother. Her pleasure at the engagement was obvious and she clearly wished to further an acquaintance with Elizabeth and Georgiana. Expressing her regrets that they would not be making a longer visit, she expressed a desire, since she herself would be coming to stay with her brother in London for the season, upon arriving to call on Elizabeth which was agreeable to them all.

Darcy could not altogether lose his reserved manner but he did make an obvious effort to converse with those around him and, if he needed the occasional encouraging smile from Elizabeth, he was deemed to be much less arrogant and prideful than in the past; and Elizabeth’s happiness in the marriage was now thought to be more likely than otherwise by those who observed them both.

To everyone’s amazement, Georgiana and Kitty improved their acquaintance to the point that Georgiana was talking about inviting her to visit in London. Mrs. Annesley’s nod of approval did much to alleviate Darcy’s concern and he did not dismiss the idea outright.

April 17, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

When Darcy entered the Gardiner drawing room the next day, he was greeted by the sight of Elizabeth reading to the Gardiner children who surrounded her and he stopped in the doorway to watch. Elizabeth was unaware of his presence so wrapped in the story was she. Her voice changed timber as she assumed the different characters in the story; only the oldest daughter _____ was aware of his presence and, recognizing Darcy’s finger to his lips as a sign to ignore him, she did so. It took but five minutes for Elizabeth to finish the story and the pleas of her cousins for another story were, however, interrupted by Darcy’s appearance. Warmed by Elizabeth’s welcoming smile, he greeted the children with a bow to the girls and a handshake with the boys and, taking Elizabeth’s hand, he first addressed the children, “My apologies for interrupting your pleasure but I must borrow your cousin Lizzy for a while. If I promise to bring some special biscuits baked by my cook, will I be forgiven?” Receiving an enthusiastic response from Elizabeth’s cousins, he turned to her and motioned towards the door, “I believe your uncle is expecting us in his study.”

Elizabeth laughed, “I am not sure my aunt will appreciate your means of bribing her children, Mr. Darcy.”

“It just shows how far I will go for the pleasure of your company.”

Mr. Gardiner smiled warmly at them both as they entered his study laughing and took seats before his desk. “I am glad to see you both and, if I failed to do so yesterday in all the confusion, please allow me to offer my heartiest congratulations on your engagement. I am so very pleased for you both.”

Looking directly at Darcy, he nodded his head, “I am glad that you were able to provide me with a
copy of the settlement last week since it gave me an opportunity for a thorough review. It is, I must admit, extremely complete and my suggestions are mostly minor and intended for clarification.”

"Thank you, sir. I confess that I followed the outline of my mother’s settlement with some modifications as I deemed necessary.”

Mr. Gardiner, seeing Elizabeth about to say something, quickly interjected, “Elizabeth, I intend to review the main parts of the settlement with you today. You can read the final document at your leisure should you wish to do so. Perhaps I can do that now and we can discuss my suggested amendments afterwards?”

Receiving a nod of approval from both Darcy and Elizabeth, he first wrote on a slip of paper which was then passed to Elizabeth and began, “The first number is the amount that Mr. Darcy will settle on you which will be invested in the Funds and augmented by the accumulated annual interest. Over the course of the next twenty years, the settlement could double in value. The second number is your annual allowance – your ‘pin money’ as your mother most inelegantly terms it.”

Elizabeth was in a state of shock, “So much? William, surely I don’t need that much? How can you afford it?”

“This is quite reasonable for a woman of your station, Elizabeth. I do not want you to have to ask me for money every time you need a new dress or buy a book.”

Mr. Gardiner added, “I suspect that Mr. Darcy’s income also exceeds ten thousand a year, Lizzy.”

Darcy smiled, “True, Pemberley contributes that much alone. I have two other estates, albeit much smaller, and many other productive investments. I do not contradict the ten thousand a year claim to avoid even greater interest and speculation - which is bad enough as it is.”

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief, “I never realized or thought to inquire. I have never really thought about your income other than I knew I would not have to worry about the roof leaking or that we could afford our next meal.”

Mr. Gardiner cleared his throat, “I would hope those concerns have been eased, Lizzy? Shall I continue?” and did so after receiving an assenting nod from both Elizabeth and Darcy, “Mr. Darcy has been very generous to your family, Elizabeth. He has included a provision to provide a house in Meryton plus a living allowance for your mother, should your father die before she does. As well, he is settling a dowry of £5,000 each on Mary and Kitty.”

Elizabeth could only look at Darcy in shock, “I never…”

“Elizabeth, I spent as much to protect you and your sisters by essentially dowering Lydia by a like amount even if it was not called such. With even these small dowries, your sister’s prospects improve greatly. They will be my sisters after all and I want them to marry as well as possible. As far as your mother is concerned…well, let us hope that the security will calm her nerves to some degree.”

Elizabeth could not suppress a grin, “And if she is living in Meryton, she is not living with us. Well played, sir! Well played!” Her smile gradually faded and was replaced by a more thoughtful look, “William, I seem to be in a continual state of shock this morning. I hope there are no further surprises or I might start experiencing my mother’s flutterings!”

Both Darcy and Mr. Gardiner started to chuckle and continued until finally Mr. Gardiner wagged a finger at his niece, “Do not even joke about such, young lady…..but now that you mention it, there is one final important clause. In the event that Mr. Darcy dies before your eldest son reaches five and
twenty years of …”

Elizabeth’s distress at such a thought was evident as she cried, “I do not want to even think about such happening!”

Darcy grasped her hands, “Dearest, it most likely will not happen but we must allow for the possibility. This is included for my peace of mind. I will be assured that should something happen to me, the most important person in the world to me will be looked after.”

Mr. Gardiner paused to allow Elizabeth time to regain her composure and then continued, “As I said, if Mr. Darcy dies before your eldest son is five and twenty years of age, you will be responsible for managing Pemberley and all of the other family assets. In the event that the eldest son is five and twenty, the jointure provides for a Dower House to be established for you, unless you chose to remain at Pemberley.”

Darcy had retained his grasp of Elizabeth’s hands, “Elizabeth, I wish for you to be a true partner and be involved in all of the activities that I engage in, at least to the extent you desire to do so. I would have you learn how to run Pemberley with me at your side. I have too much respect for your intelligence to not give you the scope to exercise it.”

“William, at this point I am speechless and somewhat…no, not somewhat, but very intimidated by the responsibilities that I am expected to assume.”

“Elizabeth, it will not happen overnight. I suspect that after the first fortnight your first priority will be learning the duties of the Mistress of Pemberley. There will be time to learn the others and I will be with you always.”

“After the first fortnight, sir?”

“I wish for you and me to be free of any responsibilities for at least that long.”

Mr. Gardiner hid a smile, “May I continue?…..The rest of the settlement deals with dowries to be assigned to any daughters, allowances for sons until they reach their majority, your portion of your mother’s dowry and so on. Let us review those elements with which I have some concern.”

The ensuing discussion lasted for almost two hours. By the end of which Elizabeth felt herself to be in a state of utmost confusion. After several small amendments, to which Darcy agreed, they agreed to have final copies readied within a week for signature. She turned to her uncle, “there is little chance I will understand or grasp all of the details you have presented. Are you and my father satisfied with it?”

“Yes Lizzy, I wrote your father explaining the basic elements and he is in agreement and has given me permission to sign on his behalf. This settlement will protect you more than adequately.” Mr. Gardiner rose, “I will leave you alone for a few minutes. Mr. Darcy, will we see you and your sister for dinner tonight?”

“I must visit my uncle to inform him of the engagement this afternoon but my sister and I will be delighted to dine with you tonight.”

Elizabeth tightened her grasp of Darcy’s hands which had held hers almost continuously throughout their discussion, “You are much too good to me, William! I can hardly comprehend such care and concern.”

“Elizabeth, one of the responsibilities I gladly assume with our marriage is to protect you to the best of my ability. This allows me to do so even after death. It is something I do for myself as well as you.
You will bring so much to our marriage, do not…”

Darcy was unable to finish when he found himself being fiercely hugged by Elizabeth who held him thus for several minutes. He eventually kissed her hair and roughly said, “We had best join your aunt and uncle.”

Elizabeth waited for Darcy to arrive with little pretence of calm. She knew he was to meet with his Aunt and Uncle Matlock that afternoon and she could not but be apprehensive as to the outcome. It was not Darcy’s commitment that concerned her but the possible severing of a family tie that she knew he valued was not something she could contemplate with any equanimity. Finally, she heard a carriage stop in front of the house and very shortly thereafter Darcy and Georgiana were shown into the drawing room. She looked at Darcy with a question in her eyes and his murmur, “All is well.” as he bowed over her hand produced an obvious sigh of relief from her. Darcy looked at Mrs. Gardiner and asked, “May I have a few moments alone with Elizabeth to acquaint her with my meeting with my Aunt and Uncle Matlock this afternoon?”

“Certainly, the parlour is not in use at the moment.”

Once they were assured of some privacy, Darcy sat beside Elizabeth, took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. “Truly my love, you fret too much on this. I met my aunt and uncle this afternoon and they received the news much as I expected. They were disappointed that I will not marry someone from the ‘ton’ and with connections but they recognize that I am head of the Darcy family and entitled to make my own decisions. They will be cool but civil and will accept my choice.”

“I am sure that they thought me the veriest fortune hunter!”

“I cannot deny my uncle said as much but I assured him I had absolute, incontrovertible knowledge that you were not. He did not press me on this but I have no reason to think I was not believed. He did warn me that Aunt Catherine would not take the news well and to expect some action on her part. He assured me that she would not speak for the Matlock family.”

“How did your Aunt Matlock receive the news?”

“She seemed to take it better than my uncle and had many questions about you. She does wish to meet you soon. In that regard, they have invited us to dine with them Monday next. I believe my cousins will likely be there.”

Elizabeth tried to hide her consternation at this news but was obviously unsuccessful since Darcy immediately tried to reassure her, “Do not worry unduly, Elizabeth. They will be polite; they will want to get to know you. If you are simply yourself, you will charm them I am sure. I cannot speak for my cousin’s wife but she will be civil although I would not expect anything more.”

Mrs. Gardiner knocked on the door and informed them that dinner was ready. As they took their places at the table, Elizabeth informed her aunt about the dinner invitation from the Matlocks and wondered whether she owned a suitable gown. After a few minutes discussion, Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth determined that none of her gowns was suitable and a visit to their modiste necessary. Darcy listened to their comments and when they had reached a conclusion, offered a few thoughts of his own, “Ladies, I make no observations about a gown for the dinner, only to note it is a family party; however, I know it is customary for a bride to acquire her wedding clothes. I am sure that Georgiana could assist your efforts. Perhaps her modiste would be appropriate. Georgiana can advise of the clothing most appropriate for Pemberley winters which are much colder than those in Hertfordshire although we could put off ordering those until the fall. As well, when we meet my
aunt, she might be able to provide guidance on the clothing you will need as my wife. I suspect that you may well be underestimating what you will need.”

Both Georgiana and Mrs. Gardiner were quick to agree with Darcy and made plans to visit Georgiana’s modiste the next day. Elizabeth’s objections as to the cost were quickly overruled by Mr. Gardiner and Darcy. Recognizing the futility of continuing that argument, she beat a strategic retreat and changed the topic of conversation. “I will conced this matter but I would like to know where I will be married? London or Longbourn?”

“Elizabeth, I really think this is something you and I need to discuss privately after dinner.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded her agreement, “I agree. You can use the parlour and let us know what you decide.”

So, after dinner Elizabeth and Darcy found themselves once more alone. Nevertheless, neither was inclined to push the limits of propriety and, as a result, occupied adjacent chairs. Darcy, without any conscious thought, held Elizabeth’s hand and began the conversation, “I suspect that you would prefer a London wedding, would you not?”

“Yes, in many respects I would; however, I have been thinking about this over the last day or so and I now think that we should marry at Longbourn. I feel that it would be perceived as a slight to my family to do otherwise. It might appear that I am estranged from them even though they would attend in London.”

Darcy considered her words briefly, “I can accept that. The only reason I would prefer a London wedding is that my Aunt and Uncle Matlock would be more likely to attend, but their presence at the wedding is not all that significant if they acknowledge us publicly on other occasions. So Longbourn it shall be. Am I correct in assuming that you plan to follow the same path as your sister and minimize your presence in Longbourn?”

“Indeed! I suggest a Wednesday May 19 wedding. We can travel to Longbourn Monday morning which allows my mother two days to show us off to the neighbourhood. Like Jane, I do not propose to call on anyone except the Lucas family, my Aunt Phillips and the Thompsons.”

“Very well. I think it most unlikely that any of my relatives will travel to Hertfordshire for the wedding.”

“I wonder …..?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I would like to invite the Johnson’s to attend. They were, unintentionally, the reason we met again.”

Darcy had a pensive look on his face. Elizabeth’s first reaction was that he was concerned about their being in trade but realized he could have other concerns and raised a quizzical eyebrow at him and asked, “This troubles you. Why?”

“Oh … no … I was simply wondering where they could stay for a night. Does Longbourn have room for them as well as the Gardiners?”

“Probably not! But they could stay at the ______ Inn. Or perhaps the Thompsons could host them. My Uncle Gardiner has become well acquainted with Mr. Thompson and might be able to request such a favour.”
The Gardiners were apprised of the wedding plan and gave their wholehearted support. They had been somewhat apprehensive that Elizabeth would be so disenchanted with her family as to hold the wedding in London, which could imply an estrangement with them. They also agreed to solicit the Thomsons to host the Johnsons the week of the wedding.
Thursday April 23, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

The sun was more promise than reality when Elizabeth walked into the kitchen. The cook and her helpers were already busy at their work and could only spare her a quick smile and word of welcome as she entered. Pausing to pocket a couple of biscuits, she looked at the cook, smiled her thanks and turned to the waiting groom who would accompany her on her walk, asking, “Are you ready, Jonathon?”

“Yes, Ma’am”

Elizabeth smiled once more and headed out the door. These morning walks which had begun when she visited Pemberley had become a ritual. It was unfortunate, she thought, that Darcy could not accompany her in London. She missed the closeness and companionship that those walks had developed between them; in fact, she felt a rather distinct sense of resentment that her time with him was being so limited by social commitments, wedding preparations and the pervasive presence of chaperones on those occasions that they were together. It was most vexing!

She forced her mind from wandering down that trail. There were more immediate concerns and, as if to reflect the seriousness of her thoughts, her walking pace gradually slowed. So much had happened in the last three days that she was struggling to absorb or rather digest it all.

The dinner with the Fitzwilliam family had taken place on Monday evening and she could look back on it now with equanimity and some small satisfaction. His uncle, the Earl, was every bit as reserved and coolly polite as William had given her to expect. His wife was much less so. She could not be sure how they perceived her but from their reaction to her answers to some of their questions, she detected some reservations. Nevertheless, their civility did not waver and she thought she discerned some warming on the part of the Earl when she was able to encourage him to talk about his sister, Darcy’s mother. Thinking about their conversations she had concluded that he seemed delighted to talk of his childhood with his younger sister and it was a topic that she knew could be explored with him in the future. Elizabeth could find no evidence in his treatment of her, nor did he disclose anything in their conversation, that hinted at any awareness of Lady Catherine’s interference although she was sure that Lady Catherine had written her brother to state her objections to the match. It was as though it had not happened. For this she could only be thankful.

The rattle of a passing coach alerted her to her surroundings once more. Checking her timepiece she realized that she must have been walking much slower than was her usual wont. By now she should have reached the park which remained some distance ahead. She glanced back and could see Jonathon ambling casually behind her, close enough to provide protection should such be necessary but providing sufficient space for her to feel a degree of privacy. She looked ahead and thought to quicken her pace and for several minutes she concentrated on her surroundings, noticing the streets to be gradually filling with people and the sounds of a neighbourhood coming awake. It was somehow both comforting and relaxing and not too many minutes had passed before reflections of that dinner had once more commanded her thoughts. She had found the Countess to be less reserved than her husband and when the ladies had withdrawn to the music room, she had warmed even more, particularly when talking about her son, Richard, who was with Wellesley’s army in Portugal, or had they moved into Spain – she could not be sure. His mother’s concern and fears for his safety were evident and Elizabeth could not but be sympathetic. That she had met the Colonel in Kent was a revelation to the Countess and Elizabeth was more than willing to share her approbation of him with his mother. In their discussions she admitted she had admired his amiability and gentlemanly...
behaviour and that she quite envied Lady Frances since she had no brother of her own. Lady Frances
laughingly commented that brothers could sometimes be rather a nuisance, particularly when a young
lady was striving to present an image of ladylike behaviour. This was greeted with sympathy from
the other ladies; however, Lady Frances did admit that overall she found her brother to be tolerable
enough when not being a nuisance. Elizabeth’s chuckle was met by an easy grin from Lady Frances.

“Quack! Quack!”

Elizabeth came to an abrupt stop and looked about her. Her feet had not only carried her into the
park but also to the pond where she frequently stopped to feed the ducks who, having seen her
approach, had swum out of the water and surrounded her, begging for food. She sought the bench
nearby and, retrieving the biscuits from her pocket, began crumbling them to distribute to the
noisome flock around her feet. Holding some in her hand she let them feed directly, replenishing the
supply until all the biscuits were consumed. She rose and dusting off her hands, she took her leave
saying, “That’s all for now, my friends. Perhaps I will come again tomorrow.”

Once more checking her time piece, she thought she had sufficient time to extend her walk a little
further and began to walk up a street that she had not yet explored. For a while her attention was
focused on the houses she passed. Most seem to be of an age, size and appearance that mirrored that
of her aunt and Uncle Gardiner. The grounds were well-kept, the houses well maintained, at least
from an outward appearance. Altogether the houses radiated a sense of comfort and well-being that a
healthy income could provide. In such an environment it was possible to allow her attention to drift
onto those matters which were of immediate concern.

She had found the Colonel’s siblings to be much as William had described them. Lady Frances and
her husband were amiable, intelligent conversationalists and quite interested in learning about their
cousin’s courtship. Elizabeth restrained her teasing and gave an abbreviated version; however, she
did not hesitate to share with the Countess and her daughter that her initial opinion of William was
very poor and that it had taken some months for him to convince her to change it. That any young
woman would not be impressed with William from their first acquaintance was something which she
could see they had difficulty comprehending. She dared not tell them she had refused his first offer of
marriage, lest they think her a simpleton. The evening had passed tolerably well and William had
assured her the next day that his aunt and uncle had found her acceptable – high praise indeed she
thought cynically – and were prepared to help her entry into society. His aunt had invited Elizabeth
and Mrs. Gardiner to tea in two days time, in company with her daughter, daughter-in-law and
Georgiana. Elizabeth’s thoughts on this were interrupted by a call from Jonathon, whom she noted,
had shortened the distance between them and was now just behind her.

“Miss Elizabeth, I think it is time you returned home. They will be breaking their fast shortly.”

Checking her timepiece, Elizabeth could see that it was indeed time to return, “Thank you, Jonathon.
I had quite overlooked the passage of time.” With which she began to walk back, attempting to set a
faster pace so as not to be late for the meal.

She could not regulate her thoughts so as to exclude the meeting with the Countess that had taken
place the previous afternoon. Nor did she want to. She had found it had been more pleasurable than
she had anticipated. Her own aunt had clearly surprised the Countess with her manners and gentility
and over the course of the hour they had warmed to each other to the point where both had, at one
point, turned to regard Elizabeth closely. She had felt somewhat akin to an exhibit on display and
said as much only to be reassured by her aunt that they were simply considering which styles would
suit her best. They were making plans to visit a modiste for that purpose. Both Lady Frances and
Georgiana expressed an interest in being one of the parties and Elizabeth was more than willing to
comply, particularly if it meant she could avoid having her mother involved. She could hope that,
knowing a Countess was helping her with her wedding clothes, would suffice to dissuade her mother from journeying to town for that purpose. Her aunt seemed to have guessed her reasons and had gone so far as to express an appreciation for the Countess’s help since it would allow Elizabeth’s mother to concentrate on planning the wedding.

If the Countess and her daughter were amiable, Lady Elaine was civil but only barely so and contributed little to the discussion. After one or two aborted attempts at conversation, Elizabeth directed her efforts elsewhere and paid her only such civilities that met with the approval of both of them. While most of her attention was directed to the Countess and Lady Frances, she consciously tried to ensure that Georgiana was included in the discussions. In this, she was assisted by her Aunt Gardiner and she could see that Georgiana was losing some of her shyness when discussions focused on Pemberley, music and shopping. By the time they left, plans had been laid to visit a modiste within a day or so.

When she had related these matters to Darcy later that evening, he had been quick to indicate his regard for his cousin, Richard.

“'We owe much to him. It was only with his good advice and counsel that I was able to see how grievously I had offended you in my first offer of marriage. He has ever been your strongest supporter and encouraged me to amend my behaviour and to try to convince you that I could be worthy of your respect.”

“I found him to be most gentlemanly and …” here she cast a teasing look at Darcy, “his manner of discouraging any expectations on my part was most skillfully done.”

Darcy spoke with no little trepidation, “Did you have any? Expectations I mean?”

Elizabeth had turned thoughtful, which she could see did little to ease Darcy’s concern and when she spoke again it had been with measured words. “I cannot be less than truthful. Given how poorly I thought of you at the time, the attentions of the Colonel were welcomed. No woman can be insensible to the attentions of an amiable, honourable man.” A pause had lasted for several moments before she continued, “However, your cousin was very careful to indicate that he was not free to marry without consideration of a substantial dowry.” She laughed, “I believe the figure of 50,000 pounds was mentioned.” She looked up at Darcy, “Do not concern yourself on this, William. I know my affections were not engaged, since I viewed the situation with only a minor regret which lasted no longer than the end of our walk that day.”

The sombre expression on Darcy’s face did not ease and Elizabeth grew somewhat concerned, “What is the cause of that dour look, Mr. Darcy? You are not jealous of your cousin surely?”

“No…No…I simply began thinking of my behaviour to you in Kent. I still cannot think of ….”

“No more, William! No more! We have left that behind, have we not? Truly, neither of us behaved properly that night. You must accept my philosophy on this.”

“Remind me of that philosophy please.”

“To think of the past only as its remembrance gives you pleasure.”

“You have so little to regret that …”

“Mr. Darcy, I shall get quite angry with you if you continue like this. Enough, sir! The past is past!”

Elizabeth’s voice had risen slightly as she spoke and her Uncle Gardiner looked up from the book that he was reading to glance at them both. His raised eyebrow had been met by a firm shake of the
head from Elizabeth and he returned to his book, to all appearances oblivious to the couple on the other side of the room. Darcy finally managed a small smile, “I bow to your wisdom on this.”

“Clever man! Now, let us talk of more enjoyable matters.” Darcy leaned forward and took her hand in both of his, running his thumb over the back of her hand. Elizabeth could feel the heat of his hand and a small frisson of delight at his touch. She could only look at his hands and hope he did not observe the flush of colour that his actions engendered. Her mouth was dry and she wetted her lips to as though to speak although no words came forth. She could not realize how her action affected Darcy with the sudden desire to kiss her and he leaned forward. Only his realization of her uncle’s presence stopped him from such an action. Instead he cleared his throat, “ah…I find myself…I mean…”

“You are babbling, sir!” Elizabeth’s chortle of delight forced a small smile from Darcy.

“Indeed I am, Miss Bennet!”

“Miss Bennet?”

“Babbling, Miss Bennet. Babbling! See to what a state I have been reduced!”

“And I am at fault here, sir?”

“Indeed you are. I find myself wishing that your sister would return sooner from the north so that we might be married sooner. The next month seems interminable to me. That we can spend so little time together only increases the torture. The wait until I can take you to Pemberley as my bride … as my wife... is torturous indeed.”

Even now, in the cool morning air, Elizabeth could remember the heat of his hands and the passion underlying his words. She had been unable to respond herself as she wished, contenting herself with grasping his hands even tighter. His leave-taking shortly thereafter had given her the opportunity she sought. After he raised her hands to press a kiss on her fingers preparatory to leaving, she had halted his departure by placing a hand on his chest and brushing her lips against his. Stepping back quickly, her demure, “Good-night, William.” accompanied by a slight smile had frozen him in place. Only a discrete cough from her uncle who had finally made his way to the door had been, she was convinced, all that prevented her betrothed from returning the favour more vigorously. At the time she had wished her uncle to have been a little slower but now she conceded his timing to have been fortuitous. Shaking these thoughts away and concentrating on the present, she became aware that the Gardiner house was but a short distance away. Checking her timepiece once more, she realized that she had been gone almost two hours and that her aunt was likely to start worrying about her. Given her aunt’s condition, she did not want to cause her any unnecessary concern and, quickening her pace, she finally entered the house, greeting her aunt and cousins cheerfully as she joined them in the dining room to break her fast.

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Elizabeth was enjoying a quiet, for once, luncheon with her aunt later that day when they were disturbed by a maid bearing a message which she handed to Elizabeth. “Andrew, from your father’s estate, Miss Elizabeth, just delivered this. He said it was urgent but that no reply was required.”

“Thank you, Millie.” Elizabeth’s apprehension was obvious to her aunt who waited while her niece opened and read the letter. “Oh my, I think …” the tremor in Elizabeth’s voice brought her aunt to her side, “I think William must see this at once!”

“What is it, Lizzy?”
April 23, 1813
Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Dear Lizzy,

Now that I think on it, I have just had the most amusing morning in years and all courtesy of your cousin’s patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. You know that only the most diverting of follies would lead me to write unless absolute necessity inspired me.

Just as we were getting up from the breakfast table, we were visited by your betroth’s aunt, Lady Catherine. Given the condition of her horses, which I noted afterwards, she must have driven all the way from London that very morning. They were quite blown, the horses that is, not Lady Catherine, although in retrospect that is not a poor description of that lady also.

I thought her purpose was to voice her objections to your engagement and I was not to be disappointed. She was most seriously displeased to find that you were not at Longbourn but, instead, visiting in London. She took it upon herself, to assuage her disappointment I have no doubt, to inflict on me all that she had planned to bestow on you. You are greatly in my debt, daughter – most greatly and I will insist on some suitable recompense.

I will not insult or bore you with all of the foolishness that Lady Catherine spouted. I have rarely seen so much pomposity, stupidity and arrogance encapsulated in one person in my whole existence. I suspect that having surrounded herself with those who not only flatter but are afraid to dispute her opinions, she no longer can distinguish between facts and her wishes. If one of those advisors is her doctor, she could be breathing her last while being reassured that she is well.

How she can believe that her wish for an engagement between her nephew and her daughter creates an obligation which that nephew must honour, in preference to his stated and public intention to wed another, is not something I can credit. But she does!

I was most amused by her request of me to break the engagement in order to free her nephew to marry her daughter. I could not help but observe, to her obvious displeasure, that even should I do so, there was no guarantee that Mr. Darcy would offer for her daughter and that, having declined the opportunity to do so for five years or more, it seemed unlikely he would do so now.

Having exhausted all arguments, logical but mostly illogical, to convert me to her way of thinking – may the good Lord preserve me from that – she made a final effort. She offered me 25,000 pounds to break the engagement. When I gently suggested that, even should I accept the offer, since both you and Mr. Darcy are of age, my consent is not required in the first place and, in the second instance, only you and Mr. Darcy could do so. I assured her that I would not presume to act for you in this matter and that your affections had been fully engaged such that breaking the engagement would be as frivolous and ill-considered as her proposal. Needless to say, she was not amused – a point she made several times in fact. That she had insulted my honour I could not bother to even mention to one so lost to the very concept. Obviously, she believed me devoid of such an attribute. Perhaps she thought it reserved for her exalted position.

I do not know her intentions when she left. Her horses were exhausted and I believe that this letter should arrive in London before her carriage. I would suggest you apprise Mr. Darcy of her activities and forewarn him of her probable presence.

Your loving father,
Thomas Bennet
“Yes, we must inform Mr. Darcy, Lizzy, and I think we must include your father’s letter which I will arrange to have delivered immediately. Write a short note to accompany it while I make the arrangements.”

“I believe he is at home. I do not expect him to visit until somewhat later.”

Elizabeth wrote a brief note addressed to Darcy and sealed her father’s letter inside. One of the Gardiners’ grooms was waiting when she had finished and within minutes was on his way to Darcy House.

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Elizabeth was not altogether surprised to see Darcy enter their drawing room later in the afternoon. His note, after receiving hers, had suggested he would do so if circumstances permitted. She could not help look up at him with an obvious question on her mind. His slight smile was reassuring as he bent over her fingers and brushed them with his lips. After greeting Mrs. Gardiner, he remarked that the neighbouring park looked quite inviting and asked if Miss Bennet would enjoy a stroll with him. Mrs. Gardiner was not insensible of the notion that they wished to discuss Lady Catherine’s activities and readily gave her consent to the outing.

Darcy and Elizabeth walked in silence for some few minutes. Elizabeth after a quick glance at Darcy’s mien could tell he was thoughtful and guessed he was trying to decide how best to express his thoughts. This deliberateness was, she now recognized, an essential part of who he was. When he was ready, he would speak. Until then, she would not press him.

Finally, he shook his head. “Elizabeth, I must thank you and your father for the promptness of the warning in regards to my Aunt. I must also, at some point, apologize to your father for her behaviour. It was most unconscionable.”

Elizabeth smiled, “I doubt you need apologize to my father. I suspect he derived considerable amusement from her visit.”

“Nevertheless, I feel compelled to do so.”

“Can you speak of what happened? Did she go to your uncle?”

“Yes, to both questions. Lady Catherine did indeed call on my uncle. Fortunately, I had enough time to warn him that she might visit and was myself present when she arrived.”

“I suspect she was not happy to see you.”

“True, and when she was told that we had been informed of her meeting with your father, she did not seem inclined to stay overlong. My uncle was quite irritated with her behaviour – I think he called it ‘presumptuous’. He was also not inclined to support her desire for an attachment between Anne and myself since he felt that Anne’s health would prevent her from fulfilling any of the duties required of my wife, quite apart from any consideration of mutual affection.”

Elizabeth could tell that what he had to say next was quite distasteful. His lips had compressed to a thin line but then curved into that slight smile once more. “My uncle was very disturbed by my aunt’s attempt to bribe your father. He described it as frivolous as it was ill-considered. I must admit I was both shocked and …amused to hear him view the whole episode with the same disparagement as your father; particularly since I had decided that showing your father’s letter to him would be most impolitic. I was uncertain that my uncle could appreciate your father’s rather impertinent perception of Lady Catherine.”
“What happened next?”

“My uncle simply told Lady Catherine that the engagement had his blessing and that any public opposition on her part would not be tolerated. After some further huffing, Lady Catherine departed for Kent. I have no reason to believe she will change her stance, but I do not expect her to oppose the Earl on this.”

“We have reason to thank him, then.”

“I believe he was motivated mostly by a desire to avoid a split in the family – a severing of the Darcy-Fitzwilliam linkage.”

“Whatever his motive, I appreciate it.”

“Your father’s letter gave me cause for concern on another issue. His joking reference to my aunt’s doctor made me question whether my cousin, Anne, is receiving proper attention. I mentioned this to my uncle and he admitted he had not thought of that. We, neither of us, know my aunt’s doctor and my uncle has decided to investigate further to ensure Anne is receiving proper care.”

“I had not thought of that.” Elizabeth shook her head, “I cannot conceive of someone not availing themselves of the best care if they can afford to do so. Surely your aunt would not be so … so misguided?”

“I cannot answer for her actions. I would hope not but she is not one to take correction or advice easily if it does not agree with her prejudices and opinions.”

They continued to their walk. By now they had completed a full circuit of the park and were moving toward a set of benches that ringed the small pond. Once seated, Darcy took her hand in his and, with what she now could see as embarrassment, asked, “Can we speak of a more … ah, pleasant topic?”

Elizabeth’s curiosity was now aroused, “Certainly, sir. There can be no shortage of more agreeable topics.”

“Actually, I wish to know your preferences after we are married.”

Elizabeth made no effort to mask her confusion. “Preferences, sir?”

His embarrassment was causing a slight flush to appear on his face, “Yes … well … actually I was thinking of where we might spend the first few weeks of our marriage.” Suddenly, the words came pouring out as though he needed to loose them as soon as was possible. “I had thought we might spend the first two weeks in London and then in early June, go to Pemberley. However, we could go to Pemberley directly or to another location … Bath, The Lakes … I wish you to be happy and for us to enjoy the time together … alone.”

Elizabeth had not given much thought to where they would go after the marriage. “I do want to be at Pemberley as much as possible, I feel at … at home there. But I would not be opposed to spending time in London. Once I am ensconced at Pemberley, you will find it difficult to get me to leave. Jane will not wish to leave London once her husband sails and my Aunt Gardiner will be unable to travel this summer. Perhaps a fortnight in London before we go to Pemberley would be best.” She thought for a few seconds, “Are we likely to be plagued by callers, if we stay?”

“We will simply take the knocker off the door for the first week.” Darcy suddenly smiled, “And we can attend a ball while we are here and I can show my beautiful wife to the world. While I would like to insist that, for this ball, you dance only with me, I realize that is not possible! However, I will
offend the proprieties by insisting on three dances – the first, supper and last dances. Oh, and if there is a waltz, which is unlikely, you must dance that with me.”

Elizabeth blushed deeply, “Such punishment I find I can bear quite easily. I must warn you though that I have not learned the waltz so will have to sit it out.”

“That may be less of a problem than you believe. I am sure that with a few lessons you will dance it admirably. Perhaps Georgiana can play for us while I teach you.”

“And where exactly did you learn to waltz, sir?” The raised eyebrow which accompanied this question encountered a complacent grin from Darcy.

“I had the services of a most excellent dance instructor…for Georgiana! She was being taught and I attended a lesson or two. I think I have learned enough to avoid damaging your toes too greatly.”

“I look forward to being instructed, sir” her cheeky response elicited another grin from Darcy, “Indeed, and I to instructing.”

“I think we should be returning home. I believe the dinner hour fast approaches.” Elizabeth was less concerned about her meal as she was to recover her equilibrium in the privacy of her room. The thought of waltzing with Darcy, to be held so intimately in his arms was both disconcerting and, she realized, alluring.

They returned to the Gardiner’s home in much better spirits than when they had departed. Elizabeth was able to relate to her aunt all that had transpired at Matlock House with Lady Catherine’s visit. Their intentions to remain in London for a fortnight following the wedding also met with her approval; and the Matlock’s plans to host them for a dinner before they left for Pemberley were discussed and approved.
Saturday April 25, 1813 – London

It was with no little relief that Elizabeth sought the comfort of her bed, thankful that Darcy had been unable to stay after dinner due to pressing business matters early the next morning. The past week had been such as to limit her opportunities to contemplate and understand all that had happened and, when not under the press of one engagement or another, Darcy had consumed her attention when they were together and thoughts when they were apart. She did not think she was besotted with the man but admitted to herself that others might well believe her so. In less than four weeks, he would be her husband. She held that thought close to her heart for comfort and with no little anticipation.

She was coming to understand the man although she suspected that he was complicated enough to forever be providing her with new insights. After so signally failing to illustrate his character over the first few months of their acquaintance, she had devoted a considerable effort to decipher his expressions once they renewed their relationship. She knew that her sketch was incomplete but her ability to sense his moods was improving. He would always be reticent. That was his basic nature but, in familiar company, he was more outgoing. He would never be as easy as his friend, Mr. Bingley, nor would he ever overtly break the proprieties in public. She knew this of herself as well. With no dowry and no connections that the world valued, her character and reputation were her most precious assets. Lydia’s actions only made it more important that the latter not be tarnished. In this she knew she could trust William. However, she had hopes that, when they were able to enjoy true privacy, he could and would be even more open and thus allow herself to be so as well. She contemplated such privacy with both trepidation and anticipation. She was a country girl. One could not raise farm animals and be ignorant of the mating process. While she was not totally ignorant of the marital intimacies, she could not relate that knowledge to the marriage bed. She could feel herself flushing and thoughts skittering away from contemplating those intimacies. “I had better think less pleasant thoughts!….shopping.”

Elizabeth knew she really did not enjoy shopping. She liked new gowns as much as the next young lady but the effort and time seemed to be such a waste when there were more interesting things to do. Unfortunately, her aunt and her Darcy and Fitzwilliam soon-to-be relations were of a different persuasion and had left her little choice but to surrender to their demands. Thus she knew she would find herself, over the course of the next weeks, being dragged from one shop to another, visiting modistes, milliners, glovers and boot-makers to name but a few. It had all begun with the shopping trip planned by the Countess.

Elizabeth and her Aunt Gardiner had arrived at Darcy House to find Georgiana, the Countess and Lady Frances waiting for them. The Countess wasted no time in bundling them all into her carriage to visit her modiste, Madame Estelle. Apprised that Elizabeth and Darcy were planning to attend a ball before leaving for Pemberley, a suitable ball-gown was placed near the top of the list. When they arrived at Madame Estelle’s, an assistant, recognizing the Countess, immediately attended her. The Countess, in a carrying voice, said, “I have an appointment at two with Madame”

The assistant quickly sought and returned with Madame Estelle who welcomed the Countess.

“Madame, I am pleased to introduce Miss Elizabeth Bennet who is to marry my nephew, Fitzwilliam Darcy, in a month’s time. We are here to augment Miss Bennet’s wardrobe and to select a ball-gown.”

The heads of several other shoppers in the room snapped up and Elizabeth was quickly aware of the attention being focused on her. Two ladies, known to the Countess and her daughter, walked over to
be introduced and chatted amiably with the party while Madame Estelle arranged for a private showing room. The questions directed Elizabeth’s way were not unexpected as the ladies sought to find out more about this young women who had captured the affections of one of London’s most eligible bachelors. The Countess listened with no little appreciation as Elizabeth answered most questions cheerfully while deflecting those that bordered on impertinent, and occasionally interjecting a comment of her own to indicate the support of the Fitzwilliam family for the marriage. When Madame eventually returned to lead them to the showing room, The Countess patted Elizabeth’s hand saying, “You handled that very well, Miss Bennet.”

“Thank you, Lady Matlock. But please, can you not call me Elizabeth?”

The Countess looked at her for several seconds. She could not detect, in Elizabeth’s manner, any desire for undue familiarity, and nodded her head, “I think I would like that. You shall call me Aunt Eleanor.” Behind her back Lady Frances was unsuccessful in hiding a smile as she watched her mother warm to the young woman who would soon be her niece. She reached over to lay a hand on Elizabeth’s arm, smiled and said, “And you must call me Frances or Fran, whichever you choose.”

Elizabeth returned her smile, “Please, call me Elizabeth or Lizzy, as my family does.”

Madame returned with books of designs and swatches of fabric and arranged for refreshments as they began their deliberations. It was quickly determined that while a wedding gown was of importance, the immediate priority was for several day gowns and one or two evening gowns to be readied within days. Elizabeth demurred at first but the Countess looked at her severely and stated clearly, “You will suffer a great deal of public scrutiny in the next few weeks. I know from experience, how important it will be for you to feel comfortable in how you look. It will give you confidence to deal with whatever or whomever you may face. As well, you can be assured that most of those who will be assessing you will look first at the quality and style of your clothes. We will give them nothing to disparage. … Besides, I am sure that my nephew will be delighted to show how beautiful you are.” The last was said with a small smile and Elizabeth could see her aunt nodding in agreement. She realized that further argument was futile and simply nodded her acceptance. The Countess patted her hand, “I believe I will gift you the ball gown. It has been a long time since I dressed a daughter for a ball.” Her sly look at Lady Frances only elicited a grin from that lady, who whispered audibly to Elizabeth, “My mother and I could never reach agreement on what suited me best. I am afraid she quickly gave up on me.” The Countess simply shook her head feigning some dismay.

Elizabeth laughed openly, “That sounds all too familiar. My mother and I could never agree on the appropriate amount of lace on a dress. Any was too much for me most times.”

For the next four hours, Elizabeth felt herself befuddled by designs, fabrics and a vast array of colours and patterns. Several morning and day gowns were ordered as well as two evening gowns for delivery within days in addition to another twenty gowns that were ordered for delivery several weeks hence. Arrangements were made for a fitting in two days with the gowns being completed a day later.

That day set the pattern for subsequent visits to other shops. The Countess would enter a shop, ask to see the proprietor and introduce Elizabeth in much the same manner as was done at Madame Estelle’s. As Elizabeth’s Aunt Gardiner explained to her after the first day of shopping, the Countess was publicly and clearly stating the Fitzwilliam approval of Darcy’s betrothed. When, upon returning in the carriage, Elizabeth subsequently expressed her appreciation, the Countess was quick to disclaim any particular credit. “It is” she stressed, “a matter of importance to my family that my nephew’s bride be accorded the respect due her position. However,” and her face took on a sterner cast, “it will be up to you to maintain and enhance that respect. Nothing I have seen of you so far
would suggest that you cannot do so.” Lady France, who had been silently observing this exchange, leaned forward and to offer her support, “Elizabeth, whatever help I can provide, it is yours.”

Elizabeth was pensive for a few seconds, “Thank you, Frances.” Turning to the Countess, she continued, “You have introduced me to a number of ladies over the last few days. I will admit that I cannot remember all of them. I trust there are a few that are most important to remember.”

The Countess nodded, “Lady ____ and Countess _____ are very important, however, I believe you will meet both again before you leave London. I would expect them to call on you if you receive visitors before departing for Pemberley.”

Elizabeth leaned back against the carriage seat and sighed, “I think I need a long, long walk. Perhaps I can convince William to take me to Hyde Park. An hour or so of walking would restore me. I do miss being able to walk with him in the mornings. We had such lovely rambles at Pemberley. I long to return.” The remainder of the carriage ride was completed in relative silence. Elizabeth was not the only lady feeling the strain of their activities. Fortunately, there was a respite of two days before the final fitting for the ball-gown.

Friday May 1, 1813 – London
Elizabeth was enjoying the courtship elements of her engagement period. The announcement of her engagement to Darcy had been published and she had already been called upon by several of her acquaintances. The Johnsons were among the first to visit and express their pleasure. Mrs. Johnson had divulged that her suspicions had been raised at a dinner where she had observed them both. When informed that both Darcy and Elizabeth hoped they could attend the wedding, their assurances not slow in being given. Other welcome visitors were Mrs. Thornton and her daughter who were come to town for the season.

As it happened, Mr. and Mrs. Thornton along with their daughter and eldest son and his wife had been their guests for dinner several evenings previous along with Darcy. Conversation at the table had been pleasant and, if the talk had focussed more on the political events that were transpiring and their implications for their business and professional interests than was perhaps usual, none of the participants took offence. In fact, Elizabeth had appreciated the intelligence and discernment of their guests and enjoyed the discussion and found that the time had passed most expeditiously. The subject of her upcoming marriage was, of course, a topic of singular interest and Elizabeth was pressed to divulge all of the plans that her mother was pursuing. As the ladies rose to withdraw to let the gentleman enjoy their wine in private, she did notice Mrs. Thornton stoop to whisper something to her husband. His response and her emphatic assent seemed to settle something of importance between them.

Once the ladies had settled in the drawing room discussion had quickly turned to the particulars of the London Season. As Miss Thornton explained, it was her third season and she really did not expect that it would prove more productive or interesting than those previous. Her opinion of most of the supposedly eligible men she had met was not high and she was inclined to set a less strenuous schedule for herself to which lack of effort her mother was opposed. Mrs. Thornton was not unsympathetic to her daughter’s disenchantment but was concerned that withdrawing from the social activities would entail withdrawing from the search for a suitable husband for her daughter. And, while she was not inclined to pressure her daughter, she admitted she could not perceive alternative means of putting her daughter in the way of worthy suitors.

In the course of their conversation Miss Thornton and Elizabeth realized that they were both of a mind to further their acquaintance and, to that end, agreed to visit regularly while both were in town.
Elizabeth indicated that she and Darcy planned to spend the first two weeks of their married life in London and anticipated visitors in the second week and gave Miss Thornton reason to believe a visit would be welcomed.

Mrs. Thornton started to say something but appeared to be hesitant until Mrs. Gardiner, noticing her reluctance, prompted her. “Mrs. Thornton? Was there something troubling you?”

“No indeed. I was just a little uncertain how to approach this subject.” Turning to look at Elizabeth, Mrs. Thornton continued, “The problem is that you will be at Longbourn for only a few days. I … Mr. Thornton and I would very much like to host a dinner, to celebrate your engagement, with our neighbours in Hertfordshire. Unfortunately, you will be there for two nights only. Would you… would your family be agreeable to us hosting at Netherfield a dinner on the evening before your wedding – the 18th?”

Elizabeth did not conceal her surprise at the proposal and looked to her aunt for guidance. Not seeing any particular direction from that source, she responded, caution evident in her words, “For my part I would have no objections at all to such a dinner. In fact it sounds quite delightful; however, my mother may be making other arrangements and she must be consulted on this.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded her agreement, “My sister is most likely planning a dinner but may not as yet have issued any invitations. I would suggest you contact her her directly and as soon as possible.”

Mrs. Thornton promised to do so on the morrow and then proceeded as follows, “I believe that you, Miss Bennet, that your family including your sister and her husband and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and their children will be staying at Longbourn for several days prior to the wedding. Is this correct?” She smiled at the puzzled expressions of assent that followed and continued, “My husband is currently inviting Mr. Darcy and any of his party to stay at Netherfield. I understand his sister and best friend, Mr. Bingley, are likely to join him. And possibly some of his other relatives. We have more than sufficient rooms and would be delighted to accommodate them all.”

Elizabeth was speechless at the offer. “I can only express my appreciation Mrs. Thornton. Your offer is most kindly done and will, I hope, be gratefully accepted by Mr. Darcy. I believe he was planning to rent rooms at the Inn in Meryton.”

Mrs. Gardiner took the opportunity to quietly ask if the Thorntons would object to hosting Mr. and Mrs. Johnson as they hoped to attend the wedding. Mrs Thornton was quick to agree and offered to extend the invitation. Mrs. Gardiner was not unaware of the unstated object of the Thornton’s invitation. They were, in essence, attempting to cement and deepen an acquaintance to a higher level of society. It would be interesting, in her opinion, to see if any of the Darcy connections availed themselves of the offer.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies, Darcy quickly informed them all of the Thornton’s generous offer which he had accepted on behalf of himself, Georgiana and Mr. Bingley. He declared his intentions of extending the offer to his Fitzwilliam relatives and was hopeful that some would accept. As he mentioned privately to Elizabeth later that evening, he did not anticipate that his Uncle Matlock would accept the invitation since it would mean staying in the home of someone directly connected to trade. Nevertheless he thought his cousin, Lady Francis, and her husband would accept.

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The following night Darcy and Elizabeth attended a performance of ‘Love’s Labour Lost’ at Covent Gardens in company with the Gardiners and Lady Frances and her husband. As they had expected, their entrance to the theatre had drawn considerable attention and a steady stream of well-wishers had slowed their progress to the Darcy box. While a few of those seeking an introduction to Elizabeth
were friends of Darcy, most were mere acquaintances and curious to see and meet the woman who was to become Mrs. Darcy. Elizabeth smiled, nodded acknowledgements as Darcy maintained their movement to their box, stopping to talk only with those with whom he was well acquainted. Darcy’s discomfiture had been increasingly obvious as they entered the theatre and Elizabeth could feel his tension through her grasp of his elbow. She squeezed hard to capture his attention and murmured “William…William!” Once he glanced at her, she continued, “I am with you and we can get through this together.” Recalled to their situation, he realized that she was as stressed by the attention as himself and he gave her a small smile to ease her concern, laid his other hand atop hers and intertwined his fingers with hers. He was able to greet those who presented themselves with tolerable humour but it was only when they finally reached their box, that she could feel him begin to relax.

As expected they remained an object of attention by many in the theatre. She was very conscious of the eyes turned their way but, since they were there to enjoy the play, it was no hardship to ignore the gazes focused on them and devote themselves to enjoying the performance on the stage. The intermissions saw several visitors, among which were Darcy’s Aunt and Uncle Matlock. Their visit and the civility displayed to Elizabeth signalled quite publicly the approval of the Fitzwilliam family and was duly recognized as such by those members of society present that evening. When the Earl bowed over her hand, she thought she heard an audible murmur in the audience. The small smile that graced the Earl’s visage seemed to suggest that he heard it as well. When the Countess embraced her and whispered, “I suspect the best performance of the evening is taking place in this box.” Elizabeth could do naught but chuckle her agreement and express her thanks to both the Earl and his wife.

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This very day the Darcy carriage had delivered her to Darcy House early in the afternoon. Anticipating an afternoon in quiet conversation with Darcy and his sister and possibly a walk in Hyde Park, she was slightly surprised to be shown into the drawing room where Georgiana was seated at the piano. Darcy greeted her and introduced her to a much older gentleman standing by the pianoforte. “Elizabeth, may I introduce Georgiana’s Dance Master, Mr. Ambrose Peddle. Mr. Peddle, This is my betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” Darcy paused and then gave her a slight grin. “We are going to learn a new dance this afternoon…the waltz!”

Elizabeth’s gasp was quite audible. “But…but…Is it proper? We are not married after all?”

Darcy reached over and grasped her hands, drawing her towards himself. “It is not improper at all and has been introduced at several private balls over the last year. We do not have to dance should it be played but I thought that if circumstances permit, we might wish to do so. It can do no harm to learn at least.”

Elizabeth’s uncertainty was obvious and only overshadowed by a reluctant desire to try something the reputation of which polite society viewed as scandalous. Her agreement was won but with an underlying trepidation. With Georgiana providing the music and under the tutelage of their Dance Master, she was introduced to the various postures that embodied the waltz. The dance did incorporate sufficient similarities in terms of steps and movements to those dances with which she was familiar that it was possible to quickly become comfortable with that aspect of the dance. It was the unfamiliarity of being solely partnered by Darcy and the continuous and close contact that prevailed which most seriously discomposed her. Nonetheless, after two hours of such contact she was sure that even her reservoir of blushes and flushes was exhausted. It was with no little relief that she greeted Darcy’s departure on urgent business following the arrival of his steward from Pemberley. Apologizing for being unable to walk with her in Hyde Park and promising that he would attend her before she returned to Gracechurch Street, he joined his steward in his study. Left to their own devices, Elizabeth looked at Georgiana and laughed, “Whatever shall we do for the next hour. Truthfully, I am no longer in need of the exercise provided by a walk.”
Georgiana looked thoughtful, “Actually, there are a number of questions that I wished to talk with you about but have simply not had the opportunity to do so. Perhaps we could move to my sitting room?”

Elizabeth’s surprise was obvious and was tinged by a slight concern. Nonetheless she readily agreed to the suggestion and they chatted on inconsequential topics as until they arrived. Once the door was closed ensuring their privacy, Elizabeth made herself comfortable on the settee and calmly awaited Georgiana’s conversation. She was required to wait several minutes as the younger woman was obviously struggling on how best to introduce the topic which concerned her. Seeing her struggles, Elizabeth began to worry that something of a most serious nature was at issue although she could think of nothing that would cause such obvious anxiety in Georgiana. She forced herself to remain calm and let her initiate the conversation. Georgiana had walked slowly around the room before coming to a stop in front of a window out of which her gaze was focused.

At last Georgiana turned to face Elizabeth and broke the silence, “I am sorry. You must be thinking me quite the fool.”

“Not at all. I am simply worried that something has distressed you so. Will you not speak to me of it? I can assure you that I can imagine very few topics of which we may not speak.”

“Elizabeth, can I ask that our talk remain in confidence between us?”

Elizabeth considered this request for several moments, “I can agree to that only in so far as doing so will not cause harm to you or someone else.”

“It will not, I assure you!”

“Very well, You must know that you have piqued my interest and concern. Of what do you wish to speak that requires such privacy?”

Georgiana’s blush surprised Elizabeth but not as much as the words that followed, “I wish to…I want to know…Oh!…” finally she blurted, “your sister Jane and Mr. Bingley. What is their history because I am sure that must be such?”

Elizabeth did not try to hide her surprise from Georgiana. “I am all amazement. From your demeanour I was anticipating something truly worrisome.” She thought for a few moments and continued, “their history?…well…you know Mr. Bingley leased an estate – Netherfield - near Longbourn almost two years ago, do you not?”

At Georgiana’s nod she continued, “He took possession around Michaelmas and within two months his attentions to my sister were such as to lead to an expectation on us all that he would be making her an offer of marriage very shortly. However, after a ball at Netherfield towards the end of that November, in which he danced at least four times with Jane and his attentions were such as to discourage others from seeking her to dance, he departed Netherfield and Hertfordshire never to return. My sister was…devastated to be truthful. She had come to esteem Mr. Bingley a great deal and, as well as losing his affections, she was mortified by the manner in which he cut the acquaintance. She was hurt for quite a long time although her hurt gradually turned to anger over his treatment of her. Eventually that anger dissipated and she thought little of him. We – neither of us – had seen him since the Netherfield ball until we met in York. I think it is fair to say that my sister feels no more for him now than for any other man of her acquaintance.” Elizabeth grinned, “I dare say that Jane would now think her previous attachment to Mr. Bingley a pale shadow compared to that she now holds for her husband.”

Elizabeth paused, “Does that answer your question?”
Georgiana’s countenance became paled, “Elizabeth, when…when my brother explained what happened when you refused his proposal in Kent, he indicated that one of the reasons was that he had separated your sister from a young man who was very interested in her. Was that Mr. Bingley?” Was that why Mr. Bingley did not return to Netherfield?”

“Yes, although in fairness to your brother he did not believe my sister to have an affection equal to Mr. Bingley. From what your brother has related, Mr. Bingley himself came to believe that he was not ready for marriage at the time else he could not have been worked upon.” Elizabeth was not prepared to divulge the particulars of Darcy’s involvement in separating Bingley from her sister. “I suggest that if you need to know more that you apply to your brother since I believe Mr. Bingley spoke to him of his intentions.”

Georgiana was clearly unsatisfied with this answer but Elizabeth also thought her to be reluctant to approach her brother on the subject. “Georgie, do you mind telling me to what these questions tend?”

After a few silent minutes, Georgiana responded, “Mr. Bingley visited us at Pemberley last winter. He seemed much changed. Quieter, amiable but not as…as lively, perhaps, as in the past. He seemed much different – older I guess. When we met again in York, he appeared to have become even more like William – serious and much involved in his business activities.”

Elizabeth nodded in acquiesce. “I agree, Mr. Bingley has grown quite markedly.”

“Elizabeth, Mr. Bingley did not, I think, pay me any particular attentions but looking back on our conversations I see that they were much different than in the past.”

“Different? In what way, Georgie?”

“While we talked of my activities, we also spoke about his businesses, social activities in York, what life was like there.” As Elizabeth listened to Georgiana she smiled to herself, “Well done, Mr. Bingley!”

“Georgiana, do you feel Mr. Bingley paid you any particular attentions?”

“Not really. He seemed to spend an equal amount of time with other young ladies.”

“Let me ask an important question. How do you feel about him?”

Georgiana mien became pensive, “I hardly know. I…I think I would like to know him better.”

Elizabeth considered the young girl in front of her for a few moments. Georgiana grew a little restive under her gaze and opened her mouth to speak when Elizabeth interrupted, “First of all, You are not out yet so questions of his attentions are moot. Your brother would not allow Mr. Bingley to pay his addresses until you are out and I am sure Mr. Bingley is quite aware of that fact.” She paused for a second and continued, “Second, you are not yet seventeen and your experience or knowledge of men is quite limited.” She grimaced, “You certainly met one of the worst already. Most men are not like Mr. Wickham but you have not been in company with many of them even considering those that are family. I believe you should experience a full season before even considering any possible attachments. I have not spoken to your brother on this and do not know his opinions. I am sure he is in no hurry to see you married and will afford you all the time necessary. You need to meet and become better acquainted with a wider variety of men before accepting one as a husband. Be assured that your brother and I will always be available for help and guidance.”

“Georgie, I seem to remember that we held a rather similar conversation some weeks ago. Nothing has really changed. You will come out - probably this fall, you will meet and get to know a wide
variety of men and women and your brother and I will be there to support you. If Mr. Bingley or any other man has intentions towards you, there will be more than sufficient time for you to get to know him and decide your wishes.”

The two young women continued their conversation until interrupted by a knock on the door and William’s voice requesting permission to enter. Informing them that it was time to travel to Gracechurch Street for dinner, he shepherded them down to the carriage which awaited them. His attempts to find out what they had talked about were frustrated by Elizabeth’s quip that “Young women need some secrets even from brothers!”
Chapter 37

Saturday May 8, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

Elizabeth was just finishing her breakfast when her aunt entered the room with a smile on her face and placed a letter beside her."I think you have been waiting for this, Lizzy. A letter from Jane!"

"Oh, I was wondering when I would hear from her. I realize we have been apart for little more than a fortnight, but so much seems to happen every day." Without further ado, she opened her letter.

May 2, 1813
York, Yorkshire

Dearest Lizzie,

I was thrilled to receive your last letter. You may be assured that we will return in time for the wedding. We will be in London by May 15 and will travel with you to Longbourn on the following Monday. I will be honoured to be your bridesmaid. I also understand your reasons for being married in Longbourn, I find myself feeling as much anger now by the treatment we received as I did several months ago. It is, I admit, most unchristian of me and I am sure I can hear you saying, ‘most un-Jane like’. Perhaps time will lessen my ire. I hope so. Since I will have little time to acquire a gown for the wedding when I return to London, I decided to visit a modiste here in York. I found one that was highly recommended and she will have the most beautiful blue silk gown ready before I depart.

On happier topics, Amos and I are thoroughly enjoying our stay in York. I very much like the country and the people here; and, once I find myself comfortable with the local dialect, I am sure I should get on famously with everyone. Until then, I frequently seem to require a translator by my side. As you remember, Mother Stovall is a dear heart and his sister, Emily, is much the same. I regret you had to leave before becoming acquainted with her. She reminds me very much of Charlotte – sensible and intelligent with a good heart. We visited with her and her husband for several days; they are very comfortably situated and will find their family enlarging in August. They are both so happy about it that I find myself envying them greatly. I hope Amos and I do not have too long to wait.

I have the most wonderful news. If you remember, Mr. Bingley invited all of us to dine one evening. It was, unexpectedly, a most enjoyable evening and, as I told you afterwards, I found Mr. Bingley as amiable as ever and someone who could be a good friend. I was able to compare Mr. Bingley with Amos. I think I could have had a contented life with Mr. Bingley as a husband but Amos has given me so much more – joy, a feeling of security – I am simply so glad I married him that I cannot find the proper words. I am a foolish woman but a happy one.

I believe Mr. Bingley has demonstrated his friendship and perhaps a small desire to make amends for his abrupt departure from Hertfordshire. Apparently Amos had mentioned to him that he was looking to acquire an estate in Yorkshire. Mr. Bingley is planning to do likewise and has been actively searching for months. In the course of his efforts, he came upon several estates that he felt were not suitable for him but might satisfy our wishes. He was gracious enough to visit several estates with us and one has proven to be most satisfactory and can be purchased at a good price. The house is smaller than Longbourn but Amos feels it can be expanded at a reasonable cost. The estate is located some forty miles from York but only ten from Scarborough - the latter fact pleases Amos greatly since he hopes to purchase a small boat and sail it from there. He is making arrangements to purchase the estate – Edgemont - and we hope it to be completed before we depart York. Amos proposes to have the manor house expanded later in the year after we finish identifying what is to be done.
We will not remove to the estate until Amos quits the navy; when that will be is not known to us at this moment. We have discussed another matter; when we are ready to occupy the estate, we hope that his mother will live with us for part of the year. We expect she will want to spend some time with her daughter also. I would hope that you and Mr. Darcy will be amongst our first visitors. I know Amos would value any advice that Mr. Darcy could impart.

I should mention that Mrs. Stovall offered to have me live with her while Amos is at sea but I think I would rather live in London. The Gardiners have offered to have me live with them and I will be glad of their company. As well, London is much closer to Portsmouth. Amos and I will travel to Portsmouth following your wedding and take rooms there until he must put to sea. I know you will offer to have me stay with you at Darcy House when you are in town but truthfully, I feel more comfortable living with my aunt and uncle. Please do not take offence but I find myself a bit intimidated by Darcy House.

Speaking of houses, our mother has written me several letters, all of which seem to presume that Amos and I will be returning to Hertfordshire to live. She seemingly has designs on several estates in the area which she considers suitable; however, from my experience, none of them are appropriate for us and truthfully, I dread living in such close proximity to our mother. I fear she would leave me no peace and quiet. Since removing to London, being married and not having to suffer her nerves, I find myself more content and so much happier. I have yet to inform her that we will not be living in Hertfordshire, nor that we will be buying an estate in Yorkshire. I find I can bear the pain of waiting to deliver that news very easily – I am a most undutiful daughter. Since we will be visiting at Longbourn for the wedding I will most likely have to reveal our plans at that time. I suspect our removal to London will be a relief.

I have just realized that this is the first letter I have written to you as Jane Stovall. You have no notion of how pleased and proud I am to carry that name and of the man I married. I can only wish that you and Mr. Darcy can experience the same joy in your marriage as I do in mine. I remain, as ever,

Your most affectionate sister,
Jane Stovall

“Oh Aunt, she sounds so happy. They will buy an estate in Yorkshire! Mama will be so unhappy. I am sure she believed Jane would settle near Longbourn. Here, you must read this yourself.” With which she passed the letter to her aunt while commenting, “I admit to some surprise that Mr. Bingley offered to help them. It must have been somewhat embarrassing for all concerned at first but Jane appears to have survived the experience with little distress.”

"Your uncle and I have never gone so far north as Yorkshire. I can see us visiting Jane when they move to … Edgemont? Yes Edgemont! We will be able to visit our two favourite nieces on one trip. Now, if only your uncle can find time from his business for such a tour.”

“That would be so lovely. Do you suppose that you and uncle and the children could visit us at Pemberley this winter? I know I am being a little presumptuous to be issuing invitations when I am not yet Mistress but, if it is possible, I would love to have you visit.”

“Let us wait and see. I am not sure I wish to travel that far with an infant. But … let us see what develops. Now I believe that Mr. Darcy plans to call on you shortly to visit his home and perhaps take a walk in Hyde Park with Georgiana. You had best prepare yourself.”

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Darcy was also just finishing breakfast that morning when a footman delivered his personal mail. A quick scan of the three letters led him to open that from his Aunt Catherine first on the principle of
getting the worst news over with as soon as possible. He found nothing new. His aunt abhorred his engagement, his choice of a wife, his failure to perform his duty to Ann, his uncle’s acceptance of the engagement, his … in short, she was most seriously displeased with him, Elizabeth and, apparently, his uncle. He could not ascertain from the letter that she planned to take any further action and hoped that his uncle’s warnings to her of the danger of doing so had been believed.

It was with some pleasure that he opened Bingley’s letter to learn that Bingley would indeed be his groomsman for the wedding, expected to arrive in London several days before the wedding and planned to stay for a fortnight before returning to York. Unfortunately, he could not stay at Darcy House on this visit. He and Elizabeth could not be expected to entertain visitors that soon after their marriage.

Finally, Darcy opened the letter from his Cousin, Richard Fitzwilliam.

Darce,

February 8, 1813
Greetings from one who has finally managed to keep a solid meal down for the first time in a senday. I suspect I have been an endless source of amusement to the sailors on this tub they call a ship but the humour in it has not struck me as yet. I am truly thankful I decided to cast my lot with the army and not our naval forces. I would make a truly awful seaman. According to the sailors on this ship we have had decent weather so far. I fear for my life if we run into bad weather and I have been told that the prospects do indeed look poor for tomorrow.

I have read your letter several times and put off answering until I felt capable of directing my attention to doing so. I am sure that my thoughts are very little different than yours. Unless Miss Bennet’s sister can be found married to Wickham, I do not see how you can possibly attach yourself to her for several years. The damage to the Darcy name and to Georgiana’s prospects would be too severe to contemplate such an action. It grieves me to be so blunt but I see no other course. That the reputation of a young lady of Miss Elizabeth’s worth should be so damaged by the thoughtless actions of a younger sister is appalling. Her marriage prospects may be irreparably damaged. I am so very sorry for her and for you.

February 16, 1823
As I mentioned above the sailors were not hopeful that the fine weather would last. It did not. We began the stretch to cross the Bay of Biscay and were subject to a truly terrible storm. If I thought I was sick before, I now experienced absolute misery. Fortunately, my man was able to get me water to drink but I kept very little food in my stomach. I have been told that the winter storm was so severe the ships were forced to run before it and were driven part way to the Americas. I asked the Captain why this was so and he simply said that trying to fight the storm would have caused major damage to the sails and masts. As it was, two sailors died, one washed overboard and the other felling from the rigging to the deck. They are now trying to round up all the ships in the convoy which have been scattered across the face of the ocean. Again, according to the Captain, the wind which so dispersed us may also have allowed the French navy to escape the blockade. We have to be concerned that they may be preparing to attack us. We have some escorts but they may not be sufficient. We can only pray.

March 11, 1813
I can finally relax with two feet firmly plant on terra firma. My regiment has at last joined Wellesley’s army here in northern Portugal. It took us almost two weeks to make Lisbon after the storm and we marched immediately upon landing. Of course, given our condition, it was a poor excuse for a march. Fortunately there are no immediate plans for meeting the French. My men are not fit to fight as yet and could be routed by a battalion of aged grandmothers. I suspect we have a month or two to
work up our men and develop battle plans. Right now my main concern is getting my regiment healthy and fit. Our horses did not do well on the crossing and are in even worse shape than my men.

I am comfortably situated at the moment in an inn that has been commandeered for officers. It is warm and dry which, after several weeks on board a ship, is a definite relief. I have nothing but admiration for men who make a career in the navy, admiration but no envy. It is not a life I would want at all. I have to close off this letter now since they are collecting mail for delivery home.

RF

He would have to write Richard with the news of his engagement. He could not write of the scheme that was underway to salvage the Bennet reputation. Such could not be put in writing. He was glad that Richard was safe but also knew that, by now, Wellesley’s army would most likely be moving against the French forces in Spain.

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Darcy took up his aunt’s letter once more. He knew he must respond immediately and forcibly. Perhaps if he was sufficiently forceful, he could dissuade her from any further interference. Knowing his aunt’s temper, he was not overly optimistic that he could convince her to accept Elizabeth. He would be satisfied if she simply was quiescent. He also knew it would not be an easy or pleasant letter to write. Moving to his study, he took pen in hand and began. Some two hours later, he reviewed his final effort.

Lady Catherine,

It was with extreme displeasure that I read your most recent letter. I had hoped, after the debacle of your ill-advised visit to Hertfordshire, that you would have come to realize the impropriety of your behaviour. Of that I will say no more. You know my feelings on that subject. That you could now write in such a disrespectful and slanderous manner of one whom I hold in the utmost respect, has angered me greatly. Miss Bennet has done nothing to earn such disapprobation as you have expressed. I am insulted on her behalf as well as my own. I cannot credit that you could speak so of one whom you invited into your own home but a year ago and appeared to view with some approbation. Nor can I credit that you would think so poorly of my judgement as to question the merits of the woman whose hand I have been fortunate enough to have been given.

As far as I can determine, Miss Bennet’s only real fault, in your eyes, is that I have asked for her hand in marriage and not that of your daughter, Anne. As I attempted to make clear previously, I have never entertained any intention of offering for my cousin. I like and respect Anne but only as my cousin. Marriage, and all that it entails, was never a consideration. Your claim that my mother was somehow complicit in such an agreement is, I believe, a product of your hopes and aspirations. I know my father never spoke of such to me.

As to my Aunt and Uncle Matlock, be assured that they have met and approved Miss Bennet both privately and publicly. I would caution you not to expect any support from that quarter as I hope that my uncle made abundantly clear when you last met with him.

I cannot, I will not tolerate such disparagement of Miss Bennet now or when she becomes my wife. It grieves me to write so but if you cannot accept and accord her all the respect and consideration that is due my wife, I must inform you that all further converse between us will cease. You will no longer be welcomed at any of my properties nor will I visit Rosings Park again. Anne, of course, will still be welcomed, should she choose to visit. This is my final word on the matter. I will only reconsider should you make a full apology to me and to Miss Bennet.
As one of my closest relatives, your behaviour to Miss Bennet shames me, Madam. I had thought better of you than this.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Folding and sealing the letter, he found he need to contemplate a happier event. Elizabeth and her aunt were to visit Darcy House this afternoon for tea and to review his …. her home. He had not made any significant alterations to the house when he became Master and, in fact, he was certain that nothing of significance had been altered since his mother had died. The furnishing were desperately in need of refurbishing. Elizabeth had visited the house on several occasions and he knew she was quite pleased with it despite that parts of the house were dated but she had only seen a few rooms at most.

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Darcy had been waiting in the drawing room when he heard the sound of a carriage drawing up in front of the house. Checking his time piece for only the ninth time in the last quarter hour, he knew that Elizabeth was arriving as planned accompanied by Mrs. Gardiner. He suspected that his eagerness to greet her was quite evident to Mrs. Hodgkins as he joined her in the foyer as Elizabeth and her aunt entered.

"Mrs. Gardiner, Elizabeth … welcome to Darcy House. I cannot remember if you have been introduced to Mrs. Hodgkins, my most excellent housekeeper?"

Mrs. Gardiner responded quickly, “I do believe we have met before though I cannot remember if we were actually introduced at the time. Nevertheless, it is a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Hodgkins.”

“Thank you Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Bennet it is a pleasure to meet you again as well. I believe we were introduced when you visited Miss Darcy.”

Elizabeth acknowledge the greeting with a nod of her head, “I remember that well. I have been most impressed by how efficiently things are accomplished here in Darcy House. I am sure that is a credit to you and Mr. Hodgkins.”

Darcy, took Elizabeth’s hand and placed in on his arm, “I thought we might review the main rooms that you have yet to see and have tea afterwards, if that is agreeable?” Upon being assured that it was quite agreeable to both ladies, he continued, “I know you have seen the music room upstairs and the drawing room, and dining room on this floor. I thought we might look at the Mistress’s chambers today.” There are other family rooms on the second floor while the third floor contains the guest rooms and the nursery. I would hope that you could view them at a later time.”

They walked up a wide stairway to the second floor to a landing area that contained several chairs and opened a door that faced the stairway. He ushered them in explaining, “This is the Mistress’ private sitting room. Georgiana has used it on occasion in the last year or two and had it refurbished to her liking.”

Elizabeth walked into the room and gazed around. It was a comfortable size with book shelves, a settee and wing chairs ringed a small table in front of the fireplace. A writing desk was against a wall framed by large windows. It exuded a light, airy feeling. The furniture looked well upholstered although perhaps a little faded but not ornate. She thought she could feel comfortable here. She looked at Darcy and could see he was expecting some comment. “I like it very much. I was just thinking to myself that I could feel very comfortable here. I would not change a thing.” She smiled, “I think Georgiana and I share a similar taste in furnishings.”
Darcy was a little surprised, “Are you sure that you do not want to refurbish this room?”

“Indeed. I see no reason to change a room that appears to me to be admirable in comfort and furnishings. I may wish to add a few personal things but that can happen later. The upholstery is perhaps a little faded but that simply adds to its comfort.”

Darcy nodded, noting a smile of appreciation from Mrs. Hodgkins that she failed to suppress. “Very well. Let us look at your bedchamber and dressing room now.” and leading them back out of the room he proceeded down the hall towards the front of the house finally stopping to wave them through into a small rather ornate room. “This is your dressing room and the Mistress bedroom is through that door.” He pointed to a door on the opposing wall. “These rooms have been cleaned but have not been refurbished for almost twenty years. Is that not correct, Mrs. Hodgkins?”

“Yes sir, not since before your mother passed on, Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth walked over and entered what was to be her bedroom and gazed in some astonishment. The room was more ornate than was typical of the house in general. The wall paper was of an intricate, busy design that she could not like. The furniture reminded her somewhat of Rosings Park – a little too ornate to be truly comfortable - and there was too much of it. The curtains were a dark gold colour that matched the wallpaper but seemed to soak up any light that entered the room. She could not sleep here in any comfort. She could not hide her thoughts since Darcy was quick to notice her reaction. “You do not like this room?”

She could not prevaricate, “Well, it is very different from any other room. It reminds me somewhat of Rosings Park.”

Darcy smiled, “My mother and my Aunt Catherine shared somewhat similar preferences in furnishings although I believe my mother’s taste was a little more restrained in that regard.”

“I must admit I find it rather discomforting. I would like to see a complete change here but I feel that it should wait until later when I have time to consider how best to do so.” Elizabeth was not prepared to discuss with Darcy that she did not expect to sleep in this room with any frequency, if at all. It was her intention that they share a bed every night and she rather thought his bed would be hers also. Her talks with her Aunt Madeline had given her to believe that her marriage would benefit from such closeness. She would retain this room for periods when she was ill and needed to separate from her husband.

Darcy was not terribly surprised by her reaction given how she had viewed the other furnishings in the house with such appreciation. “Very well. Although we could arrange to visit some furniture shops to select and order new furnishings, there is, I am sure, time enough for that.” Observing that Elizabeth was not in favour of such an effort, he did not press the issue, “Very well! Shall we return to your dressing room?”

Elizabeth and her aunt walked back into the dressing room which was furnished in a fashion similar to the bedroom. Elizabeth wandered around touching the dresser, chairs, opening a door into a very large closet with racks for dresses and shelves for other items. She gasped at its size, “However am I to fill this room. I could never need so many dresses.” Her aunt laughed, “I imagine you will not need so much space right away but I suspect that over time, this closet will be filled.” Elizabeth just shook her head and wandered over to inspect an extremely large tub. “Ah, I think I am going to enjoy having a bath here!” she thought to herself. She stuck her head into another small attached room which turned out to be a water closet. Turning back into the middle of the dressing room, she looked at Mrs. Hodgkins. “I think I would like to have some of the furniture removed – the room is too cluttered for my taste. Perhaps several chairs could be removed. I would also like to replace the other furniture with a simpler style – perhaps like that in the sitting room. As well, the wallpaper
should be replaced with a lighter colour - yellow, I think – and the curtains likewise with a brighter light colour. The rugs are too elaborate for my liking – a simpler design in a warm brown perhaps. Would it be best do you think to leave this till after we are married?"

Although the question was directed to Darcy, Mrs. Hodgkins, with his tacit approval, responded, “Actually Miss Bennet, the changes you have suggested are very much in line with those Mr. Darcy expressed earlier this week. I have tentatively, subject to your approval, placed an order for new furniture and we can have the room completely redone by the time you return from Hertfordshire.”

“That sounds excellent, Mrs. Hodgkins. I can see why Mr. Darcy has such confidence in you. I think you are going to make my life very much easier.”

Mrs. Hodgkins nodded in appreciation, “Thank you, Miss Bennet.” Everything she had seen of this young lady had impressed her. Her taste, intelligence and kindness were all that she could have hoped for in the next Mistress. “Miss Bennet, while I have your attention there is another item I would address.” At Elizabeth’s inquiring look, she continued, “Are you planning to bring a ladies maid with you?”

Elizabeth was rather surprised, “I had not thought of that at all. There really is no one at Longbourn that would suit particularly. I suppose I will have to employ one.”

Mrs. Hodgkins nodded, “I thought that might be the case. In general,” and she looked at Darcy, “Mr. Darcy prefers to hire from within our current staff but, in the case of his valet he did not do so and perhaps your maid should be treated so as well.”

Darcy noted Elizabeth’s puzzled expression, “My valet and your maid will be closer to us than any other member of the staff. They will become aware of personal matters that require the strictest privacy. If they are hired from outside the regular staff their first loyalty will be to us. However, I am not overly concerned if you decide to hire from within. My valet was hired because there were no suitable candidates on staff. The choice is yours. I would mention that my uncle has followed the practice of hiring personal staff from without for the reasons given.”

Elizabeth looked at Mrs. Gardiner, “Aunt, do you have some thoughts on this?”

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head, “Not really, I can see the merits though in hiring from outside but personally I would prefer to hire from within.”

Elizabeth looked conflicted, “Mrs. Hodgkins, is there someone who is well qualified on staff now?”

“No Miss Bennet, there is not. Neither here nor at Pemberley as far as I know.”

“Well then, it seems the matter is settled. Can you arrange to interview some candidates?”

“Again I took the liberty to advertise and believe we could have several to interview the day after next.”

Elizabeth nodded, “Very good. I do not leave for Longbourn for a week at least. I will not need a maid while there and can use my sister’s should a need arise.”

Darcy had waited patiently for this discussion to conclude and, seeing the opportunity to continue the tour, suggested that they return to the main floor to view the rooms there. As they walked down the stairs, Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow at Darcy, “Are there rooms on this floor that I have not seen?”

“I do not think you have seen our dining rooms. And I know I have not shown you my billiard room.”
Elizabeth grinned impishly, “I have never seen a billiard room. I shall be quite interested.” She leaned a little closer to Darcy and whispered, “Shall you teach me how to play?”

Darcy’s blush produced a chortle from Elizabeth which was replaced by a blush of her own when he murmured, “I shall take great delight in instructing you….I shall endeavour to ensure that you enjoy the lessons.”

When they reached the main floor, Darcy led them on a tour of his study and the billiard room. The latter room drew a pointed look from Elizabeth and a slight smirk from Darcy that was missed the rest of their party. Mrs. Hodgkins then led them to the dining room informing Elizabeth that it could seat two and forty people. Elizabeth could only gaze around with great pleasure evident on her countenance, “What a beautiful room, those chandeliers are exquisite.”

Darcy looked around, “I cannot remember when we last hosted a dinner in this room with that many people. Do you remember, Mrs. Hodgkins?”

“No sir, not since I have been here which covers some fifteen years.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully, “We have hosted smaller dinners, of course, but not since my mother died has there been a hostess for Darcy House with a desire to entertain. In truth, most of our meals are taken in the morning room. Follow me.” Leading them back out of the room and down the hall, he opened a door into a small dining area that could accommodate about six people. Again it was tastefully furnished albeit in a rather plainer fashion than elsewhere with a small writing desk and sideboard in addition to a table and chairs. “Georgiana and I take all our meals here unless we are entertaining.”

Elizabeth admired the room, “I particularly like the windows. They have an eastern exposure I think which should make the room delightfully bright in the mornings. I like it very much. In fact, I have seen little that I do not like. I do fear that you will have some difficulty in prying me out of your library though.”

Darcy smiled, “I am glad you approve. I know we have only looked at a few rooms but the rest can be viewed when we have more time. Shall we have tea?” That being agreeable to them all, they repaired to the drawing room. Before leaving to attend to her duties, Mrs. Hodgkins arranged to meet with Elizabeth in a few days to interview candidates for the position of her maid.

Mrs. Gardiner led the their return to the drawing room and Darcy managed to delay Elizabeth by from following her by a gentle pressure on her arm. Conscious of the lack of privacy he was reluctant to be overly bold and was content to have her walk slowly with him. Taking the chance for a few moments of relative privacy, he whispered, “You cannot know how much I am looking forward to having you here every day. It seems that we have so little time together and when we are in each other’s company, there are chaperones everywhere. She could hear his frustration in his voice and, truth to tell, she thought her own not much less. Yet she also knew that until they were married, they must remain circumspect in all particulars. A quick glance assured her of their privacy since her aunt had entered the drawing room. Gently brushing his lips with her hand, she quirked her lips, “Soon my love. Soon!” At that point her aunt appeared in the doorway ahead and pointedly raised an eyebrow which elicited a chuckle from both Darcy and Elizabeth and a very quiet “Not soon enough!” from Darcy before they joined her.
Chapter 38

Monday May 10, 1813 – Darcy House, London

It had been rather a tedious afternoon. Mrs. Hodgkins had arranged for them to interview applicants for the position of her ladies maid and so far they had spent two hours interviewing four applicants all of whom would probably have done a satisfactory job although none had impressed either of them as being appreciably better than the others. Mrs. Hodgkins looked up from the letter she was reading, “I believe I have saved the best for the last. It was not totally accidental. Shall I call in the last young lady?”

“Please do. I hope that she can make this decision easier.”

Mrs. Hodgkins passed the letter she had been reading to Elizabeth and then left the room only to return within a minute or two with a young woman of about five and twenty years, attractive and composed although Elizabeth thought she detected a faint nervousness in her mien.

Mrs. Hodgkins introduced the young woman, “Miss Bennet, This is Julia Derwin who is currently ladies maid to Lady Bettin. Miss Derwin, this is Miss Bennet who is to marry Mr. Darcy and is looking to hire a ladies maid.”

Elizabeth and Mrs. Hodgkins talked with the young woman for almost an half hour discussing the duties involved, her service with Lady Bettin and previous employment. Elizabeth had been quite impressed with her responses and her background was very much superior to the other candidates but there was something that was puzzling her. Finally realizing what it was she became aware that conversation had ceased and the both of the other women were looking at her. “I must apologize. I was lost in some thoughts.” She paused briefly, “Miss Derwin, would you mind waiting in the hall outside for a minute or two while I consult with Mrs. Hodgkins?”

“Certainly, Ma’am”

After Miss Derwin had left, Elizabeth turned to Mrs. Hodgkins. “Is there something that you have not told me about Miss Derwin?”

Mrs. Hodgkins smiled, “You have caught me out. Lady Bettin wrote me shortly after your engagement was announced to see if you were in need of a maid.”

Elizabeth was taken quite aback, “Why? Did she give any reason? Her references are excellent. I can think of no reason why she would wish to lose such a proficient maid.”

“She gave no reason but she spoke highly and kindly of Miss Derwin.”

"I suppose I will have to ask her, Miss Derwin I mean. I plan to offer her the position if the answer is satisfactory. Do you concur?”

"Indeed I do. I will fetch her now.” With which Mrs. Hodgkins bustled out of the room to return very shortly with Miss Derwin.

Elizabeth smiled at the young woman, “Your record is quite satisfactory but I would wish you to answer one question for me if you would.”

“Ma’am?”
“Yes, well you see, I am wondering why you would wish to leave a situation where you are maid to someone of higher status than myself. It would seem that being maid to Lady Bettin would be preferred. It puzzles me greatly.”

The young woman’s discomfiture was obvious, “Is there some concern with my references, Ma’am?”

“Indeed no. They are excellent. Were you aware that Lady Bettin had written Mrs. Hodgkins prior to our looking for a personal maid?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I was aware she had….in fact, I asked it of her.”

“And she obviously agreed despite the reluctance to lose you and her affection both of which are clearly expressed in her letter of recommendation……Why?”

Miss Derwin looked down at her hands, her nervousness more readily apparent. Both Elizabeth and Mrs. Hodgkins remained silent giving her the chance to regain her composure. Finally, after some moments, she looked up and looked at Elizabeth although her eyes were focused on the picture hanging behind Elizabeth, “Lady Bettin is very kind…I asked to leave….she thought it best that…her son was beginning to pay too much attention to me. We did not talk of it but she could see I was becoming more and more uncomfortable and I must believe she knew why.”

Elizabeth could not hide her dismay. “I am…I find this disgusting that a man should behave so.” She looked at the young woman, “You need not fear such attentions here. We will have to check the references, of course, but the position is yours if you want it.”

“Thank you.” Miss Derwin’s relief and gratitude was apparent.

“Excellent! I am sure we shall fit very well. Miss… no, Julia ….when can you start?”

“Lady Bettin has given me leave to start immediately. I could begin tomorrow if you wish.”

Elizabeth considered for only a few seconds before responding. “Excellent, I shall check with Lady Bettin today. Mrs. Hodgkins will arrange for your quarters here to be ready for you when we move to Darcy House. You will be staying with me at my Aunt’s home until I am married. Mrs. Hodgkins will arrange for a carriage to transport you there when you arrive here tomorrow.”

Shortly thereafter, Julia Derwin was shown out and the two ladies proceeded to those tasks which awaited them. Mrs. Hodgkins to prepare a room as required and Elizabeth to write a note to Lady Bettin to confirm her recommendation. The note was delivered by a footman instructed to await an answer. He returned an hour later with a short note for Elizabeth.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

I am extremely gratified by your decision to employ Julia. I have no doubt that you will find her as diligent and competent as I have done for the last three years. As I said in my reference, I am sorry to lose her but cannot disoblige her desire to improve her situation.

Sincerely,
Lady Bettin

After sending a note to Mrs. Hodgkins that Lady Bettin had responded favourably, Elizabeth called for a carriage to return her to Gracechurch Street. Arrangements would be necessary there also to
accommodate her new maid.

Thursday May 13, 1813 – London
Julia emplaced the final pin in her hair and stepped back to scan her work. Her smile of satisfaction was echoed by Elizabeth’s as she did likewise in the mirror in front of her, “Thank you Julia. This looks beautiful.” The warmth of her approbation was easily discernible from her voice.

“It’s a pleasure to work for you, Miss Elizabeth. Your hair is delightful.”

Elizabeth stood and shook out her skirts as a knock sounded on the door. Her Aunt Gardiner stuck her head in saying “Come Lizzy, the carriage is waiting.” As her niece turned to face her, she could not help but exclaim, “You look radiant. Mr. Darcy will be speechless I am sure.” She laughed, “I can hardly wait to hear what the gossip sheets will be writing tomorrow.”

Elizabeth shook her head gently so as not to disarrange Julia’s work, “Nothing too good I warrant.” Walking out of the room she began the task of mentally preparing herself for the ordeal she faced. This would be her second and final public event in London prior to her wedding and, for Darcy’s sake, she was eager for it to go well. She had selected her gown with care and had accepted from Darcy a simple necklace with a gold chain and an emerald pendant which had belonged to his mother. She felt distinctly uncomfortable when festooned with jewelry. As with lace, less was more to her liking and this necklace suited her very well.

As she descended the stairs, she heard an audible gasp and looking up realized that Darcy had moved to the foot of the stairs to await her. From the rather stunned look on his face, she rather thought she had achieved her objective. “Well sir, am I tolerable enough do you think?”

Darcy seemed to be having some problems in speaking but finally managed to utter a succinct but heartfelt phrase, “You are so beautiful!” which brought a delighted blush to Elizabeth’s countenance, “Your flattery is most welcome, sir. It is always wonderful to have one’s efforts appreciated.”

“My dearest Elizabeth, I will be the proudest man alive tonight with you on my arm. Every man will be envying me.”

Elizabeth turned to her aunt, “Does he not say the sweetest things? I am in great danger of becoming quite vain if he continues. I shall become quite puffed up in my vanity and become insufferably proud”

Darcy shook his head in denial and, draping her shawl around her shoulders, placed her hand on his arm and led her and the Gardiners to his carriage. As they were being driven to the theatre, Elizabeth turned to her uncle and asked, “I know you have made the arrangements for tonight but in all the preparations I never thought to ask which play we would be attending.”

“Ah Lizzy you have a rare treat tonight. The incomparable Edmund Kean is performing as Shylock in the Merchant of Venice at the Theatre Royale in Drury Lane. I know you prefer Shakespeare’s histories and comedies so we are doubly fortunate in that a comedy is being performed and that Shylock is also one of Kean’s finest roles.”

“A rare treat indeed Uncle. I have heard much of Mr. Kean but have never seen him perform. I expect to enjoy myself greatly.”

Conversation continued in a desultory fashion until they arrived at the queue of carriages waiting to disembark their passengers at the theatre. Progress was slow but they eventually arrived at the
entrance. Darcy and Mr. Gardiner were the first out and turned to assist Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner to alight from the carriage. Elizabeth and Darcy looked at each other and she murmured, “I realize that we are attending this performance mainly to satisfy your family’s desire for us to make a few public appearances but I fully intend to enjoy the play itself. I shall let nothing distract me from that!”

“That is a challenge indeed, Elizabeth. May I not hope to distract you just a little tonight?”

Elizabeth’s smile was heartfelt, “You, sir, are distracting enough as it is. Please do not try to discompose me entirely.” Saying which she began leading them both up the stairs to the entranceway of the theatre. Darcy was content to let her have the last word and, as they walked into the main lobby of the theatre, could feel Elizabeth’s tension as her grip on his arm tightened. So concerned with her comfort that he forgot his own discomfort, he looked down and placed his free hand atop hers and whispered, “I said it earlier but it is worth repeating – I will be the envy of every man here tonight.”

With those words they began to wend their way through the crowded lobby trailed by the Gardiners. It was not long before they were approached by a very finely dressed couple of mature years who greeted Darcy, “Darcy, It has been a very long time since we met. Would you introduce me to this lovely young lady?”

“Certainly your Lordship. Elizabeth, this is his Lordship, the Earl of ___ and his wife Countess ___. Your Lordship, Milady may I present my betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet and,” indicating the Gardiners who had paused slightly behind them, “her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Gardiner.” Turning back to Elizabeth, he continued, “The Earl and his wife are neighbours of mine in Derbyshire and our families have been fairly close for several generations.”

The Earl smiled and nodded as Elizabeth curtsied saying, “We are pleased to meet you Miss Bennet. You are to be married shortly, I believe. We wish you joy.” Elizabeth politely acknowledged the Earl’s comment and, after he and his wife moved on, whispered to Darcy, “I do not think the Countess was as pleased at the acquaintance as his Lordship.”

“I doubt she was. They have a daughter of marriageable age and may have had some hopes of an attachment. We will probably not see much of them since their estate is some forty miles distant from Pemberley.”

As they continued to walk through the lobby towards their box, Elizabeth was interested to observe the varied reactions of those people they encountered. Darcy nodded quite frequently to those they passed. A few were obviously not welcoming, returning only the barest nod and a disdainful look to Darcy’s nod. Most were, if not welcoming, at least civil and in one or two instances politely congratulation them and inquiring as the wedding. A few people were more amiable and approached them with obvious pleasure in making the acquaintance. One couple in particular elicited a warm welcome from Darcy. “Colbert, I had not thought to see you here tonight!”

“Darcy, it has been quite some time since we met – our family ball I believe.”

“Indeed. Colbert, may I introduce my betrothed?”

“I would be delighted to meet her.”

Once all of the introductions were complete and Lord Colbert had introduced the young lady he was escorting, Darcy smiled at Colbert, “In some respects, I owe you a great debt.” At Colbert’s inquiring look, he continued, “I met a gentleman and his wife at that ball who, several months later, re-introduced me to Elizabeth. So I must thank you for that service.”
“Re-introduced, Darcy?”

“It is too long a story to discuss here. I shall save it for a more propitious occasion.”

As they chatted, they heard the signal bell indicating that the performance would soon start. After expressing their intentions to meet in the future, Darcy, Elizabeth and the Gardiners walked more briskly to their box, not allowing themselves to be slowed by others. As she settled in her seat, Elizabeth was once again quite conscious of the number and intensity of the looks directed at them. If the attention was disconcerting, she allowed no trace of such to appear and made it her focus to converse as naturally as possible with the Gardiners and Darcy. Once the lights dimmed, it was possible to concentrate on the performance on the stage below and before long she was enraptured in it, murmuring many of the speeches along with the actors on stage. For Darcy, it was difficult not to try and claim her attention. His hand lay on hers on the arm of their adjoining seats but, in deference to her obvious enchantment, he was careful to do nothing to distract her. The short intermission following the first Act was sufficient to allow Mr. Gardiner to exit and return with refreshments. Following the second Act, Elizabeth expressed a desire to walk around. Mrs Gardiner, not feeling up to such an endeavour, chose to remain in the box accompanied by her husband while Darcy and Elizabeth strolled through the lobby.

One very well dressed couple passed them and greeted Darcy briefly in passing. Their deliberate shunning of Elizabeth brought a scowl to Darcy’s face which Elizabeth became aware of when she felt a sudden tightening of his arm muscles. Recognizing at once the cause, she looked up at him and laughed. “It does not bother me William. Do not let it upset you.”

“Elizabeth, I can more easily forgive an insult to myself than one to you. That was the Earl of ___. Fortunately he is not someone that I have had many dealings with in the past. I suspect I will have even fewer in the future.”

They had little time to consider the Earl’s actions before they were approached by an elderly couple. The gentleman was tall, rather portly and balding. His wife was also fairly tall with a matronly figure and wearing a significant amount of jewelry. Both were finely dressed and radiated the self-assurance of the wealthy and entitled.

“Darcy, I assume this is your betrothed. Would you introduce her to us, please?”

“Certainly, your Grace. Elizabeth, may I introduce you to the Duke and Duchess of ____. Your Graces, my Betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire.”

“We are pleased to make your acquaintance Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth curtsied saying, “And I am most pleased to make yours, your Graces.” Elizabeth could feel herself being thoroughly scrutinized by two sets of eyes. It was not totally uncomfortable since neither the Duke or Duchess seemed censorious and she strove to maintain an calm expression. The scrutiny did not last overlong – probably not more than a second or two – before the Duchess asked Elizabeth, “When do you marry?”

“In less than a week, Your Grace.”

“Will you be in town afterwards?”

Elizabeth looked at Darcy before responding, “I believe we will be in town until June 4” when we depart for Pemberley.

“Excellent! Excellent! We would hope to see you at our ball on the June 1.”
Darcy glanced quickly at Elizabeth and, seeing her slight nod, was quick to accept the invitation. The ducal couple had observed the interaction, filing it away for future reference. Apparently the new Mrs. Darcy would possess the respect of her husband. The Duke gave a small smile saying, “I am glad to see you marrying Darcy. Pemberley has been without a Mistress for too many years.” Nodding once more they moved on leaving Darcy and Elizabeth to consider the implications of this meeting as they strolled back to their box. Darcy turned to Elizabeth, “Are you sure you wish to attend this ball?”

Elizabeth thought for a few moments before answering, “I think so. We planned to attend one and I think it would be most impolitic not to attend this one given the personal invitation we received. I feel we will be received fairly by them at least and their approval will do much to moderate the reactions of others, would you not say?”

Darcy nodded his agreement and Elizabeth continued, “I wish to discuss this with your aunt and cousin. I am sure they can provide some useful guidance and perhaps some information on whom else will be likely to attend.”

Entering the box they quickly apprised the Gardiners of the meeting with the Duke and Duchess but the resumption of the performance prevented any further discussion of that topic. It did not take long for Elizabeth to lose herself once more in the play. The remainder of the evening passed quietly. They did receive a few visitors during the intermissions that occurred but all were close friends of Darcy or the Gardiners and delighted to make Elizabeth’s acquaintance.

The next morning when she had returned from her morning walk and begun to break her fast with her Aunt Gardiner and the children, she noticed her aunt scrutinizing the newspaper more closely than was her usual wont. Puzzled, she was about to inquire of her aunt as to what was of such interest when the paper was placed on the table and her attention directed to a brief paragraph in the Society section. With no little amazement she read,

The very public-shy Mr. FD from Derbyshire was seen proudly escorting a Miss EB from Hertfordshire, to whom he has recently become betrothed, at a performance of the Merchant of Venice at the Theatre Royale. Miss EB was handsomely and elegantly garbed in a gown of a shimmering light green silk and wearing a simple but elegant emerald pendant necklace. Reports of her beauty which first surfaced when she attended a performance of Love’s Labour Lost at Covent Gardens can now be confirmed. Miss EB and Mr. FD spoke with with a number of those attending the play during the intermissions notably the Earl and Countess of ___ and their Graces the Duke and Duchess of ____. It is reported that the engaged couple will marry within a week and are also expected to attend a ball hosted by their Graces, the Duke and Duchess of ____ on June 3.

Elizabeth looked at her aunt, “I think this is favourable, is it not? I know my mother will be in raptures if she reads it.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled saying “I think Countess Matlock will be appreciative as well.”
Saturday May 15, 1813 – Gracechurch Street, London

It was not the same as in the past. Of course, it could not be. Jane was a married woman now and Elizabeth could no longer expect to enjoy long talks with her sister that lasted into the early hours of the morning. She had learned that all too well at Pemberley and in York. Nonetheless she had managed to separate her elder sister from her husband for several hours this evening after dinner. They were now ensconced quite comfortably in Elizabeth’s room and endeavouring to relate each to the other all that had happened during their month long separation that could not be comfortably encompassed in a letter.

Elizabeth was most concerned to learn about Mr. Bingley and his involvement in helping her sister and her husband to acquire an estate. If the reason for her interest was to better sketch Mr. Bingley’s character on Georgiana’s behalf, this was not something she could relate to Jane. While it was not difficult to conclude that Mr. Bingley had earned a reasonable degree of admiration from both Jane and Amos Stovall, it was also easy to ascertain that the admiration was that which would be bestowed on a good friend. Jane was very quick to praise Mr. Bingley but Elizabeth could detect nothing of her former feelings in such praise. With an easier heart she encouraged her sister to talk about the estate which she and Amos hoped to make their home when he left the navy.

“Oh Lizzy, I will so love to have you visit. I will never be able to keep you in the house since you will wish to walk and ride all over the estate’s park which is not as large as Pemberley but has as many beautiful views.” Jane paused for a moment or two before smiling, “According to Amos, the winters are quite cold and snow is plentiful. He is already talking about acquiring a sleigh or even two for driving about in the winter.”

Elizabeth laughed, “Jane enjoying a sleigh ride? I do not believe it to be possible. You are a creature of the gardens and prefer a warm room to being out in the cold.”

“I think I might enjoy a sleigh ride a great deal if my husband is next to me!” Jane’s blush prompted a most unladylike snort from Elizabeth which she tried to hide by pretending to cough but eventually gave up the effort and laughed at her sister who also began to laugh happily.

“Jane, I am so pleased to see you so happy. I will be most willing to visit you at Edgemont when you take up residence. Of course, I will insist on William accompanying me and a sleigh of our own.” Elizabeth’s arch look elicited a knowing grin from her sister. “Of course, Lizzy. Of course!”

The two sisters continued to talk for another hour as Elizabeth described all that had happened to her and Darcy since they returned to London. Elizabeth found that as she talked to her sister the events which she found somewhat overwhelming when they occurred could be placed in perspective. She had met members of the social elite and survived the experience quite nicely. She had been on public display and, if understandably nervous at the time, she had been in command of herself and thought she had acquitted herself well. With the support of William, the Matlock family and her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, her first tentative steps into London society had been taken without accident. Doubts that she harboured about her ability to be a good Mistress of Pemberley in all of the facets involved still existed but they no longer seemed ready to overwhelm her. She could face the future with more confidence in her abilities.

Sunday May 16, 1813 – Darcy House, London
Darcy was there to welcome them all when they arrived at Darcy House. It had been over a month since he had been in company with Jane and her husband and he welcomed them both with particular warmth. The intensity of his gaze as he turned once again to Elizabeth was matched by hers and as he placed her hand on his arm to lead them all to the drawing room, he murmured, “I have a small surprise for you.” At her quizzical look, he continued, “I shall show it to you very shortly.”

As they entered the drawing room, Elizabeth was surprised to see Mr. Bingley talking to Georgiana. “Is this your surprise, sir? I admit it to be a pleasant one.”

“No indeed although I am pleased Bingley arrived in time for the dinner tonight. I rather expected he might be late.” Since the Gardiners had not previously met Mr. Bingley, Darcy made the introductions. The Gardiners were very interested to make the acquaintance of one of whom they had received such varying reports. While he had apparently disappointed their niece greatly by his withdrawal of his attentions, he had also been very generous in his assistance to her and her husband in acquiring an estate. It seemed likely that he might be in the company of the Stovalls in the future and it behooved the Gardiners therefore to think well of him. It did not take overmuch time for them to be convinced of his amiability and worthiness.

After a few minutes Darcy spoke to the room, “I have no wish to disturb any conversations taking place but I would like to show Elizabeth her chambers that we have refurbished to her specifications – I hope. Would any of you wish to accompany us?”

Jane and Mrs. Gardiner were quick to show their interest and Darcy led them upstairs to the Mistress Chambers. Before throwing open the door, he asked Elizabeth to close her eyes until told to open them. After some teasing on her part, she complied with his request, her anticipation increasing her reluctance to delay viewing her rooms. Leading her carefully into the room followed by Mrs. Gardiner and Jane he stopped her in the middle of her bedroom and asked her to open her eyes. Despite being warned by the appreciative murmurs of Jane and her aunt, she nevertheless was overwhelmed by the changes that had taken place. Gone were the ornate furniture, brocades and the clutter of furnishings. In its place was a room designed to provide light and warmth and comfort. She walked around fingering the curtains and the small settee in front of the window. Walking into the bedroom she admired the fittings and coverings.

“I hope this meets with your approval.” Darcy’s voice was low and his breath tickled her ear.

“Indeed it does, William.” She paused and turned her head slightly towards his, her lips within inches of his and her voice equally quiet – and she hoped indistinct to her aunt and Jane, “However, I hope to spend but few nights in it!” At Darcy’s uncomprehending look, she broadened her smile a trifle while a blush pervaded her face, “I hope to spend most of them in your bed, William.”

“Truly?”

“Truly!”

“I…ah, I think we should view your dressing room also.” If her aunt and Jane had discerned the cause of Darcy’s reddened countenance or loss of composure, they gave no sign other than a slight smile from Jane. Darcy quickly ushered them into the dressing room in which many of Elizabeth’s recent purchases had been stored. She looked around and nodded her approval. “I must convey to Mrs. Hodgkins my appreciation for the way she has carried out this refurbishing. I shall be most comfortable in these rooms.” Darcy watched with great satisfaction as the three women wandered back and forth in the two rooms admiring the furnishings and the care that had gone into making the rooms so suited to Elizabeth. As Mrs. Gardiner so aptly stated, “I cannot envisage rooms that could more closely reflect your tastes and preferences, Lizzy.”
Once they had rejoined the rest of the party in the drawing room, Elizabeth quickly went to Georgiana and taking her hands expressed her appreciation, “For I am sure that you had no small part in making my rooms so delightful.” Georgiana’s discomfiture at the praise was obvious and Elizabeth chuckled, “I can see I still have much work to do in teaching you how to accept praise.” Further teasing was cut short by the entrance of Mrs. Hodgkins to announce that dinner was ready. Before she could depart, Elizabeth hastened to take her aside and express her appreciation. “Mrs. Hodgkins, you must allow me to thank you for your efforts to refurbish the Mistress chambers. It can have been no easy task to take the few comments I offered and effect such a delightful transformation and with so little time to accomplish it.”

“Miss Bennet, I was truly happy to do so. I have been the housekeeper here for fifteen years and the happiness that has invaded this house in the last few months has been a joy to see.” With that she patted Elizabeth on the arm and was about to leave when she turned back saying, “I have taken the liberty of writing Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley about your preferences. She will see to the refurbishing of the Mistress Chambers there.” She then bustled off about her duties. Elizabeth noted that Darcy was waiting to lead her to the dining room and quickly took possession of the arm he extended. At his raised eyebrow, she quietly answered, “I just wished to thank Mrs. Hodgkins for her efforts on my behalf.”

He nodded and led her to sit at his right hand at the head of the table. Georgiana, acting as hostess for the family gathering, sat at the foot of the table which had been shortened to more comfortably suit the number of guests. Bingley and Mr. Gardiner had seated themselves to her right and left while Mrs. Gardiner sat between Elizabeth and her husband. The Stovalls sat to Darcy’s left. Altogether it was an amiable company that sat down to dine and the presence of Bingley and Mr. Gardiner served to envelope Georgiana in an easy conversation that eased her discomfort at being the hostess. Conversation ranged over a wide variety of topics although, not unexpectedly, the upcoming nuptials and the Stovalls experiences in Yorkshire were of much interest. Darcy informed Elizabeth that his cousin, Lady Frances and her husband, would attend the wedding but that his Uncle, Lord Matlock, had declined to do so, citing a reluctance to travel to Hertfordshire. If there were other reasons, they remained unstated.

Elizabeth was pleased that she was able, from where she sat, to observe Mr. Bingley’s behaviour towards Georgiana. Given that he had been a particular friend of Darcy for more than five years and had known Georgiana for as long, she was not surprised to see how comfortable they were in each other’s company. She could not detect that he paid her any attentions beyond those of a close acquaintance; however, Georgiana’s preference was more obvious and, although not improper in any fashion, more concerning. Elizabeth thought she should mention her concerns to Darcy when the opportunity arose.

When dinner was finished the ladies withdrew to the drawing room, leaving the four gentlemen to their port and cigars. Stovall and Bingley quickly fell into a discussion about York and the Stovall estate with Bingley also discussing his plans to purchase an estate in close proximity to York itself for as he said, “I am too much about my business in York to be separated from it for long periods and yet I like the easiness of country living and manners.”

Darcy and Mr. Gardiner found common cause as their discussion centred on a common interest – business. Darcy had invested in the Gardiner business and both were considering opportunities elsewhere. Bingley had briefly mentioned that he was looking to expand and neither Darcy or Mr. Gardiner were adverse to such involvement. They would take the opportunity while in Hertfordshire to talk to Messers Johnson and Thompson about the possibilities although Mr. Gardiner was rather convinced that much of the discussion would fall to his lot since Darcy’s thoughts would be much more pleasurably engaged. After a half hour they decided to join the ladies in the drawing room and were greeted by the sight of Georgiana and Elizabeth essaying a duet as they entered the room. The
two young women played charmingly for a further ten minutes, becoming aware that their audience had expanded only by the volume of applause that greeted their efforts. They were pressed to continue playing and obliged for a further quarter hour at which point they joined the others for tea and coffee. Elizabeth took the opportunity to sit somewhat apart with Darcy on a settee, where they could converse in quiet comfort and deliberately ignored by the others. If there was no obvious contact between them, glances and brushes of a hand on an arm or hand conveyed the affection and desire each was feeling for the other.

Since their plans called for an early departure for Longbourn the next morning, they did not linger afterwards wishing to return home to make final preparations for their journey the next day. Once the Gardiner carriage had departed for Gracechurch Street, Darcy returned indoors to join his sister and friend. Georgiana wished to retire to her rooms to make her preparations and, if she was to spend more time considering the attractiveness of a certain gentleman, it was no more than might be expected of any young lady who was not yet seventeen. Darcy and Bingley enjoyed a companionable brandy in his study before Bingley acknowledged his fatigue from travelling and retired. Darcy’s thoughts were almost completely of Elizabeth and the realization of his dreams and hopes to make her his wife. He did not attempt to deny to himself his anticipation of their wedding night and all the days and nights which would follow.
"Lord, I hate carriages!" Elizabeth’s exclamation drew smiles and laughter from the other inhabitants in the room. Having departed from London early Monday morning and arriving in Longbourn before luncheon, she had known her mother would want to display her to all the neighbours particularly since Elizabeth had deliberately refused to return to Longbourn for an extended period before the wedding. She was convinced that Mrs. Bennet intended to extract every ounce of patience that Elizabeth possessed and her reserves of such had dwindled alarmingly. Mrs. Bennet had started her campaign almost as soon as Elizabeth had alighted from the Darcy carriage. The Gardiners had barely time to see their children into Longbourn before Mrs. Bennet had commandeered the carriage - and along with it, Elizabeth - to begin the visitations. Mrs. Bennet had, in her good opinion, much to be displeased about; the lack of time for wedding arrangement and Elizabeth’s unavailability to be displayed throughout the neighbourhood were those that excited her greatest displeasure. While she had finally acceded to the desire of the Thompsons to host a dinner on the eve of the wedding, it had taken a forceful order by Mr. Bennet, for her to do so with the barest minimum of grace. She consequently determined that the wedding breakfast would be unrivalled and insisted that Elizabeth accompany her on visits. The satisfaction of boasting about her least-favoured daughter’s excellent match could only be exceeded if that same daughter was present when said boasting occurred. Fortunately for Elizabeth’s temper, she and her mother had to return an hour or two before dinner since the Bennets were entertaining that evening.

When Elizabeth finally returned that afternoon, Mrs. Gardiner and Jane wrested her away from Mrs. Bennet insisting that Elizabeth needed to rest and hustled her upstairs to her room where Julia awaited. A short rest followed by a bath and a period of quiet, as Julia dressed her for the evening, repaired Elizabeth’s mood. Mrs. Bennet’s attempts to orchestrate this process as she thought appropriate were diverted by Mrs. Gardiner who cajoled her with stories of Elizabeth’s evening at the theatre where she had been introduced to an Earl and a Duke and Duchess. When Elizabeth finally came downstairs she was greeted by a somewhat worried Darcy. “I fear your mother has quite exhausted you, Elizabeth.”

"I am well now, William. But I think I will insist we remain at home tomorrow.”

Taking him by the hand, she had led him to a quiet corner and sitting with him on a settee she had lowered her voice and said, “One of the things I have come to miss greatly are our early morning walks. I plan to walk out very early tomorrow morning around seven. Perhaps I might meet a tall, handsome gentleman on my walk to Oakham Mount. Do you think that possible, sir?”

“You may count on it, Elizabeth.” Their moment of quietude had not lasted as Mrs. Gardiner approached them with a request from her children that Cousin Lizzy come up and see them. Elizabeth had been more than willing to comply and accompanied by Darcy had gone to sit and read with her young cousins.

Once the guests arrived there had been few chances for her to talk with Darcy and she anticipated their morning walk with delight. The evening passed as such evenings do and Elizabeth’s main concern that evening had been to ensure the comfort of both Darcy and Georgiana. With her aunt’s assistance, she was able to ensure that seating at the table placed them both in proximity to people with whom they could converse comfortably and had asked Kitty to attend Georgiana when they removed to the drawing room. She could see that Georgiana, in particular, was not wholly comfortable in the surroundings but not unduly distressed. Darcy returned to her side when the
gentlemen rejoined the ladies and attached himself to her side for the remainder of the evening much to the amusement of Mr. Bennet and the Gardiners.

Tuesday May 18, 1813 – Longbourn
The day dawned warm and sunny which lent an extra spring to Elizabeth’s step and she had not been walking for long before Darcy overtook her on his horse. Leaving the horse to follow behind, he joined her afoot and arm-in-arm they walked in comfortable silence to Oakham Mount. They found little need to talk, limiting themselves to the occasional observation about the scenery or the people that had attended the festivities the previous evening. If Darcy took advantage of having to help Elizabeth over a stile obstructing the path and stole a kiss, Elizabeth raised no objections and conveniently forgot to mention that she had climbed that stile by herself for years.

Once they reached Oakham Mount, Elizabeth let herself be wrapped in Darcy’s arms leaning her back against his chest as they looked out over Longbourn and, in the distance, Netherfield. Elizabeth’s mind cast back to the previous summer when she had walked to Oakham Mount almost daily to escape her home and her thoughts of Darcy’s offer of marriage. Feeling the warmth of his body surrounding her and the strength of his arms, she marvelled at the change in her thoughts and future that had taken place in less than twelve months. Turning to face him, within the envelope of his arms, she cupped his face with her hands and kissed him softly. She had felt his surprise at her initiative, however, it had taken him but moments to tighten his grip and respond. He had slowly removed his lips from hers after a minute or two, lingering over the taste, and seeing the tears streaming down her cheeks, wiped them with his gloved hand. She had listened to his breathing quicken and thought hers had done so as well. His voice had a husky sound when he asked, “What caused these tears, my love?”

It had taken her a moment or two to be able to respond, “I was remembering that about a year ago I sat up here, thinking about you, your letter, my mistakes and errors, my anger at you, myself, my parents. The only joy I saw was the prospect of a tour with my aunt and uncle of The Lakes and I thought I was quite reconciled to never seeing you again. And yet, here we stand and…and I have never been as happy.”

Darcy grimaced unseen as he remembered his feelings of a year ago. When he finally spoke Elizabeth could detect a change in his emotions that his words made clear, “A year ago I was…sunk in the most abject misery of my life. I was angry at you for rejecting me, at myself for laying myself open, for deluding myself of your affections, for my behaviour, at Wickham for poisoning you against me. To be truthful my thoughts were still in turmoil a month after Hunsford. I could see no joy only duty and responsibility. I was gradually coming to realize the merits of your words but it was hard to bear.”

Elizabeth turned and placed a hand on his cheek, “Come William, when the past brings no pleasure, it must be discarded.”

“Tis easier to say than do.” Darcy laid his forehead on hers, “It helps not that we have had so little time together alone. If it were not for this walk where we can be alone, I fear I should go mad.”

“I find it hard to bear as well. I want only to be in your company.”

Elizabeth moved closer and rested her head against his chest enveloped in his arms. They stood so for several minutes, each taking comfort from the other when Darcy leaned back and gazed at Elizabeth with a look that Elizabeth was coming to realize meant the subject was one he found somewhat embarrassing, “I would mention something that has intrigued me greatly over the past few days.” At her quizzical look, he continued, “You mentioned, when viewing your bedchamber, that
you wished to…ah…spend your time in mine. Did you mean for us to share a bed always?"

Elizabeth looked up. She could not be sure of his concern. She knew that it was the usual practice of his station for wives to sleep in their own bed and for husbands to visit when marital relations were desired. At least, that was the situation she had gleaned from her mother’s ramblings and from other gossip she had overheard. She could not tell if he was offended. “I…perhaps I spoke improperly William. I will follow your wishes but mine are to have you in my bed every night for the rest of my life. If the bed is yours, it matters not, but I wish to be with you. From my days at Pemberley it seems clear that your duties may consume much off your time. I would not wish there to be whole days where we did not see one another.”

Elizabeth’s distress was obvious to Darcy as he could feel her body tensing as she spoke. She had dropped her eyes to the ground as she spoke as if unwilling to see his reaction. He raised her chin so that she could see him, “Elizabeth, my darling Lizzy, there is nothing I would wish more than to share my bed with you for all the days of our marriage.”

“You have never called me Lizzy before!”

He feathered a kiss on her lips, “I think of you as Elizabeth but I shall call you Lizzy sometimes.”

“I like it very much.” She paused for a few moments, “Whatever will we do with the spare bedroom?”

He chuckled, “I am sure that some use will be found. Perhaps a Mistress study?”

He had tightened his grip on her till it was almost painful but she had not minded it, not at all. With no further words, he had finally released her only to take her arm so that they would return to Longbourn. His voice was rough as he spoke, “We had best return or your mother will have them out searching for us.”

“You know my mother too well, I fear. I am sure she is already lamenting our absence. I am afraid I have little reluctance to try her nerves further. The prospect of returning to face a seemingly endless stream of visitors is daunting.” Elizabeth looked up and gave him a mock frown, “You sir, at least, can escape to the quiet of my father’s library.”

Darcy smiled complacently, “And I shall enjoy every minute that I am there.”

“I shall have to think of some way to torment you today in retribution.”

Darcy looked at her thinking, “you are tormenting me now, my love, even if you do not realize it.” He contented himself with shaking his head murmuring, “I have full confidence in your ability to discompose me, my dear Elizabeth!”

They walked for a few minutes in that companionable silence they both had come to enjoy when Darcy thought about Elizabeth’s last words, “I realize you were hurt a great deal when your neighbours began to shun your family. Your anger was quite understandable. How do you feel about them now?”

Elizabeth walked in silence for several minutes and Darcy began to worry that he had upset or offended her and began to try and withdraw his comment, “Perhaps…I did not mean to distress…”

Elizabeth shook her head as she interrupted him, “Forgive me. I am not distressed by the question. I am just trying to form an answer.” She paused a few more moments and then continued, “I was hurt by it, sir. If the expectations of the neighbours were what I had anticipated then it would be different. The fact that the people I had counted as friends were not proving to be such is very different. It hurt that people I had counted as friends would only
acknowledge me on the street but shun conversation, would not allow their sons to dance with me at an assembly, would not call on us or accept our calls. What truly angered me though was how it hurt Jane. She is so good, so gentle and kind that she could not envisage such treatment. She tried to hide it but I know her too well and her pain was hard to witness. That my father and mother who bear much of the responsibility did not appear to suffer as we did, was not conducive to filial affection. This is largely why I wished for Jane and I to escape to London."

“Do you find that your feelings have changed?”

“I no longer am so angry. How can I stay so when Jane is so happy and I have found you. I am disappointed in those I once counted as friends but their opinion counts for little with me now. I will not hate them but neither will I seek their approval. I understand why they acted as they did but I do not have to condone it and would hope not to behave so myself should the occasion arise. I have, I think, forgiven them but I have not forgotten the injury they did."

Darcy nodded silently, “I understand your feelings. Nonetheless I have observed that you treat them all with great civility.”

“I have always attempted to be civil – even, as you know - to those I dislike."

Darcy laughed, “True, I certainly had no suspicion of your dislike at the time although Richard was sensitive to it.”

“My love, we have ample proof of your inability to discern the feelings of young ladies. Fortunately for me, I believe that practice has improved you greatly in this regard.” Elizabeth’s teasing glance drew a small chuckle from Darcy.

“Well, my dear, if I continue on as well as you claim, I have hopes of becoming a true proficient.

They walked in silence for some minutes when Elizabeth broke the silence, “William, I have been thinking.” She walked a few steps without saying anything further until prompted by Darcy, “Oh, I apologize. I was lost in my thoughts. I was thinking about Georgiana and Kitty. Georgiana will be staying with your cousin Lady Frances until they all come to visit us in July. I was thinking that Kitty needed to be exposed to better society than she will find at Longbourn and would have proposed she stay with the Gardiners but, since my aunt will be confined this summer, I think looking after Kitty would be a burden on her. I thought perhaps we could invite Kitty to travel with them to join us at Pemberley until we return to London in the fall. She would provide company for Georgiana and would benefit from her society. What do you think?”

Darcy walked in silence for several minutes considering Elizabeth’s suggestion. Finally he nodded his head, “I think it an excellent idea. Georgiana will be glad of the company since I fear you are likely to capture most of mine.” He walked on for another minute or two absorbed in thought before continuing, “I also had thought to invite my Darcy relatives – those two aunts I spoke of once – to visit us in August. Would that be agreeable to you?”

“I would like that very well. Perhaps we might invite your uncle and aunt for a week at that time. Would they be good company together do you think?”

“I will speak to my Aunt Matlock and canvas her opinion.”

“Have you notified your Darcy aunts about our marriage?”

“No, I have not. I will write in a few days to inform them and extend the invitations when I do so.” He paused for a few moments and then smiled, “Pemberley will be coming back to life this summer.
I cannot remember – it must be fifteen years or more – when we hosted so many visitors. Mrs. Reynolds will be overjoyed. She desires nothing more than to display Pemberley and the ability of its people to the greatest advantage of both.”

“I fear I will have much to learn if I am not to embarrass you and Mrs. Reynolds.”

Darcy easily detected the note of uncertainty in Elizabeth’s voice and stopping, took both her hands in his and raised them to his lips, “Do not fret, dearest. I have full confidence in you, as does Mrs. Reynolds. Between you both, I know our guests will be most comfortable. My only regret is that I will not be able to command your time as I would wish. I do plan to be quite selfish though and exercise my privileges as much as possible. Our guests will have to find amusements where they may for some of their stay.”

“I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours, William – where it involves myself.”

“I see you have been listening to your mother’s advice. On this topic I cannot but agree with her.”

“For once I have no response, sir. I pray it does not happen with any frequency or I shall be greatly discomfited.”

Their eventual return was greeted by Mrs. Bennet in urging Elizabeth to break her fast in order to prepare for another round of visits. Upon learning that Elizabeth had no intention of leaving Longbourn until it was time to dine with the Thompson’s, her dismay and disapproval was expressed for some quarter hour until Mr. Bennet was forced to intervene, “I suggest Mrs. Bennet that you take comfort in our daughter’s presence here at Longbourn. I have it on good authority she considered being married in London.” With which Mrs. Bennet resigned herself to only being able to accept the congratulations of those ladies who deigned to call. Elizabeth was not, however, able to avoid assuming her share of this burden and comforted herself that she at least had the pleasure of Jane and her aunt’s company.

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Feet curled beneath her, Elizabeth leaned back against the wall of her window seat. Looking out over the back garden, the pale moonlight cast everything into shades of grey. Only her familiarity with what lay before her allowed her to discern anything more than the barest of outlines. This was her last night as Elizabeth Bennet and she was spending it alone.

Kitty and Mary had come for a short while but she had never been all that close to them and tonight, for whatever reason, she felt even more separated from them both. Jane, with whom she had shared the closest affections, had stayed longer but even she was called to be with her husband. Her mother had visited briefly, shooing Kitty and Mary out of the room. Fortunately Mrs. Bennet had been accompanied by Mrs. Gardiner. Elizabeth knew as soon as her mother appeared what was to happen. Her beseeching look to Mrs. Gardiner had elicited only the slightest of resigned shrugs – her mother would not be dissuaded from her duty. Elizabeth had attempted to block out her mother’s words. Mercifully, the lecture was short and deviated not a whit from that which Jane had received and recounted to Elizabeth – lie still, it will hurt for a while and he won’t bother you frequently. Once her mother had finished she left the room quickly, her unpleasant duty done. Mrs. Gardiner remained. Seeing no obvious signs of distress from Elizabeth, she explained further that not all marital relations were unpleasant. That, because she was marrying a man who was both kind and much in love with her, it was quite likely that she would find much pleasure since she could trust that her husband would wish to please her. Elizabeth had not really needed those comforting words from her aunt. She had experienced a small portion of the love and care and passion that Darcy felt for her and was looking forward to becoming his wife. If she was nervous, it was more from anticipation than fear or uncertainty. Even tonight, amongst the crowded rooms at Netherfield when everyone’s attention had
been focused elsewhere, she and Darcy had managed a brief moment of closeness, a lingering caress from his fingers on her bare arm. She had seen the desire in his eyes and hoped he had recognized hers. She could not let her thoughts dwell on such, she could feel her body flush.

The afternoon had been an event that met every expectation of her mother who could safely and vehemently boast of two daughters married – albeit one whom she had not seen for almost a year and resided across the ocean – and another to be wed on the morrow. Said daughter was not, however, particularly pleased with all the attention and her civility had been tested severely. Finally escaping her mother’s vigilant eye, Elizabeth had prepared three cups of coffee on a tray which she carried to her father’s study. Upon knocking and being told to enter, she opened the door to find her father and Darcy seated in front of the window concentrating on a chess game. Handing each a cup, which was accepted with the normal courtesy of a chess player in full concentration, which is to say very little at all, she had taken her own and stood behind her father to watch. After determining that it was her father’s move, she considered the pieces on the board for several minutes. Clearing her throat, she touched her father on the shoulder saying, “Check in three moves, mate in five.”

Darcy’s head snapped up, “You know how to play?” His surprise was evident. “But …”

Before Elizabeth could respond, her father shook his head and tipped over his king. “Quite right Lizzy, we are all even Mr. Darcy.” He looked at Darcy, “I taught Lizzy to play when she was but fifteen.” He smiled up at her, “Beat her like a drum for about three years but in the last year or two she held her own.”

“Held my own! I dare say. I seem to remember winning our last three matches.”

Darcy was still shaking his head. “I do not understand. At Pemberley, I offered to teach you to play and you refused. You told me you did not wish to learn how to play.”

“I believe Mr. Darcy, you have forgotten my exact words.” This was said with a slight teasing smile on her lips.

Darcy frowned in concentration, “I do not remember your words now.”

“I believe I said that I was content to add riding to my list of accomplishments.”

The thoughtful look on his face was replaced by a knowing grin, “And learning chess would not add to them because you already knew how to play. I see …” he paused for several moments and then leaned back and gazed at Elizabeth with the slight smile she had come to associate with his teasing, “I have learned two things this afternoon.”

“Two things, sir? And what may they be, sir?”

“Well first, you know how to play chess and play it well which should add materially to our entertainments on a long evening at Pemberley. And the second, that I shall have to parse your statements very carefully in the future, Miss Bennet. Very carefully, indeed.”

Elizabeth’s look of consternation prompted a chuckle from her father. “I think you shall suit my Lizzy quite well Mr. Darcy. I have rarely seen her so discomposed.” He started to set up the chess pieces and looking at Darcy, “I believe we are all even with three draws and a win each. Shall we attempt to decide a winner?”

Before Darcy could respond, Elizabeth shook her head, “’My two favourite men have hidden away from our guests long enough. You both must come and at least pretend to take pleasure in their company. I am sure you would not wish my Mama to intrude here to express her displeasure.”
Darcy and Mr. Bennet exchanged commiserating glances and without too much grumbling had rejoined their visitors in the drawing room. Elizabeth had retained Darcy by her side until most of the visitors had departed but she knew her father had stayed but a few minutes before escaping once more.

She smiled as she considered her William’s discomfort with her neighbours. He was not garrulous but he was also not coldly distant as he had presented himself when he first came to Hertfordshire. He had responded politely and with civility to the many well-wishers and she could ask no more of him than that. That he was more amiable when amongst company with whom he had a prior acquaintance was very obvious at the dinner at Netherfield. There he knew and respected many of the guests, his reserve dropped and he was much more engaged in the conversations.

For herself, entering Netherfield for the first time in almost eighteen months carried an edge of unreality. In truth, she had few good recent memories of the house and her last memory – that fateful ball – was particularly painful as she knew her family, with the exception of Jane, but certainly including herself had displayed themselves quite, quite poorly. If she was discomfited by being there, she had to wonder at Mr. Bingley’s feelings; however, she had not been able to discern anything from his countenance nor had she the opportunity to discuss it with him during the evening. To be greeted by the smiling faces of the Thompsons as she entered the foyer dispelled much of her unease and seeing Darcy moving quickly towards her banished the remainder. As she walked to the drawing room, she surveyed her surroundings and was quite pleased with the changes she found. Mr. Bingley, since he had only leased the property, had accepted the furnishings that came with the lease. The Thompsons were clearly of a mind to establish their permanency and had, in the half year that they occupied Netherfield, refurnished many of the most used rooms to their own tastes. She approved those changes that she saw and had said as much to Mrs. Thompson to that lady’s gratification.

Of the dinner and the evening itself, she could remember little. She found herself rather fatigued by the almost constant activities of the past two days and Darcy, seeing her so, had secured them seats which allowed her to relax and recover. She had appreciated the comfort he had secured for her and remembered his query as to whether she was nervous about the next day. She thought she detected a touch of nervousness in his demeanour and teased him about it. She was not prepared to believe his assurances that he was not nervous at all. She knew that she was – the ceremony would mark the end of her life as Elizabeth Bennet and the beginning of one as Elizabeth Darcy, wife to Fitzwilliam Darcy, mother of his children and Mistress of Pemberley. “My dear”, she said quietly, “I cannot anticipate such a change without some degree of nervousness but I would brave a lot more for a life with you.” She looked at him carefully, “I trust that you will not consume too many brandies after I depart tonight?”

Her raised eyebrow as she glanced at him elicited a brief smile, “I promise to be quite abstemious tonight. Fortunately Richard is not here to lead me into a sinful indulgence.”

“I see, you propose to lay all such behaviour at your cousin’s feet then?”

“Of course, he is not here to contradict me.”

Their quiet respite was not to continue and they were joined by others and required to engage in such polite conversation as was customary on such occasions.

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If Elizabeth had any interest as the evening progressed, it was in trying to sketch Mr. Bingley’s character or, as she thought, perhaps intentions was the more appropriate term. He had spent some time talking with Georgiana, her pleasure evident only to one who knew her very well. However, he
had also engaged Miss Thompson in conversation for an extended period alone or in company with others. His attentions were not marked but to one who was scrutinizing him closely, his interest certainly appeared to have been piqued. Unfortunately, Elizabeth was certain that Georgiana had also discerned his interest and was made unhappy by it although making every effort to hide the fact. There was little that could be done at the moment but Elizabeth was sure the subject would arise sooner than she wished.

If she could retain any memories of the evening at all, they would be quite disjointed. The warmth – heat – of William’s hand on hers, Georgiana speaking so comfortably with Mary, Kitty and Miss Thompson, Mrs. Bennet’s uncivil attitude towards Mr. Bingley when he attempted to greet her, Miss Thompson’s slight mortification with her mother’s attempt to forward an acquaintance between her daughter and Mr. Bingley and the latter’s good humoured and courteous handling of both situations.

She could not think much on the dinner now as she looked about her room. She had lived here for almost her whole life and none of her possessions remained. The memories of Longbourn she wished to treasure were from her childhood and youth but Longbourn was no longer her home. That would be Pemberley but even so, she felt as though her ties to Longbourn had been fraying for quite some time. She was sure that she should have some regrets about leaving but she could not. It was difficult now to see clearly but she rather thought the process had begun when she returned from Hunsford and her family’s shortcomings had been exposed in Darcy’s letter. Her time in London with the Gardiners had not been long enough to make it her home. It had only been when she arrived at Pemberley that a sense of belonging had begun. Home had now become Pemberley and while all her belongings had been removed to Darcy House, they were destined very shortly to be sent to Pemberley. That was a natural process to be sure and one that every bride faced.

A soft tapping on her door startled her from her reflections and the sight of her dearest Jane in the doorway brought a lift to her spirits and a smile to her face. Jumping down from the window seat, she embraced her sister who led her to the bed. Once they were both comfortably ensconced on the bed, Jane took Elizabeth’s hands in hers. “I could not rest if I did not have a final late talk with my dearest sister. I cannot stay long but wish to…we will not see each other for several months or more. I shall miss you sorely.”

“I am thankful you came. I was becoming quite melancholy and part of that was the loss of our talks. I will miss you also.’

Jane reached over to the table and picked up a hairbrush. Moving behind Elizabeth she began to brush her hair with long slow strokes. As she brushed, she could feel her sister relax and they began to talk much as they had in the past sharing their concerns, hopes, fears. Before Jane left the room an hour later, she performed a final, small task – to cover her sleeping sister with a warm blanket.
Chapter 41

Wednesday May 19, 1813 – Longbourn

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in Holy matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which Holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought...”

The familiar words resonating in Elizabeth’s ears now had a significance as though she had not heard them a dozen times before, and she could not help looking away from the reverend and focusing on the man with whom she was to be joined. She was surprised and pleased to see that the solemn words were affecting him as well, their familiarity in no way lessening their import. He listened in rapt fascination, his eyes fixed on Reverend Adams, but he seemed to sense Elizabeth’s gaze and his head slowly turned until his eyes fixed on hers. Elizabeth almost shivered at that moment, for she could feel the intensity of his gaze. The bond between them which had its tenuous - and unrecognized, by her at least - beginnings in Hertfordshire and been almost ruptured in Hunsford had, in the last five months, grown to an almost unbearable strength. Neither knew how long that gaze lasted, in which the world only encompassed them both, but their awareness was drawn back to the ceremony only when Reverend Adams addressed Darcy.

“Fitzwilliam Darcy, wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

Darcy’s voice was firm and echoed throughout the church, “I will.”

And then it was her turn. “Elizabeth Bennet, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy state of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

Elizabeth’s response was equally firm, her eyes once more fixed on Darcy, “I will.”

“Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” asked Reverend Adams.

“I do,” said Mr. Bennet, and, releasing her hand to the reverend, he stepped back to join the others standing around Darcy and Elizabeth. Reverend Adams had Darcy and Elizabeth turn to face each other, then, taking Elizabeth’s hand, he placed it in Darcy’s and commanded Darcy to say after him:

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

Then Darcy released Elizabeth’s hand, and the Reverend took Darcy’s right hand, giving it to Elizabeth to hold in hers, while he directed her to repeat after him: “I, Elizabeth, take thee Fitzwilliam, to my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”
Bingley placed the ring on the Bible held by Reverend Adams who then gave the ring to Darcy. It had been his mother’s wedding ring – a simple gold band that had graced the hand of the Mistress of Pemberley for six generations. He lifted Elizabeth’s left hand and slid the ring onto her fourth finger. Elizabeth closed her eyes for a moment feeling the overwhelming significance of the action, so simple in execution but complex in its import, and then looking down at the ring that signified so much for her future – connecting and linking her to Pemberley’s past. She raised her eyes once more to meet those of Darcy who continued to hold the ring on her finger as he said, his eyes locked with those of Elizabeth and his voice husky with emotion, “With this ring, I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Darcy released her hand but could not release his gaze from hers. Her eyes promised him all the love, devotion and passion which was hers to offer and which he would receive with the greatest joy. He could only hope that she could see the same promise in his as Reverend Adams then said, “Let us pray. O eternal God, creator and preserver of all mankind, giver of all spiritual grace, the author of everlasting life; send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy Name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Mr. Adams took the right hand of both Elizabeth and Darcy, and looking out at the assembly of family and friends, said, “Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”

The rector released their hands, though they remained clasped together, as he continued, “For as much as Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth have consented together in Holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a Ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

He concluded with the blessing, “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen.”

At last the moment had arrived that Darcy had waited for over a year. Elizabeth was his wife. He stood, drawing her to her feet and smiling leant down to brush the lips that were smiling up at him. If it were not for all the eyes upon them, he would have pulled her more closely and prolonged the kiss. Instead he released her and brought her two hands to his lips to bestow a fleeting kiss before turning to face the well-wishers who thronged about them. Georgiana, with tears streaming down her cheeks, embraced Elizabeth and then her brother. Mrs. Bennet could hardly restrain herself but for once was at a loss for words and simply kissed Elizabeth and hugged her new son-in-law. It was some time before Darcy and Elizabeth could make their way to the parish registry to sign their names. Elizabeth realized that it would be the last occasion in which she would sign as Elizabeth Bennet; henceforth she would be known as Elizabeth Darcy or Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

It took only a few minutes for their carriage to deliver them to Longbourn for the wedding breakfast. Deprived of several evenings of elaborate dinners to celebrate the engagement, Mrs. Bennet had spared no effort in preparing a wedding breakfast to celebrate the marriage. It is to be hoped that she realized a full measure of satisfaction from the compliments that were delivered by the guests but for the bridal couple, the few hours they spent there were interminably long and a source of little pleasure. Finally, after accepting the best wishes of all the guests and sampling a small portion of food, Darcy and Elizabeth announced that they were departing for London.
As they made their way through the crowd towards their carriage, Mrs. Hill bustled up to them saying, “Mr. Darcy, the hamper you requested is in the carriage.” Turning to Elizabeth she impulsively gave her a hug, “You take care of yourself now, Miss Elizabeth.”

With a catch in her voice, Elizabeth returned the hug of the woman who had been as much her friend as housekeeper for over twenty years. “I will indeed, Hill. And you take care of my sisters as you did me.”

As Darcy was about to hand Elizabeth into the carriage, her father approached for a final word, his eyes suspiciously wet. “Good-bye my child. Write to me often, please. I shall miss you sorely.”

“Oh Papa, you know I will. We will be back in the fall but, you know, you might hazard to write me a letter at least once before then.”

Turning to Darcy, Mr. Bennet extended his hand which Darcy clasped and shook, “I know you will take good care of her Mr. Darcy; however, I may just make a quick trip to make sure you are doing so – and to visit that marvellous library I have heard so much about.”

“Papa!” admonished Elizabeth.

Darcy chuckled, “You will always be a welcome guest, sir. You need not wait upon an invitation.” With which he assisted Elizabeth into the coach and entered himself to sit beside her. With a final wave, they settled back as the carriage began its journey to London.

Inside the carriage there were a few minutes of complete silence as neither seemed to know how to begin a conversation. For Elizabeth, this was the first time in her life she had sat beside a man in a carriage who was neither her father or uncle. After looking at her hands for several minutes in some embarrassment, she finally ventured a glance up at her husband only to find him staring at her with the most intense gaze she had experienced. Turning to face her more directly, he cupped her face with his hands and leaning forward, whispered, “I have wished to do this for so long, you cannot imagine…” and he kissed her. What started as a gentle pressure on her lips, quickly deepened as he allowed his passion a freer reign. Parting his lips he tasted hers until she allowed hers to open and felt his tongue enter seeking hers. Slowly following his example, she found herself welcoming his kiss and her passion rising to meet his. Without being aware of it, her hands had risen to the back of his head as she held him close. His hands had dropped and she could feel them stroking her hair, her ears, her neck and then her shoulders. Lost in his caresses, it was only when she felt him slowly easing the intensity of their kiss, that she realized that she had pressed herself so closely to him that her breasts had been flattened against him. Embarrassed, she drew back, her face a bright red, “I… I…”

Darcy stopped her words with a finger on her lips, “I love you. I love the passion that is so much a part of you. I will not apologize for kissing you but, if I have been too eager, too forceful - please tell me. I will not do anything that you would not wish. I would not have you frightened.”

“I am not frightened. Just a little nervous and it was a mite unexpected.” And with a teasing glance as her blush receded, “…and most pleasurable.”

Darcy’s mien wore a slight smile, “I should hope so.”

"You, sir, are a little smug!"

Darcy just nodded, “I should hope I am very smug. I have just married the most beautiful woman I know. If that is not a reason to be smug, I know not what is.” Drawing her close within the circle of his arms, he murmured, “I am a very lucky man, Mrs. Darcy.”
Elizabeth stroked his cheek with her hand and feathered a kiss across his lips, “and I have married the very best of men.”

They remained in this quiet embrace for some time interspersing endearments with slight caresses, neither wishing to disturb the pleasure of the closeness that hitherto they had not been permitted to enjoy. Finally Elizabeth looked up at Darcy, “William, I have been thinking. Georgiana is to come to Pemberley in July with your cousin. Is that not so?”

“Yes, Frances and Henry plan to bring her and visit us for a fortnight.”

“I know we talked of inviting Kitty to come with them and stay for the summer until we return to London? Georgiana might enjoy the company and my sister could benefit from her company. I have yet to extend the invitation.”

“I am quite agreeable but you will be Mistress now and I know you like company. Should you wish to invite someone, I trust your judgement on this. Shall you write to Georgiana?”

Elizabeth gazed fondly at her husband. She knew his discomfort with those with whom he was not closely acquainted, “I shall endeavour to not discomfit you too much, William.” She paused for several moments, “I had thought to invite Miss Thompson for a visit but she mentioned that her family was planning a trip to The Lakes in August.”

Darcy considered her words and guessing at her thoughts, ventured, “Would you like to invite them to visit during their trip?”

A small smile graced Elizabeth’s lips, “You are getting altogether much too good at reading my thoughts, Mr. Darcy.”

“I suspect that, in this case, they mirror my own. I would like to repay their considerable kindness in hosting myself and my family for the wedding. As well, I have enjoyed their company and would like to know them better.” He chuckled, “I rather think that if we invite the Thompsons, Bingley may invite himself to visit at the same time.” At Elizabeth’s questioning gaze, he continued, “Bingley informed me before we left that he had been invited to stay at Netherfield until Monday next when he must return north. I venture that Miss Thompson may be the reason for his accepting.”

Elizabeth sat up, forcing Darcy to loosen his grasp of her, “Truly? I had not seen any particular interest or attentions on his part.”

“Apparently he enjoyed several talks with Miss Thompson during his stay. He said little to me about it but I detect some interest.”

“Oh dear. Georgiana will be…disappointed.” Elizabeth was not prepared to reveal too much and, in truth, she was not sure herself of the depth of Georgiana’s interest.

Darcy was a little surprised at Elizabeth’s comment, “I was not aware …that is she is too young to consider a serious attachment.” He thought then of the comment from Mrs. Annesley when Bingley had visited Pemberley, “however, I do remember that Mrs. Annesley had discerned some interest on his part and perhaps on hers. Has Georgiana spoken to you on this?”

Elizabeth detected a note of concern in his voice and thought of how best to alleviate it without breaching Georgiana’s confidences too significantly, “She has spoken of him and with some interest although I cannot, at this point, say with any confidence the extent to which her affections have been engaged. I agree she is much too young, too inexperienced to consider marriage and I would not be overly concerned if she did not marry for several years. I did not see any signs that Mr. Bingley was
trying to fix her interest.”

They discussed the matter for a further quarter hour and agreed to invite the Thompsons whose company, as well as that of the families of Darcy’s aunts, would see Pemberley more lively than it had been for years. However, it was decided that plans to invite the Matlocks would best be deferred until the fall. The discussion was interrupted by a low growl emanating from Elizabeth’s stomach. Trying to hide her embarrassment, she looked at Darcy with a quizzical eye, “I believe, William, that I need sustenance and I must assume that you asked Mrs. Hill to provide us with such since I see a rather largish hamper under the seat.”

“I rather thought we might not eat much at the wedding breakfast and asked Mrs. Hill to select some of those foods you particularly enjoy.” Releasing Elizabeth he straightened up and reached over to lift the basket onto the seat. Removing the cover he began to lift out the various delectables and it was not long before they both were devouring a warm meat roll, washing it down with a glass of wine. Tarts, biscuits, cheeses and sundry other items quickly followed until they both leaned back in satisfaction. Elizabeth tidied up returning the remains to the hamper. Once it was once again stowed away beneath the seat, she turned to Darcy with a slight blush saying, “I wish to have you hold me once more.” Darcy was more than willing to oblige and they settled comfortably together, talking quietly about all manner of things for a while until Darcy noticed that Elizabeth had fallen asleep. Placing his legs on top of the opposing seat, he turned his body slightly with his back resting against the side of the carriage – after placing a pillow betwixt himself and the wall - and settled Elizabeth against his chest. Stoking her hair and listening to her soft breathing, he let himself relax and drifted into a light sleep.

It was the noise of London that eventually woke him. As he moved to sit up, he became aware that Elizabeth was looking up at him with quirked lips. “I rather like watching you sleep, husband.” He smiled and stroked her cheek once more and leaned forward to taste her lips. Feeling her immediate response, he let his tongue taste her lips once more and when he felt hers, he pulled her more closely and kissed her more strongly; however, he realized he could not let it continue and gradually lessened the pressure and began feathering kisses over her face. Leaning back, he struggled to control his breathing, “Mrs. Darcy, you test my control most seriously. We must desist for now.”

Sitting up, he opened the curtain on the window and looked out. Recognizing their location, he turned to Elizabeth saying, “We should arrive at Darcy House in a quarter hour.” Elizabeth immediately became concerned about her appearance, her hair was seriously disarranged and a search for the missing pins was undertaken. Once most had been retrieved, she attempted to fix her hair while Darcy looked on in bemused wonder. “I have never seen you with your hair down. I think I will enjoy the prospect of relieving you of those pins.” Elizabeth gave him a stern look that was offset by the twinkle in her eye. “Mr. Darcy, I must ask you to behave. This is most unseemly.” The smile that attended her words robbed them of any offence.

At last, the carriage drew up in front of Darcy House. It was clear that their arrival had been anticipated since the vehicle had not even come to a stop before a line of servants had formed on the steps of the entrance. The carriage door was opened and the footstep readied before either Darcy or Elizabeth could move. Darcy looked at Elizabeth and smiled, “I believe your arrival has been greatly anticipated, Mrs. Darcy.” Stepping out of the carriage, he turned to help her to descend and then with her hand on his arm they entered Darcy House.

Once they reached the entrance, they were greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Hodgkins who made no effort to make their appreciation for the new Mrs. Darcy. Elizabeth was formally introduced to the servants many of whom she had already met. Upon being informed that a light meal had been prepared, Elizabeth and Darcy expressed their intention of refreshing themselves before partaking. Darcy was quick to escort his wife to her chambers where Julia awaited her. A quarter hour later, he knocked on
her door and entering found her sitting in front of her mirror with Julia arranging her hair. Leaning against the doorway, he was content to watch his wife’s preparations, a quiet smile on his lips. Once Julia was finished, he moved to offer Elizabeth a hand to rise, nodding his appreciation to Julia as he did so. “Shall we venture down to eat, Mrs. Darcy?”

Elizabeth could not but smile at his formality in front of the servants - even Julia - but was not discomfited by it. “Indeed, husband. I find I am hungry once more.”

Darcy led her downstairs but not to the dining room as she expected but rather to the morning room. “I asked Mrs. Hodgkins to serve us here. I find it more comfortable for just the two of us. Do you mind?” Receiving her assent, he seated her at the table and sat beside her. As though that had been a signal, Mrs. Hodgkins appeared to direct footmen in the serving of the meal. As she had stated, it was a simple and light meal. Mrs. Hodgkins had left shortly after the last dish had been placed on the table, shooing the footmen out ahead of her since Darcy had indicated their intention to serve themselves. Once they were alone, neither Darcy nor Elizabeth could make themselves do more than nibble on the various foods. When Elizabeth looked over Darcy he was pushing his food around on the plate and studiously not looking at her. Finally she caught him making a quick glance up at her and knew him to be as nervous and uncertain as herself. She wiped her mouth with a napkin and stood, “I am feeling a little fatigued, shall we retire now?” It took Darcy a second or two to respond but he immediately sprang to his feet and offered her his arm, his eagerness bringing a slight tinkle of laughter from Elizabeth.

They walked in silence until they reached the door of her bedchamber where she turned to him saying, “I will come to you in a half hour.” Darcy could only nod and watched as the door of her bedchamber closed before hurrying to his own rooms to bathe and ready himself.

A half hour later, bathed and dressed in loose breeches and a dark green robe, he waited sitting on the settee in front of the window that overlooked the street below. Watching the slow evening traffic but wrapped in his thoughts he did not hear Elizabeth enter the room. The flicker of movement on the edge of his vision alerted him to her presence and he stood so quickly as to almost fall. She stopped when she saw him rise and was only prevented from rushing to his aid by his upflung hand. “Please, Elizabeth…do not move.”

Darcy found himself short of breath. The nightgown she wore was cream coloured and diaphanous, both revealing and hiding the body it contained. Her dark hair spilled and curled over her shoulders and down her back. His concentrated gaze had brought a flush to Elizabeth’s face that spread down over her shoulders. Its further progress was obscured by her nightgown but her embarrassment was evident. With an effort he breathed in, “You are so very beautiful…Behold thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair;” reaching out he offered her his hand which she grasped and was led to sit beside him on the settee where she smiled and said, “My beloved is mine, and I am his”

Drawing her into his embrace they began to exchange kisses and caresses with increasing boldness and fervour until finally Elizabeth drew back and looked pointedly at Darcy, “I believe, sir, it is time for you to take me to your bed.” Darcy suddenly realized that she had taken the initiative in deciding it was time to retire and to move to the bed but that all further initiatives were his responsibility. Standing, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed, depositing her gently in its centre before settling himself beside her. Elizabeth looked up at the man who now had power over her completely but knowing his kindness and gentleness she was not afraid of what was to follow. Trusting him completely she opened her arms to welcome him to her body saying, “Come husband, make me truly your wife.”
It was the urgent pressure on her bladder that woke Elizabeth the next morning. Without thinking she scooted out of bed before realizing that she was completely unclothed. Looking around she found her nightgown lying on the floor beside the bed. Reaching for it she became aware of the streaks of blood on her thighs and looking back at the bed could see blood stains there also. “That did not occur to me!” putting on her nightgown she rushed to her dressing room to relieve her bladder and clean herself. When she returned to the bedroom it was to find Darcy gone from the bed. Putting on her robe she sat on the settee to await his return and considered the events of the previous night. When Darcy had finally entered her body, it had been painful but not unduly so. His caresses had stirred her so as to make the joining eagerly awaited and he had been patient and careful, allowing her time for the discomfort to ease. She had been able to find pleasure in their first joining and more in the second that took place during the night.

When the door of his dressing room opened and he saw her sitting he moved quickly to her side, “My love, are you well? I saw the blood. I did not realize…you must be in pain”

Elizabeth knew she had to relieve his distress, “Truly love, I am fine. I am well. There is no pain. Not now at least. I did have some at first but it did not last.” She smiled at him, “the pleasure quite made me forget it all; however, I have discovered that I am most hungry. What time is it?”

“It is just past eight in the morning. Shall I have Mrs. Hodgkins arrange a breakfast for us in the morning room?”

This received Elizabeth’s approval and he opened his door to order a footman to have Mrs. Hodgkins to attend them. When the housekeeper arrived, she was requested to have the bed sheets changed and to arrange a breakfast in the morning room. After Mrs. Hodgkins had left, Elizabeth returned to her dressing room to bath and dress. Julia was waiting for her with a very hot bath. “Mrs. Hodgkins thought you might wish to soak for a while and has sent extra hot water.”

“Thank you, Julia. That sounds delightful.”

Ma’am, Mrs. Hodgkins asked me to find out if you were in any….discomfort.”

Elizabeth smiled up at Julia, “You may tell Mrs. Hodgkins that I am quite well.”

After soaking in the tub for near a half hour, Elizabeth allowed herself to be towelled dry and thoroughly cosseted. Dressed in one of her new morning gowns and with her hair washed and pinned up, she moved to the settee in her bed chamber to wait for her husband who obliged her by entering the room some few minutes later to escort her to the morning room.

After a leisurely breakfast they decided, since the day was pleasantly warm, to walk in Hyde Park. It took Elizabeth but a few minutes to discover that her unaccustomed exercise the night before had caused stiffness in her thigh and hip muscles. Apprising Darcy of this elicited a warm chuckle, a somewhat salacious grin – which earned him a slap on the arm – and the recommendation that a brisk pace might ease her discomfort. So it was to be although it took almost an hour for the last residue of discomfort to disappear. By the time they returned to Darcy House after absenting themselves for two hours, Elizabeth was feeling very much her usual self. Repairing to the library with the intention of reading, Darcy found her presence to be totally distracting and his attempts to read quite futile. Elizabeth, observing his focus on her, began to tease him and it was not long before her kisses and caresses led them to return to his bed chamber.

Later as she lay quite comfortably enfolded in his arms, Elizabeth had a disquieting thought – one that she knew not whether she should even raise with her husband. Darcy was not insensible to the change in her mood or to the pensive expression that had laid claim to her face. “What disturbs you so, Elizabeth?”
Elizabeth found herself torn. This was a topic she felt she should not ask her husband to address and yet she yearned to know the answer. She knew enough of her nature to realize that not knowing could produce more pain than knowing. She also could not look at him while she asked. Her continuing silence began to worry Darcy, “Elizabeth, there is no question you cannot ask me. I will answer to my best ability.”

Closing her eyes Elizabeth assayed a response, “You may think…oh, I know not how to phrase this. You know my ignorance of the marriage bed, of marital intimacies. I did not expect that you would be lacking such experience and truly you gave me much pleasure but I would know…”

Whatever question Darcy had expected, this was not one of them. He stumbled for an answer – how much could or should he say. His silence which lasted for several moments only increased Elizabeth’s discomposure and she was about to rise from the bed in some embarrassment and a fear that he was displeased when Darcy locked her in his arms. “Please, Elizabeth, give me some time to order my thoughts. I assure you I am not displeased or angry.” He was silent for a few more moments.

“As you can observe, your question quite caught me by surprise. It is not one I think that husbands expect on the day after they marry.” He smiled at her, “But given the nature of our courtship perhaps I should have expected such a question. Nevertheless I will tell you of my experience, as slight as it may be.”

He paused for a few seconds to organize his thoughts, “I attended Cambridge for four years. In my second year, my father paid me a visit. He took me to London and, while we were there, he brought me to a townhouse of a modest size. I was introduced to a woman some ten years my senior. My father had arranged, as something I suspect he felt as a necessary part of my education, for her to instruct me on how to please a woman. I stayed with her for some three or four days. I learned afterwards that she did this regularly. I have not seen her since nor have I been with another woman until last night. I felt no love for her and I suppose I should be grateful for the instruction although I know I could not do the same for a son of mine.” He paused before continuing, “You must believe me on this. What we shared last night was as new to me as it was to you.”

Elizabeth lay back and drew him down to kiss, “Thank you, William. I did not want cause you distress but I did fear some previous attachment.” And murmuring against his lips, “Although I must commend her teaching ability.”

“I do also. In fact, she taught me this ….” And a few moments later, “…but this comes from my own fantasies…”

Soon the only sounds were the low murmurs of appreciation and enjoyment issuing from Elizabeth’s lips.
Thursday May 26, 1813 – Darcy House

It had taken Elizabeth but a few days to realize that she could take as much pleasure from their intimacies as her husband. That he was pleased when the initiative came from her had been particularly gratifying and their days in London had quickly fallen into a pattern which pleased them both. After breakfasting together they would venture out, if the weather permitted, for a long walk or a tour of the city. When it did not, they were quite content to read together in the library.

They could not divorce themselves from the world outside completely. Nor did they want to do so. William's business affairs would intrude and some transactions of an urgent nature had to be addressed but he was resolute in limiting himself only to such. When he was so engaged, she met with Mrs. Hodgkins to review the household accounts and begin her role as Mistress. She was aware of a growing pile of invitations but they had agreed to limit themselves to the ball and dinners with the Matlocks and the Gardiners. The knocker on their door would not go up until the day following the ball and they planned to depart for Pemberley a day later.

One morning after breakfast Darcy had to attend to some urgent business in his study. Elizabeth had been pleased to sit and read in the room with him but, after an hour had passed and it looked like he would be engaged for some time more, she had left the room. After another hour had passed, he signed the final letter and, after consigning his correspondence to the post, went in search of his wife. When the library and music room failed to disclose her, he inquired of Mr. Reynolds where she might be found. On being told that Mrs. Darcy was last seen entering the billiard room, he made haste in that direction.

The muffled clack of billiard balls being struck could be heard through the closed door. With a grin on his face, he eased the door open to be greeted by a sight which froze him completely. Elizabeth was bent over the billiard table, lining up to strike the cue ball, her bottom - delectably clothed in a light green morning dress – was presented to his eyes. Unable to breathe, he watched her strike the cue ball. “Nice shot but I think she hit it too hard.” And so it was. The ball that was struck did indeed end in the pocket but the cue ball was struck too hard and came to rest in a poor position for the next shot. “I don’t think she can hit the cue ball – she is too short.”

“Merde”

The soft explicative from Elizabeth caught Darcy by surprise. He had just learned something new. He silently closed the door and then waited with some amazement as Elizabeth hitched her dress up slightly and perched her bottom on the edge of the table in order to lean forward and make the next shot. By this time Darcy’s eyebrows had virtually disappeared into his hair line. It was all he could do not to walk up behind her and plant a kiss on the back of her neck while his hands became occupied with those parts of her body that currently had attracted his attention.

After Elizabeth had taken her shot, unsuccessfully he noted, she hopped down off the edge of the table turning as she did so which brought her face-to-face with Darcy who had taken several quiet steps into the room. A deep blush overtook her countenance as she recognized the desire in her husband’s eyes. She skittered away from him and began to walk around the table. He followed.

“Where did you learn to play, Lizzy?”

Not looking at him, she answered, “I have watched you play on several occasions when you did not realize I was present.”
“I believe you missed your last shot, did you not? That would make it my turn.” With which his hand slid gently down her arm to grasp her hand holding the cue stick. Taking it from her, his other hand brushed across her bottom before he moved away to take his turn. Upon being successful he glanced at Elizabeth, on whose mien had appeared a most determined look and a small smile as she looked at him. As he moved to position himself for his next shot he felt her presence behind him and, as he lined up the cue stick, suddenly felt her hand upon his own bottom. As he tried to concentrate on striking the cue ball her slid down to the inside of his thigh and then moved upwards. Unable to stop the motion of his arm, the cue ball went he knew not where.

“I believe, Mr. Darcy, that it is now my turn.”

“Minx!”

A gurgle from Elizabeth as she relieved him of the cue stick was his only consolation. She strolled around to the other side of the table and leaned forward to take her shot. He could not be sure but it did appear that she was deliberately prolonging the time that she did so. For a very obvious reason, he knew. Her dress was quite modest but the neckline did expose the upper part of her bosom and was sufficiently loose that it fell open as she leaned forward. That she was not wearing stays became immediately obvious and his breath caught in his throat once more.

Taking her shot – successfully – and acting quite oblivious to her husband - she moved to position herself for another. As she did so, Darcy found that indeed his limbs could function and almost without realizing he had done so, found himself standing behind his wife bent over the table, her bottom once more most advantageously positioned. He stepped so close that they almost touched. That she was aware of his presence he knew – he could hear her breathing quicken. His hands slid over her bottom, hips and upwards – stroking and caressing as they moved. He leaned forward to nibble on her neck, murmuring, “I believe that…."

Before he could finish, she had dropped the cue stick and turned in his arms forcing him to stand straight. Her hands came around his neck and her lips sought his. He grasped her waist in his hands and lifted her to settle on the edge of the table. Nudging her legs apart he positioned himself between them as their kiss deepened. He was about to raise her skirts when her hands grasped his hair and pulled his head firmly back to remove his lips.

Panting she gasped, “Not here….not like this.”

Realizing the impropriety, the risks attached to the position that he had placed them in, he lifted her down from the table and taking a firm hold of her hand practically ran towards their bedchambers dragging a laughing Elizabeth behind. Within minutes they were joined on his bed, still clothed. The ferocity of their lovemaking surprising them both. Afterwards, Darcy collapsed by her side and buried his face in the bed sheets. They spoke not for several minutes before Darcy could find the words he sought, “You must forgive me. I was a savage….tell me I did not hurt you.”

Elizabeth did not respond for several moments as she considered her response, “I am not hurt at all. I quite enjoyed it, you know. Could you not tell? If you are a…a savage, then so must I be.” She paused briefly before continuing, “I would not wish this every time but I quite enjoyed seeing you become so undone.” She stroked his head and forced him to look at her. Kissing him, she repeated her words, “I quite enjoyed it. You must have seen that?”

She levered herself out of his arms and swung her legs to the floor, “I think I must get out of these clothes.” Saying which she proceed to divest herself of her clothes and slid back under the bed coverings. Darcy was not slow to follow her example and joined her there.

“Lizzy, I do have one question.”
“Hmmmm?”

“What did you learn the word ‘merde’?”

A deep chortle came from Elizabeth, “You can place the blame directly on John Goulding.”

“How so?”

“Well, John was a playmate when I was much younger. He learned it from his father and told me what it meant.” She laughed softly, “He also learned, and told me, about when not to speak it. He used the word in the presence of his mother and sisters. Unfortunately for John, his mother knew what it meant and informed his father. As John explained it, he caught a double punishment. One for using the word and a second for doing so in front of his sisters. John told me he had to sleep on his stomach for two nights. Needless to say, I only use it when I think I am alone.”

Darcy chuckled and propping himself up on his elbow looked down at his wife. “I suggest that is a good idea. Of course, you can use it with me. I am not likely to be too offended.” As he spoke his hand began to stroke and caress her. It was not long before they were both fully absorbed in their lovemaking and the result was as much unlike the earlier effort as was possible, being a long, slow and gentle loving.

William fulfilled his promise to instruct her in how to play billiards; unfortunately for her mastery of that game, those sessions always seemed to be concluded in his bed. She was sure that they had yet to complete a game but, as his Aunt Catherine frequently stated, with sufficient practice she was sure she could be truly proficient although, with a suppressed giggle, she thought perhaps the proficiency might not involve billiards.

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Their most public outing had been to attend church on Sunday morning. St. Alban’s was a smallish local church attended by a variety of local families of disparate stations. It was not frequented by many of the ton and hence provided no opportunity to see and be seen which may be the primary reason to attend religious services by that section of society. For the Darcys, the absence of such society enhanced the pleasure that they found in attending the service. Indeed, St. Alban’s most noteworthy feature was the presence of a vigorous and able rector who delivered moving and thoughtful sermons. That day’s lesson had been on charity and the need to consider that charity encompassed more than the simple giving of money to the poor but also included active involvement of oneself in helping others. What captured Elizabeth’s attention in particular, were his thoughts on being charitable in how one dealt with others on a daily basis. She could think of times when she had exercised her wit, albeit not with the intent to hurt but may have done so nevertheless.

Both Darcy and Elizabeth enjoyed the service and participated with enthusiasm in singing the hymns. Once the service was complete, they were welcomed by the rector and were greeted quietly and with surprising restraint by many of the congregation who had learned of their wedding. The Darcy family had attended St. Alban’s for several generations and, if not frequently in attendance because of their residence at Pemberley, they were well recognized and acknowledged as supporters of the church.

Their evenings, apart from the dinners with the Matlocks and Gardiners, were spent ensconced in William’s room and frequently in his bed. The staff at Darcy House had become quite used to seeing the Master and Mistress hurrying to his bed chamber and on one or two occasions had encountered Darcy carrying her up the stairs. Their delight in each other was obvious to all and their happiness permeated the house.
As these things must, the day of the ball hosted by the Duke and Duchess of ____ finally arrived. The dinner with the Matlocks had taken place several days previous and had proven helpful to Elizabeth in two ways. She still found it difficult to be at ease in Lord Matlock’s presence. Publicly, he had clearly welcomed her into the family but, in private, his reserve was proving harder to overcome. Some of his attitudes she found to be reminiscent of those she had at one time ascribed to her husband. There was a certain distain for those not of his station although, in general, he appeared to be willing to ignore that difference for certain individuals. She had not been in his company enough, however, to sketch his character thoroughly. For the nonce she intended to be civil and pleasant to avoid taking or giving offence. During the dinner she had been seated at his right hand and, after several attempts, had finally succeeded in engaging him in conversation about his duties and interests in the House of Lords. It became obvious from the conversation that he took these responsibilities seriously and had developed a particular interest in military issues – perhaps prompted by his son’s career. Their discussion on the role of the army had interested them both and the earl’s surprise at her understanding of the campaigns and issues was clear.

Elizabeth had admitted that her father had encouraged he to read the newspapers – particularly Wellington’s military dispatches from the Peninsular War and gazetted naval dispatches - and had discussed their content with her. He had even gone so far, she confessed, to buying her a few books written on the history of the war. She was able with a few well directed questions to get the earl to expound on the government’s perspective and, if she found herself in silent disagreement on some points, she confined herself to asking probing questions to elicit more information on the reasons for the position adopted.

Later as they sipped tea, she and the countess discussed the ball. Lady Eleanor disclosed that their Graces usually limited the number of invitations to about fifty or sixty couples most of whom would be amongst the most prominent members of the ton. The countess invited Elizabeth to tea the next day to discuss the possible guest list and what she might expect. As the countess expressed it, “You will be scrutined with a critical eye! Expect that, but let us prepare for it also. I will be there to assist you and tomorrow I can impart to you something about most of those that you will encounter.” Their subsequent meeting had been of appreciable value and, if she could not remember all that she had been told, enough had been gleaned she thought to allow her to appear comfortable.

Elizabeth could not but be gratified by the willingness of the countess to mentor her in the ways of society. She and her husband had indeed attended the ball and, when Darcy and Elizabeth arrived, had casually but carefully between dance sets, introduced them to various notables. Elizabeth had found the experience both exhilarating and terrifying. All to whom she was introduced were civil and pleasant. Some were inclined to ask rather impertinent questions but she had learned long ago how to deal with such. Of particular importance was the introduction to Lady Jersey, she who was one of the rulers of Almacks, the most prestigious portion of the marriage mart to which Georgiana’s access would be most advantageous. Lady Jersey had seemed inclined to be civil and, if the conversation was, for the most part, inconsequential, Lady Matlock appeared satisfied with the encounter when discussing it later.

When she and Darcy had walked on the floor for the first dance, she had been conscious of the many eyes assessing her gown, jewels and her countenance. Her confidence in the first two was essential to the comfort and confidence she displayed. Fortunately, she also had been able to capture Darcy’s attention when they first lined up and keeping her eyes focussed on him, induced a small smile and a relaxation of his demeanour and the occasional small smile as they danced. As they wended their way through the various movements of the dance, it became clear to the very least observant of those attending that the Darcys were very much in love with each other.
Since she could dance but three dances with her husband, she had been required to be partnered by other gentlemen. Most were curious as to her background and some were mildly flirtatious, neither of which caused her any particular concern. One of her partners, unfortunately, made a slightly improper suggestion. Her quelling glare seemed to have been sufficient since he disappeared rather rapidly after returning her to Darcy. She returned her husband’s quizzical look with the barest shrug of a shoulder. Darcy himself had danced with several ladies, one of whom was the granddaughter of their hosts.

Overall the ball appeared to have been a success for the Darcys. Their Graces, the Duke and Duchess of ______ had been most welcoming and, according to Lady Matlock, who spoke long and forcibly on the matter the next day, they had been most complimentary when speaking of Elizabeth and Darcy to their guests. Not only had their Graces been complimentary but the morning society page had featured them as well, with much approbation.

Lady Matlock revealed that the main reason for her presence that afternoon was to assist in the calls that they could expect to receive that day. In the hour before callers could be expected to arrive, she and Darcy reviewed most of the cards that had been left and recommended which callers should be admitted.

Later, as the last caller was shown out the door, Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and emitted a huge sigh of relief which as greeted by a laugh from Darcy and an understanding smile from the countess. “Elizabeth, you have done quite well,” she opined, “I thought you handled the most difficult ladies as well as could be expected, Lady Sophie was determined to find fault and would not be discouraged. Fortunately she could not be overtly rude. You treated her quite civilly and gave her no grounds for further disparagement.” She turned to Darcy, “I did not recognize many of the callers, particularly the gentlemen.”

Darcy nodded, “You would not, I dare say. Most were friends from Cambridge with their wives and several were men I have met in my business dealings.”

The countess looked a little askance, “You meet your business associates socially?”

“Indeed I do, aunt. I count some of them amongst my closest friends.”

The countess appeared a little disconcerted at this news. Elizabeth looked at Darcy and then at his aunt, “Aunt Eleanor, I do not know if you are aware but my closest and favourite aunt and uncle are in trade. They are estimable and genteel people of taste and discernment and will be frequent guests here and at Pemberley. You have met my Aunt Madeline. Her husband, my Uncle Edward, is her equal in every respect.” She watched the countess carefully since this aspect of her connections had not been raised before and she had not discussed with her aunt whether the latter had disclosed this fact to Lady Eleanor whose reaction, when it came, was cautious, “I found Mrs. Gardiner to be quite ladylike and would be interested to meet Mr. Gardiner.”

With this Elizabeth was willing to be satisfied and before long the countess called for her carriage and departed. Once she had done so, Elizabeth grinned and looking up at her husband, murmured, “I find myself slightly fatigued. Could I convince my tall, handsome husband to accompany me upstairs to our rooms and comfort me?” They were not seen downstairs again until they broke their fast the next morning.
Tuesday June 15, 1813 - Pemberley

The morning’s post had been delivered and Elizabeth was overjoyed to find amongst those left at her place was one from Jane. “Oh, finally Jane has written!” And, with an apologetic look at her husband, she immediately broke the seal to unfold several sheets of closely written script. Darcy was not long left in uncertainty as to the contents as Elizabeth revealed Jane’s communication as she read.

“She and Amos are located in a comfortable apartment in Portsmouth…Amos is not to sail until June 17…he has no idea of where he is bound…sealed orders? I do not understand.” A questioning look was directed at Darcy who thought for a second before answering, “I believe that means the Captain does not know his destination until he sails at which time he opens a sealed packet with his orders. This ensures secrecy.”

“Oh, I see…well, that is the case here. Let me see, She quite likes Portsmouth…there are some comments on the shops and the quality of lace and ribbons with which I will not bore you…she will remove to London with the Gardiners when her husband sails…..she has visited the ship and met his officers…they came to dine one evening…..seem like most gentlemanly men…she also wishes to help our aunt when the baby arrives….Oh! I am so glad….I can think of no better woman to be a mother…Amos is delighted…unhappy that he must leave her now.”

At her husband’s puzzled frown, Elizabeth explained with obvious pleasure, “Jane thinks that she is with child. It may arrive next January.” She returned her attention to the letter, “She found herself tired and frequently sick but did not recognize the signs at first….oh, dear, she has not told Mama yet….She fears her effusions when she does….she expects Mama to want her to live at Longbourn… I cannot think of a less delightful prospect. I hope she stays with our aunt….she expects that our mother will wish to attend her during her confinement….I detect a note of apprehension on that…I can well believe it. Our mother will not be a calming influence”

She returned her attention to the letter once more, “She told Mama about their purchase of an estate in Yorkshire….Mama was most upset that she would be so far away….could not understand why Amos would not purchase an estate near Longbourn…Mama has written her several times”, this with a rueful smile, “…as she has me…expressing her dismay at her lack of concern for her – Mama’s – nerves….I am glad to see that Jane is not acceding to our mother’s demands. Marriage has been good for her in that regard. She is no longer willing to let our mother impose her wishes on her.”

Elizabeth leaned back in contemplation, “I must write her immediately.”

Darcy smiled at his wife whose gaze appeared unfocussed, “On what are you thinking, Elizabeth? The pleasure of being an aunt?”

“No..well, not altogether, although that did cross my mind. No, I was envying Jane a little bit.” Seeing the puzzled look that appeared on her husband’s countenance, she grinned, “I am not inclined to wish for a child too soon since I am enjoying this time with only the two of us but I confess to a small degree of envy that Jane has been so blessed.”

Thursday July 1, 1813 – Pemberley

Their time together at Pemberley had passed all too quickly for their liking. In later years it would take on an almost idyllic quality. They would rise early in the morning for long walks before
breaking their fast. Afterwards Elizabeth and Mrs. Reynolds would work together on the household accounts, or surveying the rooms to determine which need improvement. Mrs. Reynolds had been apprised of the guests that were expected during the summer and she and Elizabeth had reviewed the suitability of the rooms to be assigned to each. Since there had been few visitors at Pemberley over the past number of years, some improvements were deemed necessary. As well, Elizabeth had thought to host several dinner parties over the summer and invite their neighbours to dine. Menus had to be prepared.

Of course, as with any couple comprised of two strong minded, independent individuals differences of opinion were bound to arise. When it concern literature, as an example, it was easily and amicably resolved; however, some issues admitted of a more difficult resolution. Such was the case when Elizabeth began to expand the range of her solitary walks. Accustomed as she was to wandering as she wished in the environs of Longbourn – keeping in mind that such could encompass a range of three miles or more – she gave little thought to doing likewise at Pemberley.

When she had ventured on an extended walk that Darcy, when he asked of her whereabouts, found it to have lasted some two hours and that she had not yet returned, his frantic concern exploded in anger when she was located ambling back to Pemberley about a half mile from the house. Immensely pleased with her walk, she was greeted still some distance from the house by a white-lipped, frantic Darcy. His first words were, as he realized in retrospect, unfortunate.

“What the devil do you mean by walking off by yourself!?”

Her response was surprisingly temperate albeit tinged with considerable surprise, “I have always done so!”

“You are Mrs. Darcy. You cannot go wandering around like some country lass!”

“For your information, Mr. Darcy, I am a country lass!” Elizabeth could feel her choler rising to match Darcy’s “Insufferable, arrogant man!” and, beginning to comprehend his anger, bit back further words and strode angrily towards the house, her stride stiff legged with anger, hoping the exercise might cool it.

Darcy was taken aback by her words and that she had stalked by him, anger revealed in each stride. He hurried to reach her side, wise enough to not attempt stopping her progress. They walked in silence until they entered the house. Elizabeth made directly for her sitting room, quite conscious of Darcy walking silently and, she thought, angrily beside her. When the door closed behind them, she felt his hand on her arm, stopping her and claiming her attention.

“Elizabeth, before you loose your ire on me, hear me out …please.”

He took her silence as consent although the stiffness of her posture suggested those words had best be deserving of her forgiveness. “First, I apologize for the harshness with which I spoke to you. I should not have done so.” He could see her back start to relax and continued in an even gentler voice, “I was angry because I feared for your safety. You had been gone for more than two hours and no one had seen you. I feared something had happened and my fear fuelled my anger.”

“I do not appreciate the censure. That is what has angered me. To suggest my behaviour is somehow improper…I cannot accept that. I am a country lass and will remain so. I ….”

Darcy felt he had to interrupt, his voice caressingly soft, “Lizzy, you misunderstood me. I meant no censure. Only that you are my wife and I care deeply for your safety and the staff here at Pemberley care deeply for you also. We, none of us, want to see you harmed. As Mrs. Darcy, you are important to a great many people.”
Elizabeth turned slowly mollified by his concern, “I apologize for causing you such distress.” She stepped up to him and brushed a kiss on his cheek, “but, I did so enjoy the freedom that privacy allowed. It was the finest walk I have enjoyed in more than a year.”

“Elizabeth, you must realize the danger. The grounds of Pemberley are much wilder than Longbourn and you are not known here. I do not know if there is much of a poacher problem in Hertfordshire but here, they have always been somewhat of a concern; but I was more afraid that you had tripped or had fallen and were lying hurt somewhere.” He led her over to the settee and sat with her on his lap, enclosed in his arms. “I could not bear to have you hurt because I was not there to protect you.”

“You cannot always be with me, William.” She looked at him closely, “and I would not wish to circumscribe my walks to when you can accompany me. Neither Georgiana nor Kitty can keep pace with me.”

“I would not wish to confine you so. In sight of the house, I have no concerns but knowing you as I do, you will not be satisfied with such. Am I not right?”

“You are indeed, William, nor can you expect me to be happily so constrained.”

The release of so much anger and worry was found in the comfort of a reconciliation which, as is not unusual with young married couples – and not infrequently by those not so young anymore – saw the happy couple ensconced in their bed for some little time and considerable pleasure.

Finally rising and dressing, they wandered arm-in-arm downstairs and outdoors. Their perambulations led them into the flower garden behind the manor house. As they walked, they discussed means of affording Elizabeth the freedom to walk where she willed while accommodating her husband’s concern for her safety. The result was a compromise – the first of many they would forge over the years – built on a mutual respect for the desires and needs of each. It was not a perfect solution – compromises never are – but, over the course of the years, the restrictions involved were more than compensated for by the satisfaction gained by them both. In essence, Elizabeth would attempt to schedule her walks when her husband was most likely to be free to accompany her and he, in his turn, would make attending her a priority unless there was an urgent need to do otherwise. When he was unable to accompany her, she would walk in company with a maid capable of keeping pace and would restrict the duration and direction of her walk.

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Sundays were a special day given over totally, after church services, to enjoying their time together. They happily formed the habit of removing to the library to read together, perusing newspapers and catching up on personal correspondence. If the weather was fine, which it usually was in June, they might venture out for a ride to Lambton or Kympton, stopping at the inn in those villages for a bite to eat and to greet a few people. Elizabeth had come to know Alan Forsythe, rector of the Pemberley Chapel, quite well. He was a man of some fifty years and had been rector there for the last twenty of them; enjoying the confidence of the Darcy family; and well-beloved by those that attended his services, most of whom either worked at Pemberley or were tenant farmers. In the course of attending several services, Elizabeth had met and been welcomed by the families of most of the tenant farms.

It was from Mr. Forsythe that Elizabeth was able to discover which of the families were in need of particular assistance. Armed with this information, Elizabeth had gradually taken on the task of visiting tenant families and, to the extent possible, assuring herself of their well-being and provide assistance to those families which might might be in need of such. While she was thus engaged, Darcy would be dealing with the backlog of estate business that had compiled over the past months. Their afternoons were given over to themselves and they took the opportunity to roam the park on
horseback and to make trips to the Peaks and to other scenic spots within easy riding distance. Not infrequently they would take a picnic meal with them and not return until dusk. If their clothing was marred by grass stains, it was not something on which Mrs. Reynolds permitted the staff to comment. Their evenings were spent together in quiet enjoyment, playing chess, reading, talking, Elizabeth’s playing on the pianoforte and with the occasional game of billiards – the latter culminating in the now predictable manner. Their privacy, however, was about to end. Georgiana, Kitty and the Monteiths were due to arrive this very day.

As she sat down to break her fast that morning, Elizabeth was content that all her preparations were in hand. The arrival of an express post and a letter delivered to her while she sat drinking her tea could not help but raise concern. Opening the express first and beginning to read resulted in an emphatic “Oh my!” which captured Darcy’s full attention and a quick, “What is the matter?”

Before Elizabeth answered, she requested one of the waiting footman to find Mrs. Reynolds to attend them immediately. Then, looking at her husband, she shrugged her shoulders responding, “Your Uncle and Aunt have decided to visit us along with Lord Fitzwilliam and his family for the next fortnight instead of simply coming for the few days around Georgiana’s party as they initially proposed.”

Interpreting the raised eyebrow of her husband correctly, Elizabeth was quick to reassure him but being a little uncertain as to whether additional activities would be necessary, addressed the issue to him and asked if he had planned any particular activities that his relatives would enjoy. After some thought he mentioned that he expected the men might enjoy a fishing party, “Monteith is not an ardent fisherman but my uncle and cousin both enjoy the sport greatly. We have some excellent streams here and I can surely arrange for them to enjoy the sport…..they are also active riders and, if they have not brought mounts, I have several that would suit admirably. We might also arrange an excursion to Dove Dale.”

Elizabeth nodded and turned her attention to the letter which she then opened, “It is from my father. I hope there is nothing untoward at Longbourn? As she began to read a rueful smile appeared, “It appears that we are to receive two unexpected guests. My father and Mary have invited themselves. Mama has gone to London to be with my Aunt who, I am sure, is less than perfectly delighted with such a visitor. Mama feels that Mary, an unmarried girl, should not be present and has sent her back to Longbourn. My father appears to think this an excellent opportunity to visit our library…..oh dear, they will arrive later today also.”

Elizabeth began to consider how to deal with the extra guests and quickly concluded that no extra measures were called for. “My father will be quite content with our library and Mary with the company of Georgiana and Kitty. Papa has not written as to how long they plan to stay but I would not think them to be an imposition even if they stayed for the whole summer.”

At this point, Mrs. Reynolds entered the room and was apprised of the extra guests. Mrs. Reynolds accepted the news with equanimity, “It will be well, Mrs. Darcy. It should take but a few hours to ready the extra rooms. I will inform Cook about the need to increase the menu. Shall we alter the arrangements?”

“Not for today although the quantities might be increased slightly. I m not sure when my father expects to arrive but we shall meet with Cook to see what changes are required while they are here….the nursery is able to accommodate Lord Fitzwilliam’s children?”

“Yes Ma’am. It will be treat to have children here at Pemberley.”

'It looks like the extra staff we are training will be helpful.” At Darcy’s puzzled look, Elizabeth explained further, “Our current staff are adequate to handle the normal number of people here but in
August we will be hosting a much larger crowd. We need more footman and maids and have taken
on several more of each to train this month.”

Darcy nodded, “Ah, I see and, since we may be entertaining a bit more frequently, we will need the
extra staff afterwards.”

Elizabeth smiled at Mrs. Reynolds, “Mrs. Reynolds brought it to my attention so the credit must be
hers……..very well then. I will meet with you and Cook in an hour in your study.”

Darcy had listened with quiet satisfaction as Elizabeth had, without conscious thought, exercised her
duties as Mistress of Pemberley. He could tell from Mrs. Reynolds’ demeanour that she had no
qualms about being directed by and advising Elizabeth. Her smile of satisfaction as she bustled from
the room to arrange for the readying of the required rooms was more than sufficient proof of her
approbation of her Mistress. That Elizabeth had thought to publicly recognize and applaud her
foresight was an additional cause for satisfaction.

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Elizabeth and Darcy were warned that carriages had been sighted a quarter hour before they
appeared on the road leading to Pemberley which gave them sufficient time to be waiting to greet
their guests as the carriages rolled to a stop. With a last silent exchange of looks, they braced their
shoulders and prepared to meet their guests.

Georgiana was first out of the carriages and, displaying all the poise of a young lady, walked
sedately towards them until about three paces away at which point she launched herself at Elizabeth -
much to the latter’s surprise and disconcertment of her brother – hugging her fiercely, “Oh how I
have missed you both and ….” She released a laughing Elizabeth and hugged her brother who
grumbled teasingly, “Well I know where I rank now.”

Kitty followed Georgiana and was quick to hug her sister before turning to curtsy to Darcy, “Mr.
Darcy I am so pleased to have been invited. Pemberley is just….just magnificent.”

“Miss Catherine, we are now brother and sister, are we not?” At her hesitant nod, he continued, “I
shall call you Catherine or Kitty and you shall call me William or Brother. Agreed?”

“Yes, Mr. D…Brother.”

“Better. It will get easier, Catherine. I assure you.”

By now the rest of the carriages had been emptied and footman were moving as a well instructed
team under the direction of Mr. Reynolds to cart baggage to the appropriate rooms. The earl and
countess approached their hosts, a somewhat apologetic expression on their faces. The earl spoke
quickly, “We must apologize. I know we are imposing at short notice.”

Elizabeth was quick to respond, “That may be so but it does not follow that it is unwelcome. We are
both pleased that you have come.”

The countess hugged her, saying, “We realize that you did not get much warning but my husband
was so interested in seeing Pemberley – we have not been here for several years - that he insisted we
come. I know we planned to come for Georgiana’s seventeenth birthday next week. We really
wished for an opportunity to know you better. I hope you had ample warning.” The last was uttered
with a little hesitation which turned to a slight dismay upon being told that their letter had only
arrived that very morning.

Elizabeth, seeing her reaction, simply shook her head, “It is of no matter. That was ample time to
make all the necessary arrangements.” And seeing a rather disbelieving look on the countess’s face, she answered, “Truly, it did. Mrs. Reynolds is a treasure. And we are delighted you have come. I know Georgiana will be overjoyed that you will be here.” She then turned to greet Lord Fitzwilliam and Lady Elaine, “I am pleased that you both decided to come and that you brought your children. It has been some years, from what William tells me, since children have played at Pemberley.” She continued with a grin, “You are not the only unexpected guests. My father and my sister Mary will be arriving later today.”

She turned then to speak to them all, “We have held back dinner for an hour expecting your arrival. Hot water has been sent to your rooms for you to refresh yourselves. We will dine at seven if that is acceptable to you all?” Observing no sign of disagreement, she ushered them into the house. Stopping Lady Elaine before she left, she asked, “We would certainly not object should you wish to have the children join us for the meal.” Which, after a brief discussion with her husband, Lady Elaine found quite agreeable.

Turning to Georgiana and Kitty, Elizabeth took an arm of each and led them upstairs, “Come. I will show you to your room, Kitty. It is next to Georgie’s. I think you will be pleased with it.” As she ushered them upstairs, the two girls began to talk with animation about their trip. After leaving them to refresh themselves, Elizabeth returned to her own rooms to do likewise. She rather expected to find her husband there and to share some moments of intimacy with him. In this she was not disappointed and, if their demeanor when they ventured downstairs was such as to raise a discerning glance and a slight smile from his aunt, that lady was too well-bred and too pleased with the evidence of their attachment to make any comment.

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Dinner was just ending when Mr. Reynolds entered the dining room to advise Darcy that a coach had been sighted and would arrive in less than a quarter hour. Darcy stood and announced, “If you will excuse Elizabeth and myself, our remaining guests will be arriving shortly. Please carry on. Aunt, perhaps you could show the ladies to the drawing room.”

Darcy and Elizabeth were just exiting the house when the carriage came to a stop. Mr. Bennet was first to step down turning to help Mary descend where they both stretched to relieve the cramps from the long carriage ride before moving to greet their hosts. Elizabeth stepped forward to hug her sister who whispered, “This is so grand Lizzy. I can hardly credit it.” At the same time Mr. Bennet clasped hands with Darcy saying, “I know we are imposing on you but the opportunity to ensure that you were taking care of Lizzy was too good to ignore.” The sardonic look in his eye only earned a smile from Darcy although Elizabeth interjected, “Papa, you are a shameless prevaricator. You are only here because you deem your library deficient in comparison to that of Pemberley.”

“Unfortunately, I believe that to be all too true Lizzy….on both charges.”

“Come Papa, Mary. I believe you will wish to refresh yourselves after your travel. Hot water for a bath will be sent to your rooms shortly. We have just finished dining but I will arrange for a tray to be sent to your rooms.” As she spoke, Elizabeth led them into the house while around them footmen carried their baggage up to their rooms. Turning to Darcy, Elizabeth suggested that he return to their guests while she escorted her father and sister to their rooms. As she led them both up the stairs, they spoke comfortably about the trip and the circumstances that led them to make it. Once Elizabeth had reached their rooms, she could see that they both were rather tired and suggested that it would not be taken amiss if they decided to remain in their rooms until the next morning. This was acceptable to both and she took her leave - promising them a tour of the house after breakfast which had been arranged for the other guests – and rejoined her guests in the drawing room.
Darcy could look back on the past two weeks with much satisfaction and look forward with considerable relief that the next fortnight would allow him to enjoy Elizabeth’s company to a much greater extent than had been possible while the Matlocks were visiting. Their departure early this morning meant that their only visitors were Elizabeth’s two sisters and Mr. Bennet. The latter was so comfortably ensconced in the library as to be virtually invisible while Elizabeth’s sisters and Georgiana, being much of an age, had found endless sources of amusement without reference to anyone else.

The Matlock visit had been pleasurable. Their avowed purpose, to attend and enjoy Georgiana’s birthday, had, if they were to be believed, met all of their expectations. That day had been excessively warm and it was fortuitous that Elizabeth had planned a picnic by the pond. A canopy protected them from the sun and a day of activities was planned culminating in a special event once darkness fell. The ladies had enjoyed playing paille-maille on the expanse of lawn fronting the pond and even the gentlemen had been convinced to participate. However they did extract a promise on the part of the ladies to join them in a simple cricket game much to the amusement of all. Even Lord Matlock was induced to play and showed that his skills as a bowler had diminished only slightly with age. The two young Fitzwilliam children – Harold and Judith, of seven and 5 years of age respectively – were delighted to be included. The Bennet sisters and Georgiana had paid them particular attention and engaged them in games and activities, only desisting when it was time for them to sleep. The evening continued quite warm and their evening meal was served under the pavilion. Somewhat tired from their exertions, everyone was content to rest and converse quietly as darkness slowly fell.

His aunt and uncle were as relaxed as ever he had seen them. While content to sit on chairs whilst the younger members of the party sprawled or sat on blankets spread on the lawn, they appeared to be thoroughly happy as they murmured together casting amused glances at the others. He, himself, was sprawled on the blanket with Elizabeth sitting beside him, her feet tucked in under her dress and her thoughts very obviously elsewhere.

Softly, as not to gain anyone else’s attention, he whispered, “Elizabeth, where do your thoughts roam?”

For a few moments he thought she had not heard him and was going to repeat his question when, she turned to look at him with a slight upturn on her lips, “I was but thinking of picnics I shared with my family at Longbourn when I was a child.”

“Did your family picnic often?”

“In the summer, yes. Quite often - usually on a Sunday after church.” She paused and her eyes took on that abstracted look once more. Around them everyone else had fallen silent as she began to reminisce with a slight laugh in her voice. “We were a lively bunch, you see. Five daughters and a very lively mother. My poor father. I dare say, his library looked very appealing afterwards but he did not desert us. The picnics I remember best were when I was about ten and Jane only twelve. Lydia was the youngest at five. Before it became clear that there was not likely there would be a son to break the entailment. My mother was lively, not frantic and worried which changed her so much. Quite frequently we would invite a neighbouring family to join us – most often the Lucas family – and merry we would make indeed. Our picnics would be out in the garden behind the house. Trestle tables would be set up to hold the food. My mother loved to entertain and would always try to
outdo herself. With so many children, we could play and chase each other, play games while our parents sat under shade trees and watched us. Looking back, I suspect that their enjoyment drew as much from the wine consumed as it did from watching us children. It was amongst the happiest times I can remember as a child.”

Drawing her thoughts back to the present, she looked at her husband, “And you, Mr. Darcy. Did you not picnic?” the slight challenge in her voice was unmistakeable.

Before he could marshal his thoughts, the earl interjected, “I find your family’s idea of a picnic … interesting, Mrs. Darcy. My father father would have been appalled by it and horrified at how it was done today. I find I am not in agreement with him. I have much enjoyed this day.” The earl began then to reminisce about picnics that he remember when visiting Pemberley while his sister was alive. Georgiana came over and sat at her aunt’s feet listening to him and to her aunt’s occasional contributions and prompting.

When the earl seemed to be getting close to a maudlin stage, Darcy took up the thread of conversation and chose to respond to the question Elizabeth had raised. "I remember that we held picnics quite frequently when my mother was alive and almost always down here by the pond. My father loved them and my mother humoured him, I suppose. From his comments that I can recall, I suspect she found them to be…slightly uncomfortable. Perhaps she simply wasn’t used to them as a child.” nodding at his uncle, “I suspect my father of teasing her a bit by holding them.”

“When she died, my father did not…he seemed to lose all interest in such…” he paused and Elizabeth could see him consciously take his thoughts away from such memories. When he continued, it was in a deliberately happier tone, “Georgiana and I probably picnic several times every summer, particularly when we have guests.”

Georgiana piped in, “But not when the Bingleys were visiting!” her laugh drew a grin from Darcy, “No, definitely not when Miss Bingley was here.”

At Elizabeth’s questioning look, he smirked, “We held a picnic once when she and Bingley and the Hursts were visiting. Right here, in fact. Unfortunately, the day was quite warm, there was a breeze to disturb one’s hair, there were insects flying around, birds were making a racket – I am trying to recall if there was anything that she did not dislike.”

“She was not unhappy that you were there, Brother!” Georgiana’s tease drew a burst of laughter from everyone, including Darcy whose only comment was, “Poor Miss Bingley.”

Elizabeth could see it was time to turn people’s attention to the reason for the picnic, “I think it is time we embarrass my new sister and shower her with presents.” Saying which, she rose and walked to a table covered by a white cloth which she removed. Selected a gaily wrapped package, she handed it to Georgiana before returning to sit by her husband. Everyone was quick to follow her example and soon the pile of presents had been transported from the table to be piled in from of Georgiana.

Embarrassed at being the focus of everyone’s attention, she found herself overwhelmed by the variety of gifts she received; A new ball-gown from the Matlocks, jewelry from Lord Fitzwilliam and his wife, a copy of Sense and Sensibility from Elizabeth, sheet music from Mary, a book of poetry from Mr. Bennet, a personal sketch from Kitty and a diamond necklace from Darcy which had been her mother’s.

Elizabeth could see that Georgiana was almost overwhelmed by the attention she was receiving but that she was able to retrieve her composure quickly. Waiting until there occurred a brief quiet, Georgiana, with some hesitation and then with increasing confidence, albeit accompanied by a most
appealing blush, addressed them all, “First, I must thank each and every one of you for these marvellous gifts. I cannot remember a more enjoyable birthday. Truly I cannot.”

She turned our gaze on her brother, “Then I must thank – what a totally inadequate word that is – my brother for gifting me with the most wonderful sister.” Facing Elizabeth, she enveloped her in her arms and with teary eyes, continued, “From the moment we met, she has made my life happier, and…” looking at Kitty and Mary, “…gifted me with two more sisters that I have come to know and love dearly.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, “The truly wonderful thing is that I can now view the upcoming London season with much less trepidation than I did even six months ago. I cannot explain why, but it is so.”

By this time, the sky had completely darken and Darcy rose to command their attention, “I have a special treat planned which will begin shortly. Some of you have been wondering what those rafts are out in the lake. I can now tell you or rather….” Looking at his pocket watch under a canopy lamp, “…show you.” Moments later a streak of light ascended into the night sky and then their ears were assaulted by a sound akin to a gunshot, only much louder, followed by a burst of colour as, high above their heads, the rocket burst. For a half hour the assault on their ears continued albeit with diminishing impact as they grew accustomed to the noise - as the sky was rent by a myriad of colours. Even Elizabeth, who had been forewarned about the fireworks, had initially sought refuge and comfort within her husband’s arms as the display began. There she remained, more for comfort than refuge, as the show continued. When it was complete, the exclamations of pleasure from all were more than sufficient to convince Darcy that it was worth repeating in the future.

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Elizabeth had been uneasy about how well her father and Mary would be received by the Fitzwilliam family. The earl, she knew, was sufficiently quick of mind to realize he was the object of her father’s wit should the latter decide to exercise it on him. She could no more expect her father to restrain such exercise should the opportunity arise than expect the sun to rise in the west. Fortunately, the earl was not inexperienced in dealing with country gentleman such as Mr. Bennet and the latter was so bemused by the library that he had little attention to spare for other amusements such as tweaking an somewhat arrogant earl or his equally arrogant son. As a consequence, they were in each other's company but rarely and, when such an unhappy event did occur, Mr. Bennet’s contentment with his situation was such as to render him less acerbic than was his usual wont.

Mary, she thought, would be glad of the company of Georgiana and Kitty; and, indeed she was. Her retiring nature fit well with that of Georgiana with whom she shared a love of music. Georgiana’s technical competence she quickly found to be superior to her own but it was a gentle and tentative suggestion by the younger girl about the type of music she played that had the most profound effect. No one had really impressed upon Mary that the real purpose of performing was to provide pleasure to her listening audience and that technical superiority was a poor substitute for music that did not entertain. Elizabeth had noticed a small improvement after only a few short weeks and wondered at her own inability to have prompted such a change. As it was, Georgiana and Mary had, between them, managed to charm everyone with pianoforte duets and their solo efforts in the evenings. The other aspect of her sister’s character that she had dreaded was Mary’s ability to interject biblical homilies at the most inopportune times and while this trait had been somewhat tempered by the events of the past year, it had not been eradicated altogether. Fortunately, Mary had been sufficiently impressed by the consequence of the Fitzwilliams as to be reluctant to venture any opinions in their presence.

Mrs. Reynolds had not been slow to express her delight with the incursion of guests and, in
opposition to her master, was very much anticipating the even larger number that were expected the following month. As she succinctly expressed to Elizabeth one morning, “Pemberley, in my opinion, has entertained much too little over the past ten years or more.”

Shaking her head at the sad memories involved, she reminisced, “Ever since the death of Mrs. Darcy, the Master’s mother, there have been few such activities and those that have occurred, involved only a very small number of guests.”

Elizabeth smiled, “I believe that is changing.”

“For the better in my opinion, Mrs. Darcy. The dinner that you held for our neighbours provided excellent training for the extra staff that we hired. I think your suggestion to have Darcy House send several of its staff to Pemberley to assist when the Darcy families are visiting next month will prove provident.”

The dinner itself had been flawless. Five of the more notable families in the area had been invited to dine with the company already present. They had come to acquaint themselves with the new Mrs. Darcy and, she realized, to assess her performance as hostess. They had left content in the knowledge that Pemberley was once more to be a presence in Derbyshire society. It was agreed by them all that Mrs. Darcy was everything that was amiable, beautiful and interesting and none been had left in any doubt of her husband’s affections. Mrs. Reynolds had observed the pride with which the Master had beheld his wife as she moved effortlessly to ensure the comfort and pleasure of their guests. The only thing that was lacking, she thought, were children and she suspected that lack would be of short duration.

Darcy was particularly happy to see his uncle’s gradual thawing towards Elizabeth. He could not be sure that either would ever be entirely comfortable in the other’s company but his uncle’s demeanour was much more relaxed. As Elizabeth had acknowledged, “I no longer feel as though I am under constant scrutiny.” When Lord and Lady Matlock departed, the earl had taken his leave of Elizabeth saying, “I believe my nephew has chosen his wife wisely, Mrs. Darcy. Our stay here has been quite enjoyable and we hope to return the favour by having you visit us in the near future.”

Elizabeth had simply nodded and replied, “Thank you, your Lordship. It will be a pleasure.”

The earl looked at Elizabeth for a few moments before apparently coming to a decision. His next words caught Elizabeth quite by surprise, “I think you must call me Uncle Henry from now on and I shall call you Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth’s surprise elicited a small wintry smile from the earl, “I assure you, Elizabeth, you will get used to it.”

“I will try Your…” At the earl’s raised eyebrow, Elizabeth rolled her eyes and laughed, “…Uncle Henry.”

“Better! Much better!”

The countess stepped towards Elizabeth and embraced her, whispering in her ear, “Welcome to the family.” Releasing Elizabeth, she bestowed a kiss on Darcy’s cheek and taking her husband by the arm, they entered the carriage to return to their home.

Having seen his guests off, Darcy had removed to his study and was sorting through the letters which had been placed on his desk. Reynolds had already separated out those for the other residents including one for Mr. Bennet. Now he, Darcy, must sort his own into business and personal letters. Today there were only three of the latter – including one from his Aunt Juliana in Cornwall which
likely had to do with their planned visit in August. Bingley had also written but it was the third letter that was of most interest. It was from James Simpson. It was addressed to Darcy House in London and sent on to Pemberley by express. He wasted no time in opening the letter and, having scanned it quickly, immediately opened the door to his study to request a passing maid to find Mrs. Darcy and have her attend him in his study. As he waited for Elizabeth to arrive, he read the letter once more - slowly.

Kingston, Upper Canada
May 17, 1813

Dear Sir,

I fear you must have begun to despair of receiving any communication from me. I can only plead that circumstances have been such as to prevent an earlier response. I hope that the explanation which follows satisfy such concerns as you may have.

The voyage from London to Halifax took some five weeks. We were fortunate as to the winds and neither Miss Lydia nor I were poor sailors, a circumstance that many of the other passengers could not claim. Once landed in Halifax it became a concern as to how to reach our destination. The route most favoured during the winter was through the United States. We could, of course, not avail ourselves of that route however, and we perforce had to wait in Halifax for the St. Lawrence river to unfreeze. It might have been possible to travel by sleigh up the river but I did not want to risk such a venture. We left Halifax on April 23 since the river appears to have thawed somewhat earlier than was usual. We arrived in Montreal a fortnight later to be told that troops from the United States had invaded Upper Canada. We were advised that it was reasonably safe to travel as far west as Kingston and to there we did go arriving some ten days later travelling by sleigh the whole distance.

Once in Kingston we learned that the United States Army had burned York with most of the population having fled east to Kingston. Among them was your agent, Mr. Alcock, who we encountered by accident. Once informed of your wishes as contained in the letter we provided, things were speedily resolved. Miss Lydia and I were married a fortnight later in Kingston. The letter to her parents was posted at the same time as the one you now hold. I can only assume both letters will reach their destination similarly. Given that the marriage took place in Kingston rather than York, we have re-written the letter accordingly.

Our plans are now to continue on to York as soon as it may be safe to do so. Mr. Alcock proposes to travel with us and will assist in locating a workable farm or acquiring such land as might be available. With the destruction that has resulted from the hostilities, I surmise that the chance of acquiring a good farm, from someone discouraged by such hostilities, to be quite good. The one enduring memory of our trip so far is the vastness of this country. We have spent but a month of travel to reach Kingston and would require several more to reach the western boundary. It is vastly different from England or Scotland with settlements widely scattered and travel dangerous, not because of brigands or animals, but from the ice and snow. There is vast amount of land and few people to work it. I cannot but see this as a great opportunity for myself and the family that we hope to create.

I will write further when we arrive in York and have more information to impart. I would add that Miss Lydia – now Mrs. Lydia Simpson – seems content in the marriage and that I have had no cause to repine.

Your obedient servant,
James Simpson

By the time he had read the letter twice more, Elizabeth had entered the room concerned that some
matter of urgency had arisen. Upon being told to shut the door, she did so and came to stand at Darcy’s shoulder. He passed her the letter saying only, “From James Simpson – finally.”

Taking the letter, Elizabeth walked over to the chair by the fireplace to read it in comfort. After several minutes, Darcy joined her and sat opposite in the other chair. Finally she looked up at him, “I take comfort that Lydia is finally married and seems not unhappy. Are they in any danger?”

“I do not really know. From what I can determine, Kingston should be safe enough since it is the main army and navy centre.”

“I suspect that a letter should be arriving for my father shortly.” At Darcy’s quiet nod, Elizabeth released a sigh, “I cannot help but admit to a certain degree of comfort that Lydia is finally married. To my shame, I also concede a certain satisfaction that she is separated from us by an ocean and is not likely to embarrass us further.”

Darcy smiled, “I believe your father is planning to encourage Mrs. Bennet to visit them as soon as may be.”

“Oh, Papa.” Elizabeth was pensive for a few moments before continuing, “Thank you for sharing this with me. I am easier in my mind. Now, the day is beautiful and I have no hostess duties to speak of. A brisk long walk is my wish. Can I entice my very handsome husband o accompany me?” Saying which she rose and held out her hand.

Darcy looked over his desk. There was nothing of immediate concern and he had little desire to deal with anything else. “If I am not imposing myself on you, I would desire nothing more than to walk with you.” Moving to take her offered hand, he let her lead him from the room.

“You, sir, are never an imposition.”

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The letter that arrived for Mr. Bennet was indeed from his youngest daughter. Since Mr. Bennet had, for the most part, forgotten her existence, the letter had caused him some surprise. She had long been the least favourite of his children and her absence had been more a blessing than otherwise given the diminution in noise at Longbourn that was the fortuitous result.

Recognizing her hand, he had little doubt of the contents and while his usual preference would have seen the letter placed on the pile of correspondence that he would read at some later date, in this instance he chose to open and peruse it directly.

Kingston, Upper Canada
May 17, 1813
Dear Papa,

I hope this letter finds you and Mama well. I have news of some import for my family. As my last letter imparted, Mr. Wickham and I planned to travel to the Canadas to settle there. We reached York before Christmas and decided to settle there for the nonce. However a great misfortune occurred. My dearest George ventured out with a few friends one evening and failed to return that night. I did not discover what happened for two days. George was most shabbily treated by his friends who plied him with strong drink and left him to find his own way home. The constables here say he must have fallen asleep and died of the cold. No one found his body for two days. I am sure that there is some carelessness on someone’s part for how could such a thing happen.

Fortunately I had sufficient funds left that I was able to live comfortably although I did not know
what I should do with myself. While York is a dreary place, the society is quite lively and I was able to dance several times. I do not like mourning clothes and not being able to be out in society is too dreary for words. I was enjoying meeting several handsome young men when I had to flee York along with most everyone else because an army from the United States burned York. Why ever would they want to burn such a dreary place, I cannot understand. Anyway I was able to find a means to travel east to Kingston where most of us stopped. While there I met a Mr. James Simpson who is so very handsome and has five thousand pounds to buy an estate in Upper Canada. He is unmarried and was looking for a wife. After courting me for several weeks, he made an offer of marriage and I accepted. We were married two days ago and plan to travel back to York now that it is safe to do so. I am surprised to admit that I found Mr. Simpson’s company much preferable to that of George. I think we will be quite content together.

I will write further when we have settled permanently in one place.

Your Daughter
Lydia Simpson.

To his amazement, Lydia’s letter also contained a short missive from his new son-in-law which he read with no little enjoyment.

Kingston, Upper Canada
May 17, 1813

Dear Mr. Bennet,

Let me begin by offering a humble apology for not seeking your consent before marrying your daughter. I can only plead the exigencies of our situation that prevented me from doing so. Be assured, sir, of my utmost respect for you and your responsibilities as her father but separated as we are by months of travel and cognizant of our need to settle and establish a household, I did not see how I could do otherwise than offer to marry your daughter as soon as was possible.

I hold your daughter in the utmost respect and affection and I have every reason to believe she holds me in similar esteem. I am possessed of sufficient monies – some five thousand pounds - as to be able to purchase a sizeable property and construct decent accommodation upon it. I make no pretence that it is comparable to a property in England but I have every hope that, with diligence and hard work, we might be able to attain modest affluence.

I wish – or rather, hope – that you will extend your support and blessing to our union. Despite the manner in which this marriage has been undertaken, I have not treated your daughter with anything less than the strictest propriety. I know that she joins with me in desiring your blessing on our marriage.

I cannot, in good conscience, suggest when we will be able to return to England. It is quite possible that we both will end our days here. I will endeavour to keep you and your family apprised of events in our life. My wife informs me that she is an indifferent letter writer so I suspect that burden will fall on me. It is one that I willingly assume. I cannot as yet provide an address to which any letters may be directed but I would hope to be in a position to do so within the next few months.

Most Sincerely,
James Simpson

Mr. Bennet took some few minutes to consider this news before venturing forth to impart to his daughters, the intelligence which they contained. He would urge Lizzy to write Mrs. Bennet to apprise her and the other inhabitants of Gracechurch Street of the tidings from Lydia. He had little
doubt that his wife would not delay to write her Sister Philips to impart the good tidings and that it would be known throughout Hertfordshire shortly thereafter.
Thursday July 29, 1813 – Vitoria, Spain

It was a blessedly quiet for a change. The staff had moved out and he was, for the most part, alone with several orderlies and two other wounded officers. It was difficult to be thankful for being wounded but he could take some comfort in his surroundings. He was not lying in some fly ridden tent with twenty other wounded, crying and moaning in their pain. He, by virtue of his exalted rank of Colonel – which caused a mental snort from him - had been brought back to his quarters which had the not unappreciated benefit of being quiet and clean and dry. Of course, his rank did not prevent the slash of a sabre which, only by the grace of God and a frantic block by his own sabre, buried itself in his arm instead of his body. Only the quick reaction of one of his soldiers to kill the french cavalryman had prevented a second and most probably a killing blow. Nevertheless, if the surgeon was correct, his arm, fortunately his left arm, would not be lost but he was unlikely to recover its full use. He was fortunate to be alive. He had bled freely and it was some few minutes before his orderly had realized the severity of the wound and staunched the flow of blood. He remember little of the following fortnight due to his blood loss and subsequent fever.

Even now, a month after being wounded, he could barely lift the arm and his ability to grasp anything was limited. His days as an active field officer appeared over. No one had said as much but he was expecting to be invalided home soon – at least that was the opinion of his surgeon on the last visit. Fortunately he would not be carried on the ship but could walk, albeit shakily, on his own feet. And As his thoughts skittered around the idea that his military career could be over, he heard the door of his room open and Corporal James, entered bearing a letter.

“A letter for you, Sor”

“Thank you, Corporal. Just place it beside me.”

“No, Sor! I will be bringing up dinner in an hour.” With which he made a casual survey of the room, picked up the chamber pot to be emptied, tidied a few items on the table by the bed, and, before Colonel Fitzwilliam could tell him to stop fussing about, made an expeditious exit.

Fitzwilliam smiled - James was a fuss-budget but an excellent orderly. He looked at the letter and easily recognized the handwriting as that of Darcy.

Darcy House
May 8, 813

Richard,

I truly hope this finds you well. I think it safe to assume that by the time this letter reaches you that the army will be moving against the French. Please keep that ugly carcass of yours in one piece, I plan to win many more billiard games and Georgiana is expecting you to dance with her in her season. She was most eager to send her regards and admonishment for your safety when she learned I was to write you. Consider yourself admonished.

I consider myself the luckiest man in the kingdom. Miss Elizabeth Bennet will become my wife in less than a fortnight. There were a few obstacles to overcome but all is well. I will relate the particulars when next we speak. I called on Elizabeth whilst she was in London and was groomsman for Captain Amos Stovall who married Miss Jane Bennet in late February. I invited the Stovalls and Elizabeth to accompany Georgiana and myself to Pemberley for several weeks to break their trip to
Yorkshire to visit Captain Stovalls relatives there. Whilst there Elizabeth and I had the opportunity to resolve those issues that separated us and to get to know each other much better.

I proposed in mid March and wrote her father for his approval. Elizabeth, Georgiana and I accompanied the Stovalls to York. Georgie and I stayed with Bingley while there. It was a most illuminating trip and Bingley continues to mature. He is very much his own man now.

In mid April Elizabeth, Georgie and I travelled back to London, stopping briefly on the way at Elizabeth’s home in Hertfordshire to meet her parents. We then proceeded to London where she is staying with her aunt and uncle. I am in her presence as much as possible. I won’t bore you with effusions of delight. I am besotted and gladly acknowledge the fact. I have never known such happiness and contentment. Georgie finds equal pleasure in her company and I believe that she is as close to Elizabeth now as if they had been born sisters. I can already observe such improvement in her manner as to leave me confident that she will do well when she comes out which, we anticipate, will be this fall during the short season.

“The man is besotted!”

I informed your father and mother about the engagement shortly after returning to London. I will not hide from you that your father’s initial reaction was of extreme displeasure. I sense that he expected to be asked to consent to the match rather than simply to have been informed of it. My aunt was not slow to prevent either of us from saying something we would later regret. I did make it clear that I would marry Elizabeth regardless of their approval which, I must suppose, had somewhat to do with your father’s reluctant approval which he gave before I left. Your mother was more welcoming although she obviously had some reservations.

Elizabeth and I dined with your parents several days later and it appears to have gone very well indeed. Your father has publicly supported the engagement while your mother invited Elizabeth and her aunt to tea a day or so later. It was I believe quite successful and the ladies including Georgie and your sister, Frances, have shopped for wedding clothes for Elizabeth. As Elizabeth intimated to me later, it was as much a public endorsement as a shopping expedition and apparently both endeavours were successful.

Our Aunt Catherine, however, is a much different story. I fully expected her to behave poorly and was not disappointed although her actions were a great embarrassment. Not content to disparage Elizabeth in a letter to me, she also wrote Elizabeth. Fortunately, Elizabeth agreed to the destruction of that letter – unopened. I would not have her so insulted. Our aunt was not content to confine her displeasure to the written word but paid a visit to Elizabeth’s family, meeting with her father. After failing to persuade him to cancel the engagement, she attempted to pay – bribe – him to do so. I found all this out as he wrote Elizabeth immediately following the meeting. From the tone of his letter, he found our aunt rather ridiculous – a conclusion which I cannot fault and echoed by your father when advised of his sister’s actions. Suffice to say I have since advised our aunt that she is not welcome at my houses until such time as she has apologized to Elizabeth. I dare say it may be some time before that happens. My only regret is that Anne will be left even more alone. I could wish that she could be induced to visit your parents.

Fitzwilliam shook his head, “Our aunt is nothing if not predictable. She wants what she wants because she wants it and no one else’s wants are worth considering.”

I will not bore you with further expressions of my happiness. Once you have returned to England, you must visit us at Pemberley for as long as you may wish. Until then, may God keep you safe.

FD
“So Miss Lydia’s problems are not an impediment? Darce did not write to tell me how that was resolved. I suspect there is a good reason for the omission. Well he will not be able to evade the issue when I return.” Fitzwilliam’s mien became stern, “I hope he has not placed Georgie’s prospects in jeopardy.” He thought for a few moments, “No, I suspect that whatever he has done, it has been done with due care. I must trust that his judgement is sound and he was not persuaded to rashness due to his interest in Miss Bennet.”

Fitzwilliam folded the letter and placed it his trunk. He thought to write a reply but decided it probable that he would return to England by the time a letter arrived. It was time for his daily walk. Calling for his orderly, he walked slowly down the stairs and outdoors. Today he thought he might try to walk as far as the bridge – his strength was slow to return. The loss of blood and the fever that accompanied his wound had greatly weakened him. The surgeon was reluctant to let him return home until he was stronger. Suddenly he found a fierce desire to return to his home and family. He could recuperate there as easily and with more comfort than here in Spain. He must persuade the surgeon to let him travel. As he walked he began to consider what a future might look like should he be forced to retire. He knew his financial position. It was not poor. He could live in reasonable comfort – a wife, he doubted. His income – from his half-pay and investments - was not sufficient to support a wife in anything approaching the comfort that a woman with whom he might attach himself would require. While he did not actually require the £50,000 that was mentioned by Miss Bennet, he probably could not offer marriage to a woman unless she had a dowry of £20,000. With this rather gloomy thought, he collect his orderly and departed for his exercise.
Chapter 46

Monday August 10, 1813 – Pemberley

And to Pemberley they had all come. What had seemed like such a simple idea when first considered had become, once invitations had been extended, a major undertaking. The original intent had been to invite Darcy’s two aunts and their husbands to visit; however, when apprised of the interest of his Darcy cousins to visit their ancestral home – Pemberley – Darcy had found it impossible to do anything but oblige them and had, with Elizabeth’s support, extended invitations to all his cousins.

As it came to pass, Darcy was to learn, with some relief, that of his eight cousins only five had accepted his invitation. Two families had infants that were deemed too young to travel and another cousin was a naval officer and at sea and his wife was reluctant to travel without his assistance and to be so far removed from home should he return unexpectedly. It was a large, diverse and, for the most part, lively gathering.

His Aunt Amelia Gibson and her Husband George Gibson had two daughters some ten and twelve years senior to Darcy married to men of substantial wealth with incomes of six and eight thousand pounds per year. His Aunt, her husband and their daughters, who Elizabeth surmised possessed the fullest belief in the superiority of their pedigree and station in life, were more inclined to be displeased with any inconvenience and to find fault with the society they found at Pemberley. Their civility to Elizabeth upon arrival had been marked more by a sense of superiority rather than amiability. If they were not prone to effusions of delight – and that neither Elizabeth or Darcy would not have expected in any event – they were civil and polite to everyone. The restraint in their behaviour was not mirrored amongst their children who had not been there a week before all barriers between the children of the various families had disappeared as though they had never existed. Oddly enough, the two eldest granddaughters of Darcy’s Aunt Amelia had formed a close friendship with Georgiana and Elizabeth’s sisters and, as a consequence, had come to like Elizabeth quite well indeed which resulted in some consternation on the part of their parents.

His Aunt Juliana Holmes – who was a few years younger than her sister - and her husband Cedric Holmes had four sons and two daughters, all married, who were between thirty and forty years of age. Elizabeth had immediately felt a kinship with this branch of the Darcy family, all of whom were of the same modest means as the Bennet family – landed gentry with incomes of two or three thousand pounds per year – sufficient to live comfortably but able to provide only a modest dowry for a daughter and unlikely to be able to afford a season in London for that daughter. Their manners were more open than otherwise, amiable and disposed to enjoy the companionship they found at Pemberley. If Darcy was discomfited by the exuberance of their society, he was, by the end of their stay, on friendly terms with each, if somewhat uncomfortable when in the larger community.

It was apparent from the very beginning that there existed very little sympathy between his two aunts. The rift, if such it could be called, seemed to be reflected in the characters of their extended families. The Holmes siblings had come to Pemberley to be pleased and to please and were successful in both endeavours. They possessed no shortage of intelligent conversation, a desire to enjoy the pleasures of Pemberley and Derbyshire and a willingness to take pleasure in the company they were with. Such disagreements and difficulties which are sure to arise in such a diverse group were quickly and amicably resolved.

Between the five families that had taken up residence, there were some twenty children – twelve boys and eight girls - the ages of which ranged from three to eighteen years. Of particular interest were two granddaughters of his Aunt Amelia who were seventeen and eighteen years of age. The
younger girl expected to presented next spring; however, her older cousin had made her entrance into society last spring and was already being courted by a younger son of an earl. The younger had waxed eloquently to the others on his handsome features, his station in life and his being in possession of a fine estate; however, Georgiana, for one, had not heard or observed any sign of esteem for the gentleman himself. She rather thought her cousin was more attached to her suitor because of who he was, than what he was.

Pemberley had never, in Georgiana’s memory, been so boisterous and lively. There were too many children to be quietly confined within its walls. Fortunately, the weather continued fine throughout the month and, under the direction of the various governesses, nannies and maids assigned to the task, the exuberance of the children was dissipated on the grounds which were sufficient for their enjoyment without intruding seriously on the enjoyments of their parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and their daughter had arrived at the same time and strangely enough, Darcy found their company quite pleasant. The senior Thompsons he knew to be sensible people with genteel manners and Miss Thompson had always impressed him with her manners and intelligence. If the Gibson family was reluctant to be more than civil to them, the Holmes family was uniformly pleased to have made their acquaintance. That the Thompsons were close neighbours of the Bennets was quickly apparent and undoubtedly eased their acceptance by the others. Mr. Bennet’s preference to spend much of his waking hours ensconced in the library was no surprise to the Thompsons. Nonetheless, his favourite daughter successfully enticed him to join the company in the evenings and, if he found little in the Holmes family to excite his acerbic wit, the Gibson families were less fortunate as he took some delight in gently skewering those pretensions which attracted his notice. It was done with such exquisite care that oftentimes the recipient was unaware of the wound inflicted.

The Gibsons were not inclined, in general, to afford much attention to Elizabeth’s sisters. Since neither of the latter were particularly seeking to attach themselves to that family, both parties were able to disregard the other quite civilly. Both Kitty and Mary had, over the course of their visit, grown quite close to Georgiana and were, each in their different fashion, able to share activities with her. The older Gibson granddaughters were welcomed into their circle and between music, riding, sketching, reading and the conversations unique to young females, it was a most compatible small society.

Miss Thompson quickly found that the company of Elizabeth and younger married women to be more congenial and spent much of her time accompanying Elizabeth while she performed the duties of a hostess. As she remarked to Elizabeth on one occasion, “My mother was not raised on an estate and is, herself, learning all that is required. I would be foolish indeed to not avail myself of the opportunity to plague you while you are about your duties.” Elizabeth responded to the latter with a grin matched by that of Miss Thompson.

Bingley was, due to business commitments, the last to arrive. He had not been there more than an evening before he was universally a favourite with everyone. His pleasing manners, amiability and knowledge of the northern counties made him welcome to the Gibsons despite his background in trade. The two eldest daughters of the Gibson sisters were much taken with the gentleman and his manner to them did not waver despite the dedicated albeit modest attentions of the younger of the two cousins. However, it was clear, very early in his visit, that his interest was focussed primarily on Miss Darcy and Miss Thompson and the other young ladies soon resolved to enjoy his company without expectations of more than those moderate attentions he directed to them all.

Monday August 23, 1813 – Pemberley
Darcy waited with some impatience in his study. He was not looking forward to the upcoming interview and would have preferred that it not take place at all. But it was his duty to protect his sister and this duty he could not shirk. It may have been that he had delayed too long in undertaking to discharge this responsibility but his impatience had a more personal basis. His wife had gone for a ride and he wished to be able to accompany her. He knew she was well attended by Georgiana and Miss Thompson but he would have much preferred to have been one of the party.

As he waited – still some minutes before Bingley would join him – he considered the problem and how he might best address it. He and Elizabeth had discussed it last night and had come to the conclusion that this meeting was possibly overdue. Hence his request this morning for Bingley to attend him at ten this morning. His uncle and his aunt had met Bingley previously and had expressed reservations about his connection to trade. That they would be concerned - dismayed might be a more reasonable guess – was a foregone conclusion. Acknowledging those concerns, he had full confidence in Bingley’s gentlemanly qualities; he was quite prepared to reject any objections based on Bingley’s connection to trade.

A sharp rap on the door signalled Bingley’s arrival and he quickly entered and closed the door when invited to do so, settling himself comfortably in the chair in front of Darcy’s desk. If he was uncomfortable, it was not obvious from his demeanour although he had to concede that Bingley had become less open over the past year and much more inclined to mask his thoughts and feelings. Today he simply sat and waited for Darcy to initiate the conversation and explain the purpose of the meeting.

After waiting for several moments, Darcy began, “Charles, I know you are probably wondering why I asked to meet with you this morning....”

Bingley interrupted before he could continue, “I believe I could make an excellent guess. In fact, Darcy, I have been anticipating it for several days.”

At Darcy’s raised eyebrows, Bingley smiled. “Darcy, I am not quite as naïve as I was a year ago. I realize my behaviour might have engendered some concerns.”

“And what behaviour, exactly, are we talking about?”

Bingley chuckled, “It seems to me that you should be the one telling me what behaviour of mine has raise such concern as to merit a demand, politely requested I admit, that we meet. But under the circumstances I do not have a disinclination to humour you on it.”

“I believe, Bingley, that when you have daughters of your own, you will appreciate my concerns more readily.”

Bingley paused for several seconds as though to marshal his thoughts and Darcy was content to let him do so. Finally Bingley rose to his feet and began to pace around the study before turning to face Darcy with an apologetic look, “I must ask your pardon. I sometimes find it easier to think and talk while walking.”

Darcy waved his hand to dismiss the apology and waited silently for Bingley to come to the point. Finally he did so.

“...I believe that you are concerned that I may have engaged the interest of both Miss Darcy and Miss Thompson by my attentions. If I have, it was most unconsciously done. In fact, I ....”

Darcy interrupted, “I am more concerned that your attentions, for want of a better word, may have confused my sister and Miss Thompson.”
Bingley thought for a moment, considering what Darcy had said, “I had not thought of it from that perspective.” He nodded, “Perhaps that is the better way to look at the issue.” He paced for several moments before continuing, “When I arrived here, I determined that I would take the opportunity afforded me to become better acquainted with both young ladies. It seemed to me that being in their company for three weeks or more would allow me to get to know them better.”

He paced back and forth several times and, to Darcy’s amusement, he began to detect a regularity to it. Three steps and turn, three steps and turn. It was almost like watching the pendulum of a clock – mesmerizing almost – but Bingley’s voice claimed his attention once more.

“I had gained some acquaintance with Miss Thompson after your wedding and, of course, I have been in your sister’s company with some frequency over the last few years although, for the most part, I thought of her only as your very young sister. It was not until we last met at Pemberley and then at York that I realized she was fast becoming a young lady. I…”

And here Bingley ran his hand through his hair, “I realized that Miss Darcy is too young to consider a courtship let alone marriage and was careful, I thought or hoped, in my attentions to her.” He looked at Darcy who nodded slowly.

“I saw nothing that gave me any particular concern, Charles.” Darcy did not feel it necessary to relate that Elizabeth had discussed the matter with Georgiana or that Bingley’s interest in Georgiana had been detected while he was last at Pemberley.

“Yes, well…I came here, as I said, determined to become better acquainted with both young ladies, to have them come to know me better as well and, if possible, to see if I could fix my attentions on one of them in the future. It was not - it was never – my intention to mislead either of them. I have attempted to be most circumspect in the amount of time and attention that I afforded either.” Again his discomfit was evidenced by the frequency with which his fingers tousled his hair. He grimaced, “Obviously I was not altogether successful.”

Darcy thought perhaps it was time to alleviate his friend’s distress, “Charles, please….sit down. I am not upset nor is Georgiana as far as I can determine. I cannot speak as to Miss Thompson’s thoughts or feelings. That is the province of her father. I asked to speak with you so as to find out what your intentions are in regards to Georgiana.” He paused for a second or two but Bingley gave no indication that he was to speak so he continued, “You will be departing for York on the morrow and I wish to have an answer to my question before you depart.” Darcy waited, not sure which answer that Bingley would give would please him the most. He could see that Bingley’s thoughts consumed him at the moment and he waited as patiently as possible.

Finally Bingley’s eyes lost their abstracted look and focussed once more on Darcy, “I apologize. I had come to a decision before I entered the room. I have been contemplating how best to express it.”

Darcy waited, restraining himself from drumming his fingers on his desktop.

“All I could – no I do - esteem both ladies quite highly; however, I would, with your consent, like to pay my attentions to Georgiana.” As he saw Darcy open his mouth to speak, he raised his hand to stop him. “Please, hear me out. I realize…I am well aware that your sister is not ‘out’ in society. I also realize that she is too young to even consider receiving my attentions; however, she is seventeen and will be out this fall I gather. That is your intention, is it not?”

Upon Darcy’s nod, he resumed, “While I would wish for my sake to ask for a courtship immediately, I realize that such would be most improper and would not afford her the opportunity to enjoy her season. My intentions are…rather I wish to tell you now that I will not ask for a courtship until the end of her first season – next June. The decision to advise her of my intention, I will leave to you.”
He paused once more before stating clearly, “I will attempt to attend as many events where she is present as I can arrange. I cannot devote the whole season to this as my business will keep me in the north but I will be in London for the short season and again for possibly two months in the spring.” At this Bingley ceased to speak and looked to Darcy for his response. The latter was slow in coming as Darcy considered his friend’s comments. Finally, noticing that Bingley was starting to become a little agitated, he grinned at him, “Charles, relax. I am not displeased. I think your intentions are quite honourable and well considered.”

Darcy’s smile disappeared as he continued, “I would caution you that, should someone else ask for a courtship and Georgiana is not opposed, it will be granted; moreover, Elizabeth and I will not inform Georgiana of your intentions and we will not interfere. We consider you quite an eligible suitor but the decision will belong to Georgiana. We will advise should she seek our advice but the final decision shall be hers.”

Bingley’s nod was thoughtful, “I cannot ask or expect more than this.”

“Which brings me to my last question, Charles. Why?…why Georgiana?”

Bingley nodded slowly, “I am surprised you did not ask sooner.” His countenance took on a slightly abstracted look, “I do not know if I can fully explain or understand it myself but, while I have enjoyed my conversation with Miss Thompson, I have anticipated with greater pleasure those held with your sister and lately have had to restrain myself in seeking such conversations. My regard for her is growing with every encounter. She is…” and a slightly embarrassed look took possession of his features, “she is quite attractive and you know, as well as I, of her accomplishments. It is a rare pleasure to talk to a young woman of matters more substantial than those that are common amongst young ladies. I have little interest in gossip, the doings of polite society or such other trifles.”

His face grew even more thoughtful and abruptly asked, “I believe that your Aunt, Countess Matlock, will be hosting a ball for Georgiana this fall. Do you know when it is to be?”

“I believe around the middle of October. We plan to stay in London for about six weeks and return to Pemberley in November.”

“Will I be invited to the ball?”

“I was not sure of your plans but will certainly arrange for an invitation for you.”

Bingley stretched as he rose from his seat, “Thank you. Now I have a rather awkward task ahead. I must intimate to Miss Thompson that I have no intentions. She is a most charming young lady and, if I had not known your sister, I would be attempting to engage her interest.”

Darcy rose and ushered his friend from the room, “I am sure you will do it handsomely Charles.” And laughed at his grimace, “Better you than me. I always make a hash of such endeavours.”

Bingley looked at him and laughed, “No, you do not bother with words. Your scowl is famous throughout London.”

“Was famous, Charles, was famous…..but no longer, I trust. Marriage to Elizabeth has quite changed me I believe”

Bingley shook his head, still somewhat amazed at the transformation of his friend and began to turn away before pausing to look back at Darcy. “I should tell you some news. I had a letter from my sister yesterday – Louisa – and she informed me that Caroline has a suitor, a baronet from Sussex that she met recently while visiting the Hursts. Louisa thinks it quite serious and seems to believe
Caroline has moderated her behaviour. I can only hope. The other piece of news is that Louisa is with child and expects to be confined next February. I will be an uncle at last.”

Darcy could only respond with congratulations and commented that expecting Caroline to change seemed rather hopeless. Laughing they separated, Bingley to seek his rooms to finish his business for the day and Darcy to the stables in the hope that he would encounter his wife.

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After ascertaining from the butler, Mr. Reynolds, where Miss Thompson might be found and having been told she was walking in the front garden, Bingley set out in search of her. He had spent several hours and completed his business dealings for the day and had one last chore to attend before he departed for York in the morning. It was not a task he viewed with any pleasure but it must be done. He could not, in good conscience, leave the lady in doubt as to his intentions. He would not repeat the mistake that he had made in Hertfordshire.

Miss Thompson had, unbeknownst to Bingley, been considering that gentleman carefully for the last few days. She had been conscious of a slight change in his attitude during their recent conversations. It was not until yesterday that she realized what had changed. He no longer was as intently focussed on her when they talked. His questions were more superficial and his interest had lessened. He was, in fact, treating her more casually. She had been aware very early in the visit that he was also paying particular interest to Miss Darcy, although she conceded his attentions to either of them were quite circumspect. She quite liked Miss Darcy and felt no displeasure about his attentions to her and had not noticed, until last evening, that his affections might be engaged. That changed last night. Perhaps it was her own impartiality that made her more aware but it had become clear, to her at least, that he was having trouble not watching Miss Darcy. It was with a sort wry amusement that she observed a similar problem on the part of Miss Darcy. That she could view their interaction with such equanimity was, she thought, the surest proof that her own affections had not been engaged. She might have been able to develop an affection for Mr. Bingley but she would not mourn his loss. If she were to meet the gentleman before they separated, each to their own home, she would attempt to relieve him of any apprehensions he might harbour.

Thus it was that, when Mr. Bingley encountered the lady while she walked in the garden, they were able to converse quite pleasantly for some quarter hour until finally Bingley realized he should take his leave, “Miss Thompson, I must leave early tomorrow morning for York. I was not sure that I would have the opportunity to express my appreciation for the pleasure that your company has provided these past weeks.”

“Mr. Bingley, I have enjoyed our talks also. I hope you have a safe journey home. I know I am looking forward to returning to Hertfordshire.” She hoped that the openness of her countenance and the absence of any sign of unhappiness at their separation would reassure the gentleman that her heart had not been engaged. Indeed, she found it quite easy to assume the mien that she presented.

After a few more civilities between them they parted, each satisfied that the other was not unhappy with the separation. Bingley had one more small but important task to perform before he departed in the morning. However, it could wait until after dinner.

So it was that when the gentlemen had rejoined the ladies in the music room after dinner, he sought an opportunity to talk to Georgiana and, finding her assisting Elizabeth with serving tea, he approached them both.

“Mrs. Darcy, I wish to express my appreciation for your invitation to Pemberley. I don’t know when I have had a more enjoyable time here. I will be retiring shortly so as to depart as early as possible for York in the morning and wished to take my leave of you now in the event I did not see you then.”
“Mr. Bingley, you are always welcome. In fact, you are the perfect guest. Amiable with everyone and willing to be pleased. I hope we see you in London this fall. William did suggest you planned to visit then.”

“Indeed I do plan to visit and look forward to it.” Turning to Georgiana, he bowed, “Miss Darcy, I take my leave of you also. I know you are looking forward to the season in London. I understand that your Aunt and Uncle Matlock will be hosting a ball in your honour. I hope to attend and would like to solicit a set with you now, if I may?”

Georgiana looked at Elizabeth who gave an almost imperceptible nod, “I would be most pleased to save you a set, Mr. Bingley. Do you have a preference? I believe I must reserve the first two sets but the others are available.”

“I would wish to have the supper set, if I may.”

“I will be sure to mark it so on my dance card, Mr. Bingley.” Georgiana was aware of the fact that it was the custom for those who dance the supper set, to dine together. It provided both with the opportunity to converse for almost two hours.

With that Mr. Bingley took his leave of the remainder of the company and retired to his rooms to complete his preparations to depart early in the morning.

Wednesday August 25, 1813 – Pemberley
Darcy and Elizabeth were enjoying a quiet hour of solitude in her sitting room when a maid appeared asking if his Aunt Holmes and her husband could speak with them in private. Assent was readily given and within ten minutes they were shown into the room. Elizabeth had ordered tea and biscuits and busied herself ensuring they all were served while her mind ran over the possible reasons for the visit and, not finding anything of note to worry her, she decided she would leave it to them to reveal their purpose. Finally after several minutes of casual conversation, Darcy’s aunt set down her cup and smiled at Elizabeth, “Lest you be concerned, we have no problems to lay in your lap. Quite the reverse, in fact. Cedric and I wish to thank you on behalf of our whole family for your kindness in inviting us to Pemberley. I have spoken of Pemberley to my children for years but we were never in a position to visit and, as you know, we have been estranged for over forty years. Elizabeth, William we would be delighted to have you visit us – perhaps next summer or earlier if that is your desire.” She looked expectantly at Elizabeth and Darcy.

Darcy was not slow to answer, “I am sure that Elizabeth and I would be delighted to visit. We cannot set a date but I see no reason why we could not visit next spring or summer.” He paused before continuing, “Aunt, forgive me if I touch on a private matter that you may not wish to discuss but…”

His aunt laughed, “You wish to know what caused the estrangement. I thought you would ask before now but, since you did not, believed you knew the particulars.”

“No, my father did not speak of it and I did not know of your existence until I encountered your name in one of my father’s journals. I even had to appeal to Aunt Amelia for your location.”

His aunt looked quite dismayed and Elizabeth reached over to grasp her hand while her husband placed a hand on her shoulder. She mastered her feelings, “I did not realize your father was so angry. Perhaps I should have for he and his father were of like minds in certain respects.” She gathered her thoughts and, speaking slowly and very quietly, began to explain her history with the family. As she spoke and relived those past events, her voice thickened with emotion and her distress became more obvious. Without realizing that she had done so, Elizabeth had moved closer and taken one of her
hands in her own. The tale was a simple one. Juliana Darcy fell in love with a man that her father and family deemed unsuitable.

Giving her husband a watery smile, she explained, “Cedric had no title, no connections and was a country gentleman with a small estate perhaps a fourth the size of Pemberley. My father had arranged a marriage with the son of an earl who would inherit the title. He was wealthy and well connected. I did not like him and would not agree to the marriage. I fought it for five months until I came of age. With the help of a close personal friend, I arranged to visit her and then eloped with Cedric to the protection of his family. We were married there a few weeks later. My father … disowned me and my sister and brother, your father, supported him. I did make one attempt to reconcile with your father after my father died but my letter went unanswered.” Tears were streaming down her face as she relived memories that were still fresh after more than forty years. Her husband held her close and dried her eyes with his handkerchief.

She looked at Darcy, “I have never regretted my decision – never! I have a wonderful husband and six fine children. I feel myself blessed. That I have been able to return to my childhood home now has been wonderful. And to see you both so happy. I….I do not have the words to express my happiness.” She gathered her composure before continuing, “Elizabeth, I have nothing but admiration for the manner in which you have been our hostess. I cannot imagine doing as much after being married for but a few months. I insist that you allow us to return your courtesy. You must visit us and let us show you the glories of Cornwall.”

“Aunt Juliana, you may be assured that we will visit and I hope, as soon as may be.”

Darcy’s thoughtful expression changed and he spoke decisively, “Aunt, Uncle you and your family are welcome to visit Pemberley whenever we are here. You would be most welcome and, indeed, may visit even if we are away. All Mrs. Reynolds will require is sufficient time to prepare rooms for you. I would also extend that invitation to include Darcy House in London. Unfortunately, I do not expect we could accommodate your whole family there at one time but should you or any of your children visit London, you must stay with us.”

Elizabeth was quick to second her husband’s invitation and Mr. Holmes’s pleasure at the graciousness of the offer was apparent. He was quick to express this appreciation and the two couples spent an agreeable quarter hour discussing some attractions in London that would make a visit most enjoyable. Plans were laid for his aunt and uncle to visit while the Darcys were in London and for them to attend Georgiana’s coming out ball being hosted by the Matlocks. As Darcy was to note later, they would also have to ensure that an invitation was extended to his other aunt and uncle which was speedily done; however, a prior commitment to attend the wedding of a close relation at that time would prevent their attending. Their regrets were heartfelt and accompanied by assurances that they would be pleased to call on the Darcys in the spring.
Elizabeth found herself the last to arrive for breakfast. For some reason she had found herself tired and chose to sleep later than her usual wont. She realized that William must have noticed her fatigue and chose not to disturb her rest. He was, she had been informed, out with the men fishing and would not be back until luncheon. There were several letters awaiting her perusal but the one she sought first was from her sister, Jane. She thought she knew what news it contained but, even so, there was always some fear with childbirth.

Gracechurch St., London
August 20, 1813

Dearest Lizzy,

Wonderful news! Our Aunt has had her baby, a healthy boy who is to be named Amos William Gardiner in honour of the husbands of their favourite nieces. Our Aunt is in excellent health and spirits and, according to her, this was her easiest delivery. Our uncle is beside himself with joy in that both child and mother are healthy.

It was, to be honest, an interesting experience for me. I am now about four months along and have felt the baby quicken several weeks ago. I think seeing how our aunt handled the confinement was good for me. I was too young to remember our mother’s confinements and, unfortunately, if her behaviour then was similar to that she displayed for our aunt’s then I am resolved that she will not attend me. My uncle had to remove her from the birthing room since she was creating such a disturbance. She was very affronted and removed herself to Longbourn the next day. I will have to discuss with my aunt where I shall hold my confinement. I would prefer to stay with my aunt but fear that my mother’s behaviour will be even more unseemly. I also am not sure that it would be fair to impose on my aunt when she is burden with an infant and young children.

I know you will offer to have me at Pemberley and I believe that my husband’s mother would be delighted to have me with her. I believe I would be comfortable with her. I cannot decide at the moment and will seek guidance from our aunt. I am enjoying being with child now. I am well but missing my husband most dearly. I worry for his safety and pray for his return. Perhaps I should not say this but I find my bed cold and empty without him.

I have not heard from Amos as yet. He warned me that letters would be slow to arrive and depended on the departure of a navy vessel for England. I cannot send him a letter since I do not know where he is stationed until such time as I receive a letter from him. He sailed under hidden orders and did not know his destination in advance.

I am glad that Kitty and Mary are enjoying their visit with you. They both needed to be removed from Longbourn although Mary seems more comfortable there now that she is the only daughter home. I hope you take Kitty to enjoy a season in London. I gather from your last letter that her comportment is much improved. She is now of an age where she can seriously begin to consider a suitor. Thanks to the goodness of your husband she has some portion to offer a gentleman and under your guidance I am sure that her manners have will continue to improve. It is unfortunate that she never learned to play the pianoforte but, from your letters I gather she has developed some level of accomplishment at sketching. She is a good creature and removed from Lydia’s influence has become much improved in company. I am glad that she is surrounded by young women of sense and sensibility.
You have not said much of yourself or your husband but your happiness radiates from every page of your letters. I know you have assumed a huge burden this summer with so many guests but my faith in your capabilities is second only to that of your husband I am sure. I remember standing in the Pemberley Gallery and Mr. Darcy talking about the great Mistresses of Pemberley. You may not have known it then but he was not looking at a picture when he spoke but at you. I only hope that you do not tire yourself too much. Remember you are still a newlywed. Make sure you save time to be with your husband. Tell him from me that he must try to do likewise and not let you overburden yourself.

Enough scolding!
Your most affectionate sister,

Jane Stovall

Elizabeth placed the letter on the table while she finished eating and then, after determining where her father and sisters were to be found, she finished her breakfast. Since her father was in the library, she would speak with him first. As she ate, she considered Jane’s situation. Why, she thought, could not Jane be confined at Pemberley? If her aunt and uncle were to visit for Christmas, her aunt could be there for the confinement. Her parents could also visit but she would have to have some assurances from her father that they would leave before the new year. She would broach the subject with him this morning. He and Mary would surely leave within a few days now that her mother was at Longbourn. Kitty might return also but, since the original plan was that she would return to London with the Darcys, as Elizabeth was sure Kitty would choose to remain at Pemberley with Georgiana.

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The next day Elizabeth and Georgiana were comfortably sitting in her private sitting room along with Mrs. Reynolds. Scraps of paper littered the top of the low table before them containing the notes they had prepared for the annual Harvest Festival to be held towards the end of September. This would be the first in several years that the family would attend and the first in over fifteen that a Mistress would host. While Elizabeth had met most of the tenant families, that day she would meet them all together and host the whole affair. She was determined that the event would be memorable. They had completed the initial preparations and now Georgiana and Mrs. Reynolds were regaling her about past festivals. However, she had plans to go riding with her husband and indicated as much to the others. They rose to leave as did Elizabeth, until she felt overcome with dizziness and dropped back into her chair. Mrs. Reynolds was quick to move to her side with an exclamation of concern.

Georgiana was too surprised to react at all. Mrs. Reynolds seemed unsurprised at the events and, after ascertaining that Elizabeth had recovered, urged her to return to her bedchamber, “Come Mrs. Darcy. We must get you into bed.” And with the assistance of Elizabeth’s maid, Julia who Georgiana had called, she was undressed and placed in her bed, protesting all the while that she was not ill. Once this was done, Mrs. Reynolds asked Georgiana to send a footman to find her brother and bring him to Mrs. Darcy’s room. Once Georgiana had departed, Mrs. Reynolds and Julia sat beside the bed and looked at each other than at Elizabeth. Julia nodded to Mrs. Reynolds who began to speak and question Elizabeth. The three women talked for nearly a quarter hour before they were interrupted by a demanding knock on the door and Darcy’s voice asking to enter. Mrs. Reynolds was quick to open the door admitting Darcy and ushering herself and Julia out of the room. While Darcy had eyes only for Elizabeth, he did not miss the happy smiles on the faces of both ladies which puzzled him greatly.

It was a matter of several quick strides and he had grasped the hand that Elizabeth held out to him, “Lizzy, are you well? Georgiana said you fainted.”
“Not fainted, dearest, just dizzy.”

“What is the problem? Are you ill? Shall I send for the doctor?”

Elizabeth considered her answer carefully, “Truly, a doctor is not necessary…not immediately, at least, but it would be helpful to see him in the next few days perhaps.” She placed her fingers over his lips, “Please, let me finish.” She paused, “Are you familiar with a woman’s courses?”

“Yes, I had to learn as Georgiana grew up.” She could see only puzzlement on his face.

“Well, perhaps, you have not noticed that I have not had any since July.”

Seeing no comprehension as yet on her husband’s face, Elizabeth chortled, “We may expect to be parents in early May next year.”

“Oh…..Oh!” In a second he was beside her on the bed and wrapped her in his arms.

Resting her head on his chest she smiled up at him, “I think I can assume you are pleased.” She felt rather than saw his agreement, “I was so busy with our guests and ensuring that everything went well that I did not notice their absence myself. I know I have been a little more tired than usual and both Julia and Mrs. Reynolds suspected something as a result but said nothing to me. I noticed that I was a little more tender…” and Elizabeth placed a hand on her bosom,”…than was usual but thought nothing of it.”

Her husband wiped his hand across his mouth and she could see the hope and joy that she felt mirrored in his eyes. “Elizabeth, It is certain?”

“As much as it can be at this stage. I have not felt the babe quicken but I am … I believe I am carrying our child.” She did not want to allow her emotions free rein as yet. She knew that women sometimes lost a babe early but could not let herself think on that possibility. She felt strong and healthy.

“What can I do to help you? You must get enough rest. Should we cancel our plans to visit London?”

“There is not much anyone can do as yet. Fortunately I have not been sick although I find myself eating less than usual. Julia and Mrs. Reynolds will take care of me. The important thing is to take enough rest. I think I can trust to them and…” she looked pointedly at him with a small smile, ”…you to ensure I do so.”

She paused while she considered his last comment, “I do not see that we need to avoid London. If I am rested, I can attend with Georgiana. I may have to limit my dancing… “ She smirked at her husband, “a hardship which I am sure you will suffer gladly.”

“As long as I am allowed to dance with my wife, I have no objection to her not dancing with others.” He chuckled when she poked him in the ribs and then turned serious, “I am known as a unsociable man and we can use that to limit the number of engagements we attend. We will not attend parties and events simply to allow others to scrutinize you or because society demands it of us. I do not want you to tire yourself and I know you well enough by now to know that you will feel an obligation to do as much as you can for Georgiana. I will insist that you come first and I know that Georgiana will agree with me. Your health and that of our child must come first.”

Without a conscious thought his large hand had encompassed her stomach and she placed both of atop his linking their fingers. Seeing the pensive look on her face he asked, “What frets you, my love?”
She looked up at the man she loved so dearly. Could she burden him with her uncertainties when she knew he was harbouring his own? After several moments she confessed, “I want this child so very much now that I realize he is here and yet I worry that I will be a good mother. Am I ready? There are so many questions that my mind is all confusion.”

Darcy smiled and squeezed her gently, “Much as I had no doubt that you would be an excellent Mistress of Pemberley, I have none that you will be a most excellent mother.”

“Well, as long as one of us is confident in my abilities, I shall have to be satisfied.”

“You realize, my love, that you have referred to the babe as ‘he’. Are you that convinced?”

Elizabeth laughed, “Not at all.” She paused and grew thoughtful, “I expect you would prefer a son.”

Darcy heard the question in her voice, “I prefer only a healthy wife and babe. Son or daughter will be greeted with equal love and joy.” She heard the determination in his voice, “This child and you are my main concern.”

Elizabeth knew that his instinct to protect her would emerge stronger with a desire to extend that protection to their child. She suspected that she would have some battles in the future as he attempted to constrain her activities; however, for now she was content to allow him free rein to do so.

Some time later, assured that Elizabeth was feeling well, they ventured downstairs to join Georgiana, Mary and Kitty for tea. Mr. Bennet had been requested to join them and did so shortly thereafter. Swearing them all to secrecy, they announced their joyous news. Kitty and Mary were pleased but Georgiana was overjoyed at the news. Mr. Bennet was silent while the young ladies exclaimed their happiness and did not venture a comment until he felt Elizabeth’s quizzical gaze. Getting to his feet he went to stand before her and, taking her hands in his, he pulled her upright hugged her fiercely, “Oh, my little Lizzy. I am struggling to accept the fact that you will be a mother…a most excellent one to be sure. I…” and, releasing her hands so that she could sit once more, he waved his hand and grimaced, “your mother will be overjoyed.”

Elizabeth quirked her lips, “We must talk about that Papa, but not now.” We must discuss how to ensure my mother does not intrude.

The subject of conversation did not depart appreciably from matters pertaining to the babe. Darcy noticed however that Elizabeth become distracted and a little pensive.

“Elizabeth, what troubles you?” Both Kitty and Georgiana ceased their talking to look between Darcy and Elizabeth with questioning gazes.

“I am not troubled so much as uncertain…”

Darcy quietly asked, “Uncertain? About what?”

Elizabeth shook her head, “I would wish the child to be born here – at Pemberley. This is now my home. This will be his or her home. Our children should be born here. Of that I am certain. It is just that…”

Darcy waited patiently for several moments before prompting, “just that…?”

Elizabeth smiled weakly at him, “I was hoping that Jane and my aunt would attend me and that seems unlikely since Jane will have a babe only a few months old and Aunt will not wish to travel so far with an infant although the worst of the winter weather should be past.”
“I agree that Jane is not likely to wish to travel. I would not want you to do so if you were she. But your aunt…I do not agree. I think we can inquire as to her thoughts. I can….I will surely provide a most comfortable carriage and attendants for her trip.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly and then decisively, “We will leave this for now and discuss it with my aunt and Jane when we are in London. There is time to consider what is best.” Looking at Georgiana, she thought her be rather pensive and inquired as to the cause. Georgiana did not deny her observation but was reluctant to reveal the source of her concern until finally she blurted, “You will not be able to engage in the season in the spring, will you Elizabeth?”

“I had not thought that far ahead to be honest.” Elizabeth paused to think about the matter, “I would not want to travel with so young an infant and I will not be parted from the child.” She looked at Georgiana with some distress, “I am sorry. I had not thought of this.”

Darcy interjected, “If we are at Pemberley, we shall stay there until it is safe for both Elizabeth and the babe to travel.” In a somewhat hesitant voice, he suggested, “Perhaps our Aunt could assume the role. She has done it with Frances, after all. I had wished to be present for your first season, Georgie but I must be with Elizabeth.”

Georgiana nodded decisively, “Of course you must. I have decided that I will not attend the spring season unless Elizabeth is with me. I will stay here at Pemberley with you both.” She looked at Elizabeth and her brother and smiled tightly, “and I will not be dissuaded on this!”

And so it proved to be. After over a half hour of arguing and discussing, Georgiana remained firm in her decision. Kitty, who had remained silent throughout the conversation, expressed her support for Georgiana and her willingness to forego the spring season as well. Elizabeth suppressed her surprise at this decision since she had expected her sister to have been looking to the season with great eagerness. That she was willing to forego the pleasure under the circumstances spoke well, she thought, for her increasing maturity. An idea which had been floating nebulously in her mind crystallized and she gave it voice, “Well, if we are not to attend the season next year, we must hold a ball here at Pemberley while I am still able to organize it. I think a ball on the first day of the new year would be appropriate, do you not agree, William?”

Her arch look at Darcy discomfited him. She knew that hosting such an event would severely tax his tolerance for society; but she also knew that he would agree for Georgiana’s sake. He nodded his approval glumly which drew quiet laughs from the three ladies and a hug from Georgiana, “Thank you, Brother!”

The rest of the evening passed in quiet conversation until Elizabeth admitted that she was feeling rather fatigued. In a matter of minutes, they had removed to their chambers and readied themselves for bed. Passing instructions that they were not to be disturbed, they settled on the settee in their sitting room and shared a glass of wine and their thoughts on the weeks to come.

Later, as they lay in his bed, Elizabeth rested her head on his chest as Darcy began to express his happiness about the child she carried. If he had any concerns about her health, he did not voice them and, since his words of endearment were accompanied by gentle caresses, it was not long before love-making consumed their whole attention. The quiet conversation that followed spoke of their hopes, dreams and fears for the child and their abilities as parents.

Mr. Bennet and Mary departed for Longbourn several days later – without Kitty who much preferred to remain with Elizabeth and Georgiana - but not before Elizabeth and her father had a protracted discussion concerning the desirability of Mrs. Bennet’s absence at the birth of a grandchild. As Elizabeth noted, her mother’s behaviour at Mrs. Gardiner’s delivery was so disturbing as to require her removal from the birthing room. That she would be more restrained at the birth of a grandchild
was too remote a possibility for any sensible person to consider. Mr. Bennet reluctantly agreed that she would not be allowed to attend and to accept the disturbances that would ensue in his household. Elizabeth suggested that it was equally important to prevent their mother from intruding on Jane and Mr. Bennet agreed that a similar restriction would apply. Noting that his brother had not hesitated to remove Mrs. Bennet from the birthing room, he suspected that Jane would have a capable champion as long as she wished for that support.
Friday October 1, 1813 – Matlock Manor, Derbyshire

As the carriage rolled to the front steps of Matlock Manor, Darcy felt a surge of excitement to see a very familiar face amongst those awaiting their arrival, “Richard! He’s home!”

Elizabeth and Georgiana jostled to view out the nearest window and their excitement was palpable. The carriage had hardly come to a stop before Darcy had exited, not even waiting for the footstep to be lower. He did repress his urge to immediately envelop his cousin in a hug and assisted the three ladies accompanying him to descend.

The earl, countess and Richard had, by the time Darcy handed down Kitty from the carriage, begun the greetings. The earl, with a small smile on his face, waved Richard forward. “I would not dare stand between my youngest son and his favourite cousins.” Richard grinned and stepped towards Elizabeth bowing over her hand, “Miss B…Mrs. Darcy, you cannot know how much pleasure it gives me to see you married to my scowling cousin. You have my utmost respect for taking on this challenge.”

“Careful Richard, I am still better than you with the foil!”

“Ha! If you challenge me, I will select a horse race. You won’t have a chance.” He clasped hands with Darcy and was enveloped in a quick fierce hug, “I am glad to see you home and in one piece, cousin.”

Richard winked at Elizabeth, “Oh and Mrs. Darcy, you must call me Richard and I shall call you Elizabeth.” He then moved quickly to hug Georgiana and then sought an introduction to Kitty, “Miss Catherine, I am most pleased to make your acquaintance. I see that the reports of the beauty of the women in Bennet family are well founded.”

The countess looked at Elizabeth closely and then moved to her side and arm-in-arm they entered the manor house. As they walked the countess spoke softly and intimately, “Do you maybe have some news for us all?”

Elizabeth laughed softly, “you are as perspicacious as my mother. She can spot a woman who is only in her first month. We plan to announce it tonight.”

“Fitzwilliam must be delighted…and very over-protective I imagine.”

“He is trying to be reasonable and we have not had any serious disagreements …yet.” Elizabeth laughed again, “We are both very pleased.”

“Have you felt the quickening?”

Elizabeth smiled happily, “Not yet. The doctor assures me the child will arrive early in May...” She chuckled, “…which Mrs. Reynolds had told me a day earlier. She thinks I should feel the quickening quite soon now.”

Laughing and talking softly together as they proceeded indoors, the countess was only recalled to her hostess duties by a quiet cough by the earl. Not releasing Elizabeth’s arm, she turned to her guests, Miss Bennet, your rooms adjoin Georgiana’s and she is in her usual rooms. She will show you there. Darcy, now that you are married I have moved you and Elizabeth into the Blue suite.” Turning she began to lead Elizabeth to her room and Elizabeth, looking over her shoulder simply smiled at her
husband. The three men simply stood and watched the four women walk up the stairs. The earl turned to Darcy with a rather odd look in his eye, “It seems I have acquired another daughter rather than a niece.” He shook his head, “Fitzwilliam, why don’t you wash the dirt off and join me and Richard in my study for a brandy.”

“When pleasure, Uncle.” As Darcy moved to walk upstairs, Richard accompanied him for a few paces – far enough that his father could not hear, “We will have to talk at some point about how your marriage came about. Not now, but later. Perhaps we can ride tomorrow?”

Darcy smiled, nodded and whispered, “Very well, but do not distress yourself. All is well.” As he prepared to rejoin his uncle and cousin, his thoughts veered pleasantly to the change that had taken place in the opinions of his Uncle and Aunt Matlock in a little less than six months. The young woman that his uncle had freely disparaged – although Darcy had not revealed that to Elizabeth – was now considered a welcome and valued member of the Matlock family. That Elizabeth had been able to win his uncle’s approbation did not surprise Darcy, but that she had done so in such a short period of time astounded him.

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The cousins did indeed go for an early morning ride the following day. Richard listened quietly, if not altogether approvingly, as Darcy explained how he had located Lydia Bennet, arranged for her to travel with her prospective husband to the Canadas and the letters which had been provided to establish the legitimacy of her marriages. “I admit, Richard, that I was banking that no one would be inclined to question a marriage when the parties were an ocean distant. The fact that she is rightfully married now gives it even more legitimacy.”

“Are you sure of that marriage?”

“Simpson would only receive his funds when he provided proof of the marriage. In this case, my agent was on the scene. It is valid.”

“The only loose end, Darcy, is Wickham. I could wish he was truly dead but perhaps it matters less now since the chit is safely married.”

“I have to believe that the threat of a death sentence or debtor’s prison should he return will silence him. Also, as time passes, any revelation he makes becomes less significant”

They rode in silence for some time, before Darcy pointedly not looking at his cousin, asked, “how serious was your injury? You made light of it last night, but I suspect you have hidden the worst.”

Richard grimaced, “I thought I had but mother quizzed me quite thoroughly and learned the whole of it.” They rode in silence for some seconds before he continued, “It was a near thing. If one of my men had not killed the bugger, I would not be here now.”

“Aunt Eleanor seems to think you will not return to action. Is this the truth?”

“Yes, I will never regain my strength in that arm. Even now it aches from our exertions which are mild compared to those required of a cavalry officer.”

“Will you retire? Can you afford to retire?”

“Two separate questions, cousin. To the second, the answer is yes albeit with a limited income and consigned to a life as a bachelor. To the first question, I do not know. I could serve as a staff officer if I can find such a position. That is what I would prefer…unless I can find a young lady with a substantial dowry and a fondness for worn-out soldiers. I admit my envy for your felicity in marriage
and would like to be as fortunate; however, I suspect that might be difficult to achieve.”

“You are on leave for how long?”

“Until the new year, it seems.”

“You will attend, of course, your family’s ball at which Georgiana will come out. Will you participate further? If you are looking for a wife, it would seem advisable. Elizabeth and I plan to attend several balls and host two or three dinners before returning to Pemberley. We would very much wish for your presence.”

“Georgiana has promised me a dance at her ball. I will concede the honour of her first set to my father but will ask for the second set. Beyond that I am not prepared to say.”

Darcy decided there was nothing to be gained for pressing the issue at this time. He would have to talk to his uncle and aunt to see what arrangements could be made for his cousin’s future. He had acquired a small estate that might serve and was more than willing to assist. Perhaps he and his uncle could talk with Richard before they left for London. “Actually Richard, I have some thoughts which might interest you and perhaps your father and I could talk with you tonight about them.” He would say no more despite being pressed by his cousin and the latter was forced to be content with agreeing to discussing the matter later that day. The two cousins rode in companionable silence for the remainder of their time, returning tired, dirty and content.

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Their stay at Matlock was not of long duration. Georgiana’s coming out ball was in three weeks and there was some urgency to return to London. Gowns were to be made and plans for the ball itself to be completed. Lady Eleanor had sent the invitations already but there were numerous tasks to be completed in the coming weeks. Darcy thoughts were, for the most part, directed towards Elizabeth than the ball. During their stay, his aunt had tried to change Elizabeth’s mind about having the baby at Pemberley but Elizabeth was adamant. She conceded that doctors were better in London but she herself would be happier and feel more secure at Pemberley. Finally conceding the point, the countess turned her attention to Georgiana’s season in the spring. When apprised of her decision to remain at Pemberley with Elizabeth, her disapproval was expressed very strongly. It took repeated statements from Georgiana that she would not be happy to participate without her sister at her side to finally convince Lady Eleanor who, at last, sat back and stated, “I do not recognize this Georgiana. The young girl I knew would not have been able to carry her point like this.” She looked at Elizabeth with a rueful smile, “I blame this on you, you know; however, I cannot be too unhappy. She has improved marvellously in the past months.”

Elizabeth accepted the praise calmly with a slight nod, “I think having my sister Kitty as company has helped them both as well.” She turned to Lady Eleanor, “We have decided to host a ball at Pemberley – on the first day of the new year. I have never organized such. The Harvest Festival we held last month was, I suspect, a small effort compared to that required to host a ball. I would much appreciate your guidance; if you would permit me to assist you in preparing for your ball, I am sure that the lessons will help me greatly.”

Lady Eleanor was more than agreeable to the suggestion and the following hour was spent outlining the various tasks that were necessary. The subject was addressed the next day as well when Elizabeth sat down with Lady Eleanor and the Matlock housekeeper. Elizabeth’s countenance was slightly rueful when she was finally convinced to rest that afternoon by her husband, “I suspect that I will be thankful for Mrs. Reynolds and hope that she isn’t too distressed by the work I expect to lay on her.”
“Nonsense, Elizabeth. She will love the chance to show Pemberley in all its glory. I assure you of this.”

I trust you are right, my love. I trust you are right.” Darcy lay beside his wife as she drifted off to sleep. Once assured that she would not wake, he carefully rose and went to sit by the fireplace to read until it was time to wake her once more; however, his thoughts were shortly drawn back to the discussion that had been held with his uncle and Richard the previous evening. He had been quite surprised and pleased that his uncle was in a position to support his proposition financially. That Richard would feel honour bound to reject any large gift he knew in advance; however, even his stubborn, independent cousin could not reject what essentially would be a wedding gift from his relations. That his cousin would be settled in close proximity to Pemberley added no small amount of gratification.
Chapter 49

Friday October 15, 1813 – Darcy House, London

Darcy had convinced Elizabeth to cancel their engagement for the evening in order to rest. Both were feeling the stress of the social season albeit for somewhat different reasons. In this instance, each was in sympathy with the other in a desire for a quiet evening in the other’s company. Elizabeth had finished reading the latest letter from Mary detailing recent events at Longbourn and pensive air drew her husband’s interest, “What are thinking of, my love?”

Elizabeth appeared to him to be reluctant to respond, “Come my dear, tell me what troubles you.” She finally grimaced before responding, “I doubt you will hear it with any pleasure. I wish…would it be too much to ask my family to visit us over Christmas? My mother has never seen Pemberley and feels the slight a great deal it appears. We could invite the Gardiners and Jane as well perhaps.”

Darcy attempted, probably not altogether successfully he suspected, to school his features to hide his reluctance to be in Mrs. Bennet’s company; however, he realized that this was not an unreasonable suggestion. “You may invite whomever you wish, my love and, while I admit that your mother will test my patience, she will be welcome.”

“Thank you, William. We both know she will act improperly but I will endeavour to prevent the worst. I hope to convince Jane to have her confinement here and to have Aunt Madeline attend her.” She gave her husband a teasing look, “You, sir, are the fortunate one. I have reason to believe that you and my father will spend no little time enjoying the quiet and solitude of the library during the visit.”

She shook her head at Darcy’s smirk but any amusement fled with his following words, “What about the New Year’s Day ball, Elizabeth?”

“Oh my! I had not thought of that.” Darcy could see Elizabeth thinking for several moments before abruptly coming to a decision. Her voice was firm when she finally spoke, “She cannot attend. I…we cannot afford the embarrassment should she behave in a manner remotely like that which she displayed at the Netherfield Ball. I will not tolerate it!”

“Shall she stay in her rooms or depart for Longbourn before the ball?”

“I will leave that decision to my father but I hope he takes her home before the ball and will ask it of him. She will, I know, be most unhappy and will make her displeasure known.”

“I suggest you write your father as soon as may be and talk to your sister and aunt as well. If your sister is to travel to Pemberley we may want to leave London a little earlier than planned.”

“I shall write Papa immediately but perhaps when I am done, you could give me another billiard lesson?”

“That, my dear, would be delightful. Please make that a short letter so that I might sufficient time to devote to your instruction.”

Within a very short time indeed, a servant passing the billiard room could hear the clack of billiard balls being struck and the Mistress’s laughter.
“Miss Georgiana Darcy!”

As her name was announced, Georgiana began the descent of the stairs leading to the ballroom. She was the third, and last, of the young ladies to be presented to society tonight. As she slowly and gracefully made her way down the stairs, her thoughts were a jumbled mix. I know my gown is beautiful and William gave me my mother’s diamond necklace which she wore on her introduction. I can see Elizabeth on William’s arm. She glows, she looks so happy. I hope I can find someone who will make me as happy. William looks unhappy. Elizabeth says he is not looking forward to losing me. Silly man. I will always be his sister. I just hope his countenance does not discourage all of the gentlemen who wish to dance with me.

She looked past her brother and his wife to see her cousin step forward to offer his hand. I am so glad that my uncle ceded the first dance to Richard. As she reached the last step she placed her hand in her cousin’s and let him lead her to the head of the dance pairs. Darcy and Elizabeth took the fourth position after the other two couples being introduced. As the dance proceeded, she was warmed by Richard’s care and teasing comments which distracted her sufficiently that she became less conscious of the many eyes upon her. The grin she received from Elizabeth when their paths crossed caused her to giggle and relax further. By the end of the set, she was quite looking forward to the following dances.

Richard led her, after the set concluded, to join Elizabeth and her brother. She was to be partnered by the earl for the next set and was already being approached by a few gentlemen seeking to be included on her dance card. While she spoke with these gentlemen under the watchful eye of her brother and Elizabeth, she noticed Richard in close conversation with Miss Thompson who had been invited by Elizabeth to this ball. A surprised as she was by the invitation, it had been made clear, albeit obliquely, by Miss Thompson that she had no particular interest in Mr. Bingley. As she snuck the occasional glance at Richard, it seemed to her that he was not disinterested. To her surprise, she heard him ask for the third dance but before she could hear Miss Thompson’s response, the earl arrived to lead her once more unto the dance floor. Richard was partnering Elizabeth and Darcy had led Miss Thompson onto the floor.

The remainder of the ball had proceeded with unexpected, by her at least, quietude. She had danced with her Fitzwilliam cousins and a number of gentlemen who had been carefully screened by her aunt for suitability. She rather expected one or two of them to call the next day. The most memorable time had been with Mr. Bingley. Their dance itself was unexceptional; he was an excellent dancer and their steps and movements together could not have been smoother or more enjoyable. That he did not attempt to distract her with trivial conversation only added to her pleasure. When they did converse, it was on a topic that was of interest to both but for the most part, they danced in a companionable silence.

Since he had engaged her for the supper dance, he was able to partner her while they ate. In this regard, he was particular in seating her amongst her relations with whom she could converse comfortably. He himself did not try to monopolize her conversation but did succeed in engaging her interest on the theatre where they discussed a recent performance she had seen and on travel where they spoke of Yorkshire and some of the more interesting locations he had visited. While her attention had been largely focussed on Mr. Bingley, she had noticed that her cousin, Richard, had escorted Miss Thompson to the supper table which suggested to her that he had also just danced with her. Such a degree of interest on his part was unusual and she contrived to observe them occasionally as she ate. Richard was, as always, quite amiable and conversing with all those around him but it did seem that he was devoting an extraordinary amount of attention to Miss Thompson. That they had met once or twice at dinner parties, she was vaguely aware of but had not attributed much
significance to the fact. Obviously that was a mistake on her part. She did not know Miss Thompson well; their interaction at Pemberley had been somewhat constrained but she had found her to be intelligent and kind with a rather disillusioned view of London society. Perhaps she was not a poor choice as a wife for Richard.

She was truly thankful for Elizabeth’s guidance when her turn to exhibit arrived. She had chosen two pieces that were enjoyable listening, required a decent degree of competence to perform and, most importantly, that gave her pleasure to play. Lost in the music, she had been scarcely conscious of the audience and the applause that greeted her when she was done both surprised and pleased her. As she returned to Elizabeth’s side, it was impossible not to observe her sister’s joy. With her hand resting on her stomach, Elizabeth murmured to her, “I just felt the babe’s quickening!” and looking up at her tall husband, she rolled her eyes and whispered, “And I fear his protectiveness will only increase. I dare say that if it were not your coming out, he would whisk me home right now.”

Georgiana looked over at her brother. She could not see that he was any more attentive than usual. His discomfort with such public occasions led him to remain by Elizabeth’s side as much as possible although she admitted that he had improved greatly in terms of sociability in the last year. Nevertheless she harboured no doubt that he would remove Elizabeth if she displayed the least sign of discomfort or fatigue and suspected, as well, that Elizabeth would hide any such signs as long as possible. Given her brother’s sensitivity to his wife, she rather thought Elizabeth would have limited success. She found herself quite happy with this thought. Turning back to Elizabeth, she ventured to say, “You must not stay should you feel tired. My uncle and aunt will surely look after me.”

Elizabeth nodded, “I do not plan to dance anymore and, should I feel tired, I believe I can retire to a room to rest. And …” she looked past Georgiana, “I believe your next dance partner approaches.”

Georgiana turned and smiled slightly at the young man who had come to claim her for the set. Lord Albert Knowles was the second son of the Duke of ______ and had been gifted a comfortable estate by his father. She had not met him previously but knew that her Uncle Matlock was supportive of a connection with that family. Their dance together was unexceptional and such conversation as was to be had was unmemorable and, at the end of the dance, Georgiana was surprised at his request to call on her the next day.

Georgiana was fully engaged for the remainder of the ball although her attention frequently drifted back towards her brother and his wife. Elizabeth had, as she stated, danced no more but, her arm firmly resting on that of her husband, she had moved casually around the room stopping to speak with acquaintances and leaving behind her smiling faces. She was to learn later that her brother had eventually insisted that Elizabeth remove herself to a room to rest until the ball was complete.

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Richard had arrived at the dance with the object of determining whether he wished to try and engage Miss Thompson’s affections. He remembered their first meeting; she had been invited, along with her parents and her brother and his wife to a dinner party hosted by the Darcys. It had been a rather large and mixed affair with a mixture of Bennet, Fitzwilliam and Darcy relatives along with a number of particular friends of the Darcys. He rather doubted that Darcy House had seen anything similar for over ten years. He had been introduced to Miss Thompson when she arrived but the press of people had prevented any opportunity for conversation. Fortunately, although he was later to suspect that chance had little role in the matter, he was seated by Miss Thompson during dinner and their conversation, full of the commonplace topics at the beginning, had quickly taken a very different tack as the meal progressed.

"Mrs. Darcy tells me, Colonel, that you are only lately returned from Wellington’s army. I
understand you were injured at the battle of Vitoro – have I pronounced that correctly?”

“You certainly pronounced it as I do anyway, I am not in a position to judge its correctness. Indeed I have been back almost a month now.”

“Will you be required to return?”

Richard was not sure how much to divulge in this matter. My parents have convinced me to resign my commission. I will be simply Mr. Fitzwilliam in a month or so.

“Your parents must be very relieved at such news. I am sure that mine would be if one of my brothers was similarly situated.”

Richard smiled, “I have good reason to know they are mightily happy; although there remains the question of my future employment. As a second son, I must make my own way in the world. Fortunately, I believe my prospects are reasonably bright. But enough of such dismal topics, your family is now established in Hertfordshire I believe. How do you find it there?”

Miss Thompson was willing to let him divert the conversation to other topics and responded by praising the area and noting that she had been invited by the Darcys to visit almost a month at Pemberley during the summer. They spent much of the remainder of the dinner conversing on the beauties of Derbyshire and Pemberley and their conversation was joined by Richard’s sister, Lady Frances. Both Miss Thompson and Richard regretted the separation of ladies and gentlemen that occurred when the meal was complete.

Richard casually surveyed the room when the gentlemen returned. Miss Thompson was an attractive young woman and her countenance was enlivened by her intelligence and a distinct sense of humour. He found her comments on the other guests that had been visiting Pemberley had displayed a sense of the ridiculous without descending into that malice which seemed to permeate much of London society. He finally saw her sitting amongst a group of young women and foresaw little opportunity to further engage her in conversation. Casting another glance in her direction, he perceived that she had discerned his attention and awarded him a slight smile before returning her attention to those surrounding her. Opportunities to converse with her further had not been available until shortly before she was to depart with her family. He had just returned his coffee cup to the table when he felt her presence beside him. He recognized her delicate perfume before turning to face her and knew he wished to further their acquaintance. To this end, he began, “Miss Thompson, it has indeed been a pleasure to have met you tonight. Are you finding the season to be interesting so far?”

“I admit Colonel that I find little enjoyment in most of the Season’s activities. Dinners like this one tonight have proven to be a very welcome respite.”

“Forgive me if I am being impertinent but your days or rather evenings must be full of events. I remember my sister complaining because she was never home for an evening to rest.”

She laughed, “That is all too true if one allows it to happen. I have convinced my mother to be more circumspect with our endeavours. We shall attend the theatre two nights hence and have been invited to a ball by the Samuelsons. Do you know them?”

“Paul Samuelson?”

“Indeed.”

“I have only heard of him. I believe my Cousin Darcy knows him rather well.” I wonder if Darcy has received an invitation?
Before she could respond further, she was reminded by her mother that they were to depart and she took her leave of him.

His appeal the next day to Darcy had convinced the latter to solicit - successfully - the Samuelsons to substitute Richard for the Darcy presence at the ball. He had attended and had requested, again successfully, two dances – the first and, subsequently, last - with Miss Thompson. His enjoyment seemed to have been matched by hers and during the dance, they had somehow contrived to be in each other's company on the one occasion when she had not danced. As their final dance was concluded, he had taken the critical step, “Miss Thompson, may I call on you tomorrow?”

She had appeared a little surprised at the request but there appeared no uncertainty in her mien when she responded, “I should like that very much, Colonel.”

“I will call at two o’clock, if that I agreeable?”

“I look forward to seeing you, Colonel.”

As they left the dance floor, she handed him her card with her address which he took and then bowed over her hand before taking his leave of her.

He had called upon her at home three times since the Samuelson ball and been invited to dine with them once. Such occasions had permitted them to discuss a variety of topics although the presence of others had limited them to such topics as would be appropriate for a drawing room. He had come away impressed by her sense, sensibility, good humour and kindness. That she had a carefully hidden wit was obvious from the mirth that flickered across her features when some absurdity occurred. Nevertheless, he knew that more precipitate action was required if he were to forward their acquaintance.

Her presence tonight at the Matlock ball had been at his request and he knew his parents were almost quiveringly sensitive to his interest in Miss Thompson. He had been present when Elizabeth had introduced her to his parents and, if Miss Thompson was not aware of the focussed interest of his mother, he most certainly was. He had previously asked her for the supper dance and tonight, he planned to ask for a second dance. If he could arrange the opportunity he planned to ask her if he could court her.

Later, after they both had finished eating he assisted her from the table and they began to stroll around the room. Realizing that he might not be afforded a more opportune moment that evening, he directed their steps toward an open door opening onto a balcony, to which he gestured. “Miss Thompson, would you allow me an opportunity to speak to you in private?”

Receiving her surprised assent, they stepped onto the balcony which was unoccupied He ensured that the door remained open and that they were visible from within the ball room. He thought he saw his mother watching him but the room was too crowded for him to be certain of that. He found himself uncharacteristically nervous. He knew what he wished to say but his throat seemed tight and her questioning gaze at him did nothing to expel his sudden fit of nerves. “Miss Thompson, I wished…” he grabbed hold of himself and willed a posture of calmness that was more feigned than otherwise. He tried again, “Miss Thompson, I find myself bereft of the poise that I normally possess. I asked you here for a purpose.” At last I am starting to make sense. “I have been much in your company for the last several weeks and have developed a sincere appreciation, esteem for you. I wish to ask whether you would be agreeable to my courting you?”

That she was surprised by his request was obvious and it was several moments before she responded, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, you find me quite discomposed. I… I would welcome such a courtship, sir. Very much, in fact!” She raised her eyes to search his face, “I would very much wish to know you
better.”

“I will call on your father tomorrow morning at two then for his consent. Perhaps I might, if the weather is favourable, arrange for us to walk in Hyde Park.”

“I would look forward to that.” She then became conscious that the musicians were preparing to begin to play, “Unfortunately sir, I must return to the ball. I am to dance the next.”

Raising her hands he brushed them with his lips and then returned with her to the ballroom. They had but a few moments before she was claimed by her next partner for the dance. As it turned out, Richard was unable to obtain her attention again until she and her family departed. He assisted her into her coach under the questioning looks of her parents and could easily surmise that she was to be quizzed on the drive drove home and her own rueful smile, as she accepted his help, left little doubt that she understood what was to follow. He watched her carriage drive away before returning indoors only to meet the inquisitive stare of his mother. He gave her a little shake of his head to indicate he did not wish to discuss the matter as yet. He knew he had bought some time but that his mother, and his father, would not be gainsaid for long.
Saturday October 23, 1813 – London

Richard Fitzwilliam had little difficulty in ascribing the word "eventful" to his day so far. As he walked in Hyde Park with Miss Thompson on his arm, he could not control the large smile that spread over his face. She had, so far, been content to let him talk about superficialities until they arrived at the park. Her quiet he knew to be somewhat uncharacteristic. That she had many questions to ask was a certainty but only a few of the more important ones should be addressed now.

“Miss Thompson, obviously you realize your father has consented to the courtship. I suspect you have many questions to ask of me, do you not?”

“I do indeed, Colonel.”

“Perhaps we can start by called me Mr. Fitzwilliam. My resignation is in process and officially I will be a civilian again in less than a fortnight.”

She gave him a slight grin, “That will be no hardship on my part, Mr. Fitzwilliam. And how shall you like being a gentleman?”

He met her teasing look with a grin of his own, “I shall like it very much, I think. You are, I believe, the first to name me so. I thank you. Now, as to your questions?”

She waited for several moments before responding, “I know my father gave his consent but your visit with him lasted over a half hour. My father knew you would ask for his consent since I had talked to him earlier. Whatever could you talk about for so long?”

“He wished to ensure that I could support a wife properly and comfortable. I assured him I could and provided the information to assuage his concerns.”

“As I am an interested party, could you share that with me?”

“Of course, I had planned to do so when the opportunity arose.” His face took on a look that she was coming to learn indicated he was deliberating on how best to answer and that he would answer when he was ready. She schooled herself to patience.

When he finally spoke, she later realized she should be amazed that he would confide in her to the degree he had. For now, she listened.

“When I arrived home I went to stay with my parents. The Darcy’s stopped for a short visit of a few days before continuing on to London. As first I thought my cousin had anticipated my situation but now I believe it was simply his foresight. He saw an opportunity and seized it.” He glanced at her and saw her confusion.

“I am not making a lot of sense am I.” He shook his head, “please, be patient….As I was saying, my cousin saw an opportunity, in this case a decent small estate being sold cheaply because the owner needed funds desperately. He bought it, I suspect, for one of his sons but when he realized my situation, he – in conjunction with my parents and siblings – gave it to me. I am the proud owner of a small estate with about fifteen hundred pounds a year which could be increased to two thousand according to my cousin. The property has been neglected although the manor house is, apparently, in decent shape. With my pension and income from savings I will have an annual income of about twenty five hundred pounds a year. More than enough to support a family although we will not by
any means be wealthy. He paused following the last statement and looked at her, “I realize that it may be less than you are used to and we will not be making much of a presence in London.”

Miss Thompson strolled beside him in silence for a minute or two before, answering the unasked question. That she smiled at him with no reservations before answering eased his concern, “Mr. Fitzwilliam, I am much relieved. I do not need a lavish house or income. My concern was that we might depend upon my dowry. I am much relieved we shall not.”

“Your father spoke of that. I am sure he was concerned that I might be a fortune hunter….”

“No, I do not think so. I told him that I was sure you would not have spoken, if my dowry was an issue. I cannot tell you how or why I believed that but I have come to the conclusion, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that you are an honourable man. Your cousin Elizabeth certainly thinks highly of you.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, basking in the sun and coolness of a late October day before she put words to her thoughts, “I have found that, despite living my life in the city, I quite prefer to live in the country. Visiting the city for few weeks for the theatre and exhibits is wonderful but I am quite content in the country.” She paused for a moment before asking, “Where is this estate to be found?”

“About ten miles from the Darcy’s estate at Pemberley. Do you remember the small village of Lambton?” at her nod, he continued, “Holsten is about five miles east of Lambton while Pemberley is five miles west. According to Darcy, the road between them is in good shape. I expect we…I will see much of the Darcys when..” His face got slight red from embarrassment at his mistake.

“I apologize, that was very presumptuous of me.”

“Indeed it was, Mr. Fitzwilliam; however, I am not offended. Not at all.”

She exerted herself to continue the conversation, successfully diverting it to topics of lesser significance. Unfortunately he could not speak of the condition of the manor house or the number of rooms since he expected his first survey of it would not occur until Christmas when he visited the Darcys.

As they neared the exit where their carriage waited for them, she raised the issue that she knew would have to be addressed. That she was extremely uncomfortable doing so quickly became apparent to Fitzwilliam as she became silent and looked worried. “Come, Miss Thompson, I know not what has you so unhappy, but I am sure it cannot be as bad as your expression suggests.”

She laughed and he thought he detected a touch of bitterness in her voice as she responded, “I do not know if you are right or not, sir.” She walked in silence for several moments looking at the ground in front of her feet. “Oh, there is no easy way to say this. Your parents, they…they refused to attend the Darcy’s wedding because the only available accommodation was with us. It was not stated so but that is what we believed. How…how will they feel about this courtship and …and me?”

“I have spoken to them already.” He placed his other hand over hers on his arm and squeezed, “Janet, I expected my father to object. In this I was not disappointed. My father is most unhappy with the connection to trade; nevertheless, once he had voiced his objections – twice I might add – and I had made him aware of the firmness of my intentions, he limited himself to grumbles. I suspect the fact that Darcy wed Elizabeth, whom he has come to regard with approval despite her connections to trade, has done much to assuage his ire. I do not know how he will treat your parents but I have no doubt he will be civil. He will accept you as my wife, should you accept me.”

“I beg your pardon!” she came to a complete stop and gazed at him.
He thought back to what he said and his countenance once again assumed an embarrassed mien, “I apologize once again. I am…I am too precipitate.” He squared his shoulders and faced her directly, “Janet, Miss Thompson, I spoke out of turn but I will be frank. There is very little doubt in my mind that I will make you an offer. Its timing and its acceptance or rejection are both yours to command. I will say no more at this time.”

He placed her hand on his arm once more and continued to walk towards the waiting carriage. After they both had seated themselves and the trip back to her home begun, he resumed their previous conversation. “I have told you of my father’s reaction. My mother surprised me. She was rather silent during the discussion with my father, the reason for which became clear as I was about to depart. She observed my interest in you last evening and that I had spoken with you privately on the balcony. She suspected that I had made an offer of marriage or courtship. She discerned our pleasure when we returned to the ballroom and a little later she spoke to Elizabeth who was most complimentary of you. I have observed that she has a great deal of respect for Elizabeth. As a consequence, you may expect an invitation to tea for you and your mother to meet her on Monday next.”

The remainder of the ride was conducted in relative silence as the young lady had much to think on. She had formed a very good opinion of the gentleman sitting across from her in the carriage but she had yet to take his full measure as a possible husband. It seemed that he was less uncertain but, as she suddenly realized, he was not going to pressure her to make a decision in haste but, instead, would allow her to proceed at a pace with which she was comfortable. When he finally escorted her to her door and bowed over her and kissed her fingers, she knew that his openness and consideration had advanced his suit quite a bit and this, she thought, was only the first day of their courtship.
Sunday November 8, 1813 – Matlock House, London

Georgiana was grateful for the solitude. Kitty had gone to visit the Gardiners and would not be home till late while her aunt and Uncle were visiting their daughter, Lady Frances, and were not expected back for hours. Richard, of course, was in company with Miss Thompson and had little thought for anyone else at the moment. She needed this time to herself - to sort out the events of the past week. A week ago, she had been looking forward to a ball and dancing the first set with Mr. Bingley. Now she found herself having to decide whether to accept a courtship with a man that she was increasingly inclined to dislike. If it were left to her solely, she would refuse; but it might not be that simple and she needed the advice of those closest to her and whom she trusted most.

She was still trying to comprehend how it had come to be and yet her mind seemed always to be grasping futilely at wisps of thought. “I must gain come control. Elizabeth would not behave so.” She thought of her sister and then she remembered something Elizabeth had confided some months ago. When she – Elizabeth - had been beset by confusion and uncertainty, she had…what was her expression. Oh yes! “I forced myself to look back to when I was content, not confused, and then look at subsequent events as they happened.” Georgiana began to recall her last contented or happy time.

It was at the Ball. She had been looking forward to dancing the first set with Mr. Bingley which he had requested two days previous to the ball. Instead of dancing the first set with Mr. Bingley, she had sat it out. He had not attended the ball at all. That was a disappointment enough but she had masked such feelings and circulated amongst the crowd meeting and talking with a few acquaintances. Questions as to Mr. Bingley’s absence she deflected as best she could since she had no explanation to give and then, stopping at the refreshments, had stepped away from the table to once more gather her composure which was starting to fray. That eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves was once again afforded validity as she listened to a conversation between two young ladies with whom she had a slight acquaintance.

“I do wonder that the Matlocks are sponsoring Miss Darcy.” said one lady. “I know she is their niece but surely they must be despairing of her. I mean look at her, she’s as tall as a man and hardly slim. Poor Mr. Fairly looked embarrassed to be dancing with her. She almost dwarfed him. It is not even as though she were pretty. I have heard her features called handsome but I do not see it. There is nothing particularly attractive about any of her features.”

Her companion tittered, “Yes, if it were not for her dowry, no one would pay her any attention at all. Her thirty thousand pounds will be needed to find her an eligible suitor. I mean really, she has no conversation, attempts to discuss music and the theatre with men when she can be convinced to talk at all. Why I remember that just the other night I listened to a conversation between two young ladies with whom she had a slight acquaintance.

“I do wonder that the Matlocks are sponsoring Miss Darcy.” said one lady. “I know she is their niece but surely they must be despairing of her. I mean look at her, she’s as tall as a man and hardly slim. Poor Mr. Fairly looked embarrassed to be dancing with her. She almost dwarfed him. It is not even as though she were pretty. I have heard her features called handsome but I do not see it. There is nothing particularly attractive about any of her features.”

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At this point Georgiana forced her leaden legs to move away and, as she did so, spotted her Aunt Eleanor searching the room, presumably for her. With some relief she rejoined her aunt. That she was able to maintain her composure for the remainder of the evening was something she could only wonder at afterwards. Even now she could not recollect who partnered her for the various dances.

Her aunt had noticed something was amiss with her but had been satisfied when told by Georgiana that she had simply heard some malicious gossip which had discomposed her for a few moments. In truth, she was sure that the hurtful comments would have been forgotten immediately if Mr. Bingley had been present. However he was not and since he had been calling once a week at least his absence concerned her slightly. Furthermore, she had expected to encounter him at a dinner two
nights after the ball and his presence at one or two other social events that week would not have been unexpected. Georgiana found herself confused by his absence and worried by his failure to explain that absence. She remembered too well that he had fled Hertfordshire and Jane Bennet with no explanation. Her first thought had been that he had decided that she was too plain and uninteresting to pursue, but her common sense quickly overrode such fears. As well, he had shown himself to be too honourable to behave in such an ungentlemanly manner. No, the reason for his absence was unknown but she trusted that he could and would explain all.

Her uncle’s request to speak to her last Thursday morning had only compounded her uncertainties. He had called her down to his study to, as he put it, “apprise her of a serious courtship offer.” As it turned out, he had been approached the previous night by Lord Albert Knowles who wished to enter into a courtship with Georgiana. Despite being told that Lord Matlock could not sanction any such offer, he had persisted in presenting his case, which Lord Matlock eventually agreed to convey to Georgiana’s guardians. Lord Albert was advised that he would have to obtain Georgiana’s consent to such a courtship before her guardians were likely to approve it. Lord Albert appeared, he thought, rather unimpressed with such a nicety but agreed to do so the next day. Accordingly, the earl fully expected him to arrive shortly to make such an offer.

If the earl had reservations about the whole business, Georgiana could not detect them. He waxed eloquent about the young man’s noble lineage – after all, the second son of a duke was an excellent connection with a standing in society that was superior to her untitled position. That such a connection would be of benefit to the earl himself, he readily admitted. His efforts in the House of Lords would be enhanced by the support of the Duke of _____ and, as he pointed out to Georgiana, the eldest son was sickly and his wife was still childless after four years of marriage. Georgiana might well become the Duchess should an offer of marriage be made.

The earl waxed no less eloquent about Lord Albert’s financial prospects – he had a decent estate and a fine income from it – and was wellFEATURED and quite amiable which, the earl suggested, given Georgiana’s reserve would complement her very well. Lord Matlock asserted, perhaps with more confidence than was warranted, that even Georgiana’s brother would have supported a courtship with Lord Albert. Georgiana’s protestations that she barely knew the gentleman and had developed no affection for him were dismissed with the brusque, “Georgiana, you must be sensible about this. Your brother was fortunate to marry a woman for whom he had a great affection and who returned it. As much as I have come to esteem Elizabeth, you must realize that such marriages are highly unusual amongst our station. I did not love your aunt when I married her. I barely knew her but we have grown to esteem each other highly.” He had paused then and more gently stated, “It may seem cold but many solid marriages arise from such arrangements since there is a commonality of station, pedigree, education and background. A young woman cannot afford to wait upon the arrival of a gentleman who holds her in deep affection before the marriage. Marriage is too important a matter to be left to chance, Georgiana. One must be practical in such matters after all.”

Lord Matlock’s endeavours at extolling the manifold merits of Lord Albert were only brought to cessation by the appearance of the gentleman himself who, after the proper civilities were expressed, requested and was granted a private interview with Georgiana. Grasping the opportunity, she began to consider the gentleman while he made conversation with her uncle. He looked every inch the gentleman, taller than herself by several inches, well-formed although of a slender build. His manner towards most of their acquaintance seemed amiable enough, though he appeared to her to be fully conscious of his rank in society. His apparel was of the finest quality and, if he appeared to be somewhat of a dandy, he was not excessively so. As she appraised him, she realized that he was giving equal attention to her. In that appraisal she could find no particular regard and his gaze appeared rather cool than otherwise.

Georgiana’s assessment of Lord Albert Knowles was not too far off the mark. The gentleman had a
firm conviction of the merits of his station in life; an opinion that had been fostered by an overbearing father possessed of the conviction that the rest of society, except for those few of equal or superior rank, were of lesser worth than himself; and, if truth were known, his Grace the Duke of ____ was not convinced that even those few of equal rank, merited his consideration. By virtue of this conviction, he had imparted to his children that their opinions and wishes were such as to assure their acceptability by others, regardless of the merits of such opinions and wishes. Fortunately, his Grace had, with the assistance of tutors and governesses managed to instruct his children in proper comportment and their belief in their own superiority was well masked by civility towards others. Unfortunately, his Grace, who was himself a reasonably intelligent and educated gentleman, had not managed to inculcate in his children his own respect for learning. Hence while reasonably intelligent, Lord Albert had acquired a gentleman’s education at university, which is to say that he was much less acquainted with his books and tutors than he was with the other attractions and activities which a wealthy young gentleman could enjoy. That he did so without incurring a reputation for dissolute behaviour is a tribute to his intelligence and discretion. This is the gentleman that Georgiana was considering and he was not one that she instinctively liked.

Yet his voice when he spoke was quite pleasant albeit lacking any particular emotion, “I believe, Miss Darcy, that your uncle has informed you of my purpose here today?”

At the brief inclination of her head, he had continued, “I am come to you today to seek your consent to a courtship. My parents – my father in particular – are quite desirous of my, as he put it, ‘settling down.’ If they have other concerns, I am not privy to them. I have taken no little time to observe you in the past month and am convinced that you would be a suitable partner in life should it come to that. Your station in life, while inferior to my own is acceptable. That the Earl of Matlock is your uncle is sufficient to ameliorate such connections to trade as may exist. Your presence, countenance, dowry and accomplishments all establish that you would satisfactorily adorn any gentleman’s arm. However, I realize that this offer has most probably been a surprise to you and that it is the custom for ladies to wish to get to know their partners in life before accepting any offer of marriage. For this reason, I am disposed to offer a courtship at this time rather than an offer of marriage as I had intended. Do I have your agreement, Miss Darcy?”

Georgiana could not help but feel that he had considered his question to be worthy of only one answer and, she admitted to herself, the temptation to reject it based on his manner of soliciting her agreement was very strong. His arrogance was beyond anything she had previously encountered and she could not like it – not at all. Nevertheless, she schooled her features to suppress her ire and replied, “You must appreciate, sir, that this offer comes as a complete surprise to me. I would ask you to allow me some time to consider it.”

His surprise at her response was obvious, “Consider it? Miss Darcy I…” Then he bit off his words and nodded his head, retreating to a nearby window from which to inspect the street below.

Georgiana had first thought that she should not take overlong to consider this offer, but as she pondered the situation she knew that she needed her brother and sister to advise her. Looking at Lord Albert she realized quickly that his affections were not engaged. Thus, delaying her response might irritate him, wound his pride perhaps, but his heart was in no danger. Her thoughts skittered as the tidbit of gossip she overheard surfaced. Perhaps she was not such a poor prospect as that overheard comment would imply. Certainly accepting it would not have pleased the young ladies, a thought which had given her no little satisfaction at the time but she knew was hardly a basis for accepting.

That her uncle would appear to favour the offer greatly, she knew. That the absence of Mr. Bingley had left her feeling rather bereft was not something she recognized at the time but now knew had affected her decision, perhaps making her more cautious. She could not see that Lord Albert was an unsuitable suitor. She simply did not know what to do. She would prefer to reject this offer but her
uncle’s words seemed to suggest that doing so would be a bad mistake. How she had wished she could speak to her brother and Elizabeth. There were implications in the situation which she did not feel capable of assessing properly.

Finally, she had turned to Lord Albert, “I apologize, sir for making you wait upon my response and thank you for your patience in doing so. I appreciate the honour that is involved but, as I am sure you can appreciate, this offer has come as a complete surprise to me. I must ask for your further patience as I consult with my brother and his wife.”

That Lord Albert’s displeasure had increased was obvious only to the most careful observer. Perhaps the length of time she had taken to consider his offer warned him that an acceptance was not assured. His manner remained polite as he responded, “I would assume from your request that you might have reservations about the offer, Miss Darcy. Might you share them with me?”

“My reservations, Lord Albert, are as I have stated them. Your offer is quite unexpected and I wish to discuss it with my brother and wife.” She looked at him directly as she continued, “I understand that courtship is intended to lead to an offer of marriage. I would not wish to enter a courtship if I am not prepared to give serious consideration to such an offer. It would do no credit to either of us to be precipitous in this matter.”

Lord Albert was now clearly displeased by her decision but made every effort to mask his feelings and respond with civility, “Very well, Miss Darcy. When might I expect a response?”

“I will talk with my other guardian, Richard Fitzwilliam, today and he will send an express to my brother. I would think he would be here within a week or less.”

“Then I will restrain my impatience and await your brother’s arrival.” He hesitated, “May I call on you tomorrow? At eleven, perhaps.”

“Of course, My Lord”

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As she sat at the pianoforte, her fingers casually running over the keys, unaware of what melody was issuing forth, her thoughts focused on the moment she had realized that unless her brother suggested otherwise, she would not accept Lord Albert’s offer. The morning following her conversation with Lord Albert, her aunt had been seated at the breakfast table and opening her morning’s mail. Looking up at Georgiana, she had blurted, “Well, that explains what happened!”

“Of what do you speak, Aunt?”

“Mr. Bingley! He has just written to express his regrets. Poor man. I am glad he is better.”

“Better? Aunt I do not comprehend you?”

“Mr. Bingley writes that he was taken quite ill the day before the _____ Ball. A violent fever rendered him insensible for almost a se’enday he says and it is only recently that he is out and about. He sends his apologies for missing the ball and regrets the loss of the dance you promised him. And, let me see…” Turning to the second page, she continued, “Ah yes, he expects to be out in company as soon as the doctor declares him healthy. Lady Matlock looked at her niece noting her sudden smile, “Georgiana dear, whatever is the matter? Have you developed an affection for Mr. Bingley?”

Georgiana could not control either her happiness or her blushes, “Yes aunt, I do not know for sure but I do enjoy his company more than any man I know.”
“I will say nothing against Mr. Bingley. But you have not yet made an acquaintance with many gentlemen who could be potential suitors. I would urge you to be very cautious in your behaviour to him.”

Unfortunately, she had not been allowed time to enjoy the prospect of further attentions from Mr. Bingley. Lord Albert was to call at eleven but it had taken her maid only a few minutes to prepare her appearance for the outing. As she looked back at her encounters with Lord Albert – of which there had been only a few – she could recall little that spoke to his benefit. They had been sitting in the sitting room with only a maid, safely and discreetly sitting in a far corner, for company. Seeking to discover more about the gentleman she had begun to question him about his estate.

“I understand, Lord Albert, that your estate is located in Devon. Is the country there much like Derbyshire?”

“Yes, it is although perhaps slightly less wild. The hunting is very poor though.”

“Are you there much of the year?”

“No, I have not been there for two years or more. I organized a hunting party three years ago and it was so poor we had to give it up after only a week.”

Georgiana was nonplussed as to how to continue the conversation. “That is very unfortunate, I am sure. But may not the park afford some excellent trails for riding?”

Lord Albert nodded slowly, “Certainly it does, but that amusement palls quickly and my guests were quite eager to depart.”

She thought she might ask after some features of the house. “What is the manor house like?”

He appeared to be surprised at the question but responded, “Ah, I forgot that ladies are interested in such features. I am desolate to say that I really cannot remember much about the house. It is not fashionably furnished and while it has been maintained it is not located, I believe, where I wish to be overlong.”

Georgiana’s misgivings were increasing the more he revealed. Her brother she knew was intimately involved in the running of his estates and their management absorbed a considerable portion of his time every day. Perhaps the same was true of Lord Albert and so she asked, “It must be difficult to manage your estate from afar. I know my brother receives many reports about his every week.”

Lord Albert looked at her in surprise, “Does he? I am sure I do not understand why he would waste his time so. That is what stewards are for, surely.” He paused for a moment or two before continuing, “As long as I receive the income I expect from my estate, I leave the getting of it to those I have hired for that purpose.”

Georgiana had some difficulty in masking her disapproval and did so successfully only by leaning forward to refill her cup with tea. Fortunately, Lord Albert was inclined to begin talking of some hunting parties that he had attended over the summer and the remainder of their conversation suffered a surfeit of information – from Georgiana’s perspective – about guns, birds shot, fishing and other such activities which attend such parties, none of which she found to be of particular interest.

She found it particularly irritating that he had made but a token attempt to acquaint himself with her interests and thoughts. While he might initiate a conversation about a play or exhibition that she had attended, it did not require much time for the conversation to devolve to his interests and she quickly determined that a simple question from her was sufficient to allow him to expound on those activities.
That her interest in them was limited never seemed to occur to him.

Georgiana could see no reason to accept Lord Albert’s offer and rather regretted not doing so immediately; however, she knew that, given his station, such a rejection might be impolitic in the extreme.
Wednesday November 11, 1813 - Pemberley

A letter had been placed on the tray delivered to the Darcy’s private sitting room where they had decided to break their fast this morning. Jane was inclined to rise late and, with no other guests, they preferred to enjoy the privacy of their own chambers as much as possible. Darcy accepted a cup of coffee from Elizabeth before picking up the letter. Breaking the seal, he observed to Elizabeth, “It’s from Richard. I wonder…”

Elizabeth glanced up from buttering a biscuit to see a frown cross his face, “Problems…?”

‘Hmmm….problems? I do not know. Here read it and share your thoughts with me.’

Matlock House
November 7, 1813

Dear Darce,

This is a rather difficult letter to write. First, the important news, Lord Albert Knowles has asked to court Georgiana who has, with considerable foresight, asked for some time to consult with you and Elizabeth. I am writing to request your immediate presence and that of your wife, if possible, in town. If the offer is accepted I believe Lord Albert will request that Georgiana remain in town for an extra month or until Christmas; however, it appears that Georgiana would still prefer to leave London no later than the end of November.

I admit I am a little uncomfortable about this courtship offer. I have not detected any particular interest on the part of Georgiana towards Lord Albert. And I cannot discern any particular interest on his part either in the few times they had been in company together. My father favours the young gentleman; however, I suspect that it is the connection to the Duke of ____ that is of primary importance to him. I believe there may be issues in the House of Lords where the Duke’s support might be critical. In any event, my father reminded me that their Graces and their son should be invited to your ball on the 1st of January if the offer is accepted.

When I spoke with Georgiana, I was quite pleased by her attitude. She displayed considerable poise in dealing with it. I suspect many young ladies of her tender years might have accepted without giving any thought to the merits of the offer or the man himself. She has professed no particular regard for him and, as I remarked above, I had never detected that she derives any noticeable pleasure in his company. Rather the reverse in fact. I thought it interesting that she was quite firm about her desire to return to Pemberley as soon as may be. The most that she would admit was that he was pleasant-looking and that being the son of a duke he was possessed of excellent connections.

As I write this, my suspicions that my father has pressed her to accept the courtship, are becoming firmer. It is to her credit she has not done so.

While a courtship does not necessarily require the couple to wed, the opprobrium attached to a rejected proposal will tarnish Georgiana’s reputation as well as that of Lord Albert. I would prefer to avoid such if at all possible. In this I am sure we are of a like mind. I could also wish that I were present when this letter is read. The little I have seen of the gentleman does not predispose me towards him and I wonder at the opinions of you both.

I plan to bring both Georgiana and Miss Catherine to Pemberley and expect to arrive mid afternoon on the 2nd of December. I will visit with you for a day or two before stopping off at Holsten for a
few days on my way to Matlock Manor.

Your bedevilled Cousin,

Richard

PS My courtship of Miss Thompson is proceeding excellently I believe. I am increasingly of the opinion that we will suit exceedingly well. I can only hope that she is of a like opinion.

Elizabeth put the letter down and her surprise was evident to her husband. Her first words mirrored his thoughts, “I do not understand this at all. There was no obvious interest from Lord Albert prior to our departure.”

“Do you subscribe to Richard’s thoughts on my uncle’s involvement, Elizabeth?”

“It is possible, I suppose. Certainly Lord Albert possesses all the attributes that your uncle would wish to see in a suitor. Wealth, connections and breeding!” If her tone was a little acerbic, Darcy was not prepared to fault her and his grin drew a most unladylike snort from his wife.

His grin faded as the other questions arose in his mind. His next question was thoughtful, “What is your opinion of Lord Albert, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth sipped her tea and deliberately broke open and buttered another biscuit. “Mmm, these biscuits are delicious. I must remember to thank Cook for baking them.” She slowly ate half of the biscuit and Darcy was content to let her deliberate. She had told him that she was increasingly inclined to consider a matter thoroughly before expressing an opinion. “After all,” she opined to him one day, “my reliance on first impressions has been proven faulty on at least one important occasion. I must be more cautious in the future.”

His patience was rewarded when she finally responded, the remainder of the biscuit in her hand, “I first must admit that I was in Lord Albert’s company only a few times – he called on us twice in town and then two balls and a dinner, I believe. And we did not converse a great deal on any of those occasions even when he called on us at Darcy House. It is difficult to form a solid opinion on so little.”

“Nonetheless, I detect that you have reached some thoughts, sketchy though they may be. I would hear them Elizabeth. You know how much I value your opinions.”

“Then I shall share them with you, poor though they may be.” Her rueful smile gave truth to her words. “I was, as I said, but little in his company and my impression from his behaviour was that even that little was a bit too much for his liking. He sat beside me for an entire dinner and addressed but a handful of words to me the whole time whilst talking amiably with several others around us. Those he addressed were all well connected. Did he consider me beneath his attention? I do not know but that seemed a reasonable supposition at the time. As it was, I was not so enamoured of his conversation as to take exception to his incivility or miss the lack of it. He appears to be a capable dancer but I know of no other good of him.”

She paused and thought for several moments trying to recall their conversations, “When he called on us, he did not really distinguish himself amongst the other callers. He stayed the approved time. He did not single me out for conversation and spoke only briefly to Georgiana as I remember. I gather he attended Oxford, I believe, but it was not apparent, from such discussions as I overheard, that he attended for purposes of acquiring any learning. Certainly his acquaintance with his books must have been brief and unsatisfactory. His opinions seemed ill-formed and poorly expressed. His father might have better spent the cost of his education on helping the poor….better value to be sure!”
She refilled her teacup, adding a dash of cream and stirring for several seconds. As she raised the cup to her lips, she paused to state, “I cannot see what would attract Georgiana to him. His life seems to be one of visiting friends to hunt or ride or simply visit. Much of his time is spent in London and his activities are probably those of most young men of a similar age. I have heard nothing of dissolute behaviour but neither have I heard of any characteristics that would raise him in my esteem. As I said, I fail to see that she would wish for a courtship with him.” She looked at her husband, “Do you comprehend more than I?”

“No, my dear. I most unhappily do not. I probably have been in his company even less than yourself. I had no knowledge that he would apply for a courtship and did not make an effort to discover his background.” He shook his head, “What little I do know is not particularly favourable, although it is also, I regret to say, not uncommon amongst young men of his station.”

Acknowledging her raised eyebrow with a slight grimace, he continued, “As you say, he spends his time in London and visiting the estates of friends and relations. His own estate is not small and should require a considerable amount of his time to manage properly; however, that responsibility seems to be left to his steward. You know my feelings on such behaviour. It does not recommend the gentleman to me. But, apart from that, I know no ill of him.”

“William, I have seen Lord Albert only a few times in company with Georgiana. Never did I see any sign of particular attentiveness on his part. Nothing at all that would have caused me to suspect an attraction. Why ever is he asking for a courtship? What can he mean by it?”

“I know not.” His air of abstraction deepened and she was content to let him deliberate on the matter. She rather expected that he would not be content to let the matter rest. She congratulated herself on her judgement minutes later when Darcy returned his attention to her, “It will not do, Elizabeth. I must go to London!”

Elizabeth’s wry smile drew a chuckle from him, “Ah, so you have already decided what I should do?”

“No, my love. Only that you would not be content to leave matters in such an unsatisfactory state. You wish to ensure your sister’s happiness.”

“I wish I could bring you with me but ….”

“And you will. I am not so delicate that I cannot survive such a trip quite well. If you send an express to Richard to halt an announcement of the courtship if it is not already been announced, we can afford to travel with less haste. Since the courtship has not been accepted or made known to society, an extra day will not materially change the situation.”

She smiled at her husband who, she could see, was attempting to marshal arguments to dissuade her. “I would wish to be with you and Georgiana will need us both. I do not want to leave Jane but she will be well without me for a week or so.”

The discussion that followed finally convinced Darcy that her mind was not to be altered and he eventually called Reynolds and ordered his most comfortable carriage to be prepared to leave in two hours and then gave directions to have his valet prepare a travelling kit. While he was giving these directions, Elizabeth called Mrs. Reynolds to request that a basket of consumables be prepared for the trip. Directions were then given to her maid to prepare her travelling kit.

He finished his coffee and rose from the table, “Come, Lizzie. Let us put aside these troubles for a few minutes and venture out for a short walk. The day is lovely and we have had too few opportunities to be out walking since we returned. I have heard too much of Lord Albert today and
what I have heard pleases me very little. A good brisk walk should clear my head of such dismal
thoughts and your company will allow me to contemplate this trip with less displeasure. I do not
anticipate being away for more a week and such business that waits upon me, will surely not suffer
for the delay.”

Elizabeth stuffed the remainder of the biscuit in her mouth and washed it down with the last of her
tea. Accepting the proffered hand of her husband to help her rise – although she was usually quick to
decry the nicety of such help – they quickly left the room to don their outer wear. She knew she
would have to make her apologies to her sister before she left but they were only to be gone for a
week and Jane would be well taken care of in her absence.
Chapter 53

Friday November 13, 1813 – Matlock House, London

Darcy and Elizabeth strode up the steps of his uncle’s house, impatient to see Georgiana. His letter to Richard had indicated that he expected to arrive today and indeed they had made a good passage and they wished to see Georgiana immediately. They had taken time to stop at Darcy House to refresh themselves after the rigours of the trip. He had expected Elizabeth to be fatigued by the trip but surprisingly she was in excellent spirits although she had conceded that the bath which had awaited her was immeasurably welcomed.

The butler was quick to show them in and, after relieving of them of outerwear, responded to his request to be taken to Georgiana by informing him that Lord Matlock and his cousin were expecting Darcy in the study. Since he had not included in his letter that Elizabeth was to accompany him, he anticipated some surprise on their part. Controlling his impatience, he briefly dismissed the butler and they walked into the study. Lord Matlock and Richard were quick to rise and welcome them both, controlling their surprise at Elizabeth’s presence. That his letter had raised concerns on their part he had no doubts and, if he had any, their countenances would have quickly relieved him of such. After a few perfunctory pleasantries as to his trip and the offer of a brandy, which was declined, he very quickly indicated his desire to speak with Georgiana. That his uncle wished to discuss the matter with him first was evident but on this he was firm, “Uncle, I will be quite willing to talk with you later but I must insist on seeing Georgiana first.” He turned to Richard, “I hope you do not take offence but I wish to talk with her alone – as her brother, not her guardian.”

Richard simply nodded. “Of course. She is in her chambers, I believe, but is expecting you. You should also know that rumours of the courtship offer have not surfaced to my knowledge.”

Taking leave of them both – his uncle’s dissatisfaction clearly but silently expressed – Darcy and Elizabeth ascended the stairs to his sister’s chambers. She rose to greet them as they entered her sitting room and her worry as to the cause of this precipitous visit by her brother and sister could not be concealed despite her obvious efforts to act composed. His smile seemed to reassure her and she stepped into his hug which he held for an extra second or two longer than he should. After accepting a similar greeting from Elizabeth, she was then led back to the settee. Darcy sat her between Elizabeth and himself, continuing to hold her hand, finally spoke, “Georgiana, Elizabeth and I are both greatly worried about this courtship offer that you have received. I am glad you had the sense to ask for time to respond and call on us. You showed uncommon sense my dear.”

Georgiana did not answer for several moments, her gaze firmly fixed on the hand being firmly clasped by Darcy. She briefly glanced first at her brother and then Elizabeth, her eyes pensive as she considered what must be said. With a visible effort she gathered her composure and replied, “I have spent the last day or so trying to see…how this situation came to be. I am worried that I will be expected to accept the offer because of Lord Albert’s connection to the Duke of ____. I know our uncle wishes me to do so and will argue that I should give the utmost consideration to connections and rank. Yet I cannot like the gentleman. I cannot see that I would wish to marry him…ever.”

Darcy considered his sister thoughtfully, “Georgiana, what did our uncle say to you?”

“Uncle Henry asked to speak to me and mentioned that Lord Albert had expressed some interest and then spoke for some time on the appropriateness of a match with the family of the Duke of ____. He talked a great deal of the importance of connections, the need for a family to enhance them and that such a match would be of benefit to our family as well as myself. I was left with the impression that he spoke for you on this, which I found to be disturbing. I had not thought you to hold such
opinions. When I spoke of a desire to marry with affection, his response was that you and Elizabeth were very much the exception and that marriages between those of our station were, most usually, matters of money and connections, not affection and that to expect otherwise was impractical. I was confused and when Lord Albert seemed willing to increase his attentions, flattered by them, I suppose.”

Darcy relaxed, “The main question is simple, Georgie. Do you want to accept this courtship? I will speak quite frankly and state that I had not intended to allow a courtship before the end of your first season. You will be eighteen then and old enough by then, I believe, to enter into one. I can - and will - refuse to allow a courtship as your guardian, if you wish it so. That will remove from you the need to actually have to refuse the offer to Lord Albert. I think that will be easiest for all parties. As well, I am concerned that since a courtship almost invariably results in an offer of marriage, that accepting a courtship only to reject the marriage offer would be considered by His Grace to be more…ah, more of an insult because of it being made public than simply refusing the courtship offer which is private to the two families.”

Georgiana looked at the concerned faces of her brother and Elizabeth and took heart from the assurance she found there, “I do not wish for it. I only wish I had decided to refuse it in the first place.”

Darcy regarded her closely, “I think your decision to postpone your answer was wise. It allows me to deal with the matter and avoid an outright rejection.” After a brief pause, he asked, “How much of Lord Albert’s company have you had, Georgie? And what did you think of it?”

Georgiana’s expression grew thoughtful as she considered her answer, “He has called several times and we have talked – or rather he has talked.” She looked at her brother, “I find I cannot respect him. He displays no interest in any serious activities. He has not visited his estate in almost three years. As long as his steward sends him enough money, he is content. He rides, he hunts, attends the theatre and opera but for what purpose I cannot say since he knows naught of the plays. He has no time to read. His life is one of idleness.”

She paused for a few moments before looking at Elizabeth, “I may be wrong but I also sense that he holds you and your family in some disdain. He has said nothing explicit but I cannot believe I am wrong. He is, in my opinion, most assuredly convinced of the superiority of his station in society.” She giggled, “He was a trifle upset when I asked for a few minutes to consider his courtship offer. I almost refused him immediately because of his arrogance. I wish now I had!”

With a quick glance at Elizabeth and interpreting her slight nod correctly, Darcy stated, “Then this courtship offer shall not be approved. I will speak now with our uncle and Richard. Elizabeth, shall you join me or will you stay with Georgiana?”

“I will stay with my sister for now.”

Darcy nodded and, with a brief hug for his sister and a kiss on Elizabeth’s cheek, left to join Lord Matlock and Richard in the study. Entering without knocking, he found them comfortably sitting in front of the fireplace nursing a brandy and talking quietly as they waited for him. Lord Matlock waved towards the sideboard where brandy and port awaited him but feeling that he needed his wits about him tonight, he availed himself of the port. Sitting himself down across from Richard and beside his uncle, he took a sip of the port before beginning, “It will obviously not surprise either of you that this courtship offer from Lord Albert has greatly worried both Elizabeth and me. We would not have traveled hither in her condition if it were not so. We have talked with Georgiana and her reluctance to have him court her is obvious and she has requested that we reject the offer. Frankly, I was inclined to do so even without talking with her.”
Lord Matlock’s displeasure increased as his nephew spoke until he burst out. “That should not be. This is a most advantageous arrangement!”

"Advantageous for whom, uncle?”

Lord Matlock was taken aback at Darcy’s response, “For…for Georgiana, for our family…of course!”

“On this I am afraid we must disagree, uncle. I see no advantage to Georgiana possibly being shackled for the rest of her life with a man she does not respect or admire and my family does not need or want the connection.”

Richard interjected before the temper of either man could escalate further, “Father, Darce….please, calm yourselves. I admit I have not thought much about the situation we face but…”

Darcy gave a slight grin, “I suspect your attention was otherwise engaged Richard.” He paused for a moment before speaking once more, “I must also admit some responsibility. I did not expect any such offers – not so soon. I intended that Georgiana be allowed to complete her first season before having to consider a courtship offer. She is but seventeen now and I thought to wait until she was eighteen before agreeing to…. the brief wave of his hand completed the thought. “She is, I consider, too young to consider marriage and I would not see her wed for several years, if possible. I regret I did not make my wishes known to Richard before I left London, else this whole business would not have occurred. He could have rejected the offer or dissuaded Lord Albert before it came to that point.”

Darcy looked at Lord Matlock, “From what I have been able to ascertain, Uncle, several of your actions may have contributed to, or acerbated, the problem. I recognize that Georgiana is under your protection while living here, but it was not your responsibility to allow Lord Albert to make his offer. Richard should have been consulted first and his decision sought.”

Lord Matlock’s surprise and affront was obvious to them all and his immediate response was to disclaim any knowledge of what actions he could have taken that would justify such words from his nephew. Richard laid a hand on his arm to calm him, “Let us hear what Darcy has to say before losing our tempers.”

Darcy bowed in Richard’s direction and then fixed his gaze on his uncle, “I regret if my words are such as to upset you, uncle. I do not wish to do so but I must understand your actions in this matter. From what I have been able to determine, the main issue that I would have an explanation for is that Georgiana was given to believe that you spoke on my behalf in pressing the advantages of a courtship with Lord Albert. That matters of affection were of little significance and that his connections, station and income were of the utmost concern. I will not argue with you about such beliefs, we have already discussed those thoroughly at the time of my marriage and you know my opinions then. They have not changed. I do take exception to your pressing on Georgiana, opinions which are in such contradistinction to mine. I am her guardian, as is Richard. This responsibility is ours alone.”

The ruddiness of earl’s countenance increased as he listened to Darcy. Richard and Darcy watched as he took several deep breaths in order to control his choler. At last he responded, “I will not apologize for what I told Georgiana. Those are my opinions and, as her uncle, I believe I have a right to advise her where I think it appropriate. I will apologize, however, to both you and Georgiana for misleading her as to your opinions. It was most unconsciously done but nevertheless I may have allowed the warmth of my approval and opinions to colour my words. I spoke, wishing you to be of a similar opinion, rather than believing it to be so. I may well have convinced myself that, in this instance, you would agree with me.”
Darcy looked at his uncle coolly, “We may have to disagree on this point, Uncle. I do accept your apology and I am sure that Georgiana will do likewise; however, on the business of advice, I would prefer that you consult with me or Richard before tendering such advice that is contrary to ours.” He continued to gaze at his uncle until the latter acknowledged his request with a slight nod. At that Darcy sighed, “We have a problem. I must advise Lord Albert that Georgiana will not be allowed to accept his offer. The question…”

Lord Matlock interrupted, “Why? Why do you and Georgiana wish to reject it? It is a most suitable connection. He is the son of a Duke and may well be the next Duke of ____.”

Richard was about to respond until he saw the glower on his cousin’s face. “This could be interesting.” He thought, “Darce looks like he just ate a sour pickle.”

Darcy looked at his uncle with some concern and thought, “Uncle is so blinded by Lord Albert’s station and connection to the Duke of ____, that he can see nothing else.” He gave himself a minute or so to collect his thoughts before answering.

“Uncle, I cannot deny that the young man may have the advantage of being connected to His Grace and could be the next heir although that does depend on the health of his brother, does it not?” He paused again before continuing, “Unfortunately, that seems to be his sole attribute to recommend himself to me. I have discussed Lord Albert with Georgiana and with Elizabeth and I have, if you are not aware of it, come to place a great deal of value on my wife’s opinion of people. Neither of us has met Lord Albert more than a few times but on those occasions he has managed to convince my wife of his arrogance and disdain for others and as well, I might add, of the poverty of his opinions. To quote Elizabeth, his father could have gotten more value from the money spent on Lord Albert’s education by giving it to the poor. I myself was concerned about his lack of attention to the management of his estate and Georgiana only confirmed this when she mentioned that he freely told her that he had not visited it for almost three years.”

Darcy’s countenance took on an angrier cast as he continued, “As well, I have no doubt that he views Elizabeth with disdain. His words in his courtship offer to Georgiana suggest as much and, according to Elizabeth, he has shown naught but the barest civility when in her company.”

Lord Matlock’s eyebrows rose at this statement and he was about to remonstrate with his nephew when he reconsidered and hesitated before responding, “I know the Duke is arrogant beyond belief and his pride in his position is, I admit, truly wondrous.” The chuckle that he elicited from Darcy and Richard drew a small smile from him. “I had not, however, thought his son to be of a like mind.”

Richard looked thoughtful as he spoke, “I have not had much to do with either gentlemen but I must admit that, according to Georgie, Lord Albert’s manner in requesting the courtship was not…ah, pleasing. According to Georgie, he appeared to expect her to agree to it and was surprised, perhaps even annoyed, when she requested time to consider it.” He snorted, “I wonder what he thought when she had asked to consult you, Darce?”

Darcy shook his head, “None of this matters now. The issue before me is how to reject the courtship offer without antagonizing the Duke.” He glanced at his uncle and Richard but neither seemed prepared to venture a suggestion and he grimaced to himself, knowing that he alone would bear the responsibility. “I shall write a note to Lord Albert, requesting to meet with him tomorrow at his convenience either at Darcy House or at his own house - I assume he is staying at the Duke’s home, is he not?”

Lord Matlock nodded in agreement, “Yes he is. How…on what grounds will you break the courtship, William?”
“I do not wish to antagonize the Duke or his son. I believe that if I simply state that it was my wish that Georgiana complete her season before considering any courtship offers. That I believe her too young and inexperienced. I have no intention, nor would any purpose be served by doing so, of mentioning our dissatisfaction with his character.”

Lord Matlock shook his head, “I suspect his Grace will be most annoyed, although I would suspect that Lord Albert will have no difficulty fixing his attentions on another young woman - and more successfully I would think.”

“I agree most heartedly with Darcy’s plan!” Richard’s strong statement was an obvious surprise to his father. “His Grace may be insulted but the offer is private and since we have no reason to announce it, such it should remain. If it does not, the fault will not lie with us.”

Lord Matlock was clearly not convinced or resigned to the decision but recognizing that it was not his to make, conceded the issue although not before cautioning Darcy, “You realize, of course, that since Georgiana will not be participating in the season next spring that she cannot consider being courted until the end of the following season? She will be almost nineteen by then, you know.”

“Darcy nodded in agreement, “True, although it may be that we can entertain an offer a year from now after another ‘small season’ or possibly even after her next birthday. I would also expect that should Lord Albert enter into an engagement with another, we could act as we wish. Now, I must collect my wife and write a note to Lord Albert.” He looked at his uncle, “We will collect Georgiana and Kitty tomorrow and remove them to Darcy House. I believe Elizabeth and I should remain in London for a few extra days so as not to give rise to ill-founded rumours about our sudden return to London.”

Taking his leave of his uncle and cousin, he hurried upstairs to Georgiana’s room. After apprising her and Elizabeth as to what had been decided, he collected his wife, who was showing signs of fatigue, and they quickly returned to Darcy House. Elizabeth was sleeping soundly before he had finished the note to Lord Albert and, after ensuring its prompt delivery, he slid into bed and drew his wife into his arms before falling asleep himself.
Chapter 54

Saturday November 14, 1813 – London

Darcy strode up the steps to the residence of the Duke of ____. His note had been promptly returned early this morning inviting him to meet with Lord Albert and the Duke himself. That the latter would wish to attend had not come as a complete surprise; he was not personally acquainted with His Grace but his father had been. Unfortunately, the latter’s opinion of the gentleman had not been vouchsafed to him. His uncle’s views suggested that he would find little enjoyment in His Grace’s company. He apparently was expected since the door opened before he even reached for the knocker and it was but a matter of minutes before he was shown into a room, obviously the Duke’s study, and greeted by a young man of about four and twenty and older man of about sixty years. Both were tall although a few inches shy of Darcy’s height and rather heavy built, with His Grace tending to corpulence. Lord Albert seemed likely to suffer a similar fate, unless there was some radical change in his manner of living. Although Darcy knew little of that gentleman, nothing that he had learned suggested such was likely. Their countenances were sufficiently similar in features and expression as to remove any doubt as to their being related. There was a degree of pride and arrogance displayed that forewarned him that they would not greet his decision with approbation and could possibly view it as an insult.

After the ritual greetings and the offer of coffee, which was declined, His Grace chose to open the discussion with a brusque, “Your note asked to talk with us about my son’s courtship offer. What is there to discuss, pray tell?”

Darcy was not at all put off by the Duke’s manner. In fact, in this instance, he welcomed it. He had considered how best to raise the subject without offending the Duke too seriously and had decided that a matter-of-fact approach raised with tact and civility was best. He knew he would have to maintain his temper since it appeared that the father, and perhaps the son, might not be so constrained.

So it was with as calm a manner as he could marshal that he replied, “I received word of this offer of courtship only a few days ago. I admit to considerable surprise when I learned of it since I had not observed any particular attentions on the part of Lord Albert or any other gentleman prior to my departure. I have heard that you value forthrightness, Your Grace, so I will be forthright.”

His brief pause was more for effect than to allow time for thought, “My sister is but seventeen years of age. Too full young in my opinion to be courted or wed. It had been my intention not to allow any courtship offer until the end of the upcoming season when she would be nearly eighteen years of age. Since I had not seen any particular attentions being directed to her, nor had I been approached by a suitor, I failed to inform my cousin of my intentions prior to departing for Pemberley.”

He had kept his gaze firmly fixed on the Duke's countenance as he spoke. The impending signs of anger were easy to discern. A rising flush and thinning lips indicated that he had determined the direction of the discussion. Before the Duke could respond, Darcy held up his palm and quietly requested, “Please allow me to finish. I realize that you have probably ascertained what I intend to say. I…”

The Duke could not be restrained. “You intend to reject my son’s offer of courtship! This is unconscionable. Ridiculous!” The duke continued his exclamations of displeasure for a full five minutes, expressing his dissatisfaction with Georgiana, Darcy, their decision, the Darcy family and the effrontery of the aforementioned. His disparaging comments were not such as to recommend him to Darcy and, if the latter had had any regrets about rejecting a connection with the Duke of ____,
they did not survive past the first few minutes of the latter’s tirade.

Darcy kept control of his temper and finally managed to interrupt the stream of abuse, “Yes, I plan to reject the offer; I must emphasize that I am not insensible to the…value of a connection to your family. However, that does not, in my opinion, constitute a valid reason to enter a courtship where neither party has given any evidence of an attachment to the other. My sister is full young to be courted and I will only accept an offer where I believe a strong attachment is developing.”

Lord Albert burst out, “She would refuse me! I do not believe it!” That the young gentleman was equally surprised and offended was readily apparent and only the firmest grasp of his temper prevented Darcy from expressing himself more forcibly. As it was he contented himself with a simple statement, “I assume, sir, that my sister is not insensible to the honour of your offer but, in fact, the decision is mine and mine alone… I have consulted my sister on this but had resolved to deny the offer before I left Pemberley. If indeed I had been in town at the time you approached my uncle, I would not have agreed to your making the offer. I intend no disrespect to you, sir, but my resolve is firm on the matter…”

His Grace could not restrain himself further, “Are you a fool? Do you not realize the significance of my son’s position? That our family is conferring a great honour on yours?”

Darcy took a few seconds to ensure that his anger at the insults was not reflected in his voice. “I can assure you, Your Grace, that both I and my sister are fully aware of your family’s position.” He paused to collect himself a little further but hurried to express his thoughts since he could see that his hosts were about to remonstrate further.

“I think, Your Grace….Lord Albert….that we need not further discuss the question of whether the courtship has been accepted. It has not. Knowledge of your son’s offer has not been made known by us out of respect for the reputations of both families. I trust that you and your family have responded similarly.”

Darcy looked at His Grace but could not tell if, in fact, such was the case although the Duke did nod briefly as though in agreement. “The unexpected return of my wife and me may feed unwanted rumours; however, we plan to remain in town for another week and will be in company with my sister on several occasions. I plan to simply state that our return was to accompany my sister back to Pemberley. If, for some reason, the courtship is mentioned, I will simply deny any knowledge of it and will simply admit a preference that my sister not enter a courtship until she is eighteen.” He looked Lord Albert and the duke closely before continuing, “I trust that will be satisfactory to you both?”

It took only another quarter hour before all parties accepted the situation. That his hosts were not pleased with him or his family was apparent by the speed with which he was shown to the door. That he himself saw no need, nor felt any inclination, to tarry and thus delay his departure was not something Darcy felt necessary to voice.

As he recounted the particulars of the meeting to Elizabeth a short time later, he could not help but chuckle a little ruefully, “It was all I could do to constrain my temper. The arrogance of the man is beyond all belief. He boasted of the significance of his family and denigrated ours. It was all I could do not to throw his words back in his face.” He grinned savagely, “I now wish I had!”

Elizabeth looked puzzled, “I do not comprehend your meaning?”

Darcy’s grin did not abate although the humour was now tinged with irony, “His Grace and his family can legitimately claim their title to be of two hundred years duration. Which is a fine thing I am sure. However, their ancestor was simply a royal favourite of questionable distinction and his
roots could be found ultimately in a Bristol fishmonger.”

Elizabeth could not help the peal of laughter which escaped her, “Oh dear! I am relieved that you did not inform His Grace of the poverty of his origins. He might have ordered you into his dungeons!” Shaking her head, she could hardly contain her laughter.

“A fishmonger! Truly?”

“Well, not exactly. He got his start as a fishmonger but built a shipping and trading company that his sons expanded. Nonetheless, I admit to a guilty pleasure in thinking of fishmongers.”

Their conversation continued in this lighthearted fashion for several minutes until Georgiana joined. Her visible relief at being informed that the courtship offer was not accepted was evident and neither Darcy nor Elizabeth thought it necessary to discuss with her the particulars of Darcy’s meeting with Lord Albert. Eventually, however, Darcy knew he must mention the one regrettable aspect of the whole business.

“Unfortunately, this whole situation makes it necessary for us to remain in London for another week. We must attend some public events – theatre perhaps – and dine out several times. I am sure we have invitations awaiting our…pleasure.” The questioning looks from sister and the dismay evidenced by his wife revealed they had not divined the need for such action.

“The news that an offer of courtship has been made may surface. We will simply deny the existence of a courtship and not discuss whether an offer was made. Our presence is needed to limit the….repercussions that are sure to attend such a rumour if it arises. My uncle and cousins will be aiding our endeavours but we must also be present to show that there is nothing untoward in the situation. If we were to leave immediately for Pemberley – which I assure you I would wish to do – questions would be raised as to the reasons for our trip. I wish to avoid such speculations.” His pause was thoughtful, “As well, I wish to ensure that His Grace and Lord Albert do not attempt to cast us in an unfavourable light should the existence of the offer become public.”

Over the following week, the Darcys were much in the public attention, attending several plays and, on evenings when not so engaged, accepted invitations to dinners with friends and acquaintances and hosted a dinner for family and close friends to which Mr. Bingley was invited. When apprised of the offer of a courtship to Georgiana and her refusal, he was quick to accept the invitation. In all of this the Fitzwilliam clan supported their efforts assiduously and Elizabeth, Georgiana and Lady Matlock received many callers but it appeared that knowledge of the offer was restricted to the families concerned. It was with no little relief that, a week later, Darcy assisted his wife and sister into the carriage to return to Pemberley. Elizabeth’s increasing fatigue at the demands placed on her had begun to concern him greatly and his remonstrations with her to reduce her efforts were unavailing in the face of her determination to be of assistance to her sister.

Before they left for Pemberley however, Darcy saw the need for a meeting with Bingley and invited him into his study following the dinner when all the other guests had departed. Passing his friend a glass of port, he said, “That you have formed an attachment to Georgiana is now readily apparent to most of us who know you both.”

If Bingley was disconcerted by his blunt words, Darcy could see no sign of it. Instead, Bingley simply replied, “I should hope that it was….And that Georgiana is aware of it also.”

“Regardless of your feelings or those of Georgiana, I will not allow her to accept any offer before her eighteenth birthday. I had not intended to allow her to accept such offers before the end of her first season and now, since she plans to miss the season next spring, I may insist she wait for a full year. However,” and he grinned at Bingley, “I will not prevent you from courting her unofficially,
provided that all the proprieties are observed and you both act with discretion.”

Bingley considered Darcy’s words for a moment or two before responding, “I quite understand; however, you should know that I plan to offer for her at the first opportunity that you will allow.”

“That is as may be. I will not inform Georgiana of this and I will expect you to observe all of the proprieties with her.”

Bingley nodded his acceptance and only asked if he might call on her before they left for Pemberley. When permission was granted, he resolved to ask her for two dances at the Pemberley Ball. Darcy saw his friend out and, while satisfied with the substance of the discussion, he was a trifle perplexed at the odd abstraction displayed by Bingley as he left.
Chapter 55

Saturday, December 18, 1813 – Pemberley

Their company was now complete. The Gardiners and Miss Thompson – unaccompanied by her parents who had chosen to spend Christmas with their other children – had arrived yesterday. The Gardiners were accompanied by all their children and the newest Gardiner had enjoyed all the attention and fussing over that any infant of but five months is likely to encounter from his female cousins. That he was insensible of the pleasure he afforded them can only be attributed to his lack of years and did nothing to lessen the pleasure of those who attended him.

Mrs. Bennet had, in company with Mrs. Reynolds and Elizabeth, been given a tour of Pemberley that had reduced her normal volubleness to a bemused awe. That is not to say that she was bereft of speech but certainly her desire to offer suggestions as to appropriate changes to the furnishings were muted and those she did offer were greeted with amused albeit masked tolerance by the other ladies. Suffice it to say that, by the end of the day, even Mrs. Bennet’s desire to view the splendours of Pemberley had been exhausted by the number of rooms that she had perforce to view. So tired was that lady, she was required to remove to her room to rest for several hours.

Mrs. Bennet was not alone in her fatigue from the day’s activities. As she relaxed in the privacy of her personal sitting room, Elizabeth recalled with relief the meeting with her mother that had, only shortly before, seen that lady – perhaps for the first time – made aware of the consequences of her actions. Elizabeth, with the support of the Gardiners and her father, had spoken to her mother of her concerns about Mrs. Bennet’s lack of propriety in public settings. That Mrs. Bennet was quite insensible of what constituted proper behaviour was evidenced - within minutes of Elizabeth broaching the subject - by loud exclamations and protestations denying that she had ever behaved in a way that would offend others. Recalled by Elizabeth to her behaviour at the Netherfield Ball, she disavowed that such behaviour was improper. Neither the comments of the Gardiners nor those of her husband were sufficient to cause her to amend her opinion on this matter and her feelings of ill-usage only intensified in their expression the more she was importuned.

Finally, Elizabeth realized that her mother was not open to persuasion on the issue and had recourse to an ultimatum; the threat of being prevented from appearing at the ball to be held on the first day of the new year unless her behaviour was amended, rendered Mrs. Bennet speechless for several minutes. Once she reclaimed the power of expressing herself, those recriminations about to be levied at her daughter were cut short by Elizabeth’s command, “Enough!”

Looking directly at her mother, Elizabeth stated clearly and slowly, “You will not be present at the Ball unless…”

Mrs. Bennet’s mouth snapped shut. She had never heard any of her daughters speak so to her and she was about to chastise Elizabeth and opened her mouth to do so when she heard her daughter say, “I am mistress of this house and, if you are not prepared to accept my rules, you are not welcome here. Am…I…Understood?!"

Mrs. Bennet was too surprised at the sternness with which Elizabeth spoke to answer and so Elizabeth repeated herself, “Am…I…Understood?!"

Mrs. Bennet finally nodded and Elizabeth continued, albeit in a more moderate tone, “It is unfortunate, Mama, but my experience with the impropriety of your behaviour is such that I am not prepared to expose my guests at the ball to an exhibition which would embarrass my husband or Georgiana or the other members of my husband’s family. I will not recount the many instances in
which you have embarrassed Jane and myself in public, nor the damage you may have inflicted upon our reputations at various times. I will not dispute the facts with you. I am simply informing you of my concerns. However, I am prepared to offer you the opportunity to demonstrate you can behave with civility and propriety.” Gathering her resolve, she continued, “Three days after Christmas we will be hosting a dinner which includes all of the Matlock family – the Earl and Countess, Lord Fitzwilliam and his wife, Lady Frances and her husband and Mr. Fitzwilliam. If you can behave properly that evening, an invitation to the ball will be extended. Again, your continued presence there will depend on your behaviour. I would add that I will expect you to behave properly between now and then.” The smile she directed at her mother contained little mirth, “Consider it an opportunity to practice.”

The silence in the room was tense as Mrs. Bennet sat, mouth agape, the focus of all eyes – everyone rather anticipating a familiar outburst. Elizabeth could not remember her mother as quiet until she recalled the latter’s surprise when her engagement to Darcy had been revealed. Mr. Bennet broke the silence, “Mrs. Bennet, do you comprehend what Lizzy has stated? She is the Mistress of this home and has responsibilities which require her to act with a degree of propriety with which you are not familiar. She cannot have you and I and her sisters expose her and her family, the Darcys, to censure or ridicule. Do you understand?”

Mrs. Bennet reluctantly nodded and Elizabeth sought to appease her slightly, “Mama, Kitty and Mary have both improved greatly by their exposure to more refined society. There will be a number of very eligible young men attending this ball but those men will be more willing to court a young woman with only a small dowry if they can be assured of the propriety of her behaviour and that of her family.”

She paused and considered her mother further, “Do you understand what I am offering?”

Mrs. Bennet was oddly thoughtful, “If I behave properly at the dinner with the Matlocks, I can attend the ball.”

“That is so.”

Mrs. Gardiner interjected, “I will be sitting beside you, Fran, and will help.” At Mrs. Bennet’s nod, her husband said, “I will be with you also. Now I can see that Lizzy is quite tired and we should allow her to rest.”

Mrs. Bennet looked at her second oldest daughter reflectively, saying “Yes, indeed. I admit to being quite exhausted myself.” With which she accepted the arm offered by her husband and bustled out of the room followed by the Gardiners, who sent a final commiserating look at Elizabeth before closing the door behind themselves.

Elizabeth had not been left alone for long as her husband, discerning the departure of her company, had quickly joined her. Fully aware of the purpose of the meeting, his raised eyebrow and quizzical look only elicited a tired chuckle from Elizabeth, “All is well, my love. My mother has accepted – most reluctantly I must admit – that she must curb her behaviour. I hope to see an improvement but I will not waver in my determination on this.”

“Elizabeth, I would not have you become estranged from your mother over this. I am sure we can all tolerate a little foolishness.”

Elizabeth simply shook her head, “The thought that Kitty and Mary could attract more eligible suitors seemed to catch her fancy. Let us hope it is enough. Between Aunt Madeline and father, I hope we can moderate her effusions.” With a quick glance at her husband who was hovering and looking at her with an expression she had long ago had come to recognize as desire, she murmured, “Enough of
Mama. I would like my tall, handsome husband to…. ” Before she could finish the thought she had been picked up by Darcy and was being carried to his bedchamber. Thoughts of her mother and her behaviour were banished rapidly and replaced more pleasurably by the loving attentions of a husband.

Tuesday, December 21, 1813 – Pemberley
Mr. Bennet was surprised to receive a letter as Reynolds distributed the post that morning. Putting aside thoughts of his breakfast for a moment, he considered the letter. He recognized the hand that had written it and was undecided whether he wished to disturb his meal by reading it immediately. With some regret he filled his cup with coffee and opened the letter.

Dear Papa,

This may be the hardest letter I have ever written. Before I write any more I would ask for your forgiveness for being such a burden and hurtful to you and my sisters. I know I can never absolve myself of the pain and distress I have caused but I ask for it anyway.

I have been a selfish being all my life. I know that Lizzy, Jane and you have tried to give me good principles and to teach me how to behave in a proper manner but I would not listen. I thought you all fools and could see no reason for your strictures. I was the fool and the price I paid is heavy.

I am with child who will, I am told, be born around June of next year. I have been blessed with a good man as its father. How good I knew not when I met him and it is only as we became acquainted in our travels that I came to esteem and respect him. As I learned to do so my wish to garner his good opinion increased. He has always treated me with kindness and respect. Now I believe I can hope for his esteem as well. He knows of my past and my mistakes. I told him all before we left London. By that time I knew his goodness well enough to not want to burden him with my past should he wish to not bear it. I told him all and he has never spoken of it since and has told me to remember it not.

My thoughts, however, would not leave me in peace. The minister of our local church saw, I suspect, my distress and, gentle soul that he is, did not press me to reveal my problem. He suggested that if I felt I had wronged someone that perhaps asking for their forgiveness would alleviate my distress. This I must do and feel I must also share my past with you if only to help you understand my resolve for my future behaviour as well as to ask for forgiveness from you and my sisters.

My time with Wickham I am sure you know. As well, I am sure that there was a period of 6 weeks or more between Wickham’s desertion and my arrival at the home where I was sheltered. Wickham left me at a brothel where I was told I could work or leave. I left penniless and lost and attempted to reach my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner’s; however, I was accosted by a man while trying to find a hackney cab and used most foully by him. I was lost, confused, hurt and tired. I could not believe that my aunt and uncle would now accept me into their house. I was forced – and this pains me still – to sell myself to eat. That I did not become diseased is something I cannot fathom even today. God must have been watching over me despite my actions. I was with child but due to my illness, lost the babe. I cannot regret that loss. I could not have provided a decent home for a child – I was one myself. That I was able to stumble into the home where I was eventually found and then be recovered by Mr. Darcy only makes my gratitude greater.

It has taken me many months to understand all that I have done and the reasons for it and the consequences that attend my behaviour. That I am with child now has forced me to consider how I wish that child to be brought up. My husband is such a man as will not permit our child to behave as I did. For this I am most thankful and, as the mother, will do whatever is required to ensure that my
daughter, should I have one, is not another Lydia Bennet.

I would wish you to share this letter only with Lizzy and Jane and their husbands. I have sent a separate note to Mama telling her that I am with child and the particulars of our life here. I am sure that it will please her.

For you and my sisters, be comforted that we are well; that I respect and esteem my husband; and that we are building a fine living here in Canada. The war with the United States may have proven a blessing for us since many families were frightened away by the violence. James was able to purchase an excellent farm with a good home for a decent cost. We are improving the property and should be able to live quite well. I have much to learn to be a proper wife – our mother did us no favour by neglecting our instruction – but we have hired an elderly woman who is teaching me all she knows. I have no cause to repine and James seems content with my efforts. I am indeed most fortunate.

I would wish to hear from you and my sisters if you and they could bear to write me. I know I have never been a good correspondent but in this as much else, I am determined to improve.

Your daughter,
Lydia Simpson

He folded the letter and placed it beside his setting before walking to the sideboard to fill his plate with food. For some reason his appetite, healthy when he entered the room, had diminished. The reason he knew well. His guilt over his failure as a father had never borne on him so heavily and sharing Lydia’s letter with his other daughters would only add to that burden. That Elizabeth already thought poorly of his past laxity, he had long suspected. Sharing this letter could not but lower him further in her esteem. Nevertheless, it could not be avoided.

When his meal was finished, he went in search of his daughters. Elizabeth was to be found in the study, with her husband, working on the household accounts. Once apprised of the letter, Elizabeth was quick to sent notes to Jane and the Gardiners to join them there and within a quarter hour they all had assembled. With little ceremony Mr. Bennet handed the letter to Elizabeth and, at the request of others, she read it aloud.

Reactions to the recital were mixed and the letter was quickly sought by Jane and Mrs. Gardiner for their closer perusal. The distress that the three women shared was obvious to them all and even Mr. Gardiner and Darcy could not – not did they try to do so – mask their sadness, although both had suspected much of what Lydia had revealed about the previously unexplained portion of her stay in London. Darcy expressed some surprise that he had not heard from James Simpson but allowed that a letter could be expected soon. As he admitted to Elizabeth later, the possibility of acquiring land near where the Simpsons were located appeared promising and he could, if purchases were made, appoint or arrange for Simpson to have the management of them. That, at some point in the future, they might visit the Simpsons if such purchases were made, was implicitly understood between them.

After reading her sister’s letter once more, Elizabeth stated her intention of responding directly, an endeavour which both Jane and Mrs. Gardiner agreed to emulate. Mr. Bennet was led to understand that he should do so also and he knew, if he were to be honest with himself, that he must acknowledge his own failures to his daughter and seek her forgiveness. It would not, he admitted, be an easy letter to write but it must be done.

Saturday, December 25, 1813 – Pemberley
It was a boisterous company to be sure. As Elizabeth looked down the dining table to her husband,
she could more easily than ever recognize traces of his discomfort with her family, particularly her
mother. In contradiction to most seating arrangements, she had seated her mother next to her, with
Mrs. Gardiner on her other side and Jane across the table. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet sat on
Darcy’s either side with Georgiana, Mary, Kitty and Miss Thompson seated next to each of them,
respectively. It was a surprisingly comfortable group and if the volume of chatter was somewhat
louder than was customary due to her mother’s rather piercing voice, none seemed to take it too
much amiss. There were at least three separate conversations taking place at any time and anyone not
seated at the table would most assuredly not be able to separate the various threads. Since she could
see no signs of distress on any countenance, Elizabeth was not disposed to worry over the matter.
Her mother was currently engaged with Jane and Mrs. Gardiner to the exclusion of any topic other
than Jane’s approaching confinement. That Mrs. Bennet would not be allowed to attend her daughter
during the birth had not been vouchsafed to her as yet – it was agreed that this news could wait until
the need arose – and the matron was quite happy to consider the soon-to-be arrival of her first
grandchild. That pleasure would not be denied her since Jane planned to remain at Pemberley until
Elizabeth’s confinement. Thus the plans for the Bennet’s to depart immediately after the ball were
altered and the Bennets would now return with the Gardiners following the arrival of Jane’s baby.

As Elizabeth looked down the table, she could not help but recall the dreariness of the previous
Christmas. Notwithstanding the company of the Gardiners, there had been little joy in their lives
then. Looking at her husband engaged in a serious but obviously absorbing conversation with her
father, she was surprised to see him glance up at her quickly as though her own gaze had called him.
Her smile was answered by one of his own before he once more let her father demand his attention.
Feeling her sister’s hand on her arm, she heard Jane murmur, “You are so very lucky Lizzy. He is a
very good man.”

“Oh Jane, I know that very well indeed. I am…we are singularly blessed in our husbands. Now, if
we could only get yours back home, all would be well.”

“I admit I miss him greatly. I had hoped he might return before the babe is born but that seems
unlikely now. I will simply have to trust in God to keep him safe for me and our child.”

“That he will, I have no doubts whatsoever.” Elizabeth paused and deliberately tried to turn the
conversations to a more pleasant direction. “I must thank you and Kitty for your assistance in
decorating the house. I wished to add or merge such of our traditions to those of Pemberley that
would be most attractive. I admit to being surprised” and here Elizabeth nodded at Kitty, “at how
valuable Kitty’s eye for design and colour would turn out to be. Mrs. Reynolds was most impressed
and delighted with all of our efforts I assure you.”

Kitty, having overheard the latter part of Elizabeth’s commendation, blushed becomingly and was
quick to declaim any particular contribution. Her efforts were, however, defeated by the praise of
Georgiana, Mary and Jane and she was eventually forced to accept the praise which only increased
her embarrassment. To spare further damage to Kitty’s countenance, Elizabeth encouraged the
conversation to meander to other topics.

The next day, following church services, Elizabeth, Darcy and Georgiana removed to the ballroom
where the Boxing Day ritual was to be enacted. Mrs. Reynolds, Elizabeth and Georgiana had spent
much of the previous fortnight preparing boxes containing gifts and food for their tenants and gifts
for the Pemberley staff. This ritual was held every year although in recent times the presence of the
Darcy family had been sporadic and a Mistress had not presided for fifteen years or more. Elizabeth
could see Mrs. Reynolds’ pleasure and pride in the occasion; her smile could barely be contained as
she watched the Darcys engage with their tenants and servants. That the latter were happy with the
attentions paid them Mrs. Reynolds had no doubt and she had observed more than a few glances of
approval directed at Elizabeth; her being obviously with child and thus ensuring the continuation of
the Darcy presence was a matter of much satisfaction.

As Elizabeth moved amongst the crowd, she was grateful for the presence of her sister and husband who could recall to her the names of those she met. Indeed, she had met and greeted all of the tenants previously but some she knew but little. Finally, she found a moment to herself and rested by a table still partly laden with food and drink unconsciously placing her hand on her expanding stomach. The ripple she felt caught her by surprise. She had become accustomed to the flutterings of the babe but never had she felt his presence so tangibly and he was continuing to be active. Looking up, she sought her husband’s eye and found him across the room already gazing at her with some concern. Her smile and slight beckoning motion drew him to her and within seconds he was beside her asking, “Are you tired? Georgiana and I can remain should you need to rest.”

“I am not tired. I felt the babe!”

At her husband’s look of incomprehension, she took his hand and placed it on her stomach. The babe remained lively and her husband’s delight was obvious as, for the first time, he could feel the life moving in her body. He whispered, “Tis a Christmas present a day late but well worth the wait.”
Saturday, January 1, 1814 – Pemberley

The road leading to the entrance of Pemberley was lined with lights which reflected off fresh fallen snow to cast an even greater brightness to the evening’s darkness. The stream of carriages had begun shortly after eight and showed but few signs of slowing. Fortunately most of those attending the ball were guests at Pemberley but still the surrounding estates had been delighted to accept the invitation and had made the trip despite the winter weather. The rooms at Pemberley were filled with guests and Mrs. Reynolds could scarce remember when the house had been as full of life and laughter. That problems would arise was a foregone conclusion but those that had were dealt with at little discomfort to anyone.

It had proven fortunate that Richard Fitzwilliam had taken residence at his small estate, which was reasonably close to Pemberley, since he was able to accommodate not only his Fitzwilliam relatives but also some for whom Pemberley had been unable to find space. The earl and countess had arrived several days previous to the ball and had been in company with the Darcys almost every evening since then. The coolness between Darcy and his uncle had almost completely dissipated, assisted undoubtedly by the news that Lord Albert had become engaged to the daughter of the Earl of ____. That the lady had a handsome dowry and face and was unattached after three full seasons may have ensured her ready acceptance of Lord Albert’s offer. If her other attributes were somewhat deficient, they apparently were not of concern to her betrothed. The Earl of Matlock may have regretted the loss of such a connection but the speed with which Lord Albert sought and found another lady to grace his home consoled him that the Duke of ____’s displeasure might be of short duration.

The Matlock party were among the first to arrive and greet Elizabeth and Darcy. Lady Eleanor was quick to praise the arrangements for the ball and noted to Elizabeth that it was unfortunate that her confinement would prevent Elizabeth from participating in the season since she, the Countess, would take great delight in Elizabeth to perform a similar task in London. As the lady observed, “Elizabeth, it is past time that Mrs. Darcy take her place in society and I am looking forward to your doing so!”

“Aunt Eleanor, I may be forced to disappoint you. I look forward to spending my days here at Pemberley and raising my children.”

The countess shook her head, although a small smile touched her lips, “I am afraid that will not do, Elizabeth. You, your husband and your children will have a position in society. You must give some time to filling that position.” Her smile broadened, “Of course that does not prevent you escaping to the wilds of Derbyshire…which event I am sure will happen with great frequency.”

“You know me too well indeed, aunt.”

Their conversation was cut short by the press of other guests and Elizabeth found herself rather bemused by the stream of faces that she scarcely recognized and secretly gave thanks to the presence of her husband who seemed to know them one and all and made such introductions as were necessary. When it appeared that the last of the guests had arrived, Elizabeth gave the signal for dancing to begin and the musicians signalled their readiness. Elizabeth as hostess was moving to begin the task of circulating and ensuring that ladies found partners when she was prevented from doing so by Darcy taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor. Her surprise was evident as she cried quietly, “William, what are you doing? We cannot dance. I am the hostess!”

“I intend to ignore society’s dictates tonight and dance the first with my wife. I will not be dissuaded on this! Do not try Lizzy!” His smile belied his words and, truthfully, she knew she was not inclined
to deny him or herself, the pleasure of this dance.

That Mr. and Mrs. Darcy took up the first position in the set caused as much whispering as her obvious enceinte condition. Their equally obvious pleasure with each other and the affectionate glances they exchanged and made little effort to hide were a surprise only to those who had not previously been much in their company and such murmurings of disapprobation as did arise were quickly suppressed by the general approval of the lady and her husband. The conclusion of the dance saw the Darcys separate, each to perform their own tasks for the evening; Elizabeth to circulate and ensuring the enjoyment of her guests and Darcy to partner such ladies as might be in need of one for a dance. It would have taken an acute observer to notice that his attention, even when dancing, was focussed very much on his wife and her movements around the floor were tracked closely. However most of the guests could not be unaware that Mr. Darcy was quick to return to his wife’s side following every dance set and that attempting to deflect him from such a purpose was futile. Several gentlemen had indeed tried, only to have to be satisfied with a brief apology to the effect that he was required to attend his wife.

Richard Fitzwilliam was one of those who had carefully observed his cousin's behaviour with some amusement and had remarked to his partner at the time, Miss Thompson, “I never really expected my cousin to find a wife who would so capture his affections.”

“I think they are both delightful and extremely fortunate; but why should it surprise you?”

“You did not know my cousin before he met Elizabeth. He was quite different. A man of pride and position who I would never have expected to attach himself to someone from Elizabeth’s station in life.”

“He is much changed then?”

“Oh yes, indeed he is. But enough talking of my boring cousin. Are you engaged for the next set?”

“I am not but it would be quite improper for us to dance it. We have danced the first and you have requested the supper dance.”

Richard smiled broadly, “I have no intention of asking you to dance, delightful though it would be. Come, I would have a private talk with you…if I may?” And after her nod of acquiescence he placed her hand on his arm and led her out of the ballroom.

Their escape had not gone unnoticed. In fact, Elizabeth had been quietly watching them both all evening and, having come to know a little of her friend’s heart, was hoping that Richard would offer for it tonight. As her husband approached she took his arm and motioned in the direction where Richard and Miss Thompson were walking through the doorway of the ballroom, “Do you have any notions of your cousin’s intentions?”

Darcy’s grin reassured her, “I believe I will have an opportunity to tease him for a change. You can be assured that I shall not deprive myself of that pleasure.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “Men!” and was about to dispatch him to find another dance partner when he demurred and stated his desire to remain in her company for this set. His company was agreeable to her and they were quickly joined by the earl and Countess who had come to impart such news as they had gleaned that evening. They had conversed for some quarter hour when Elizabeth nudged her husband and nodded to the doorway where a beaming Richard and Janet Thompson had entered and, from their behaviour, obviously searching for someone. Janet was the first to see Elizabeth and after pointing her out to Richard, it was a matter of seconds before they had spotted his father and mother and the Darcys. Richard’s happiness was palatable and he wasted no time in informing them
all that Miss Janet Thompson had given him her hand in marriage. Elizabeth and the countess were no less eager to welcome her into their family with warm hugs and Richard received the congratulations from his father and cousin with pleasure along with some requisite teasing as Darcy observed, “I can easily understand you wishing to win Miss Thompson’s favour but whatever can she see in you, cousin?”

Elizabeth’s laughing admonishment to her husband was followed by a kiss to Richard’s cheek and a warm, “Congratulations Richard. I think that you both shall be very happy together.”

After accepting their congratulations, Richard turned to his father, “I applied to Mr. Thompson for consent before I left London so the engagement is official. Would you announce it during supper?”

“Of course, I would be proud to do so.” He looked at Miss Thompson, “How long are you planning to stay here at Pemberley Miss Thompson?”

“My plans are not fixed but I had thought to return home in two days.”

“Yes well, perhaps you might stay a little longer. It might be a good for us to get better acquainted with the lady who will soon be a new daughter and I am sure that Richard would wish you to visit Holsten. From what he has told us, there are some changes required there.”

The Countess could no longer be repressed, “Have you considered a wedding date? And where the wedding will take place?”

Richard laughed, “Not yet, mother. Although I am not in favour of a long engagement. Janet and I have not had time to consider these issues. Let us enjoy tonight before you force the practicalities on us.”

They conversed for several more minutes before Richard and his betrothed moved to join his sister and her husband to share their news. This seemed to be a signal for the others to disperse until only the countess remained in company with Elizabeth who thought to take the opportunity to query Lady Eleanor.

“Are you satisfied with your son’s choice?”

The countess did not answer immediately and her gaze was thoughtful as she scanned the crowd around her. Satisfied as to their privacy, her gaze returned to Elizabeth.

“I suspect that if Fitzwilliam had not married you, I might be quite unhappy. The connection to trade would have been a difficult fence to jump. But…I have met and grown to like you very much, I have met Miss Thompson, who is everything that is genteel, and her family are quite presentable as well. I could wish that he wished to marry someone of our station but he has had many years to do so and has not. I am satisfied and quite willing to accept Miss Thompson into our family. She will do well I think. She is much like you and Frances, you know.” Her pause was almost too brief to notice, “And there is the fact that he has resigned from the army and will be safe. That cannot but make me happy.”

Elizabeth smiled and laid a hand on the countess’s arm, “I am glad. I am glad for Janet and Richard as well. I know Janet was beginning to despair of meeting a man she could esteem. Too many thought only of her possible dowry, convinced that her father’s wealth would ensure that it was large. She did not reveal her heart to me but I could see Richard had gained her affections. I think they will do well together and I admit to a selfish pleasure that my friend and the man William considers a brother, will live so conveniently close to us. Very selfish of me, I concede.” Her grin was quite unrepentant and drew a soft chuckle from the countess; but that lady’s attention remained
fixed on her son for a short time only. The supper dance was beginning and Bingley’s participation with Georgiana caused a slight frown to appear, which Elizabeth, once she had determined the direction of the countess’s gaze, could easily interpret.

"I am not certain of my sister's affections; she has not confided in me to that extent – perhaps because she does not know them herself. I am convinced that she holds Mr. Bingley in considerable regard; it is not the work of a few meetings – indeed she had known him as William’s closest friend for several years.” She paused, unsure how much to relate and decided that certain matters – Bingley’s intentions in particular – would be best left to William to reveal.

“I have no particular disinclination to Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth. He is quite an amiable and genteel gentleman....”

Elizabeth knew the earl would be less favourably inclined – Bingley’s personal involvement in trade would be upsetting and his acquisition of an estate would not ameliorate such a disinclination. Her response was temporizing, “Well, let us deal with problems if they arise. I cannot say that William favours Mr. Bingley but he will not discourage him – of that I am convinced.” After a moment’s thought – she would be imparting information that the countess would shortly learn anyway – she mentioned, “Mr. Bingley will be staying with us for several more days before returning to York. I believe he has business with William but he will be seeing Georgiana as well.”

The countess’ pursed lips suggested that this did not meet with her complete approval, but she let the matter drop and tactfully began to discuss some of their guests. Elizabeth was inclined to reveal that Georgiana had also assigned the last dance of the ball to Mr. Bingley but thought better of it – perhaps Lady Eleanor would not observe this obvious sign of Georgiana’s preference though such was not likely. More likely she would observe but refrain from commenting when nothing further happened – she could hope anyway. Shortly thereafter the two ladies separated; to mingle with crowd in the case of the countess, and Elizabeth to visit the dining area where her guests would shortly congregate.
Early May, 1814 – Pemberley

As Elizabeth had come to recognize, there is frequently a degree of inevitability about certain events. A couple will wed and, if they are blessed, children will be conceived and then birthed; a couple may court, become engaged and then wed; a conception that was so welcomed but seemingly taking forever to come to its usual conclusion will eventually do so. One can set something in motion and then one is left powerless to alter, in any significant manner and mostly unwilling to do so, the course that is followed to its predestined end. So it had seemed to her for the last four months. Perhaps, she thought, it was that her confinement was wearing on her; certainly her inability to walk comfortably for more than – to her – a short distance without tiring and being required to sit down. Feeling bloated and ungainly as well was not designed to improve her mood and all the solicitous care of her husband and sisters was frequently a cause for irritation – which she tried to conceal as much as possible. If not for the comforting presence of Jane and her Aunt Madeline, she probably would have loosed her ire at them all more frequently.

As she thought back, it was little more than a year ago that William had proposed to her here at Pemberley and in little more than fortnight, they will have been married for a year and in a few days, or less, they will be presented with their first child. With all that had gone before, the humiliation that followed Lydia’s ruin, the despair of believing that due to her own immaturity and prejudices she had lost the affections of Mr. Darcy and the unbelievable pleasure that arose when she met him once again and realized his affections had not faltered in the period of their separation, she could now see as akin to one of her morning rambles where the path rose and fell, twisted and turned presenting a different landscape with every change. That she was only on the early stages of that ramble and the prospects ahead – although certain to present some troubles and sorrows – were, for the most part, likely to be full of joy and love. If her days were tedious at the moment, she knew that state would not continue for long.

Fortunately, today was one of the better days and she had managed to walk to the conservatory to rest in the comfort that it provided. If she could not wander the wilds of Pemberley, here she could feel close to trees, plants and rivers she had come to love. As she relaxed in the warmth and sounds of the nearby fountain, she watched her sister cradling her child beside her murmuring and crooning to him and remembered the day of his birth.

About a week after the Pemberley Ball, the day started rather earlier than was usual for Jane who, as she admitted later, could remember only poorly her last night of uninterrupted sleep. That morning’s discomfort was quite a bit different from the usual need to visit the water closet or to change position because the ache in her back or her hips or some other part of her body. The cramp that caught her by surprise was like none she had ever previously experienced and, if not unduly painful, had been sufficient to wake her thoroughly. A return to sleep proving impossible and, as the discomfort of the cramp receded, she had risen to begin her preparations for the day. Her maid was called to assist her and a request for tea and a light breakfast sent to the kitchen. A quarter hour later, dressed and refreshed, she had moved to her sitting room awaiting a tray from the kitchen which arrived at virtually the same time as the next cramp. Alarmed now, she had called for her maid who, understanding what was happening immediately moved to assist her mistress and then, when the cramp had passed, to make Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth aware of what was happening.

From this point there was an inevitability about the process and although the labour was not complete until late that night, Thomas Joseph Stovall – named in honour of both of his grandfathers – made his appearance to a tired but joyful Jane Stovall and only the absence of his father could diminish that
Mrs. Bennet, who had been removed to Derby, when Jane’s labour began – a fact which was kept from her by her husband - for the purpose of shopping in the stores there and hence did not greet her grandson until two days after his birth. That she was displeased at the inconsideration shown her was made known to all her family – several times; however, Mrs. Bennet’s delight in the child quickly was sufficient compensation such that, within minutes of being allowed to hold him, she proclaimed that he would be much the handsomest of any grandchild she could possibly have.

For her part, Jane had consoled herself for the absence of her husband by writing him a letter describing the child’s perfections in great detail. Another, less voluminous letter was dispatched to York to impart to Amos’ mother the important news. Her reply was swift and contained all the assurances that a new mother could wish, the regrets that she was unable to have been present at the birth and the best wishes of Amos’s sister and brother.

For Elizabeth the months that followed were a time of quiet enjoyment with but herself, her husband, Jane, Georgiana and Kitty as the Bennets and Gardiners removed to their homes a week after the birth of Jane’s baby. Her own increasing size and a blustery winter largely confined everyone indoors and, for Elizabeth and Darcy in particular, the conservatory became a favourite retreat. Music, reading and chess were the staple of an evening’s entertainment and while several dinner parties were arranged in January, Elizabeth found more interest in remodelling her own bedroom into a nursery.

It was only the need to remove to London to attend the wedding of Richard and Janet that had disturbed their quiet. Accompanied by Georgiana – Kitty deciding to remain at Pemberley with Jane – Elizabeth and Darcy had made their way carefully to London. Janet and Richard’s preference for a quiet Hertfordshire wedding had been overruled by the two mothers who, for different reasons, wished for a more prominent ceremony. Their original proposal for a wedding in April – to allow for the most exhausting of preparations – ran into opposition quickly when it became apparent that the Darcys would not be able to attend since it was too close to the expected date when Elizabeth would deliver the heir to Pemberley. Janet and Richard insisted on an earlier date and eventually agreed to a date in late February which Darcy stated was the latest that he could allow Elizabeth to travel – ignoring, it must be added, the eye-roll performed by that lady when informed of his decision.

Fortunately, the weather, although cold, was good and the roads clear and hard with the result that the trip was more expeditious than usual. They arrived several days in advance of the wedding, and if Elizabeth’s activities were limited to family dinners, the constraint was borne by them both with great equanimity. The wedding took place as planned and both matrons could not help but be pleased with the result of their endeavours. The bride was beautiful and the groom, if not handsome, was most presentable and his adoration of his wife hidden from no one. Darcy had the joy of having his cousin happily and safely married and Elizabeth, the pleasure of one of her best friends becoming a close neighbour. The newly–wedded couple had chosen to remove to their estate in Derbyshire with the intention of taking a bridal trip during the summer months and chose to return in company with the Darcys albeit in their own carriage.

The sound of footsteps drew Elizabeth’s attention and she looked up to see her Aunt Madeline and, to her surprise, Janet Fitzwilliam approaching her.

“Janet, I am surprised to see you. When did you arrive?”

“Richard and I arrived but a half hour ago. He is with your husband now.”

“Can you stay for the night? Or longer perhaps?” Janet did not miss the hopeful note in Elizabeth’s voice.
“Richard and I are here until the baby is born. Richard rather thought your husband would wish for the company and I believe his father and mother can be expected shortly.”

Elizabeth began to laugh, “With my aunt, my sister, Aunt Eleanor and yourself the birthing room will not lack for support. Will there be room for the midwife do you suppose? You know Mrs. Reynolds will want to be there as well. I fear to disappoint you all by only having a single baby. Should I not have twins to merit such a congregation?”

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, “You should not joke about twins, Lizzy. They have appeared in the Gardiner family in the past.”

Elizabeth paled, “Oh, that I did not know. Surely I do not have twins now. Would not I have been told? Would they know?” Her agitation started to increase until finally Mrs. Gardiner managed to calm her with assurances that twins would represent no more of a problem than a single child and, where there were nurses to care for the children, she should not worry about something that was unlikely.

The arrival of Jane with her baby successfully diverted attention and the conversation reclaimed its happy tenor for the rest of the day. The arrival of the Earl and Countess of Matlock completed the party that awaited the birth of Elizabeth’s baby and the next day or so passed in relative ease although everyone admitted, out of Elizabeth’s hearing, to finding the wait to be tedious and tense.

As with all things of this nature, the waiting did come to an end. The delivery was relatively fast and Elizabeth endured not more than four hours to safely deliver the Pemberley heir. While she was quick to appreciate the support of those who attended her, she drew her strength and calmness from Jane as the travails of the birth grew most painful. In the early hours of the afternoon, Bennet Joseph Darcy arrived healthy and strong and, as his father was wont to concede, possessed of a healthy set of lungs.

Darcy had tarried not at all when apprised by the countess that his wife and babe were both healthy and arrived in the birthing room within minutes of receiving the news. Presented with the picture of his obviously tired but glowing wife cradling his child – his son – in her arms, he could not control the tears that flooded his eyes. As he knelt beside her and enveloped them both in his arms, he whispered, “Lizzy, I do not believe I can be happier than I am now.”

“William, I have thought much lately of the journey we have taken to get here. I know the journey is not over - that we have much joy ahead - but this moment, this day I will never forget. I am in your arms and holding our son. I can ask no more. Are you truly happy?”

“Such a foolish question from such an intelligent woman. The husband of Elizabeth Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to his situation that he could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.”
It is not to be wondered at that any couple – no matter the depth of affection that exists in the marriage – will find disagreements arising between them; pride, a willingness to compromise and discuss the issues that lie between them will not inhibit the resolution of such differences and prevent erosion of the love and respect each brought to the marriage. Fortunately for Elizabeth and Darcy, the travails and misunderstandings that plagued the early days of their relationship taught this valuable lesson. Theirs remained a love match that deepened and broadened as their family grew and the years passed. Bennet was joined by four brothers over the first fifteen years of the marriage; but the couple had all but despaired of having a daughter – Darcy, in particular, wanted a daughter cast in the image of his wife – until Elizabeth, then in her late thirties, unexpectedly found herself again with child and pleased her husband with the delivery of twin daughters, Jane and Ann. Now nine years of age and virtually identical, they are – in the words of Mr. Bennet – the image of Lizzy with the added advantage of five older brothers to plague – which they do as much as their governess will permit – and the girls, as Mr. Bennet was also wont to observe constituted a just reward to Elizabeth for the vexation that she gave her own mother at a similar age. Elizabeth appeared to take it in stride and was heard one day by her husband to inform her daughters ‘what are girls for but to make sport for their brothers and to laugh at them in turn’.

Amos Stovall had returned to England several months after Napoleon abdicated in 1814, his ship laid up in ordinary and his services no longer required by His Majesty’s Navy. Not wasting any time, he was in London short days later to join with his wife and son in London. While some business kept them there for a fortnight, they made their way to York as expeditiously as possible with only a short visit to Pemberley on the way. Once established on their estate, they were extremely reluctant to leave and the fact that a daughter – Elizabeth – was born a scant year after Amos’ return, encouraged them in that decision. Due to his being rather remote from news of events on the continent, Napoleon’s return and ultimate defeat at Waterloo, was over before he could be called back into service and his ship commissioned for duty. The Stovalls were blessed with another three children and lived quite happily in Yorkshire with only occasional visits to visit relatives in the following years - London, in particular, held few attractions and had been visited there but twice – to visit the Gardiners. Shortly after his return, Stovall purchased a cottage in Scarborough and a small schooner which he kept docked there. His summers were frequently spent sailing, an activity which none of his children much enjoyed but which quickly became a favourite pastime of the second youngest Darcy son who, from the age of ten, spent most of the summer months visiting the Stovalls and sailing with his uncle. That he, at the age of fourteen, would join the navy as a midshipman came as a surprise to no one although his mother was less than pleased by the decision.

Catherine and Mary both married; Catherine to a promising young clerk in her Uncle Gardiner’s company who, ten years later, had been promoted to a junior partner and were blessed a brood of children; Mary, however, did not marry until almost thirty years of age and her husband, a widower of some ten years her senior, was in possession of a small estate in Lincolnshire and several young children for whom he needed a mother. While conceding it to be a prudent marriage for both, Elizabeth’s concerns were not alleviated until she recognized the affections that each held for the other. The friendship that developed between Catherine and Georgiana lasted throughout their lives although it was carried out mostly by correspondence with Georgiana living in the north and Catherine in London.

Lydia and James Simpson raised a large brood of children in Canada and, if neither had the opportunity to visit their homeland again, they did have the pleasure of Elizabeth and Darcy crossing the ocean to visit some fifteen years after their marriage – Elizabeth was heard to aver that sea trips must encourage getting with child, attributing the trip to the birth of her twin daughters. With eight
children Lydia’s days were full and the Simpson farm was large and prosperous. Most of her sons had made a place for themselves on the farm but their second oldest son not being interested in farming and longing for a city profession travelled to London and eventually found a position in the Gardiner’s company. Elizabeth thought that James Simpson had much to do with the gentlemanly behaviour of his sons and the girls, who she feared might resemble their mother in her early years, were indeed lively but very well behaved. If the society they moved in was less refined than London it was not dissimilar to Hertfordshire in most respects.

Charles Bingley waited until Georgiana’s eighteenth birthday to request a courtship; however, before Georgiana would accept the courtship offer she felt the necessity to inform Mr. Bingley of the events at Ramsgate involving George Wickham. His response was all that she could have hoped for and her acceptance was joyful and approved, with reservations, by Darcy. The courtship lasted a scant six weeks and his offer of marriage accepted with considerable delight and the couple were married three months later. The marriage was a happy one and blessed with several children. They remained in York in comfortable distance from Pemberley to visit the Darcy’s and, as well, the Stovalls with whom they became very close.

Mr. Bennet had retired to Pemberley some twenty years after the Darcys married; too enfeebled to live alone at Longbourn – Mrs. Bennet having succumbed to an illness ten years previous - he availed himself of the Pemberley library and the company of his most cherished daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Collins were established at Longbourn to take care of the estate. The death of Mr. Collins – an ill-advised tour of his farms left him wet and badly chilled by a severe rainstorm, from which a severe fever developed – left Charlotte Collins to raise the heir of Longbourn – Thomas Collins – along with her two daughters. Young Thomas, with help from Darcy and being blessed with his mother’s good sense, quickly learned the rudiments of managing an estate. At five and twenty, he actively courted and married the Bingley’s middle daughter whom he met while they both were visiting Pemberley.

The Gardiners remained in London until such time as Mr. Gardiner retired from his business, turning it over to his own sons and those of his nieces possessed of a commercial bent. Upon retiring, the Gardiners removed to Lambton where Mrs. Gardiner was able to develop and improve those connections and acquaintances which had been created during her many visits to Pemberley. Proximity to the superb fishing at Pemberley and the ability to enjoy that pastime fully provided no small amount of pleasure to Mr. Gardiner.

Richard and Janet Fitzwilliam settled down in close proximity to Pemberley and each of the two families was much in the company of the other and the cousins were as close as siblings. Richard was able, over a ten year period, to improve the productivity of the estate to more than three thousand pounds per year. He also, as a personal project, began to breed and raise thoroughbred horses, a sideline which gradually developed into the main business of the estate and a source of considerable earnings.

For those less estimable characters, the years treated them as well as may be expected. Lady Catherine de Bourgh never reconciled with the Darcys and the death of her daughter some five years after their marriage only fixed her disdain for Elizabeth even more firmly and none of the representations of her Fitzwilliam relations managed to alter her opinions. As Rosings Park had been inherited by Anne by virtue of her father’s will and would pass to the nearest de Bourgh relation if she died childless, her death in 1820 saw the removal of Lady Catherine to the Dower House a circumstance held against Elizabeth for the remainder of Lady Catherine’s life.

Some two years after his marriage Darcy received a letter from a Colonel of the Georgia Militia to the effect that George Wickham had died in the Battle of New Orleans – one of the few American casualties in that battle. According to the Colonel he had comported himself well and his death was
regretted by his comrades. If Darcy suspected that such regrets may have been fuelled by debts of
honour that Wickham had left behind, such suspicions were only spoken to his wife. Lydia’s
response, upon being informed of Wickham’s demise in a letter from Elizabeth, was a succinct
‘Good!’ and could not be induced to express any other opinion.

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