Not Every Gentleman

by hl (hele)

Summary

Edward Bennet is an excellent brother to Jane, and an excellent son to his father, but what about his twin sister, Elizabeth?

Notes

Warning: problematic gender-wise. I would step carefully. I'm rewriting the later parts for it be less so. Feel free to tell me what you think about this issue.

I welcome any and all feedback, including flames.

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All errors and roughness remaining are mine.

This is dedicated to my siblings Re, Leo and Ju.
Edward reined in his horse with a sharp movement, five feet or so after the place he usually stopped. His mind elsewhere, he handed control of the animal to the young groom. He jumped up the stairs of the front of the house and went in directly to the drawing room, not even considering freshening himself up. He hoped his sister would be alone, but if she was not, he would make his excuses.

As it turned out, she was alone, embroidering something or other. Her face lightened with a pleased smile when she saw him, and she lost no time in setting her work on a side table.

'Edward, you are back at last! I did not know were you had gone to, and my father took great pains to inform me that it would be of interest for me to find it out. Of course, he insisted that he would not be the one to tell me.'

'Oh, Jane, of interest indeed.' Edward could not avoid smiling at her perplexed face as he kissed her cheek and sat beside her. 'Would that my father be for once wrong! But I am deathly afraid that he is right in this case.'

'Why? What has happened?' Her interest increasing, her face had lost her usual sedateness.

'Nothing, there is no call for alarm; I am only taking great pleasure in teasing you. Nothing grave at least; if anything, I bring good news, not bad.'

'The best of news, as some in this neighbourhood would say,' came Mr Bennet's voice from the doorway.

Startled, Edward turned to where his father now stood, smiling; that seemed to prompt him, and he entered and sat himself in a comfortable chair a little away from them.

Jane resumed her work, and Edward could tell, by the care she took with each stitch, that she was as annoyed at their stalling as Jane could be, which was, when it came down to it, only slightly.

'Well, Jane, I do think that you have heard the superb good news from our Aunt Philips. You do know that Netherfield is let at last? It turns out that, thanks to your own dear brother, you will be one of the lucky girls that will have first-hand information about the gentleman leasing it.' Edward adopted a pompous tone and then continued, saying, 'No, please, do not thank me yet, not until I have at least related the important details.'

Jane, who had moved to do no such a thing, only smiled wider and lowered her eyes.

'His name is Mr Bingley. Do you not think it a very agreeable name? I certainly think so; it *should* be so, as he is a remarkably agreeable man. Indeed, I am surprised that such an overall pleasing man, with such gentlemanly manners and handsome countenance, is unmarried still. I can only hope the local matrons realize their luck, and count their blessings, because it will not last.'

'Is he to be married then?' asked Jane, and Edward had to check to make sure she was not teasing him then, because it did not seem possible that she fell for his raillery.

'Indeed, for though I do not know the gentleman overmuch, I know he will fall in love with my dear sister, and being he all that a gentleman ought be, you are sure to fall in love with him, and the both of you are, without doubt, to be married by the end of the year.'

'Edward, I do not know Mr Bingley!' Jane's voice contained no little amusement, but it had a
scandalized note all the same.

'Details, dear sister. I have yet to meet a man that does not fall in love on first seeing you. Though in this case, it could pose a problem. He has made the horrible mistake of bringing with him'--he made a pause then, and waited for Jane to raise her eyes to his--'a friend.'

'A friend? That does not seem so very horrible.' Jane seemed determinate to ignore his insinuations and was working again.

'You have yet to meet him, Jane, you cannot know. But I was not referring to his friend in particular, as you well know, just at the unfortunate event in which the two gentlemen would fall in love with you at the same time. This particular fellow's character would make it a far more difficult eventuality, though. You should choose at once and then I could warn the other away.'

'What do you mean?'

'I would prefer to avoid the scandal of a duel,' he said, with perfect seriousness.

She blushed, but answered nonetheless in an even voice, 'How would his character make things more difficult?'

'He is a dour fellow, Jane; he did not laugh at even one of my jokes!'

Edward could perceive then a tiny shake of his sister's curls, and continued on, now sure he was not off mark. 'So, then, Jane, talk to me. I would have thought you to prefer a charming, agreeable fellow over his serious friend any time, but I should ask. Women's hearts do work in mysterious ways, and you could both have a secret weakness for a romantic hero and imagine it embodied in this man.'

'Perhaps,' said Mr Bennet, 'you should wait until they meet your sister. It would not be the first time that men are silly enough as to not to recognize something of value at first sight. You might be lucky and avoid a duel if only one of them falls for her.'

'Then we are doomed -- I never have any luck.'

'We could make a wager,' said Mr Bennet. 'I have always been one to trust in the silly nature of my neighbours.'

'I could not take advantage of my ageing father in such a way, I having all of the information and he none.' Edward leaned back. 'I have met the gentleman in question, and though in both could be found some weakness of character, I do not think them as silly as that.'

'Not as silly as that? Can that be taken in any way as a compliment? Come, Edward, behave yourself, and quench you dear sister's thirst for real information of the gentlemen. What you have spoken until now can hardly be considered news. Are they rich and handsome? Would they be silly enough as to fall in love and marry into any Hertfordshire family besides our own? The truly important subjects you have yet to touch upon.'

Jane kept her eyes on her work.

'Very well,' said Edward. 'If I must, I will do my duty as the neighbourhood's ladies' spy. They are both rich, of course, although I am given to understand that Mr Darcy--the friend--is richer by far. He is the master of some great estate up north; Pemberley of Derbyshire, if I am not mistaken. I would conjecture they are worth around five thousand a year one and ten thousand the other, though for his pride I would have guessed double and a Peerage to boot.'
'Luckily, excessive pride is not only to be found in those individuals where it could be understood and excused. How boring life would be if that were the case, for where would the two of us find our entertainment if people would behave exactly as good reason shows that they should?'

Edward grinned. 'Mr Bingley is, as I have already said, excessively handsome. He shows a remarkable desire to please and be pleased with everybody and everything that certainly brings to my mind another person of our acquaintance."

As Jane said still not a word, Edward shared an amused look with his father before continuing thus--

'Mr Darcy is very tall, very serious and very proud, and I am afraid that he disproves of me for some reason."

'And, patently, you of him!' Mr Bennet cried. He observed Edward over the fingers of his crossed hands, and appeared to be excessively diverted. 'You have not even granted him half his friend's agreeableness, my son. Is he so very handsome that you begrudge him already the ladies' attention?'

'I must grant anyone would find him handsome, if only because he is very rich. I am certain that the matrons will agree."

And to Jane's look of disapproval, Edward replied, 'Oh, Jane, you know it is true! But if I am to be sincere and abstain myself to facts--present facts--then I have to say that I do not remember. We spoke very little. But I am certain the ladies need not to worry; I am perfectly certain that Mr Darcy is the handsomest man this side of Hertfordshire, if not one with the most engaging manners."

'Edward, what will you do when Jane here chooses the disagreeable one, I wonder? You have already raised our interest in him so much, that it can only be the natural outcome, you know. You would have done much better in keeping quiet about him and making his friend much more interesting. 'Agreeable', you describe him, and you say of his friend 'tall and brooding'; I wonder if you know the female mind at all."

Edward grimaced. 'I did not say brooding. In any case, I do not care a jot of the female mind. Jane's mind, my sister's mind, I know much better; I am sure she would not be as silly as that."

'I admire your faith,' said his father seriously. 'I am not so sure of myself and mine as to think them completely devoid of silliness."

'He is not as very interesting as all that, in any case. He is really a very dull sort of fellow."

Jane then spoke, her voice holding only a hint of teasing in it, 'You cannot dislike the man already, for his manners in your only meeting. Perhaps he was having a bad day -- even the best of men are not perfectly agreeable to everyone at all times."

Edward snorted. 'I do believe you are teasing me. It is most strange, you never do it."

'You never have any need of it,' said Jane.

Their father then stood up and went to the door, and Edward could tell he had tired of company already, and was going to shut himself up with a book for a while. His tone was nonetheless good-humoured when he said, a foot on the doorway already, 'He has not. Neither of you will have any need of it while I am around, for I am sure I provide more than enough of it for any person."

Silence reigned for a while after their father had gone. Jane concentrated on her work, and Edward stood and paced, first walking one way and then the other. He felt restless, but he did not know why; he had almost decided to ask for his horse to be saddled and go outside again when his sister spoke.
'Edward, is something the matter? You have something on your mind, I am sure. Come and sit by me again, and tell me; you will wear out the rug if you keep up like this.'

'There is nothing the matter, truly. The man did not insult me, exactly, but I do believe I did not make a good impression. It is a pity--I like Bingley exceedingly.'

'I am sure they both liked you,' said Jane, with the assurance only a sibling could have.

He sat down by her again; he felt ridiculous, and tried to laugh it off--to reclaim at least the semblance of dignity. 'I am in an odd mood, myself, and Mr Darcy's rudeness has discomfited me a little. I cannot understand why Mr Bingley is his friend at all.'

Standing up again, he continued speaking without giving her a chance to respond. 'I think I will go riding before lunch, Jane. I shall try to spend all of my excess energy, so you will not have to stand my dreadful manners this afternoon, as well; although I do think we can blame them to this unseasonable weather, and so they are not my fault at all.'

And he hurried away before she could wish him a pleasurable ride.
Chapter 2

It was only a couple of days later, as Edward had predicted, that he and Mr Bennet had the pleasure of Mr Bingley’s company again. He made the call alone, and although Edward was expecting it and would not say anything about it to Jane, he could only feel that his first impression of Mr Darcy would continue to confirm itself if left to its own devices.

Mr Bingley was in good spirits and not only reiterated the invitation for an afternoon of shooting, but pressed it.

‘You must come! We plan to go out the day after tomorrow as I have to go into London in the interim. It is only Darcy and myself, as my brother-in-law usually prefers the indoors. Darcy is lately in such a dreadful humour that I am sure only our combined efforts would be able to overcome it.’

Though Edward had no particular wish to do anything with Darcy’s humour but ignore it, he acquiesced almost immediately, as he had never thought to decline. He had been looking forward to it and furthermore, it was out of his power to deny the amiable Mr Bingley anything.

They were then alone in the library, Mr Bennet having left them at their own devices after tiring of the interminable talk of horses. Bingley was inordinately pleased with a mare he had lately obtained for his sister, and parallels had to be drawn between the animal and all the others that either of them had ever owned.

‘I do think she is a better choice for Caroline than the last gelding she owned. It was a much larger animal…’ Bingley’s voice trailed off.

Edward turned around to find before him a most charming picture: through the window, Jane could be observed collecting roses from the garden. Both the light and the occupation served to show her at her most attractive; if Jane had not been already a beautiful young lady, the situation would have depicted her so.

Not a person to rejoice in being ungracious with his fellow man, Edward offered with a smile, ‘She is my sister, Jane; if you are so inclined, I could probably manage an introduction.’

He had the inkling that it was, indeed, a most momentous meeting. They would fall in love, and Mr Bingley would carry Jane away. It was good that not only Bingley was a pleasant fellow, but he hopefully would not carry her farther than Netherfield.

Bingley agreed most readily to the introduction, and Edward, decided to go out to the garden to meet her, instead of sending for her with a servant. The only sure way of discerning his sister’s first reaction to the gentleman would be to catch her unawares.

Jane, however, was only imperceptibly discomfited when the gentlemen approached her. She did blush a little when Mr Bingley asked for the first dance at the Meryton Assembly—scheduled for more than a week later—and she could not stop smiling even after the gentleman made his excuses and went home, which proved to be ammunition enough for her brother when he returned to her side.

He basked in the still warm autumn sun for a while before speaking.

‘So, Jane, is my friend to your liking? Can I rest easy and warn Mr Darcy away before he sets his eyes on you?’
Jane made as if to ignore him and continued filling her basket with flowers, but Edward could not let the matter stand.

‘You can stop attempting to turn that pretty smile into a frown, sister, as ’tis quite impossible for you. Is not Mr Bingley a pleasing man? I do not think you could find a much pleasanter gentleman without him being a great fool as well, and Mr Bingley is no fool, I assure you.’

That, at last, got an answer from her, delivered with her eyes still on the long stems of the rose bush.

‘I do have your leave to like him, then?’

‘I have yet to meet a person you do not like, but if that blush was anything to go by, then I will answer that yes, you do have my leave to like him, as if it were not too late already to prevent you; or, indeed, if I dared to stop you.’

‘I have yet to know of something you do not dare do, Edward.’ His sister’s voice was warm with amusement.

‘Well, there you have it, then; I do not dare to put myself between you and your considerable kindness towards the rest of your fellow human beings. Though, I do believe it is not mere kindness that makes you like Mr Bingley.’

‘Do be serious for a change. Are you going to befriend Mr Bingley? I do think it a good idea. You must tire of the talk of lace and gossip. Even of my father’s books, I am sure you have by now had your fill. Mr Bingley seems a very good sort of man, and he is nearer your age than any of the other gentlemen of the neighbourhood; he is sure to do you good.’

‘You overestimate gentlemen’s habits of conversation, sister. I am certain there is quite a bit of gossip going on in those as well. But you are right, of course. Having someone to go hunting with–someone who enjoys it instead of putting up with it for my sake–will be a pleasant change.’

‘So you will go out with him this week?’

‘Yes, I will, in two days’ time. And if you are good, which you are sure to be, I will try to bring Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy both along later; you will finally see them side to side and compare them at your leisure. Perhaps after that you will be able to set my mind at ease and choose the most agreeable one.’

‘You make it sound as if they were both mine to choose, Edward.’

‘One of them is yours for sure already, and despite anything my father will say, I am certain the other cannot be far behind.’

‘Are you so desirous of my being gone already?’

‘Indeed, you are too annoying by half. Come, let me carry that for you. Let me keep you company while you arrange your flowers. I have not helped you in a while.’

‘A while! Several years… Well, then, you carry it, but keep away from the flowers. You were never very good at it, and it is not a very appropriate occupation for a gentleman anyway.’

They proceeded into the house, where Jane set to work filling several vases with artfully arranged roses. She alternated between paying attention to her work and casting tender looks at him, and when she finished, she asked him to help her distribute them through the house.
The perfume in the shadier interior of the house brought to Edward’s mind happy childhood memories of afternoons spent helping Jane make rose water and of the laugh filled conversations they used to have while they worked, but they did not cheer him. He could not find in himself a reason for his restlessness, and that bothered him more than the odd mood itself did.

They finished in his room, where she placed the largest and more cheerful of the bouquets. She turned then to him, suddenly saying, ‘Edward, you do know that you will always be the dearest person in the world to me, don’t you? Even if I marry, you will be always welcome in my home.’

‘I appreciate the sentiment, Jane, but I am afraid that my welcome would be the prerogative of your husband.’ His tone sounded bitter; Edward frowned, impatient with himself.

‘I would never marry someone that could not love you as well. And besides, you make it sound as if you will be all alone in the world, while I am quite sure that the second some pretty young lady catches your eye, you will forget everything about your older sister.’

‘No, Jane. I do not think I will ever marry.’

‘Never marry? You cannot be serious! You are quite handsome, and although sometimes you do seem too witty for everyone’s sakes, I daresay there must be some women that can appreciate it. My father married, after all.’

Her teasing smile finally coaxed one from him, and he felt it hovering on his lips despite himself. He was not made for gloomy thoughts, and it amused him that that was his sister’s idea of what ailed him. ‘I will remain single, and kidnap my nephews and nieces every once in a while, and spoil them rotten. You will rue the day you made me welcome at your home.’

‘It will be a very happy day indeed when I will be able to relate these same words to your wife, Edward, or even to your children. Even you will be able to laugh about it then.’

Edward shrugged. ‘Believe what you will, I am not fit for marrying.’

‘Not yet, perhaps, but I am tempted to tell my father you need a season in town.’

‘You think the city air will do me good?’ asked Edward laughingly.

‘No, indeed, I think that some broader society would. The new neighbours are a beginning, but if they do not work in bringing you to your senses, then I am afraid I will have to act.’

‘You make me sound positively wild, sister. I do think you want me to have some more contact with fashionable ladies, with all that talk of ‘broader society’.’

‘You said it, not I. But yes, I do think it would do you good. It is a shame the Netherfield party does not have any ladies.’

‘Have I forgotten to mention it? How remiss of me. There are, in fact, two ladies now residing in the manor house of Netherfield. Both are sisters of Mr Bingley; Miss Bingley is to keep house for her brother and Mrs. Hurst is visiting, along with her husband.’

Jane’s voice was as sly as he had ever heard it. ‘It is most curious. Anyone would say that the presence of ladies would be one of the first things you would relate to your sister. Have you seen them?’

‘Now I can see, you are suspecting something, Jane. I assure you, it is not warranted. There is no conclusion at all to be drawn of this most trifling oversight on my part. I have yet to meet any of
them, so you can erase that smug look from your face before you say anything.’

‘Oh, you may cease being so defensive this instant. I have the right to tease you a little, you know, after all I have to endure every time I meet a gentleman, or even every time you meet a gentleman. You must allow me to have a little fun. Besides, you like the brother well enough, who is to say that you will not like the sisters?’

‘They cannot be as agreeable as he. We have daily proof of this; you and I, sister, cannot be more different.’

‘You think so?’ Jane was smiling at him most innocently before continuing, ‘But you will not distract me from my subject. Be the sisters as unlike Mr Bingley as you and I are, you can still like them very much. Indeed, I have never thought you matched with anyone resembling my character.’

‘How many times have you thought of matching me?’ asked Edward, alarmed. ‘I can, perhaps, like them; we are still to meet them, so any further speculation is useless. In any case I like plenty of people, if not as many as you do, and I do not love anyone except you and our own dear father. I will carry my point in the end. Mark my words: I shall never marry.’

‘Oh, Edward, you can be as mulish as you wish if it makes you happy,’ said Jane, smiling. She then kissed his cheek and retired from the room—it was the first time Jane did not finish a discussion by agreeing with him.
Chapter 3

Edward woke up early that morning, and the first thing he remembered was the appointment to hunt with Bingley. He had not lied -- he had felt the lack of companionship to do what most amused him, of late. He went through his mornings ablutions with efficiency and was on his way, without taking any breakfast, before any other person in the household could realize he was up and about.

He set out walking; he had plenty of time before he was expected at Netherfield. He made his way, as he preferred on his morning walks, rambling and stopping every time something drew his interest. The day could not be brighter or more pleasant; the trees were greener than he had seen them in a long while and the birds sung liltingly.

He was almost inclined to laugh at himself and at the absurdity of this sudden and completely ridiculous good humour.

When he finally came upon the great house, the butler was expecting him and directed him to the breakfast room. There, he only saw the two gentlemen who were to go hunting with him, and neither hide nor hair of the rest of the party.

Bingley received him with an exuberant welcome and invitation to breakfast with them, and noting his curious gaze, observed jokingly that not everybody appreciated the benefits of making an early morning.

Darcy barely acknowledged his presence by the slightest nod, and with a short phrase, expressed his gladness in having his company. He did not appear to care that his frown seemed to belie his words.

Nevertheless, Edward’s cheerfulness could not desert him when he was in so agreeable a company as Bingley’s, and so he gladly accepted the invitation to partake with the gentlemen of the fare generously laid out. They ate a little and drank a copious amount of tea before heading outside.

Darcy’s humour, and consequently his manners, improved as time passed, and though he never showed himself to be particularly lively or agreeable, soon Edward felt more charitable towards him. At least, his silence was such that he was easy to ignore.

Edward and Bingley walked together, discussing favourite guns and current fashion for hunting weapons. Darcy brought in the rear, only a little ahead of their men and Bingley’s young pointers, until they had lost sight of the great house completely and sent the dogs ahead.

‘I still appreciate Manton-style flintlock guns, especially if they have rifled bore. But wait until you try mine, you will see that the percussion cap is much better. Besides, it need not be heavier, ’tis quite the same as a Manton-style in that regard,’ Edward said.

Bingley readily agreed to look it over, but he was adamant that each of them use their own guns.

‘I could not part with mine,’ he said.

‘But will you not try it?’ Edward asked, perplexed. ‘How will you know if it is better or not this way?’

‘I trust your word, of course, and I will see you shoot with it today. If I ever want to try the new lock system, I will order one for myself.’

‘I managed to acquire several and pulled them apart. The principle is the same, only the substance
used to make the initial ignition is more powerful. My father was worried while I was experimenting with it, as it explodes with a stunning ease. I simply cannot understand how it is that is not the most used, as it is certainly more effective.’

Uncomfortable with Darcy’s silence and inscrutable expression, Edward made an attempt to draw him out, saying, still addressing himself to Bingley,

‘Do you think your friend thinks meanly of my opinions on the subject, or only of my manner of expressing them?’

‘Darcy?’ Bingley asked, smiling at Darcy in amusement, ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Perhaps I am merely unused to having so silent a companion. I thought that we may be boring him.’

Darcy opened his mouth as if to speak, appearing somewhat disconcerted, but then he quickly shut it closed again. He looked back at Bingley rather plaintively. Only after several seconds did he find his voice.

‘Not at all. I only find that I have no fixed opinion on the subject,’ he said at last.

‘No fixed opinion? This is dreadful,’ Edward said. ‘A gentleman who does not know the best length and size for the double barrel, or whether indeed he would choose the double over the simple one? What are we to discuss now that you have barred us from this subject?’

‘By all means, keep talking about it. It is all the same to me,’ said Darcy with some harshness.

But once Edward had glimpsed a chink in the armour, as he fancied the moment of uncomfortable indecision had been, he was not likely to let Darcy retire behind a façade of indifference again if he could help it.

‘No, no, it will not do. The subject is dry enough as it is, but if only Mr. Bingley and I will be speaking, I am afraid it will be rendered completely dull. He tends to agree with everything I say.’

‘I see you know my friend well enough.’

Edward had never met anyone so determined to not help a conversation along. For his part, Edward was determined to make at least one more attempt (and was also somewhat curious at how two such dissimilar personalities were friends), and so he asked in a broad manner, ‘Were you at Cambridge together?’

As it perhaps was to be expected, Bingley was the one to answer.

‘No, we were not. Darcy had left already when I was capping the quadrangle. But I knew of him at Cambridge. We shared some acquaintances and they have told me a thing or two.’

Darcy’s eyebrows had shot up at the last phrase, but rather than seeming angry—as Edward had feared for a second—he appeared amused.

‘Stories?’

Edward was as curious as Darcy, but he offered no remark. Experience had taught him that an unassuming air of perfect indifference could often provide the means of hearing something interesting.

‘Well, not stories, per se; more like the general report of your notoriety.’
‘I hope they are not tales of infamy; we would not wish to leave an unfavourable impression of you and your friends on your new neighbour.’ Darcy said, as he smiled and leaned carelessly back into a tree. He had not forgotten Edward’s presence.

Bingley smiled. Edward did not know if the cause of this was the mere idea of Darcy’s being infamous or that the gentleman thought it necessary to give a warning about it at all; Edward certainly found both excessively diverting.

‘Darcy here,’ Bingley said to Edward, ‘was renowned for his prowess at fencing, but certainly he was most famous for arranging to box in a case in which a duel had been proposed. It became all the rage after that. They used to say that he had made it so because he was a good student of Jackson’s, but did not care for pistols one way or the other.’

Then Darcy’s man approached them, as was not only one dog pointing out birds for netting, but several others were backing it up. They sent him to flush the fowls and spread out.

Some moments and several deafening bangs later, Edward was pleased to have shot a brace, and seeing that more than those two birds had fallen, looked about his partners to see what their luck had been.

Bingley did not care for his expression. ‘Luck, you say? It requires no more luck than what it takes to earn the heart of a woman.’

‘Bennet, it would be better for you to know that you cannot disparage shooting in front of Bingley.’ When Edward tried to protest, saying that he had not intended to do any such a thing, he added, ‘Some things cannot be discussed: first, there is no luck involved in the sport at all, it is only skill; second, when you insult the weapon, you insult its master; and thirdly, Bingley is always the better shot.’

Bingley only smiled and said, ‘Tis is a sore subject, I am afraid -- Darcy does not care for activities in which he is not the best.’ Darcy, who was aiming himself to a stray bird, appeared not to have heard, and finally lowered the gun without shooting it.

They then set about recounting the birds. Bingley had bagged five, three more than the others’ two. Consequently, his smile was somewhat condescending while Edward and Darcy quibbled over who had killed the stray bird for which neither could account. Each was sure it had been killed by the other.

They walked rather slowly while speaking, and encountered several flocks in hiding, and although they shot them in a desultory fashion, they bagged a considerable quantity of game.

Edward had time to prove Darcy’s assertion of Bingley’s superiority to his ample satisfaction. The only potentially interesting competition could be between Darcy and himself. And it was indeed interesting for Edward, for he had a definite chance at winning.

Nonetheless, Edward feigned a fashionable indifference, as it soon became clear that Darcy could not be less moved by the supposed contest. He announced his killings and listened to those of Edward’s, but the comparative results could not hold his interest.

‘Darcy, old man,’ Bingley said one of those times, ‘it is not sad how the new generations displace the old ones when their time has passed?’

Darcy smiled but said nothing. He motioned for his man to send the pointers to flush some nearby bushes, and stood ready.
Bingley made no motion to imitate him, and Edward observed him with some curiosity, until he spoke.

‘And so I see, I know what’s causing you to miss so often, Darcy.’ Bingley’s voice was mirthful, and Darcy made no movement, though Edward had begun to think that he was always listening attentively. ‘Tis your posture; you’re always so stiff, it’s a wonder you can move your arm to aim at the necessary pace to shoot two or three birds for each flock!’

Edward had to bite back a incredulous laugh, but Darcy merely kept his position and shot at the two fowls that emerged at the dogs’ barking; the second one fell.

Only after the bird was down did Darcy turn towards them, and then Edward thought he could perceive that he was really offended. Nevertheless, although Edward could not fathom what compelled him, he added, ‘I have always considered it wise to keep a stiff upper lip in the face of bad luck such as this.’

Bingley laughed, and Darcy lowered his face. When he spoke, his voice was as indifferent as before.

‘Undoubtedly.’ he said passing Bingley his flask. ‘Though what is wise and what is possible are two different things. I for one have always considered that a stiff upper lip could not be expected from boys that could not yet grow hair over it.’

They had packed a light repast and ate it, but by early afternoon they were all hungry again. They were, by this time, so well into Netherfield’s lands that Edward invited them to Longbourn to partake in some refreshments, as it was the shorter walk. The other two looked at each other, and Darcy appeared as if he was about to decline, but Bingley was swifter.

‘Of course we would love to, but only if you are certain it will not be a disturbance to drop by unannounced.’

Edward reassured them readily of the welcome of their presence for tea: Jane would be waiting for them, since she had already been warned of the possibility of their coming. Only then Darcy did acquiesce, while still looking unconvinced. So they made their way to Longbourn after sending their men to Netherfield with the firearms and a message.

Edward had issued the invitation without thinking, and now he began to doubt its wisdom. Jane was, indeed, expecting them, but he wondered what he would do if Bingley and Jane paired themselves off and he was left to make conversation with the other gentleman. It had been uncomfortable enough while shooting, when they had other things to occupy themselves with, but sitting in a parlour with a tea tray? It would be unsupportable.

It was, nonetheless, too late to change his mind. With any luck, his father would be there and exert himself to talk to the gentlemen, but he could not really expect it of him on such short notice.

With that in mind, Edward approached Darcy while they were walking. After a few minutes of silence during which even Bingley seemed lost in pleasant reveries of a private nature, Edward ventured to say, looking at Darcy–

‘So, was this outing your idea? Do you enjoy shooting a great deal?’

In the silence that followed he cringed at his double mistake. Not only did he ask inane questions, but he also directly contradicted all that he had just learned about the gentleman. He almost exhaled in relief when the answer finally came.

‘I... the estate is dreadfully neglected, so I pointed out to Bingley that the situation could only
encourage poaching.’

Then another silence followed, so long that Edward thought no other word would be forthcoming when Darcy finally proved him wrong.

‘I enjoy shooting, although I prefer fishing. I confess I find little to enjoy in sport without company, so I take advantage of circumstances such as these whenever I am able.’

The words seemed dragged across Darcy’s lips against his will.

Edward did not know what prompted him, but he answered, ‘I know that the waters on Netherfield are a sad business, but there is a stream on the other side of Longbourn that has a fair share of trout. I have not been there in a while and my father is less and less inclined to stir from his study these days, so it must be well stocked. What say you to an afternoon of fly-fishing?’

‘I am afraid that Bingley loathes the sport, as it is a too quiet a pastime for him,’ Darcy replied.

‘Well, we could make it a picnic and invite our sisters as well, and then I am sure he will not be so averse to it. I am sure Jane will be almost as pleased to see him as he will to see her.’

Darcy then regarded him with an undecipherable expression and said in a noncommittal tone, ‘We shall see.’

All conversation seemed to an end at this, but—Edward thought—they were arriving in any case. Jane was indeed waiting for them when they did, and she lost no time in sending for a tray. It was not, at least at first, as uncomfortable as Edward had feared.

The occasion of introducing Darcy to Jane and vice versa gave plenty of opportunity for smirking knowledgeably to the latter, and the looks Edward received in return were more than worth the trouble of making conversation with the former. She faltered while speaking when she found Edward looking at her, and coloured deeply at the most innocent comments Darcy made. Until Mr Bennet joined them, the conversation remained superficial. They all but Darcy had expressed themselves as looking forward to the Assembly, and thoroughly analysed the strange weather that they were having of late.

Mr Bennet’s first words after the customary greetings were to inquire about the outcome of the afternoon’s sport; and after hearing the appropriately humble answer, to ask, ‘So, who is the best shot of the three?’

Edward looked over to Bingley, but he was speaking to Jane contentedly and not paying any attention to the proceedings in the other side of the room. It was up to him to make an appropriate answer, as Darcy was staring resolutely out of the window, where he had placed himself a moment before.

‘Bingley... that is Mr. Bingley is, I think, the best of us. I did not see him waste one pellet.’

‘Is that your opinion as well?’ Mr. Bennet asked of Mr. Darcy, forcing him to turn around to answer.

‘I... yes, although your son is very good as well.’

‘Well, he ought to be. I spent an ungodly amount of hours teaching him.’

‘Oh, I do not think I am very good, but then the exact quantity that ‘ungodly amount’ means is
probably somewhat skewed by the fact that you hate the sport, Sir. Mr Bingley is perhaps a more objective judge; I am certain he would agree with me that Mr Darcy is the better shot between us. But I see he would not appreciate the interruption; he appears to be very much absorbed in his conversation with my sister.’

‘What an obliging group of young men!’ cried Mr Bennet, now his amusement thoroughly evident. ‘Should I ask Mr Bingley, I am sure both of you would be better than he by far.’

Edward had to hide a smile then, as he thought Darcy would not appreciate it, and so was quite surprised when Darcy responded.

‘I do think you are mistaken, sir—if there is anything Bingley is proud of, it is his shooting.’

Jane then sought Mr Bennet's opinion, as he had seen one of beloved Garrick’s last plays, and he stirred himself to approach the couple to speak of the actor’s advancing age and possible career choices and of who could be expected to carry his torch when he was unable to continue, leaving Edward and Darcy alone on their side of the room.

Edward got up then, and approached Darcy at the window. He looked through it with pretended intensity, and then spoke, affecting a serious tone, ‘By God, although I have tried, I cannot see what it is so interesting in my garden.’

Darcy did not answer directly, but rather waited a moment and afterwards, looking fixedly at Edward, said, ‘I am the better shot, now?’

Edward smiled. ‘I do think we were evenly matched, and perhaps if we exchanged guns you would be the better.’

‘I see you have not been listening to Bingley; the choice of the gun certainly gives the hunter credit.’

They were looking in each other’s eyes then, quite by accident, and Edward felt his colour rising, until they were startled by Bingley calling his friend to say his goodbyes and head to Netherfield with him.

Edward was relieved, and in a second understood how convenient was to look out the window at an uncomfortable time, as he was trying to get his countenance in order before having to attend to their leave taking.

He was surprised again when he saw Darcy’s reflection bending down slightly over him and heard him say, in a low voice, ‘Perhaps we will have to choose another sport to settle who deserves the most credit.’ And in another moment, he was gone.
Chapter 4

After more than a week of constant talk of lace and the handsome neighbours, the day of the Meryton Assembly finally arrived. All ladies, young and old, were agape; the general emotion was high, and the gathering was loud. Then, at the Netherfield’s party rather impressive entrance, and much to Edward’s humiliation, all conversation abruptly stopped—taking with it any chance of Hertfordshire’s making a good impression. If he had not been so vexed he would have laughed.

Jane, he could tell, had been unaccountably nervous and was having difficulty concentrating in the conversations around her. To all others, even taking into account her distracted demeanour, she must have appeared the most collected person in the room. Barely a hint of pink was present on her cheeks when Bingley came to lead her to the dance.

Free then of his duty to her, Edward approached the rest of Bingley’s party and was greeted politely by Darcy, who introduced him to the rest. There was an older gentleman, a Mr. Hurst, who was rendered squat and red-faced by copious amounts of food and drink; and with him two very elegant ladies. One of them was Mrs. Hurst, the other Miss Bingley. Edward could not help noting that the latter lady was very beautiful, and as different from her brother in demeanour as he had predicted. She was dressed considerably better than any other lady in the room and the way her eyes took in her surroundings made it obvious she knew it.

The ladies observed him with initial curiosity but appeared to find him lacking in some respect—*income* was Edward’s guess—quickly enough. He could not be angry by it, he was happy to be left to try to further his acquaintance with the gentlemen, especially Darcy, as Hurst seemed content to be left alone with the wine.

At a loss for a topic, and wary of saying something foolish, Edward initiated the conversation by inquiring after the Netherfield party’s recent activity. Had they taken advantage of the good weather, he wondered aloud.

‘Indeed we have,’ Darcy answered, and then with a slight smile he added, ‘Although it is hardly our fault, as there is nothing at all to do but go out. Bingley quite neglects his library.’

Edward had to smile at that critique. ‘Myself, I have stayed in all but once. A visit to some tenants was my only good excuse for a lengthy ride. But then, I do not miss any exercise but my morning walk when I am cooped up. I suspect I am very much like my father, to whom a good book is the *be all, end all* of earthly comforts.’

Darcy raised his brow. ‘I would not have thought it. Are you then more attached to the sports of the mind than those of the body?’

‘Why, are you that surprised?’

‘Only slightly, and that only because that was not what I have come to expect from Bingley’s friends.’

‘You have expressed such a preference yourself, if I am not mistaken.’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘And are you not Bingley’s friend?’

Darcy smiled at that, however faintly. ‘Very well, Bingley’s *other* friends,’ he amended.
‘Are they all so very silly?’

Darcy looked elsewhere then and did not respond, and for a moment, until he realized Darcy was hiding the widening of his smile, Edward thought he had offended him.

He took courage from this and continued, saying, ‘Ah, I see you will not answer. Very well; it would hardly be polite to say anything more. You must allow me to take your silence as a yes.’

He was satisfied with his own management of the conversation, but he did not know quite how to continue. His gaze wandered freely about the company while he racked his brain for a subject. The din that filled the room stifled all easy conversation. Everywhere, couples flirted. Matrons watched with knowing smiles, and, before Edward knew it, the phrase was out of his mouth.

‘Your friend is quickly becoming a favourite, or he would be if he had eyes for any lady besides my sister. As it is, the fact that she is from Hertfordshire is compliment enough for the company.’

‘He is a favourite wherever he goes.’

‘Is that so? Do I detect a note of envy?’

The last phrase drew a sharp look from Darcy, but his voice when he answered was as inscrutable as ever.

‘Why should it be? Every temperament has its drawback.’

‘But you like Bingley’s, or you would not be his friend.’ It was more a statement than a question, and Darcy did not say anything in response.

After a little while Edward began again.

‘Is it not curious,’ Edward asked, ‘how we all seem to be attracted to a particular character, even though objective observation would not deem the match so very wise?’

‘Not always, I am sure. Although the rules of human attraction indeed may seem mysterious and random at times, and I agree that Bingley and I are somewhat superficially mismatched as friends, it seems to me you and he are not. It could simply be that a character like Bingley’s cannot help but attract, regardless of the other party’s personality.’

‘Not always indeed,’ said Edward, deeming it impolite to show more interest into Darcy’s character. ‘He and my sister seem to like each other, and they are undoubtedly well matched in character. Jane, too, makes only friends wherever she goes.’

Darcy’s tone was amused when he said, ‘And you have innumerable enemies, do you?’

‘You would be surprised,’ Edward admitted, and then, because Darcy seemed sincerely taken aback, smiled and added, ‘Not many and not precisely enemies. Although I am easy enough in company, I do not care to ingratiate myself to others; I lack Jane’s goodness and patience, as I am sure you have noted.’

Miss Bingley, who had by that time wandered to their side, intervened then. With some coldness, she said, ‘Young gentlemen find the oddest things about which to boast. You are much too young to have enemies, Mr. Bennet, and much too…’ she seemed stumped then and Edward, who had felt himself flush a little when she had begun speaking, supplied with feigned nonchalance the following sequence,

She blushed then; silent, as she was in that moment, with surprise in her eyes instead of cold displeasure, Edward had to concede that Miss Bingley painted a surprisingly pretty picture. She seemed both younger and more vulnerable.

They were looking into each other’s eyes with what initially was enmity, but soon became something else—what exactly Edward would have been hard pressed to fix upon. Of course, the moment could not last. Miss Bingley broke the enchantment by speaking.

‘Why, I never! You must think very highly of yourself!’ she huffed before returning to her sister’s side.

And with that, Edward was left wondering what she had originally planned to say. He was much too… what? Indeed, he hardly knew his own mind.

A moment later, Darcy’s voice broke the silence, startling Edward out of his reverie. ‘I can see now that you have yet to learn to distinguish the ladies who will welcome your flirtations from the rest.’

In contrast to his words, he did not look displeased, but rather amused.

‘I know perfectly well the distinction,’ said Edward, ‘but one does not always flirt with the same intention. It would make the world rather boring. I did not expect to be well received just now, but I do not see why that should have stopped me. It proved entertaining for you, did it not?’

Darcy indeed appeared most amused and observed, ‘Do you always measure your decisions by how much diversion you will derive from them? She is Bingley’s sister. You want to be his friend. It hardly seems productive to provoke her.’

‘Is that why you tolerate her company?’

‘She is never disagreeable to me,’ Darcy pointed out.

‘You are definitely correct there,’ Edward said under his breath, because then Bingley approached them with Jane on his arm. She looked flushed, and also the happiest Edward had ever seen her.

Jane remained at Edward’s side while Bingley took Miss Goulding to the floor, but her eyes followed him, and the smile did not leave her face all the while. Bingley, too, often looked past the other dancers at their corner, and even once had to be reminded of the steps by his patently vexed partner. It was strange; Bingley had proven himself a remarkable dancer just before.

Edward did not know what to say. The previous topic was out of the question and so were the surroundings, as his sister had never shown such inattention in all her life. He knew neither how to call her attention back without embarrassing her, nor what subject he could safely introduce with such dissimilar people as interlocutors. Darcy, his gaze lost somewhere between the room’s walls and the window opposite them, did not seem inclined to help him.

Instead, it was Jane who saved him.

‘Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley tells me you have a younger sister,’ Jane said, only a slight blush giving away her discomfort.

‘Yes, she is not yet out.’

‘Ah.’
Mr. Darcy appeared to regret the curt tone almost immediately and continued in a more pleasant one, ‘She is staying in London, at the moment, with Mrs. Annesley, her companion.’

‘You must miss her,’ said Jane.

Darcy smiled and acquiesced, ‘I do miss her, though we write frequently and profusely.’

‘I cannot imagine being separated from Edward for such a length of time.’

‘Oh, Jane.’ Edward felt the compliment keenly but nevertheless could not help teasing her. ‘That is what you say now, but you forget how you felt just yesterday. I am sure there are moments during which you could not wish me far enough.’

‘Indeed, there are no such moments; even when you are your most teasing unsupportable self, you must resign yourself to have your sister by your side.’

Edward could see Darcy watching them with interest, but he remained silent, so Edward decided to take advantage of the lull in the conversation to excuse himself, as he had yet to take anyone to the floor.

He could already envision the tongue wagging he would unleash if he acted differently than it was his wont; if the matrons had missed his encounter with Miss Bingley, they were surely not missing the cold glances she sent his way now.

Edward had always enjoyed dancing immensely, ever since his sister had taught him when they were younger, and she, too, had delighted on it. But tonight, something was different. Although she performed flawlessly, Jane seemed to lack her usual spirit. Edward could not help asking when they found themselves by one of the refreshment tables again.

‘Jane, what is the matter? You seem distracted. I hope my teasing has not made you uncomfortable with the gentlemen. I will perfectly understand if you are not interested in either of them.’

He could see her blush and she followed with her eyes the movement of the figures on the dance floor to stall her answer, taking the time to compose herself. When she finally spoke, it was of another subject altogether and in a tone that was both light and playful.

‘I have yet to speak with Mr. Bingley’s sisters, but he has said he will introduce me later on. They are very elegant women, are they not? Miss Bingley especially, is your age, and yet there is such an air of gentility and confidence about her; and she is such a beauty.’

Edward refused to answer the obvious raillery. A pressure on his arm made him turn to her again.

‘Forgive me, I forget, brother dear, that I am not allowed to tease you.’ She smiled, her twinkling eyes crinkling at the corners.

Edward had to suddenly bite his lip to avoid laughing. ‘Indeed, though my father would have trouble recognizing you as one of his children if you would not.’

Then Bingley appeared at his elbow, immediately asking their leave to introduce Jane to his sisters, who were, apparently, ‘very anxious to meet her.’ When Jane accepted, he guided them to the ladies.

To Edward it was obvious that they were anything but anxious to make the acquaintance, their eyes more assessing than friendly when perusing Jane’s person. Hence he could not be more surprised at Miss Bingley’s amiable tone, when she spoke thusly—
‘Miss Bennet! I am delighted to make your acquaintance; my brother has spoken so much of you!’

Jane could only blush and express similar feelings. The conversation continued on this vein for a while, all praise from one party to the other, and though Edward was looking for it, he could not now detect any falseness in the elegant lady’s manner.

The conversation soon bored Edward, especially since Miss Bingley appeared to be pointedly ignoring him. That lady addressed Jane with an exclusivity that disarmed all attempts on Jane’s part to include him in their exchange.

Finally, he thought it best for his sister’s sake if he went away. The necessity of making up his previous neglect to the Lucas party was as good an excuse as any, and even gave him the chance of dancing, which he did, with both Charlotte and Maria. Darcy seemed to follow his example and asked, not only a set of each of the ladies of his party, but one of Jane, as well.

Bingley, impeded by politeness from asking Jane again so soon, was quickly the favourite of matrons and young ladies alike. He did not sit out even one dance, and Edward, whose amusement was complete at the fulfilment of his own prediction, could barely talk to him for a moment between the two fifth and the two sixth.

‘You are determined to please everybody, Bingley.’

‘Indeed, why should I not? I have never seen more lively people, more pleasant music or more beautiful ladies in my life!’

‘And the feeling is returned, I assure you; all of Meryton could not love you more, except perhaps if you would marry one of its girls before midnight.’

Bingley laughed then, and said, ‘I do not know what Darcy has been telling you about my character, but I am not as rash as all that.’

‘Then if I were you I would take care of the wine I am drinking; the matrons look positively feral.’

Darcy was standing a few feet away from them sporting a sour expression, and Bingley, winking at Edward and motioning in his direction, said, ‘Oh, I am not afraid of them, or of marriage. I will know when the time for that is come. Besides, I know perfectly well the difference between looking to please everybody for a night and looking for someone to please for all nights to come.’

‘Why, Darcy does not?’

‘He refuses to give consequence to anyone unnecessarily, and that includes unknown young ladies in a dance. He prefers to be bored to tears than to do it.’

‘Perhaps dancing does not give him pleasure, and so it is not a sacrifice.’

‘I am sure you are right, but why does it not give him pleasure? It is because he sees it as an obligation to be met rather than an amusement.’

‘Or perhaps he is afraid of the matrons.’

‘Darcy, afraid?’

‘Far greater men have run in terror,’ answered Edward with a snort.

‘Perhaps you are right. I have never met anyone so determined to deny his family the pleasure of his
settling down.’

And he was gone again into the set.

So good was his humour that Edward even considered for a moment asking Miss Bingley for a set in an attempt to make peace with her, but that course seemed unwise, as the lady in question had not stopped looking daggers at him all night.

Even in the midst of such a gathering, it seemed to Edward that the fact that they did not direct words to each other was obvious to anyone who cared to look, and he was sure Jane would.

She would question his incivility later, with her customary gentleness, showing at most a faint disappointment in his behaviour, but provoking nonetheless the stirrings of his conscience. Even though he still could not see how he might act to resolve the situation before it was too late, he was sure to see it later. It did not help in the least that Miss Bingley was unfailingly polite and even very kind to Jane, and the perfect lady with everyone else.

Before the end of the evening, Jane had been asked a second time by Bingley, a circumstance which was probably the reason for the silly smile she sported all the way back to Longbourn. It took all of Edward’s self-control to refrain from teasing her so as not to risk upsetting the delicate balance achieved earlier.

It probably helped that he was in excellent spirits too, as Darcy had at the last moment sought him out.

Hurriedly, and in an oddly formal tone, Darcy had said, ‘I seem to have been remiss in answering an invitation. If it is still open, when do you think it would be a good time for a picnic?’

‘Well, the weather has been unseasonably warm, but I do not think it will last. Midday tomorrow or the next day, not much later. Do you have your fishing gear with you in Hertfordshire? I cannot imagine Bingley has rods enough for even one person if he so dislikes the sport.’

‘I do not have it, no.’

‘Well, then, I believe I have enough for the three of us. I hope you will not mind the length of my rods; I fear I favour Mackintosh’s style for trout fishing,’ added Edward with a twinkle in his eyes, as he remembered Darcy’s indifference to pistol makers. He wondered if Darcy was one of those men who could not care less about the technical aspects of the sports, or if he could be drawn into a discussion if the sport was one he favoured.

‘I’m sure they will do.’

‘They will do! They are excellent, I assure you.’

Darcy seemed unimpressed. ‘Bingley, you, your sister and me, then?’

‘I think you seem to be forgetting part of your party,’ said Edward with a smile.

‘Yes, of course…’ Darcy seemed a trifle flustered for his mistake. ‘Although I doubt the Hursts and Miss Bingley would find it pleasant.’

‘Nonetheless, it would be remiss of us to not to invite them. But barring that, yes, tomorrow…?’

‘Yes, tomorrow. I will ask the rest of my party, of course, though I doubt they will appreciate the exertion on the morn after an assembly.’
Edward nodded, and Darcy took his leave without further delay.
The sunrise promised a day of amazing warmth for the autumn; it was perhaps a little late for it, but Saint Martin’s Summer had yet to grace them that year. Watching the sky that morning, Edward thought it probable that it heralded a storm, although he expected that the actual bad weather would delay at least a day, and in every other respect he found it a perfect day for a picnic.

Midday brought the expected Netherfield party, with the unexpected addition of Miss Bingley. Longbourn’s was only formed by the Bennet siblings, as Mr. Bennet considered such exertions more a hint of folly, or youth, or both than any reasonable exercise.

They took off as they had planned, on foot, with two servants to carry the food. They had not walked three feet when Edward was already showing Darcy the fishing gear he had brought for both.

Jane and Mr. Bingley were behind them, the latter talking in low tones to the first, and holding effortlessly all her attention, with Miss Bingley walking close to them, appearing not too pleased with the situation.

Before long, they had arrived to a nice place with a gently stooping, grassy hill overlooking a small embankment in the stream. There were some trees giving shade not too close to the water, and the party broke up according to each person’s preference. Bingley, of course, decided to keep the ladies company in the shade rather than to go down with Darcy and Edward.

The latter two were already armed with their fishing rods when Miss Bingley’s declaration of her desire to watch the proceedings up close arrested them.

‘I have always wanted to see how it is done and never had the chance, we living in Town and Charles disliking the sport so much.’

The fishermen exchanged a look but decided to keep their silence. They nodded politely; went down, placing themselves at a comfortable distance apart from one another; and then each began to bait their hooks. Edward could not help turning for a moment to watch Miss Bingley observe their surroundings with distaste and hesitation; she clearly did not know what to do with herself.

Edward had to keep himself busy—and Darcy appeared to follow a similar strategy—to avoid laughing out loud at the woman. He was not a little surprised when she at last sat on the grass between the two gentlemen and daintily covered her legs with her skirt. He would have thought she would have chosen to sit farther from himself and closer to Darcy, although he eventually began to suspect that Miss Bingley’s attentions toward himself were part of her larger scheme for holding the other man’s attention.

Although at first she held Edward’s attention quite easily by her folly, he soon grew absorbed with the sport and his thoughts wandered into that curious limbo where they were wont to go when little or no rational effort was required of them.

It became clear then that Miss Bingley did not expect to be ignored. Not ten minutes after having settled, she spoke thusly—

‘Is this not a pleasant afternoon, Mr. Darcy?’

He answered her with utmost civility, if quite shortly, ‘Indeed, it is.’
It was not a moment later when she tried again. 'How uncommonly well you hold the rod, Mr. Darcy! I do not think I have ever seen such skill.'

Edward was severely tempted to laugh then, and a look at Darcy showed him similarly afflicted. Nevertheless, Darcy’s tone was perfectly serious. 'I do thank you, madam, but I think that must be due to you not having ever seen the sport up close.'

Edward looked at her, and tried to see if she was discomfited at all, but it was evident the lady could not be deterred when she said, her voice earnest and confident, 'Oh, no! I am quite sure you must be very good at it; I doubt your natural pride would let you do anything in a less than proficient manner.'

Edward could not help it, and let out a snicker, being barely able to reduce it to a smirk afterwards, lest it became a full out laughing fit capable of scaring off all the fish. Miss Bingley looked at him then—up and down with derision, as usual—and said, 'Others may laugh, but Mr. Darcy is all a man ought to be. He may hug himself.'

Edward thought it unwise to clarify that the source of his mirth was not Mr. Darcy after all, mindful of the discussion—or the lady—becoming too loud for the activity. He kept his gaze steadily on the water, and his lips sealed, despite the millions of retorts that sprung to his mind, and his desire to look at Mr. Darcy’s countenance in order to ascertain how he was taking such wholesome praise.

Mr. Darcy, too, clearly thought it more politic to keep silent; he behaved as if he had not heard at all.

A few minutes later, when Edward had begun to think that his self control would not be tested any longer, Miss Bingley spoke again, saying in a shrill voice, 'I think there must not be any fish in this stream, Mr. Darcy. We best desist in trying to catch what is not present.'

Edward thought it was beyond any saint’s restraint to contain himself any longer, and therefore answered in the sweetest tone he could muster, 'Though I am sure Darcy and I both love your company and the dulcet tones of your conversation, I am afraid the fish have no such a taste. Therefore, if you still want to stay by the stream, it will have to be in silence. I am afraid this is not a very entertaining sport for the observer.'

She coloured a little and said in an offended, though low, tone, 'I am sure I can be as quiet as you.' And from there on she kept a tight lipped silence that effectively put a damper on any further conversation.

They were called to eat by the others before too long, however, and Edward had the pleasure of seeing his sister as happy as she had shown herself at the assembly. Her eyes were lowered to hide her expression, but her constant smile and rosy constitution betrayed her. Although the latter could have been blamed upon the relentless heat that continued to besiege them, Edward was certain that it was not so.

Bingley, on the other hand, was enviably cool and collected, lying down with his arms behind his head. His legs were completely stretched out in front of him; a lazy smile played on his lips while, from under heavily lidded eyes, he observed the approach of the fishing party; he was the picture of indolence, and seemed to feel their plight not at all.

Edward was relieved, as under the sun he had begun to feel very much like a softly boiling pot. Under the shade of the tree it was a little fresher, and a breeze could be felt, both proving very agreeable. He could see Darcy, too, lamented the existence of his cravat—or, at the very least, the presence of ladies, which prevented him from divesting himself of it—in the way he tugged at it when distracted.
'You seem a bit warm there, Darcy,' Bingley said, not moving an inch. 'You would much better stay in the shade from here on. Have you caught anything?'

Darcy answered in a curt tone, 'You can very well see we have not.'

Edward let himself drop like a rock besides his sister, while saying, 'The fish are avoiding us.'

Jane smiled, but did not answer, and instead busied herself passing the simple fare around, which consisted principally of fresh fruit, wine, cheese, and meat. To Edward everything looked delicious, and he and Darcy ate—and drank—hearty. Soon a pleasant grogginess settled over the whole party.

Bingley was the first to speak, and he did it with what Edward was learning to recognize as mischief, saying, 'Caroline, did you know that Mr. Bennet plays the pianoforte exquisitely? And you were so sceptical about finding a fellow musician in this part of the country!'

Miss Bingley looked shocked, and Edward, sitting up, proceeded to protest. 'Bingley, even if I were not aware that you have just spent a while with my sister, that remark would have made it obvious. You must know that a sister’s praise is very hollow, especially from one as excellent as Jane. I am afraid she will find her brother without fault no matter what the subject.'

Bingley smiled, good-natured as was his wont. 'If she praised you, she must be right. You will not paint her a liar in my eyes.'

'You ought to at least to hear me play before speaking so to all and sundry of my talents, or you will do me the great disservice of rising the general expectancy so much that my performance, as unpractised as it is, cannot but disappoint.'

'Perfect, we shall insist upon hearing you at the earliest opportunity,' said Bingley.

And Darcy added, 'And we shall enjoy it, I am sure. You may make a great show of humility, but you have agreed to play for us without any prompting, which shows that you must be proud of your performance.'

'If you take into account my vanity and my shameless character, then I am afraid you will reach a much different conclusion,' said Edward with a laugh.

Bingley, apparently observing that his sister had not said a word, spoke to her again, asking, 'Do you not think, Caroline, that a man’s performance will give our soirées a je ne sais quoi, a certain original elegance?'

Caroline coloured, and before she could open her mouth to answer, Edward hastily intervened, trying to avoid any overt confrontation between the siblings. 'I am quite certain it is considered very unfashionable in the London circles.'

'Nonsense, Edward; everyone would be delighted to hear you play,' said Jane, her voice full of conviction and obvious affection.

Miss Bingley’s gaze met Edward’s for a moment before she lowered it again. Her voice was subdued when she finally spoke. ‘I am sure I shall.’

Bingley was in high spirits, telling one or other anecdote of his numerous acquaintances, trying, quite obviously, Edward thought, to make Jane laugh. He could not know that it was practically impossible with so many people around and no intimate relations either. She did reward him with a widening of her smile now and then, and once Edward could discern she had to make a real effort in containing herself.
Edward observed them with careful consideration, and he was shocked to see their relationship much furthered than what he had expected. He saw his sister tremble when their hands brushed when passing around the food, and looks into the other’s eyes that lingered much more than what was proper. Curious, Edward looked around to see if anyone else realized the seriousness of the forming attachment, but Darcy was much more concerned with observing the sky and Miss Bingley was sullenly staring at the patterned fabric upon which they sat.

After something like an hour of rest, Darcy and Edward went down to try their luck for a while longer; this time Miss Bingley stayed under the trees, complaining about the effect the sun would have on her complexion. When the fish finally began to bite, Edward could not avoid thinking that somehow they knew that said lady was no longer in the shore waiting for them.

Both of them, too, were easier, and in consideration to the sweat now drawing a winding path down their faces, and seeing that the ladies were being well entertained far from them, of mutual accord, they decided to remove the outer layers of their clothing, leaving them both in only their linen shirts.

Darcy was the first to speak afterwards, commenting, 'I am finding it extremely disagreeable that we planned this outing as a familial picnic.' Grinning wickedly, he continued, saying, 'Had this been a sporting expedition, the two of us and Bingley at the very most as the whole party, I am sure the fish would have been already snared and in the baskets, and we could have been bathing in this same moment.'

The water did seemed tempting, but the picture Darcy presented was, for reasons better not dwelt upon at the moment, somewhat disturbing for Edward.

He smiled before saying, 'I could not have joined you in any case, as I never did learn how to swim. My father was very fearful in my infancy, and insisted that the current in this pitiful stream would have been much too dangerous for me.'

'I could have taught you. If the current ever was, indeed, too strong for your arms, I am sure it is not now. Or by any chance are you afraid of the water?'

Edward felt sure he had never seen Darcy in so mischievous a humour; and replying in kind was easy when the possibility of having to act upon the words was remote at best.

'Me, afraid of a little water? Never!'

'Especially,' observed his companion, 'since the water will at most reach your neck.'

Edward kept his eyes on the surface of the water, his face warm. 'Indeed, especially since it is so.'

'Aha,' was Darcy’s triumphant cry, as he began to reel the line in, a large trout fighting for its life at the other end.

The day’s outing finished a little later, when the clouds that had heretofore settled for sending them nasty looks from the horizon covered the sky and made it a pressing matter to find shelter. The temperature dropped, and they stood shivering, at least a good half of the party not wanting to part.

Both fishermen had been successful, but Bingley invited the Bennets to taste Darcy’s last catch at dinner. Edward was torn, a part of him wanting to accept. He looked forward to the prospect of furthering his acquaintance with Darcy; but, on the other hand, he also wanted to check somewhat Bingley’s relationship with Jane. It was moving rather too fast for his liking. In the end, the look of delight that suffused his sister’s features upon hearing Bingley’s invitation won out, and he accepted.

After so much time standing around, Fate seemed to think they were taunting it, because the clouds
finally made good on their threats; halfway to Longbourn, the sky opened and it began to rain in something more akin to a torrent than to a light shower. The rain fell in thick sheets that made looking beyond two feet almost impossible, and drenched them completely in an instant.

The sudden turn of the weather was surprisingly diverting to everyone but Miss Bingley. They all made such a picture, sodden and dirty, that the others could not help but laugh. Even Darcy, after his initial worried reaction, cracked a smile or two. Any such pleasure that Miss Bingley could extract was, thought Edward, overshadowed by the fact they were laughing at her too.

It helped, thought Edward giddily, that it was a most expedient way of relieving their bone deep weariness and fever-like heat.

They separated at Longbourn, vowing to meet later for dinner at Netherfield.

The Bennets changed, and Edward asked for the carriage while they communicated their plans to their father. He, of course, acquiesced, but not after expressing disappointment for having lost the spectacle of the fine party wet through.
Chapter 6

When Mr. and Miss Bennet arrived to Netherfield, the local party was already dressed and waiting for them in the parlour. Mr. Bingley’s eyes brightened when they were announced and he went to Jane’s side immediately. Although the couple’s reunion was an understated affair, Edward was certain that everyone could tell how inordinately glad both parties felt upon finding themselves in the same room again.

As for the rest, Mr. Hurst played solitaire and barely raised his eyes from his game to give the new arrivals a polite welcome; Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley spoke contentedly to each other, and although both likewise observed the polite niceties required of them, neither one showed much interest. Miss Bingley, for her part, did puzzle Edward exceedingly, as she managed to refrain, in spite of her coldness, from making any disparaging observation on either Edward’s person or his character. He was not certain if that boded well.

When they entered, Darcy was standing with his back to the room, poking at the fire that had been lit in consideration to the colder weather the rain had brought forth. He turned around the moment he heard Bingley’s effusive greeting, and made his way to them with affability.

Nevertheless, at the dinner table, the conversation was directed and dominated by the hostess and her sister. Mrs. Hurst was suddenly very interested in the Bennet family, and no vague answer would satisfy her.

'Dear Jane tells me you have several uncles, Mr. Bennet; where do they live?'

'Only two uncles, to be sure, Mrs. Hurst; one is an attorney here in Meryton and the other lives in London. Although perhaps you also mean my father’s cousin that lives in Scotland; we do call him uncle.'

'Scotland, how charming! And your uncle in London, where does he live?'

'He lives with his family in Gracechurch Street, madam.'

She looked faintly horrified by this admission, and he felt a vague satisfaction in adding, 'Near Cheapside.'

Miss Bingley well nigh gasped, but Mrs. Hurst recovered her equanimity quickly enough, asking, 'And what does he do?'

'He is in trade, but I know not what kind of trade. He is my late mother’s brother, and we do not keep much in touch.'

Darcy and Bingley looked faintly bored by the interrogation, and Darcy finally intervened turning the subject to more congenial subjects, like the weather.

They were halfway through the fish course when Jane began to feel faint, and though she insisted it was nothing, a room was readied for her in case it was only a brief spell that would pass with a little rest. Later it became obvious it was not a brief spell and that she was best not moved.

Bingley was eager to have them both stay, and although Edward felt he should decline, his preoccupation with Jane was such that leaving her, even for a night, was insupportable. Bingley, too, insisted. What if Jane would ask for him?
They sent a note to Longbourn with the carriage, and a room next to Jane’s was readied for Edward.

That very night, Edward found himself pacing outside Jane’s door, unable to sleep. He felt worried, and useless, knowing there was nothing at all he could do until morning, and probably nothing he would be able to do even then.

To and fro he went, every time he reached a wall turning around and going back again. He had worked himself into quite a state when he came face to face with Darcy, who was just coming up the stairs. Edward started; he had thought everyone asleep.

In a low voice, Darcy said, 'Ah, there you are, Bennet. Come, you cannot help your sister now. In fact, you are probably only keeping her awake. We are playing billiards downstairs.'

Edward did not really want to leave Jane’s side, but seeing that he was keeping only her company, he saw the wisdom of some distraction, and so he relented.

As he could have predicted, he was as restless in the billiards room as in the hallway. Lack of concentration would surely hamper his already shaky game, so he chose to watch, instead.

Bingley, rather distracted himself, nonetheless attempted to joke and tease Edward out of his silence, but as he never received more than monosyllabic answers or a single smile, he soon gave up. Darcy seemed focused on the game, although when he was not directly involved, he looked over at his companions frowning, with what Edward interpreted as an expression of concern.

After several games—Edward could not to save his life say who had won, or how, or how many—Bingley retired to bed, guessing aloud that the earlier they did so, the faster the morning would come. Edward, however, was so wide awake that he could not see the wisdom of that pronouncement.

Darcy remained behind, keeping his silence while serving both glasses of brandy. Then he handed him a cue and said, 'Come on, this will help you not to think so much.' And a little while later with a smirk, 'By God, you are worse than Bingley!'

Edward, who was not keeping count this time either, but did not doubt he was the loser, owned, 'Probably not much worse tonight than every other night. I have played but little.'

'I will have to give you lessons, then. You are no gentleman if you cannot at least make a wager interesting,' said Darcy, 'but now I propose we down our glasses and go to sleep. Everything will be fine in the morning.'

'Everything could,' said Edward, 'indeed, everything should be right tomorrow morning. But were I to go to bed now, I know I could not sleep.' And trying for a little humour, he added, 'It is quite vexing, to be sure, and you need not to keep me company, but I could never sleep knowing that my sister is in pain; I feel as if I should be doing something to assist her, but, by Jove, I know not what!'

'You can do nothing, Bennet, until the apothecary comes; and he shall not come until tomorrow.' And seeing that Edward was about to say something to that, he hurriedly continued, 'I know you know it, but 'tis quite different to know it and to be told by another.'

'I see you have endured similar situations. Who advises you when you are worried?'

'My cousin, who shares Georgiana’s guardianship with me, tries.'

'Is he no help, then?'

Darcy answered with a twisted smile, 'We usually end up worrying together; we are both fearful of
doing wrong by her.'

Edward could not help a smile at this, ‘fearful’ was not an adjective he would use to describe Darcy, and he could not picture it.

'You cannot be saying to me that a young girl strikes fear into the hearts of two grown men! I had never thought you timid, Darcy…'

'Not a young girl, but the rearing of a young girl, if you please,' answered Darcy, not without humour.

'The rearing, indeed, does she gives you much trouble?'

Something indefinable crossed Darcy’s face then, and he stiffened slightly. 'She does not; I could not ask for a better sister.'

'Nor I,' said Edward then, his mood sobering.

Taking Edward’s cue and setting it on the table, Darcy calmly refilled both glasses before saying, 'To incomparable sisters, then! Bottoms up, this will help you to sleep.'

Edward downed the glass, and said nothing.

'Well, go on with you,' Darcy said, pausing to finish the bottle. 'Now you know that there is no other help for me, either, when sister troubles throw me into a state. Keep that in mind for future use.'

Edward only managed a weak smile before heading out of the room.

He had been tempted to ask for a second glass of brandy—or it was rather a third—before going upstairs; the spirit had not had much effect on him, he was sure. Sadly, Darcy had finished the bottle, leaving him no other choice but to go. Edward had to acknowledge his error, if only to himself, when he attempted to mount the stairs.

After two energetic steps up, he had to suddenly grab the banister. It was not, he assured himself, that the room had lurched and was at that moment swaying slightly; the jumping, and the darkness, and perhaps a little—a very little—the brandy had conspired to confuse him. It was nothing that measured steps could not manage.

He made his way, then, in a slower and more silent manner than would have been expected by another, the carpet masking any noise his shuffling feet made. And so it was that he was not the only person surprised when he came face to face with Miss Bingley, clad in only her night garments, at the top of the stairs.

Edward thought for moment that the alcohol had really addled his brain, and doubted his vision. The lady’s dressing gown blinded him with its whiteness, and he had to strain his eyes to make out her face.

He could tell she was blushing profusely, right down to her… raising his eyes hastily, he blushed, himself. It certainly had not been his intention to stare so, but the spirit had certainly made his reactions slower. He was sure she would think him the worst kind of rake, and she never would know how wrong she was on that score.

Finally, when the silence was becoming unsupportable, Miss Bingley spoke. Her voice shook with an emotion Edward did not recognize when she said, 'Mr. Bennet! How shocking to find you here! I was just going down to the library to find something to read, to help me sleep.' And then, before he
could make any answer, she added hastily, 'I certainly did not expect to find anyone here. I thought everyone asleep.'

Desperate for something to say that was intelligent and gracious at the same time, one unmentionable, ungentlemanly thought keep intruding so that Edward could not for the life of him remember any reasonable responses. However he tried, he could not shake the perverse satisfaction he felt when he thought, 'She certainly does not think me only a boy now.'

Desperate, he seized upon the first coherent phrase and said, 'I am not the only one awake. Mr. Darcy is still in the billiard’s room; he has managed to send me to sleep in a very efficient manner.'

He thought that he saw her eyes narrow, and heard her inhale sharply before she said in a harsh tone, 'Then I am sure I will retire immediately.'

Edward was momentarily disconcerted by her vehement reaction, and he answered as blandly as he could, 'I am sure you shall.'

A second later he knew that she would take his comment in the worst possible fashion. Indeed, she gasped, coloured even more deeply than before, and looked away. An uneasy silence followed, both at a loss for words. Finally, it was Edward who made the effort to speak again, searching this time for the most innocuous phrase he could muster; he would think later that he had been not quite successful.

'Well, 'tis Darcy’s loss then, Miss Bingley, you do look ravishing tonight. And although it is a delight to find you here, I find that I must be off presently.'

She did not speak. Considering that any further attempts at civility that he might make in his present state could only result in worse insults, he only made a stiff bow. As he left her there at the top of the stairs, he could feel her eyes on his back until he made it into his room.

Once there, disrobing proved to be difficult, not only for his drunkenness, which he had to admit was severe, but because he did not know if a servant would intrude upon him in the morning. He finally decided to simply leave his breaches and his linen shirt on. When he was drifting off he realized that Jane’s condition had not crossed his mind for quite a while, and that sleep was not taking any time at all in coming.
Chapter 7

The morning came with surprising haste; not two minutes, Edward was sure, after he had lain down, he was awakened by the sun in his eyes. He could not move at first. In fact, he was sure he could continue sleeping until the end of times came. He felt faintly sick. The odd pasty taste in his mouth made him wonder what had happened the night before, and then recollections of Jane's condition, of Darcy's advice, and especially of Darcy's brandy rushed through him. In only a moment he was on his feet and cleaning himself up.

His first action was to try to take a peek into his sister's room, but a maid caught him before he could enter and ushered him outside. Miss Bennet was not to be disturbed, the maid informed him, as she was finally sleeping after a very long and restless night. Guilt then gnawed at him; he should have stayed with her instead of going off to drink himself to sleep.

He could only leave word to Jane saying he would come by later and go downstairs; he found the rest of the party in the breakfast room.

Darcy was serious, although that was hardly new or surprising. Bingley was visibly nervous and kept sending the servants up to inquire after Jane's health and comfort. Mrs Hurst and her husband, although they inquired—it would have been hardly polite not to—appeared uninterested in the answer. Surprisingly they were the saving graces of the morning, both providing subject after subject of alternate conversation if only to keep themselves amused.

Miss Bingley proved the most curious subject. She kept her eyes lowered and flushed slightly every time their eyes met, but still she treated him with barely concealed contempt, avoiding speaking to him if she could help it; the second she had finished eating, she excused herself—heading somewhere, Edward guessed, far away from him; he was surprised to note that no one but him remarked on the breach of propriety.

As predicted, the apothecary had to be called as soon as Jane was able to receive him. After Mr Jones arrived and went up to see her, the rest of the party had only to wait a little while when word was sent that he required Edward's presence. Bingley followed him unthinkingly. The apothecary, waiting for Edward outside Jane's room, was unconcerned and advised only rest—Jane was not to be moved under any circumstances—and some draughts he could dispense himself.

Bingley immediately offered an invitation for both siblings to stay until Jane would be well enough to return home safely; a week, or four days at the very least.

Edward saw no other solution and accepted the latter option—although it was a day more than what the apothecary advised—as graciously as he could. A note was sent to Longbourn immediately to request that a servant be sent with their clothes, and to provide a more detailed explanation for Mr Bennet.

For Edward the day passed strangely; he was at the same time in a daze and excruciatingly sluggish. The lack of his usual obligations made him realize how much they drove his life. His father had indeed passed control of the estate in all but name to him, but the transition had been so smooth that he had hardly noticed the change. Only now, when he could not attend to them, did he feel the weight of his duties.

The life of a gentleman of leisure was not as easy as he had thought as a child; and not, of course, so difficult either. It was hardly as if he were forced to toil from sun-up to sundown. Nevertheless, an estate produced a frightful quantity of paperwork, even one as small as Longbourn. He would not
enjoy Darcy his Pemberley, it must need four times the attention! No wealth could repay that much
desk duty, he knew.

Finally, in the afternoon, bored beyond endurance and sure that his sister would be awake and
disposed to see him if he could only avoid the upstairs maid, Edward went looking for Jane. A
surprise awaited him when he opened the door. Although he could not be certain of his success, he
did at least take the trouble of hiding his astonishment.

'Miss Bingley, Jane, how are you passing this fine day? I trust you are both well?'

'Mr Bennet!' said Miss Bingley blushing profusely. She was apparently unable to utter another word.

'Indeed, I am. Should I have introduced myself just now, do you think? It does appear that I tend to
come upon you in surprising circumstances,' answered Edward with a grin. His intended barb was
double edged, and came quite unexpectedly to his lips.

'Edward! Stop teasing Miss Bingley. If you are indeed asking what you should have done, I can
answer perfectly; you should have knocked. You startled me so.'

A smile softened her words, then, and she added, 'And I am improved, as you can see, if I can still
berate my younger brother so well.'

'No, indeed, I can only conclude now that you are dangerously ill; you are so sweet, dear sister, you
normally never berate me at all. I did, however, have excellent reasons for not knocking, I thought
you might be sleeping and did not want to wake you.'

Soon, Edward determined that she was, indeed, as well as could be expected, and that Miss
Bingley's reading had kept her well entertained, and that they, in sum, were on the way of a rapidly
forming friendship. He could not be more surprised, but even to his jaundiced eye, Miss Bingley
appeared sincere. So he took his leave vowing to return later, once Miss Bingley decided to rest.

He wandered aimlessly through the house and proved Darcy's opinion of the library thoroughly
correct before going outside for a walk. In the garden, he found Darcy himself, and was grateful to
accept the offer of a horse and a race.

Dinner was a quiet affair, with half the people at the table thinking of other things and Miss Bingley
eating upstairs with Jane. They all went to bed early.

The next day went better. Edward was calmer after spending a couple of hours at his sister's bedside
and seeing her much improved.

He had come upon her before breakfast and asked for a tray to be brought up for him, and this time
no Miss Bingley had usurped his place.

His impressions of the other inhabitants of the house had Jane laughing in no time—especially his
account of his own worried pacing and wretched billiard's skills. Best of all was his attempt to
manage the stairs with four, or were there five?—a gentleman had to have some dignity, after all—
full glasses of brandy in his belly. Of course, he abstained from telling of his second encounter in the
top of the stairs.

'I am sure Darcy did not expect me to be so bad at holding my liquor,' he said, 'but I had not quite
realized the effect it was having on me until those first steps up.'

After leaving his place to Miss Bingley, who still seemed very dedicated to her nurse role, or at least
happy to have something to do, he went downstairs. There, he wrote a note to his father, to whom he
communicated both his sister's improvement and their consequent impeding return in the appointed
two days time.

It was a grey, overcast day, so when Darcy found him in the drawing room and offered him a
billiards lesson, he did not hesitate to accept. Bingley was, Darcy explained, occupying himself with
matters of the estate.

'A propos of this…' Edward asked, after they strung, 'How do you manage it, being away from
Pemberley so much?'

'You break, and I take the marked one,' Darcy said whilst chalking his cue, and he then continued
when Edward struck the ball, 'I am not, usually, but I have a good, trustworthy steward who sends
me all matters needing my attention by post.'

At Edward's unconcealed surprise at his nonchalance—he even stopped playing to see if Darcy was
teasing him—Darcy asked, 'How do you know how much attention an estate requires?'

Edward knew he ought to be offended by his dismissal, but he was not, and decided to avoid the
discussion of how much exactly he knew, it being rather more complicated than what he cared to
have at the moment.

'I am hardly blind; I see my father. And I only thought you a more conscious manager, that is all;
losing hazards; your turn.'

Darcy appeared somewhat offended, saying, 'Yes, well, I do not exactly like to be away so often, but
I gave Bingley my word that I would aid his search for an appropriate estate. I promised myself to
see him settled before I go…' He stopped, surprised, and finished with a lame, 'And I do not need to
explain myself to you.'

Edward could not help laughing. 'A little too late for that, I think, my friend,' he said.

'Yes, I said I need not, not that I have not.' Darcy said that last with a smile, and then took his shot
flawlessly.

Edward, remembering Bingley's remarks in the Assembly, waited until he was about to take the next
one to say, 'A wife and a few children would ensure your continuous presence on Pemberley, I am
sure.' And when Darcy missed, he added gleefully, 'Losing hazards, again. My turn.'

Darcy shot him a dark look while he prepared, 'I see you have been paying attention.' And when
he
missed, 'But not too much.'

'Yes, well, I am learning from the best, am I not?'

'You are not learning from the best. You are attempting to distract the best, and that is another matter
entirely.'

'Yes, well, besides being an attempt to distract you, my observation was sincere. Why not marry?
You are the perfect age for it, and you say your sister needs a suitable companion; who better for that
than your wife?'

'That is no business of yours,' said Darcy without raising his head from the table, where he was on a
break of seven points already, with unrelenting perfectionism.

'Very well, it was my mistake; I am unerringly too curious, as my father would say. You are
avoiding a very innocent and simple question, though.'
Darcy faltered one second and then returned his attention to the exact placement of his cue. 'You may pose any question you like; I may choose not to answer them.'

'Of course, you may not answer, but why? It is not a difficult question at all.' Edward did not stop to ask himself why he was pursuing the matter. It was simple curiosity, he was sure as he spoke, awakened by Darcy's evasiveness.

Darcy then made his fifteenth hazard and asked for Edward's cue ball to be placed on the brown spot. He made the cannon before answering.

'Why do you not answer your own question first, then?'

'Oh, that is easy. I am too young and I have yet to come into my inheritance.' He made a second's pause then and something made him add, wanting to see the other man's reaction, 'In any case, I am not remotely as handsome as you are.'

Edward smiled gleefully as Darcy missed and levelled an undecipherable look at him, 'Your turn.'

'Yours to answer, though,' said Edward with good humour while he pocketed one, two winning hazards.

'I have… yet to find someone worthy of the Darcy name.'

'Worthy? Not one handsome, agreeable duchess has crossed your path?'

Darcy suppressed a smirk, 'No.'

'A shame, really; I am sure all the uglier, disagreeable ones are suffering in well-mannered silence for your indifference.'

He was standing with his cue stick propped on the floor so excessively diverted that Darcy relented and smiled.

'Do take your shot some time in the next century; otherwise my time of wife hunting will be curtailed by my old age.' And while Edward was taking it, he added, 'I would consider Miss Bingley if I were you, Bennet. She was asking so insistently for your whereabouts this morning that I think a very fine line has been crossed.'

Edward missed. Privately he thought that he would have missed even without the distraction, bothersome as it was, as he was trying for a very complicated cannon. He had already thought that lady's dislike of him too exaggerated for comfort; but he did not falter and smiled somewhat unpleasantly.

'Why? Are you perhaps jealous? Too much of her attention deviated from you while she did the asking?'

'You know perfectly well it did not. She asked me after all.'

Darcy seemed determined not to miss any more shots, and he added, a while after. 'It is just that I have never met anyone with whom I would consider it—there is a great many things to take into account, and I would wish for something besides compatibility of fortunes.'

'So, you are waiting for the right lady. We will make a romantic out of you yet, Darcy.'

The other appeared only amused at this and asked, raising his head from his cue, 'What do you know
about romance, Bennet?"

Edward, with the echo of the earliest dismissive question still resonating within, and although almost painfully aware of the truth of this one, said with a straight face, 'I know enough.'

Darcy smiled, and then proceeded to win the game, and of unspoken accord they talked of things unrelated to marriage for the rest of the day.

Jane was well enough to come down for dinner that night. The affair was agreeable enough, Miss Bingley's unpleasantness completely masked by solicitous concern for her guest. Even Edward, who was looking for proof of her duplicitous nature, found it easy to be deceived by it. She did not seek to avoid his presence anymore, although she was, nonetheless, unfailingly cold—within the limits of politeness—to him. After each exchange, he felt Darcy's eyes on him and once, when he couldn't restrain himself and tried to meet his eyes, he encountered a smirk that was quickly hidden behind a glass. The situation was as uncomfortable as it was ridiculous.

After dinner, Edward approached Bingley, and after thanking him for his hospitality, stated that they would take their leave on the morrow, as Jane was now quite well and a three mile journey in carriage would surely not hamper her improvement. Bingley was horrified.

'Af...
sister as excellent as Jane. I am afraid Jane will find her brother without fault no matter the subject."

"Then I must repeat what my brother said then: you will not paint her a liar in my eyes."

"Well, then, if I must. We will both play and you will be able to measure my worth for yourself."

Miss Bingley acquiesced with lowered eyes, but her suddenly found inquisitiveness could not be held back for long.

'Is Miss Bennet your only sister, Mr Bennet?'

'No, she is not. I have one other.'

'One other!' said Darcy. 'Is she married? You never speak of her...’ His words trailed off, too late realizing the indelicacy of asking such a question. Edward, trying to put him at ease, answered with perfect humour.

'With my sister, I am afraid that the saying 'out of sight, out of mind' proves all too true. She is not married, but living since a very young age with some relatives in Scotland. She is my age to a day and my own excellent mother died with our birth. It was a lucky coincidence that my father could not care for both of us and that my aunt and uncle wanted children.'

Both his interlocutors were silent for a moment, at a loss for words, until Miss Bingley suddenly said, intending without a doubt to lighten the air, 'And what is she like?'

'Elizabeth is exactly like me in every respect, to both our chagrin; although I am sure she carries it better than me by far.'

'Exactly like you!'

'Identical. Once when I was... about five I think, Jane in a fit of fancy put me in an old dress of hers and my father thought my sister had come alone all the way down from Scotland.' Edward could not really remember his father's expression—he only had a vague idea of how discomfited he had been—but could imagine it well enough.

'A dress!' It seemed that there was no end to Miss Bingley's astonishment; she was indeed quite shocked.

'Do you not think, Miss Bingley, that I would make a creditable lady? You wound me!' Edward said with his humour more than intact, closing his eyes and raising his head for her perusal.

Miss Bingley's subsequent sputter drew a smile on his lips, and he opened his eyes, to enjoy the sight of her confusion.

Darcy spoke at that moment, directing himself to Miss Bingley with a serious tone, 'Do not trouble yourself trying to answer, Miss Bingley, Mr Bennet is only teasing you, I am sure.' Then, looking at Edward again, and visibly stifling a smile, he said more thoughtfully, 'Though I do believe many a woman would envy his lashes.'

Edward attempted to laugh it off, but found himself unequal to the task. He smiled weakly, looked away, and started walking again. Why must he always speak without thinking? Had Darcy tried to fluster him? If he had, he had quite succeeded, but Edward was loath to give any show of it. The others went along with him, but now the silence was unsettling.

Finally Miss Bingley exerted herself, and began to comment charmingly on the lay of Netherfield
gardens, and how Pemberley ones were so much greater.

Edward found himself answering very little, and though he was unequal to meeting them again, Darcy's disturbingly penetrating eyes preyed on him, and he could not be at ease.

Edward did not speak again with Miss Bingley until after dinner, when they both played a little for the party. Talk consisted of nothing but inconsequential things with Darcy, although they did play a spot of billiards in the afternoon.

He went to sleep with both Darcy's pensive gaze and Miss Bingley's ease at praising his playing preying on his mind. Everything conspired to enhance his relief at getting away from Netherfield on the morrow.

And indeed, as was previously arranged, the very next day after breakfast, the carriage came and returned them to Longbourn.
Mr Bennet received his children with his customary dry wit, remarking on the amazing benefits to the health that a little holiday could have.

'Although I never knew Hertfordshire was such a fashionable destiny, I am glad I need not to send you further than three miles to restore you to good health. You must tell me in what aspect of the property Netherfield's marvellous healing powers reside, as being landlocked, it cannot be on the sea water.' He paused, Edward guessed, for effect, and afterwards added with a pensive tone, 'Perhaps it has nothing to do with the estate itself, and more with its inhabitants.'

Edward was sure his father would have been surprised if he could have perceived how his raillery, patently directed at Jane, affected him. It took all his self control to avoid blushing.

Despite Mr Bennet's dry tone, his eyes were worried and his hands gentle when he welcomed his daughter. Edward could not avoid noting that he looked her over seriously, as if searching for hints of fever and weakness.

'I would not try to organize a holiday resort around Netherfield, my father; if indeed we have come back in good health, it is because neither of us was really out of it. And as for its inhabitants, in their favour I can say that they did keep us well entertained.'

'Never out of health! But I am sure I received a note in your hand that said Jane had a fever, should I look for it? Do you suppose my old mind led me astray and I imagined it all?'

Jane looked at Edward reproachfully and went to their father, 'You know how Edward is; he preoccupies himself needlessly. If he was worried for me, I can assure you there was no need. I had only a little trifling cold.'

'Mmph, I have not known your brother to excessively worry about anything in his life. Much like his father, I should say. But if you say you are well, my dear, then I suppose I must believe you. Go on with you and rest. I must steal Edward; he has played the gentleman of leisure, with neighbours keeping him so well entertained, long enough—five long days—and there is business that needs attending to in the library.'

Edward was soon absorbed by both the usual matters of the estate and the not so usual ones of breaking the entail. The time had come for them to break it, now that Edward was very nearly old enough.

The daylight hours were spent locked inside the library with his father, and if Edward's mind tended to wander away from the curly script and ridiculous vagaries of the common recovery parchment to even more puzzling subjects that resided three miles away, he thought he hid it successfully.

Three days after their sojourn in Netherfield, Edward was again with his father finishing papers. All the pertinent decisions regarding the entail were soon made, including who was going to be the trustee in charge and who would be the attorneys who would represent both of them in the Common Pleas Court.

Although he had been looking forward to witness what he considered one of the greatest farces in modern law, Edward let himself be convinced not to go. If his father was surprised he was so easily persuaded, he did not show it, and Edward himself preferred not to dwell on the reasons that kept him home.
In the aftermath of that discussion, Edward looked at the final version of the document that would begin it all. The deed looked important and he was well pleased with the elegant hand he had been able to use in drafting it. He had not always had as much patience with such pursuits. He raised his gaze and encountered that of his father, who beheld him from across the desk with eyes that spoke of pride and sadness, although the latter, Edward could not account for.

'It is done,' he said, lacking any other subject. 'We can send this today and put the process in motion. Have you thought about what we must do once the land reverts into fee simple?'

Mr Bennet sighed and looked away, taking some time to compose his response; Edward was already fidgeting when it finally came.

'Indeed, I have done so.'

He said nothing more, and Edward could not restrain himself. 'May I ask, my father, what have you resolved?'

'You know me, Edward, resolve is not one of my strengths; I have thought long and hard about it, and resolved nothing.'

His attempt at a self-effacing joke fell flat in the silent room.

After a while of tense silence, Mr Bennet began again, 'I have thought that it may be wise to settle the whole on the girls; a suitable portion to enlarge Jane's dowry, if she has not married by then, and the rest on Elizabeth.'

Edward started, 'Father!'

'Indeed, Edward, you must not speak in haste. Nothing is decided. I am only considering the possibilities.'

'Have I done anything to displease you?'

'You know very well you have not. I just think that Elizabeth has been forgotten long enough by this family.'

Edward looked away for a moment. He had trouble finding his voice, but when he did, he was surprised at how calm it sounded. 'And what if she wants to be forgotten?'

'She does not know what she is about, then. I have made enough mistakes in my lifetime, and the only thing I am proud of is that I have left a way for her to return to us. We have spoken of this several times already; you must trust me that in the future you will change your mind.'

Edward could not keep bitterness from tainting his words, 'Indeed, I will do so once you trust me enough to know my own mind.'

'I trust you, Edward, can you not sense it? It is not a matter of trust. When your mother died.... You have no way to know what it is to live without love, but if you persist in following this path, you will know it soon enough. I have kept you apart from your given destiny; someday, you will resent me for it.'

His father's voice was as warm and kind as it had ever been.

'There is no given destiny; it is only what we do with ourselves that matters. Or have I not served you well? Is that why you wish to settle upon your daughters?"
'My child, must you wilfully misunderstand my every word? It is I who has served you ill!'

'But I do not see it; I am as happy in my life as any other gentleman living in the King's Lands. If you will not trust my assurances, then where is the trust you speak of? And as for love, why should you worry on that account? It is not as though I intend to marry.'

Mr Bennet observed Edward for a few moments and then sighed in a defeated fashion before speaking.

'Very well, then, you must not worry. I will not change my will any time soon, and as I do not expect to die in the near future, we can defer this conversation to a more appropriate time. Now, off you go, enjoy the day, and take your sister outdoors for a while; so much time cooped in is beginning to show on her complexion.'

Mr Bennet's whole stance was dismissive, and Edward knew his father well enough to know that he would not be able to pry another word from his lips on the subject. His temporary victory did not appease him, as he well knew his father would try to carry his point to the end, and so it was with a downcast mien that Edward went looking for Jane.

He found her in the drawing room, and was about to propose an excursion outside when Darcy and Bingley were announced and brought in. Jane's change of countenance was obvious to Edward, her whole face lighting up with joy at Bingley's clearly besotted looks.

Edward could only be glad at their coming, as it brought happiness to his sister and a welcome distraction to himself. Promptly, before the gentlemen took their seats, Edward proposed going out. He was wild for fresh air and the sun on his face.

Bingley was the first to immediately acquiesce. Edward knew it was because it was the only arrangement that promised a modicum of privacy, but he did not care. Indeed, he was of the same mind, and he did not hesitate to suggest Oakham Mount—the longest walk without going into the village—as their destination. They walked out, and were soon separated into two couples: Edward and Darcy in front and Jane and Bingley lagging behind.

Initially, there was silence between Darcy and Edward, although the latter thought that it was the most comfortable silence that had ever reigned between them. It was Darcy who broke it, hesitantly. 'How is your father? Is he in good health?'

'He is; he remains in his library, which can only mean he is enjoying incomparable health,' said Edward with forced joviality.

'Miss Bennet appears to be in good health also. I trust there was no set back in her illness?'

'Now Edward could be honestly amused, and recover his usual merriment; Darcy's strict civility in awkward moments was indeed diverting. He had to keep his answer short to avoid laughing. 'As you see.'

For a few moments they were silent again, Darcy apparently at a loss of subjects, and then Edward, his good humour restored, decided to help the conversation along. 'I am glad you have come to call on us; I cannot claim an interest equivalent to Jane's in the visit, but I do appreciate it.'

'Bingley has been buried in estate matters; Netherfield is not in as good condition as could be wished.'

'You need not to use Bingley as an excuse to visit me, you know,' said Edward looking sideways at Darcy. 'I can honestly say that I enjoy your company. I am a very dull fellow without anybody to
'We, too, have been extremely bored without you,' said Darcy with a slight smile, and to Edward's frustration, changed the subject, 'although Miss Bingley denies it; indeed, she talks about how glad she is you are gone almost every day! I do think the lady doth protest too much.'

Edward hid his smile; indeed it appeared that way, but he should not laugh at it.

'I hope she does not regret having made our acquaintance, or at the very least, that she values my sister's friendship,' he said, trying to feign nonchalance.

'She has not said as much; but she laments that "dear Miss Bennet" has such a disagreeable brother.'

Edward made a gesture towards the direction the two lovers should be, and said, 'I think she will have to learn to endure me, difficult as I may be. I am not as disagreeable as all that, am I, Darcy?'

'You are not as disagreeable as all that, no,' Darcy answered, raising a eyebrow at him in mocking strictness.

'Ah, I see now what you are about, but I will not fall for it,' said Edward with a twisted smile. 'I will not ask at what exact measure I am disagreeable, I am determined.'

'Very well then, if you need reassurance behind that mocking gaze; you are not disagreeable at all. Are you resigned then, to make of Bingley your brother? That will make Miss Bingley your sister in a way, and if she is not disagreeable, she is not exactly agreeable to you either.'

'I am sure that no other man besides Bingley will do for Jane; she has not spoken about it with me, but I know her well enough. I suppose that if she must marry, she cannot do better than Bingley.'

'If she must marry? Are you perchance against marriage? I would not have guessed it, by your pushing the matter with me.'

'For men, I am sure it is all the same; life changes very little. We are our own masters, before or after. Women, on the other hand, never govern themselves unless they have money and are particularly lacking in husbands and fathers; and even then, they are more constrained by propriety.'

'Do you not approve?' Darcy's voice was completely neutral, and once Edward looked, his face did not offer him any hint of his feelings on the matter either.

He decided to answer truthfully.

'I do not. I would not wish to be a woman under those circumstances; would you? To be forever at the mercy of the decisions of others?'

'It is thought that they need the guidance, while we men do not.'

Edward, thoroughly tired of conventional wisdoms and Darcy's neutral responses, spoke more forcefully than what he would have liked, saying–

'You are an intelligent man, Darcy, and you have a sister; you must know that it is only education that makes the sexes' minds different from one another. How can women be fully rational if the only thing expected from them is to play and sing, draw and speak the modern languages, like trained animals taught to entertain to catch a husband? Their education does not equip them for anything else.'
'You feel strongly about this?' said Darcy; and it was more a statement than a question.

Edward vacillated only a second before answering, 'Who in their right mind would not?'

He knew he was being insulting, and argumentative, and he regretted having put Darcy in an uncomfortable position. Trying to lighten the mood, he said, 'One does worry about one's sisters—and daughters, if my father's reaction to Jane's illness is any indication. He would go to any length to provide for his daughters' happiness.'

'Indeed,' said Darcy, and then he returned to the previous subject. 'And you have been reading Wollstonecraft, I can tell. There is nothing like a good dry tome to inflame the righteous feelings.'

'You can tell? Have you read her?'

Darcy caught the incredulity of his tone, and looked at him sharply while answering. 'Why would you think I have not?'

'You did not agree with her, then.'

'Again, you are jumping to conclusions. I have read her, and I find myself of the same mind on many subjects.'

'You do?' Edward was astonished. Astonished and relieved, if he was honest with himself.

'Not in all subjects,' responded Darcy with a significant look, 'and my sister does need my guidance more often than not.'

'Your sister is very young, is she not? Are you saying that at her age, you were already the wise man I have before me?' asked Edward slyly.

'You must take care, my friend; you sound remarkably like Miss Bingley.'

Quicker to feign offence than to actually take it, Edward answered, 'Even if we may say similar things, I am sure we never do it with the same feelings!'

'Indeed, I can readily believe it; nonetheless, it would behove you to take care all the same. The shock would surely kill that fine lady if she could hear you—she is convinced you could never agree on anything.'

'She may very well believe it! And I see you have evaded my earlier question. You are indeed very sly, Darcy. Were you all-knowing when you were your sister's age?'

'I am sure I am not all-knowing now.'

Seeing that Darcy kept avoiding a direct answer, Edward decided to let the matter drop. He smiled and said, 'I am sure that to someone, whom I shall not name again, you certainly seem so.'

Darcy only raised an eyebrow, unimpressed, having heard as much from him before, and let himself be swayed into another topic.
Edward was of an extremely amiable mood the next time he saw Darcy. He, along with the other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, had been invited to dine with the officers of the ---shire's Militia, lately quartered in Meryton. For Edward, the evening ahead presented an opportunity for unalloyed entertainment.

All the officers he had met had turned out to be, if not perfect gentlemen, then at least extremely agreeable acquaintances. And besides, the presence of his two friends from Netherfield guaranteed him rational intercourse.

When he arrived, the rooms were noisy and full of smoke; it was obviously a gentlemen's dinner. He was spotted at once by an officer he had met previously, and introduced to the rest immediately. If such easy solicitude did not completely serve to put him at ease, it went a far way into doing so.

The conversation went gaily about him, only minimally tasking his mind. It consisted mainly of the officers' mutual raillery, most of whom were men only barely older than himself. It was dominated and steered by a handsome man of around eight and twenty years, one Lieutenant Wickham, who was by turns faintly boasting and humble.

It was perfectly clear to Edward that all the younger officers were completely in awe of this gentleman, who seemed well aware and relished the attention. His adventures never crossed the line of the incredible, and they had farcical endings in which he appeared to gently mock himself, but he always managed to cast it in a good, advantageous light.

The man was very good at it, Edward had to concede, and if he had not come at the gathering in a cynic frame of mind, he would have probably let himself be deceived by his charm. Perhaps if Wickham had concentrated all his power, that is. But as it was, the officer was too preoccupied enchanting his comrades. Edward listened and was amused by him, but no more.

Wickham was in the middle of a story—in which he had been drafted from the streets to judge a boxing competition between Lord Foley and a very drunk Mr Goutier while passing by White's—when Edward was distracted by his friends' entry into the rooms. Despite Bingley's usual amicable disposition, both looked around—seemingly lost—and did not make any movement to approach anyone. At this, Edward felt compelled to go to their sides immediately.

Both smiled and seemed glad to have his company, Darcy even more so than Bingley. Edward offered immediately to introduce them to the group he had been talking to, interested in seeing what they would make of Lieutenant Wickham's theatrics, and Bingley acquiesced for both enthusiastically.

As they neared the group, Wickham's voice could be heard, loud and clear, and Edward realized that he now was telling a different story altogether. When he heard the man's words he could not help starting and looking back at Darcy.

'…this bit of muslin was no innocent I assure you. I would swear that she had met more than one man already, but you could not tell from just seeing her. I am sure her father thought that she was as innocent as the day was long.'

Edward did not know if he wanted to learn how Darcy would take such a show.

Another man made a comment they could not hear, and Edward saw Darcy blanch and falter when
Wickham answered slyly—

'A prime article, I assure you. The green dress I gave her was not made with any silk her father had in his shop.'

At that moment they reached the officers' side and an extremely curious thing happened. Wickham, almost in the middle of the group, started and made an involuntary movement, as if he wanted to flee. Edward could only look at him askance, whilst he looked fixatedly at Darcy, who suddenly turned an alarming shade of red.

Seeing that the situation was almost unbearable, as all the men had been listening to Wickham before and were now looking at the newcomers and paying the utmost attention to the unfolding events, Edward hastened to make the introductions.

Darcy then seemed to make a supreme effort, and taking a sharp indrawn breath, answered the greetings. Nonetheless, his tone was clipped and angry; and when the time came he made only an almost imperceptible nod in Wickham's direction. He retreated from the group sooner than it was polite.

Bingley seemed stumped and only answered when spoken to, confusedly. He seemed as astonished as Edward felt, and kept sending curious looks at his friend, who was standing alone in the other side of the room.

The conversation in the group stalled, its self-appointed leader still white in the face and silent, until finally Bingley stepped forward and endeavoured to make matters right by being pleasing and agreeable himself. As always, it worked, and the level of noise picked up again to a hum with occasional shouts of laughter.

Seeing that Darcy was then left alone to stare out of a window, Edward extricated himself from the group and went to him.

He could not speak; nothing except questions came to his mind and he knew that at such a moment, questions could only be unwise. Darcy's face was set in grim lines, his entire posture rigid and uncomfortable. It spoke of carefully controlled anger, and it made Edward furious on his behalf. He knew not of what. He was sure at that moment that the other could not but be a smooth tongued scoundrel, and that he had perpetrated some unpardonable offence against his friend.

He had resigned himself to offering only silent company when they were called to the table. There, the only two empty seats they found next to each other were far from Bingley's. Edward could not help but feel that he should stay by Darcy the whole evening to help him, at the very least, to keep his composure.

The moment they sat themselves, Bingley looked over the surrounding officers' heads to Edward, and moved his eyes quickly at Darcy—who was staring gloomily at the table top—and back again. Edward was not sure he understood. Indeed, he was not sure at all of what one did on such occasions, but he made a gesture as if assenting. It seemed it was the right thing to do, because Bingley then smiled brightly and returned his attention to the conversation. Edward could only wonder at what he had assented to.

The last to enter was Colonel Forster, who was preceded by Wickham. This officer sported the most curious expression on his face; it seemed a mix of fear and daring, such were his paleness and smirk combined.

He thankfully sat far away from them, at the other extreme of the table, and Edward had no time to
speculate on his dominating the general conversation, when he could be easy again. The Colonel had sat at the head of the table closer to them, and in deference to his rank, the discourse turned to strategy, a favourite topic of his.

So they talked on and on about the war, the continent, and the possibility of getting Armagnac through the Navy. As the dinner continued, the wine kept flowing, and the conversation grew less serious. By the end, the Colonel was rhapsodizing over the attributes of one Harriet whom he hoped to soon marry and his officers were hiding their smirks behind their glasses. She was, apparently, not only the most beautiful girl in the county, but refreshingly honest and delightfully charming.

'Miss Harriet,' he said for what it seemed the umpteenth time, 'was just telling me during a card party at Lucas Lodge some afternoons ago, that she has never met anyone who is my match regarding shooting accuracy. She accompanied us when we went shooting with her brother, as you might know.'

Edward had the sudden urge to drink, and almost choked on his wine. The officer that helpfully hit him on the back to relieve his suffering seemed very understanding.

Darcy appeared tranquil, but he was also more subdued than what was usual even for him. To Edward, it was obvious that Darcy's effort to ignore Wickham was costing him greatly.

For his part, Edward could not eat. He had to make a real effort to be his usual amiable self. The Colonel's self-important speeches were ridiculous, and his officers unsupportable. He could not wait to be gone.

Finally it neared the end of the evening, though Edward was sure the officers planned to extend it far more than it was usual. The drink had made them raucous and the food lazy; they were patently happy to be there and had no intentions to move. He could only wonder if the gentlemen had any obligations at all besides eating, drinking, and enjoying the general society!

Darcy passed the bottle of port to Edward, and he could not avoid noticing that his friend's glass was rather fuller than what was polite. Before he could decide if saying anything to him was wise or not, a sudden hush in their side of the table made possible—nay, impossible not to—for them to hear Wickham's next words. He appeared to have been talking for quite some time, and they caught his final words.

'Miss Goulding? No, I would have you know I am no backgammon player; the woman is so little endowed, she is practically a Miss Molly!' In the following general hilarity, Darcy stood up rather abruptly, and Edward was sure he intended to leave. They could not, he was sure, leave without calling undue attention to themselves and probably offending the Colonel in the bargain, but he could do nothing about it. Placing a restraining hand on Darcy's arm, he called Forster's attention and spoke, rather urgently, 'My friend here does not feel too well,' and gesturing to the port bottle, he forced a smile and added, 'Civilians like us are not at all capable of keeping up with military men. I am afraid we must leave you; I must see him reach Netherfield safely.'

The Colonel smiled in understanding and saluted them in good humour, though he seemed a little surprised with Darcy's very apparent stability. He had gone out in decided strides the moment Edward had let go of his arm. Edward himself could not be so hasty, and looked around at Bingley before going out. There was nothing much he could communicate without speaking, so he only shrugged, almost imperceptibly.

He was turning around again when his eyes met Wickham's, and he fancied he was being coldly
assessed, but could only frown slightly and be gone. He had to hurry to reach Darcy and they set out at a furious pace, leaving the carriage to Bingley without a second thought. Darcy was always some feet ahead, and to Edward, the silence seemed to be heavier than any they had shared before. Edward abhorred silences like this one; he never knew how to act.

Finally, and almost running to keep up with the other, Edward said in his brightest tone, 'I do think I could beat the Colonel at pistols, even is he is 'the best shot of the Regiment', as Miss Harriet seems to think, or to have Forster think she thinks.'

And at Darcy's unrelenting silence, he kept going, 'If she thinks indeed. I cannot believe her so calculating. She used to be unable to do so beyond the latest fashion in lace colour for her bonnet.'

All energy seemed to go out of Darcy at once, and he resumed a more normal pace, looking at Edward once before speaking. 'You should not talk so, you know. She is a lady and you are a gentleman.'

'A lady, and the future Mrs Col. Forster to boot,' said Edward with a smirk.

He was happy to see that he got a smile for his troubles, and so he continued, 'What manner of gentlemen we dined with tonight! Lieutenant Denny, who sat beside me, for example, even attended university. He did not stay long, of course, but what tales he told me. I do think you missed most of them, as the dear colonel held most of your attention, but you must tell me, I cannot believe university allows leisure enough for all he claims to have done.'

'I am sure it does for all those who care to. I would not know.' Darcy's tone was dry, if not a little cutting.

'Come, I did not mean to insult you! You know enough of me to know that I may laugh, but I would never be so free of restraint, myself.'

'Of course.'

'Then stop being so grim! You have not told me anything about your experiences. Every man I know has things he brags about to inexperienced fellows like me—usually women, come to think of it. Indeed, I have heard enough of it tonight from gentlemen for whom I care not a jot about, and not a peep from you.'

Darcy spluttered, 'You cannot be serious. No gentleman would speak of it; Bingley, I am sure, did not tell you anything, either.'

'He is as good as courting my sister; would you expect him to?'

'No! And not because of that! There are things better kept private, you know…' But he was no longer angry, and Edward could see he was really amused by the subject.

Edward had to look away before speaking; the urge to laugh was so great. 'But then, how would green young'uns like me get any information?'

'Green! You cannot be as green as you are claiming. You will not convince me. For a short, barely tolerable fellow, you have practically every girl in the county making eyes at you.'

Darcy never broke his stride, but Edward felt his gaze on him all the same, and he could not meet it lest he betrayed his amusement. 'Only because sighing for you would be useless; you barely look at them.'
'I must weigh my actions, you know that. I am responsible for the consequences.'

Hating the fact that Darcy had turned a perfectly good conversation into a serious one, he said, unable to hide his irritation, 'I am, too, responsible and sensible. Do you see me getting any experience with young girls?'

Darcy appeared not to be offended by his tone; he only smiled slightly and raised an eyebrow. 'You are barely older yourself, you know; but if that is not appealing, there are always books…'

Edward could not resist acting the surprised youth again, turning to Darcy and opening his eyes as wide as they would go. 'Books? What sort of books? Do you have any recommendations?'

Darcy bit his lower lip and even so could not prevent a smirk from forming; his tone wanted to be final, but did not quite manage it. 'No. And I can see now, you fancy you are teasing me now.'

'Me, teasing? I am only looking for information. Would Bingley know? Or better, would he tell me?' Edward was enjoying this far more than he should have.

'How am I to know? Ask him.'

'But you do talk about this kind of thing with him, do you not?' asked Edward, who at this point found himself genuinely curious.

'We are very old friends.'

'That is not an answer.'

'Very well. Occasionally.'

Edward thought he had caught him then.

'Then why not talk to me?'

'If you are as green as you say, then I would be loath to spoil your innocence. There is so little left of it in the world,' he said with a smirk, and then, after a brief moment of hesitation, changed the subject.

'I trust you have observed today's… events, and concluded that I know Lieutenant Wickham.'

'Of course.' Edward wanted to say something more, to reassure his friend somewhat, but he knew not how.

'We have… the acquaintance is an old one. He was my late father's godson. We have not parted in the best of terms, by his own doing. He is not a man to be trusted.'

Edward knew he had to acknowledge the revelation in some form, but again was at a loss for words. To say that he had concluded that much before seemed to ask for Darcy's approval and nothing was further from his mind. Finally he said, 'Of course, I trust you, Darcy.'

A look of understanding passed between them, and then they had to turn around at the sound of a coach. It was Bingley, who had even thought to bring Edward's horse with him.

He was subdued, but in seeing them in a similar mood, made an attempt to cheer them, saying, 'Well, I do not think we have to worry about having to stand the colonel's monologues anymore: I doubt we will ever be invited back!'
They were both too grim to be so easily amused, and they took leave with few words—Darcy entered the carriage, Edward mounted his horse, and they separated, too tired even to arrange an outing for the next day.
Chapter 10

The next weeks passed, neither more quickly nor more slowly than they should, but tallying exactly sixty seconds a minute and sixty minutes an hour, twenty four hours a day, and seven days a week. What made those weeks peculiar was rather the manner in which they were spent.

Most of those hours were spent in agreeable conversation with Darcy. They hunted, or played billiards, or simply went out, riding or walking. Why would that be peculiar? Edward did not know; he only felt that they were unlike everything he had lived before in his life.

Edward had been absorbed in the contemplation of the horizon, or rather thinking of other things while appearing to observe the horizon, when he realized Bingley and Darcy had been speaking for a while.

'I do have to go to London, Darcy, it is no sudden caprice. I would much rather stay, you know, but it cannot be helped.'

Edward watched them curiously, and Bingley, seeing him paying attention, said, 'So, anyone want to join me? We can go and be back again in only a couple of days.'

'There is nothing to tempt us, really,' said Darcy.

'Not you, perhaps, but I have great plans for doing Bennet the same favour you did me, and introduce him at White's and a couple of other places.'

'I see no great temptation in that for Bennet,' said Darcy, 'there would be nobody to interest you there, so early in the season.'

Bingley was incredulous and half laughing. 'You wound me, Darcy; you must know I do not care only for the social season. Several of your relatives will be there, and some friends as well. I know, you have no interest in going, and furthermore you want Bennet to keep you company.'

'If you want to go and be back in such a hurry, you hardly need us to run after you.'

Edward intervened then, a little irked at Darcy's ready decision making for both of them, 'I will be happy to go with you, Bingley, as I have business of my own to accomplish. I had planned to do so by letter, but I find,' he added looking at Darcy with a smile which wanted to be a smirk, 'that I favour a more meticulous approach to matters of business.'

Darcy only raised his brow in response, not letting himself be baited.

The exact time and mode of travel was planned in a few more phrases, Bingley and Edward being both of such easy disposition and decisiveness that an uncharitable person would perhaps mistake them for hasty or rash. They were set to go the next day by horseback at midmorning, sending before them some clothes by carriage with Bingley's manservant.

Darcy's irritation with his friends could not be hidden, but he would not go with them, and he kept from further expressing it. He even saluted them from Netherfield's entrance when they finally left.

Edward and Bingley were obliged then to set out at a dignified pace, until the house was out of sight, and only then giving in to more childlike impulses, they raced until they were sure they had to stop, lest they kill the horses before mid-journey.
Edward was then reminded why he had liked Bingley best at first, with his easy manners and outgoing disposition. One could never be uncomfortable in his presence, and the conversation went on always effortlessly for both parties.

They reached London in good time, and found that all had been prepared for their comfort in the Hursts’ townhouse. They bathed, changed, ate something, and were out of the door as soon as they were able. Each went out to do their respective businesses first; they were both of a mind to consider duty before entertainment, especially since they wanted to leave the next day for Hertfordshire.

Edward went to his attorney’s office. There they had been waiting for his letter and were surprised to see him in person. The business he had there was soon concluded, and he was left to wander about, not wanting to be back in the house without his friend.

As it turned out, Bingley was already waiting for him in the parlour when he returned.

'Ah, Bennet, here you are. I was beginning to worry.'

'Nothing to worry about, I just stopped to buy my sister a present. I would have hurried if I had known you were waiting for me.'

Bingley dismissed the thought with a gesture, saying, 'I have not been here long. I was thinking we could go dine in a club instead of staying here. My sister's cook delights in French cuisine, but I have no taste for it, especially after months of eating nothing else.'

'I am certain I shall find agreeable whatever you prefer.'

'Perfect. If Darcy were here, we may have gone to White's; but really, neither you nor I would be really comfortable there on our own. I much prefer Brooks'. Let us dine at Brooks'.'

Thus settled, it was only matter of deciding what to do between then and now. And what could they do in London that they could not in Hertfordshire? There were suddenly so many options, Edward could not decide. Bingley finally tempted him with a visit to Angelo's, to spar and perhaps to get counsel on improving his technique.

Edward owned a copy of *L'Ecole des Armes* and his father had taught him the basics. Furthermore he had, at one point in his life, been quite enchanted with the sport and tried to practice by himself, but it was another thing that drew him to it. He still remembered that Darcy was a very accomplished fencer, and the lure of becoming equally accomplished with the goal of besting him was strong. It was ridiculous, of course, no less because he had no hopes of doing so after one lesson.

In there they met, much to Bingley delight, some of his friends, and even one of Darcy's cousins, a Colonel Fitzwilliam. He had the most agreeable manners Edward had ever met with, polite and engaging. Showing himself to be pleasantly surprised at finding his cousin's friends in Town, he asked a good deal of questions about how Darcy was doing and if he planned to join them there.

'Oh no, we return to Hertfordshire tomorrow. We came on business that could not be delayed and Darcy found it pointless to come and go back in so little time. We have left him quite settled at Netherfield and I expect we will find him there at our return, only a little more bored than before.' Bingley answered cheerfully.

'Settled! I say, I expect he has not forgotten he has a sister that is expecting to pass the holiday season with him! I will have to write to him otherwise…'

'I do not think he would forget Miss Darcy,' said Bingley without losing his smile, 'I extended the invitation to her in any case, so it is quite possible that he has arranged to bring her to Netherfield.'
Though all this open talking about Darcy's plans was bothering him a little, as he was sure the man himself would disapprove of it exceedingly, Edward hastened to assure the colonel of his cousin's constancy. 'He has said to me that he has written to his sister to arrange it, though I am not sure if she has responded.'

'And so it goes,' said Colonel Fitzwilliam with perfect unconcern, 'I am the last to hear of it. Though I must not be so hasty to condemn them, it is quite possible he has written to me about it, and I have overlooked it; Darcy's letters are so long and serious, they cannot always claim my attention from beginning to end with success.'

This phrase, said with good humour, and in all probability conceived more to amuse than to reflect the truth, almost offended Edward on Darcy's behalf. He had to make an effort to take it as lightly as it was meant. The colonel's cavalier attitude did not endear him to Edward, and almost undid the good impression his manners had left him.

They were then joined by some other acquaintance of both the Colonel and Bingley, a Mr Clowes, which, having been a while since he had last seen Bingley, was very interested in the current state of his life.

'I say, it has been awhile since I have seen any of the people we spent that agreeable summer with. I have been very remiss with my correspondence, I suspect, but that is as it is. What news have you of the Harpers?'

'I have not known anything of them either. I went to Derbyshire the day after you left for town, and any mention of my capabilities as a correspondent is best left unsaid.'

'The day after! Miss Harper must have been devastated!' Mr Clowes's tone was teasing, not at all serious, but Edward could not like it. He wanted to hear Bingley answer, and he did not have to wait very long, as it came immediately and was easy and unaffected.

'Indeed, I doubt she was! The rest of the party stayed, and I am sure they were very merry indeed.'

Momentarily, Edward had to bite his lips to avoid asking some very ill-bred questions, but soon enough he was distracted. The three men were very entertaining conversationalists, and furthermore they were at a fencing club, and all were soon likewise engaged.

Bingley was an extremely agreeable partner for simple practice, as not only was he light on his feet and graceful, but easy on his partner as well. Nonetheless, Edward suspected that in a real match, Bingley's lack of competitiveness would annoy him no end, especially since, being the poorer fencer, Edward was sure he would feel condescended to.

They sparred, and Edward had to summon all his knowledge and ability to keep up with Bingley, even though he suspected that his friend was not using all of his. Bingley kept him on the offensive, defending his position quite easily but nevertheless giving up terrain for every attack of Edward's.

Edward soon realized Bingley was teaching him, in a roundabout way. He had not said anything, and was not saying anything now, but every one of his movements showed Edward a potential misstep in his part, leaving him enough time to correct it.

Some time later they stopped, at the end of a bout, as they were both somewhat out of breath. Edward could not really tell how much time had passed since they had begun, so absorbed with the match he had been.

There were a couple of men standing sufficiently close to them to observe them comfortably, and
Edward suspected they—or in all justice only him, in his inexperience—made an amusing picture. One of them approached them then, and Bingley greeted him with respect and familiarity. He immediately afterwards introduced Edward to him. It was, it turned out, Henry Angelo himself, who was interested in knowing where Edward had learned to fence.

Edward answered with some embarrassment, 'I have not learnt anywhere, really, unless you count your esteemed father's book. My own father coached me a little, but he is not very interested in any sport, so it has been really only a little, I am afraid.'

'I only ask because you have a very interesting style. Are you interested in improving?'

'I am, of course, but I do not reside in London for any length of time, I only come, as now, for one or two days at a time. The rest of the year, I am in Hertfordshire.'

'That is a shame, indeed! Though perhaps, it is not so bad, as you would be better served in learning in the French school, I suspect. Your style, unpractised and novice as it is, reminds me of Chevalier d'Eon's. If you ever stay in Paris, you would do well in frequenting the Académie.'

Edward shamefacedly thanked him, but Angelo just proceeded to give some pointers to improve on their stances, more to Edward than to Bingley, and then he left them to themselves.

And so they sparred a little more, until they both pronounced themselves quite thoroughly done in and decided to go to the Hurst's to refresh themselves before proceeding to Brooks' to dine.

Their walk through St. James' Street was at a leisurely pace, both too tired and too happy to do more than converse of any and every thing in an easy tone. It was the perfect thing to do after the day they had, and the type of conversation one could dedicate only half a mind to, the rest of the attention used to observe the particular crowd that populated that part of town at that particular hour.

'So, Bennet, what did you bought for your sister?'

'A book.'

'Your sister likes books a great deal, I gather; we have spoken about novels in many an occasion.'

'Jane does like them,' answered Edward, beginning to understand to where the questions were tending, 'and novels best of all, particularly Miss Burney's. Are you taking notes or you will be asking me this again at a later time?'

Bingley coloured and smiled, looking up at the night, but said nothing.

'You should—you know. Not many men know—' Edward was almost stopped in his tracks. As it was, he could not avoid stumbling over his words, nor the sudden silence it followed.

'What is it?' asked Bingley, trying to catch up with him. He had stepped up his pace, completely red in the face.

'Deuced—'

'Who?' asked Bingley turning around.

'In the window,' finally responded Edward, as now that the initial moment of embarrassment had passed he felt rather foolish.

'Window? Ah! White's bow-window! That must have been Brummell and the dandies that usually
surround him, then. Why, what did they do? You must not pay them any attention.'

Edward felt himself heat up again. He regretted having made such a fuss, because how could he satisfy Bingley's inquisitiveness with anything less than the truth? And, nevertheless, he felt unequal to expressing it aloud. He tried a shortened, tempered version of it.

'They were looking me—us—up and down thoroughly, without any shame whatsoever!' He tried to say it in as dramatic a tone as he could, only because he did not want Bingley to perceive there was anything else to be told.

'And I daresay it was through those dreadful quizzing glasses as well,' said Bingley, patently trying for seriousness of tone, and failing miserably. 'I say, Edward, I did not know you were so easy to fluster! You should be glad he did not cut us; the shame would have followed us all the way back to Hertfordshire.'

'Well, now you know,' responded Edward, forcing the words between the teeth of a tight smile, relieved that he did not have to explain himself further.

The truth was that one of those so called gentleman, at the occasion of their eyes meeting, quite by accident, and having finished a through perusal of Edward's person, had lowered his glass and openly, overtly, winked at him!

Edward decided not to give in to the strong necessity of checking that the lines of his coat and breeches were in order, but it caused him to want to be away from the public eye more than ever. In a moment more they reached Brooks', and the subject, to Edward's relief, could be changed.

And so they were, hours later, drinking port contentedly ensconced in leather armchairs, having eaten heartily, and talked not half as much as they would have otherwise.

Bingley broke the silence. 'So, tell me, Bennet, what matter of business brought you here? I could tell Darcy did not know and wanted to, so I kept my peace, but now I find myself quite curious.'

'Why would Darcy know? And furthermore, how did you know he wanted to?'

'So many questions instead of answering mine! It is fine, I will answer first if that is your price,' responded Bingley with merry eyes. 'My answer to the first would be, "Darcy knows everything", but as that is patently untrue, I would say, "Darcy knows almost everything, especially those things that concern his intimate friends". The answer to the second is quite as easy as that. He did not talk about it, not even in passing. He avoided commenting on the fact with me, even though I tried to speak of it. In fact, he did not mention it once, on any of the conversations we shared about the trip since yesterday.'

'Just for that?' Edward knew he sounded disappointed, but he had spoken before he could master himself.

'That is quite enough, I assure you! Darcy does not give a more obvious hint of his mind than that. If he did not care, he would have referred to it, I am sure.'

'If you say so, Bingley.'

'I say so. What is more, I assure you he will ask you about it, once he has had time to make up his mind how. He is extremely attached to you, you know; I have never known him to make friends so easily. But now, tell me first; it would be the first time I have a chance to know before Darcy something which does not concern me privately.' Tempering his tone to one of less eagerness, he added belatedly, 'That is, if you want to.'
'I have no problem with telling you, I would not consider it a matter of this much interest. It is only some matter of business with the trustees of the estate, for my father.'

'Oh, I would have expected something less mundane.'

'Like what? Meeting a secret betrothed?'

Bingley started, and then laughed before answering, 'That would have been most interesting information to have before Darcy. And I would have been anxious to see you tell him. He has been in such uncharacteristically unpredictable humour lately; I do not know how he would react. He is excessively attentive to the wellbeing of his friends, but he does frown on romantic entanglements of the kind that are not first approved by him!'

Edward, liking and not liking the turn of the conversation, decided to press it to his advantage. 'And how, pray tell, would you know Darcy's opinion on his friends' romantic entanglements?'

'I am his friend, of course,' said Bingley in a good humoured tone.

'And have you had many chances to personally verify it?'

Suddenly, Bingley's smile was almost nonexistent. 'Not many.'

'I see.'

They were both silent for a while, and Edward felt that it fell on him to begin again, and so he did, trying to lighten the mood he had so thoroughly ruined a moment before, saying, 'His preoccupation for his friends does him credit.'

'That it does, though one could find it in oneself to wish he did not feel it so necessary.'

'One certainly could. Say, why does he find it so?' Edward could not resist the temptation of asking.

'One could suppose he has often seen his friends out of undesired entanglements.' Bingley's words were carefully spoken.

'So Darcy's care is necessary after all.'

'Well, the undesirability of any thing is, in the end, a matter of subjective opinion.'

'So, the friends find themselves regretting having heeded Darcy's advice?' Edward knew his tone to be mild, but he felt anything but.

'No! Of course not!' Bingley seemed to panic in his search for the right words. 'I never—his friends never would have heeded it in the first place if they would have not thought his advice sound. It is more a problem of Darcy's thinking that it is never a good time for being married. So his standards, however sound, are rather high for both himself and for his friends.'

Edward thought on this information a little, and realized it came as no surprise at all. A moment later, and he could not avoid smirking while he said, 'I hope he approves of my sister, then.'

Bingley sat up straight. 'I certainly could not care less!' Afterwards, even he seemed surprised for his outburst.

'Not even a bit?' Edward knew he sounded amused, a faint echo of his father, but he could not only hope Bingley would not be offended, as it was beyond him to change it.
'She is… come, Bennet, you cannot pretend you do not know it! She is an angel!'

'She certainly is. I am happy you are aware of it.'

'How could I not? I may not be the most brilliant fellow, but you cannot think me as deficient as that!'

'No,' smiled Edward, 'I do not think you deficient at all.'

Bingley smiled in response, and sat back. 'Well, I am glad.'
If the good people in Meryton could see them now, thought Edward, they would surely consider their sly remarks no longer necessary.

Following the London trip, the Longbourn and Netherfield families found themselves closer than ever, and an alliance between them was expected not too far away in the future, by the neighbourhood. However, they could get no confirmation from the Bennets, and no-one dared ask the lofty inhabitants of Netherfield. However, in the intimacy of the present situation, the conclusion of that affair seemed to Edward more than foregone.

He felt his skin tingle from his toes, ensconced in his Hessians, to his uncovered face. It could not be natural to sit so still, he was sure. The fire cracked and shifted in the hearth. Edward sighed and fidgeted.

'Are you tired, Edward?' asked Jane kindly from her place besides Bingley on the divan.

'Indeed, no-one told me having one's shadow made was so demanding of one's own patience. And I, unlike Bingley, do not have a beautiful lady willing to entertain me while I sit for it.'

The comment surely garnered a blush from Jane, who had earlier read aloud from a comedy to Bingley, but Edward could not turn to see it. He had to content himself with Miss Bingley's offended sniff for all effect.

'Not every one appreciates the art of silhouettes; I personally find them a most delightful accomplishment,' she said haughtily.

'Especially now that this pretty apparatus exists to make it easier,' said Edward. 'But I did not mean to disparage the activity by any means. I am not a patient person; that is all.'

'Edward!' cried Jane, with a hint of impatience, herself. 'Can you not stay still for one moment? Miss Bingley will never be able to make me your miniature if you move about like that.'

'Of course I will stay still; I was only speaking.'

'And flapping your arms,' added Darcy with an amused smile, from his armchair by the fire.

'I was not!'

'You were, and now you moved your head. Really, Bennet, you must remain still if you want your likeness taken. Miss Bingley will tire of you in no time otherwise,' was the leisurely response.

Edward wanted to retort that Miss Bingley had probably already tired of him anyway and was doing it only as a show of politeness toward his sister, but he thought better of it. He had always thought an air of offended dignity was better affected in silence.

'It is true that not all have the patience to sit through it. Just the other summer I was asked to do Mr Harper's youngest's silhouette for his mother, and it was nearly impossible to keep him seated! It is no wonder really, at his age, and not in any way the boy's fault; I am sure he will grow out of it in no time.'

Edward did not have to see her face to see her smirk; he could just as well picture it in his mind. He almost had to bite his tongue to avoid answering. Nothing he could think of saying was polite.
enough, or sharp enough, for his tastes. He could only try to concentrate all his will in not moving one hair from its place. A moment later he heard Miss Bingley's voice again. 'There we are. I have finished. Are you sure you do not want your silhouette taken for your sister, Mr Darcy?'

'I thank you for the offer, but she has various likenesses already.'

Edward got up and stretched his limbs gratefully. It was already winter and outside the weather was as bleak as ever. It had begun to snow, and the room was wrapped in the warm light of the fire and the less than customary lamps in concession to the ladies' silhouette taking endeavour.

Edward and Jane had been invited to stay at Netherfield after the card party, in consideration of the late hours the party was sure to keep and of the inclement weather; and so they were passing the time before bed in the drawing room. The general mood was rather subdued.

Mr Hurst snored on a settee in a corner. Mrs Hurst, after having apparently tired of commenting on her sister and friend's artistic ability, played solitaire somewhat distractedly by his side. Bingley and Jane were talking, apparently observing the proceeding, though Edward was sure they were more entertained by each other than by anything else in the room or outside of it.

Darcy sat by the fire. He was quieter than usual, and Edward wondered at the cause of this new muted, more restrained humour. Edward could not make him out, and though he was getting used to that feeling, he still could not like it one bit.

Darcy, for he was the only one who paid him enough attention, probably thought Edward was only feeling cooped up and tired of sitting still, but the reality, though it was influenced by those two facts, went beyond that. Edward had reached a decision in the last few days; the type of momentous decision that is better to take and act upon it almost at once, so as not to allow time for one's will to waver. He felt the danger of it exceedingly.

He had come to it quite unexpectedly whilst thinking on his discussion of Darcy with Bingley during the London trip. Thinking on what to tell Darcy of the entail business, he had suddenly realized that if he could and perhaps even should tell anyone the whole mess, it was Darcy. They were friends, perhaps even more than simply friends.

After not thinking about it for so many years (at least not actively), after not talking about it, he felt it was the worst of impostures to keep Darcy in the dark. If he understood Darcy's character at all, he would not take it well. Still, the possibility that he might discover it by any other means was dreadful. It was not impossible, Edward knew; the more time they spent together, the more he risked.

If he had had only this concern weighing on his mind, Edward might have been able to forbear, but his father had tried to reinitiate the discussion about Edward's future more than once. Only his frequent calls with his neighbours and some rather opportune business had allowed Edward to avoid the topic. Mr Bennet, it seemed, was determined.

Edward had no desire of changing his life in any way. Why would he? The only thing that kept him from facing his father again and deciding the matter once and for all was that he was not entirely sure exactly why his father was making such a deal of it now. He always had been happy to leave things as they were, why change his mind now? Even taking his words at face value, why did his father not believe him or trust him to know his own mind?

He needed advice from an objective person; someone whom he could respect, and whose opinion, and discretion, he could therefore trust. Although some months ago he could not have guessed it, Darcy was in every respect suited to the task.
No sooner had he arrived at that conclusion than it seemed as if he could not get one moment alone with Darcy; or when they were alone, the situation would not be conducive to confidences. Such an intimate house party should have created plenty of opportunities, but it had not. Edward was sure that if he did not speak that very same day, he would never speak of it—to anyone besides his father—again. He was sure to lose his nerve momentarily.

A little while later Jane covered a delicate yawn and announced she was going to retire. She was followed by almost everyone else, commenting as they went how much the day had worn them out. Edward felt the exact opposite: he was full of restless energy. The prospect of trying to sleep was not agreeable in the least. Fortunately, it seemed far from Darcy's mind as well, since he had not moved from his armchair. He had even dismissed Bingley with a vague gesture, saying he did not need company besides that of the fire.

As the others filed out, Edward went to the chair next to Darcy's. He could not be still. Pacing by the fireplace did not help to calm him, but had rather the opposite effect. Suddenly though, his next action seemed obvious.

'What do you say to a game of billiards, Darcy? I cannot sleep either.'

'Of course, if you want one.'

Darcy's tone was not unfriendly, but seemed nonetheless unenthusiastic.

Edward could not let himself be deterred by that. He knew he could wait forever for the perfect moment and it would never come.

They went into the billiard's room in silence, got rid of their coats, and strung. To his surprise, Edward's ball hit the top and came back to almost touching the baulk cushion. He chose the spotted ball and decided to break. His careless following shot let the balls in a prime position, but he could only cede the place to Darcy with a grimace. He was not there to win a game after all.

A silence only interrupted by the methodical clack of the balls covered them and Edward was glad to suddenly spot the brandy decanter on a little table by the wall. It was most convenient. He offered and poured a glass for Darcy before serving himself. Afterwards, the silence fell over them again like a blanket.

Gazing at the table unseeingly, he wondered why Darcy was being so stubbornly silent. He wondered if he was to be condemned to be always at a loss for words in his presence. He emptied his glass in one gulp, the liquid burning his way down to his stomach, and served himself another; a look showed that Darcy's was still more than half full. It also showed that his friend, in between shots, was watching him curiously.

Finally, Edward could wait no more and begun. 'My business in London went without a hitch.'

'I am pleased for you,' said Darcy in a noncommittal tone, looking back at the table.

'Yes, the solicitors were quite helpful, and the proceedings went as predicted.'

'Mmh.' Darcy appeared concentrated in the positions of the balls, and his demeanour could not be more distracted, Edward was sure.

'I met your cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, at Angelo's.' As he had expected, this garnered some attention.

Darcy looked at him from where he was leaning to make a shot. 'Did you, now? How did you find
him? And how do you like Angelo's? I did not know you fenced.'

'I found him very much the gentleman. We only spoke for a moment, though.'

Edward contemplated saying that he thought the Colonel talked rather too much, and said things he perhaps ought not, but dismissed it at once. He did not want to start trouble between Darcy and his cousin, and it was beside the point.

'I do not fence as such, I only know the basics,' he added instead.

'A shame I have not my practice blades with me then, or we would both get some exercise.'

Darcy's attention was again fully into making his shot. He was, apparently, uninterested in making conversation.

Edward felt tempted to sulk; what a difficult man! Nothing but forthrightness would do, clearly, so he said, 'Bingley said you wanted to know what business I had in London.'

Darcy's shot went off course then, and it was Edward's turn again.

Darcy's tone was indifferent. 'Really? I am not averse to knowing, of course.'

'Of course.'

Two could play that game, Edward was well aware, but he had no interest in ducking questions and raising Darcy's expectation of the answers. He wanted a good angle from which to impart specific information and his friend was not being helpful at all.

'I went to pick up the deeds of Longbourn land. It is—it was, I should say—entailed, and we had to do a common recovery proceeding to liberate it.'

Darcy's interest was finally fully raised, and his tone was one of worry when he asked, 'Do you need money? I mean, I should not ask, but I hope I need not remind you I am your friend.'

Edward could not help smiling at this, and his shot was a happy one. (Winning hazards, no less.) Indeed, he did not need any reminder; that was the reason behind this whole convoluted mess of a conversation.

'No, no need to preoccupy yourself with this, Darcy. Longbourn and I are in excellent financial condition. But I have a sister whose only future is marrying well; like every other lady she must have a good dowry.' He made an involuntary pause. 'And then, there is Elizabeth.'

'Elizabeth?'

Edward's next shot showed that his luck was at an end. He yielded the turn to Darcy, and went to the table where his glass awaited him.

'I told you about her before, while Jane was ill.'

'Oh, I had forgotten.'

'So had I, for a moment,' said Edward, not without humour. At a loss how to continue, Edward stared at the amber liquid, its surface trembling slightly against the glass. No sound issued from the billiard's table for a long moment

'Is something the matter with your sister, Bennet?' Darcy sounded tentative, as if he suspected he was
stepping on not quite solid ground.

Edward looked up.

'Jane? No, of course not, she is perfectly well, have you not seen her?'

'No, I mean your other sister.'

'Yes…No…It is more complicated than that.'

He could only turn his gaze to the fire.

'I am all ears, if you need to speak of it.'

'Of course.'

Another lengthy silence followed. Darcy was on another winning streak. It was the perfect opportunity, the perfect occasion to say whatever he wanted, but Edward could not find where to begin. He wished Darcy were not so understanding, or perhaps not so silently understanding. He wished to be questioned, to be able to delegate the responsibility of finding the logical path of disclosure. Every new start cost him more.

'Remember what we were talking about the other day, Darcy? About marriage and women not being independent?'

Darcy readily assented, barely raising his eyes from his cue, though his expression betrayed his confusion.

'I am… perhaps I feel the matter more because it concerns me.' The words trailed off. They did not want to be said, Edward was sure. They stuck in his throat and refused to be paraded in front of the light of the fire. He had to drink a little, to moisten his suddenly dry mouth.

'And, by that, I mean, personally.'

Darcy only stood back with the cue held vertically at his side, watched, and waited. It only served to heighten Edward's discomfiture. When he begun again, it was in a deceptively light tone, 'You know what they say, Darcy? That not every man is a gentleman?'

Edward was now resting his weight on the wall, both hands holding the port glass as if hanging on for dear life, staring intensely into the wall opposite him, but he could not avoid turning to look and see how Darcy was taking it.

'I cannot say I have heard it, but it certainly seems an accurate observation.'

His words seemed to take the change of subject in stride, but his eyebrows were raised questioningly.

'I… What would you say if I were to tell you that not every gentleman is a man?' And he hurried on, to keep on talking, as Darcy had opened his mouth to speak in what seemed total confusion. 'What would you say if a friend of yours—dash it all, this is ridiculous—if I were to tell you that I am a woman and not a man at all?'

'What would I say…' Darcy's voice trailed off, and he closed his mouth. His face was expressionless; it did not seem that he was about to speak again any time soon, so Edward felt it his duty to continue.

'I am, you know, a woman. I am Elizabeth. Edward, my brother, died not many years after my mother. My father took pains to hide it, of course, and made up the story about relatives wanting
children; though he did not make up my uncle, only that they are raising any child of his. It is all because of the entail. My father felt it exceedingly that he, on top of being deprived of his wife—he loved her very much, you see—could not leave his home to his children, by a trick of fate. If I would have died, for example, instead of my brother…'

Edward stopped and pushed himself off the wall. Without his voice ringing nonsensically, the room was very silent again, except that now, those words were left to swim in it, and turn it into an oppressive silence instead of a comfortable one.

It suddenly struck him most forcefully. If he, if she, would have… How strange, what would have been the difference? Had not Elizabeth died after all? To say that he, that she, was Elizabeth, was not that a lie as well? He took a gulp from his glass and stared into it.

'But, then, that is not right, either, is it? In nearly all respects, I am Edward. And it is Elizabeth who died. Only now, for some reason my father begins to regret his decision. He begins to talk of settling Longbourn on the girls. And what am I to do with that? Truly, Darcy, I know this must be a rather unexpected shock, but I am in need of advice.'

Talking to his glass, Edward missed the moment Darcy left the billiard table. When he came to, his friend was standing in front of the fireplace, a fist covering his mouth, his back to him. His cue lay abandoned carelessly by the wall. He did not appear to be angry, but then, when had Darcy ever been obvious with his feelings? Edward did not have Bingley's experience to be able to interpret them effortlessly; it was like trying to divine the thoughts of a statue.

Edward could only wait. More words would have been useless, unless Darcy wanted an explanation, and for now he seemed content to think about it in silence. The moment stretched on forever for Edward. He downed his glass, and could only stare at it again until he heard Darcy's voice.

'Am I to understand, then, that you have been deceiving us all this time, Mr Bennet?'

'Miss, if you please,' answered Edward, but even to his own ears it sounded a weak attempt at humour.

'Is that how you would prefer to be addressed by me from now on?'

Darcy's tone was acid, his back unyielding.

'I… You know that I would not, Darcy. It is true that I am not exactly the man you thought me—not a man at all, actually—but I am unchanged in every other regard; I am every bit as I have always been.'

'Why say anything at all, then?' asked Darcy, turning to look at him at last, but his tone was more resentful than curious, his eyes glinting cold and hard. Edward straightened up to his full height and gestured with his now empty glass.

'Because you are my friend, my best friend, and as such I thought you ought to know.' He tried to smile, failed, and added, 'Bingley said to me that you were quite disposed to offering advice to your friends whether they wanted it or not. Well, I need it.'

'That is all very well, but it does not belie the fact that all this—' he gestured vaguely at Edward—'is merely playacting.'

'Our friendship is not playacting,' said Edward seriously, 'at least not on my part. I am who I am now, and I cannot change it.'
'You will excuse my incredulity on both accounts, I hope, Madam.'

The pause lengthened into a dreadful, heavy silence, and Edward could not meet Darcy's eyes. It was Darcy who finally spoke again, 'If you will excuse me, I will retire.'

And then, under Edward's now helpless gaze, he turned, bowed briefly, and went out.

Sleep that night proved impossible.
Chapter 12

The next day, when Edward finally gave up trying to sleep and arose from bed, Darcy was nowhere to be found. He had apparently gone riding, leaving no word of when he would be back, and Edward and Jane departed to Longbourn without having seen him.

The two occupants of the carriage were too preoccupied with their own thoughts to have any conversation; one gazing dreamily out a window, the other, inescapably introspective. There was nothing to stop Edward from thinking about the previous evening's confrontation with Darcy, nothing that could distract him from dissecting every word spoken by either of them, nothing to divert him from tasting the bile that rose equally at the memory of his own naiveté and of Darcy's response.

Edward's feelings could not be expected to improve with his return to Longbourn. It was no longer a sanctuary, no longer a place where he could be himself. His father, for the longest time the only person who completely understood him, could not fill that void now; in truth, he had not filled it for some time.

All too soon, they were at home. He had to descend the carriage, hand Jane down, and walk to the door with a smile, as if his boots did not weigh impossible tons each. He could not believe his luck when he spied one of the footmen going around the corner of the house to replenish the dwindling stocks of firewood, and lost not one moment in sending him away and, coat discarded, taking charge of the task himself. His father's questioning eyes could wait; he had no desire to face them.

Now, instead of succour, this former ally presented only the danger of his keen mind and quick perceptions. Mr Bennet, even though in all probability unable to figure out the reason for Edward's recent oppression of spirit, was undoubtedly capable of using that apparent weakness to press the fitness of his own plan for Edward's life, as if the whole mess had not been his idea to begin with. He acted as if now, turning back presented only the logistical problems of the disappearance of one personae and the appearance of another; of just changing costumes behind a curtain, as it were.

It was not so, it was so clearly not so to Edward, that his mind could not wrap around the idea of his father—of his own dear father and mentor—knowing him so little. It was only then, after the dreadful discussion with Darcy, that he saw his father's words in that light.

The crack of the wood as it splinted marked a hypnotizing rhythm, and Edward fell under its spell with practiced ease.

'Deceit,' he had called it. 'My child, you are not made to endure such a deceit throughout your whole life,' he had said. And Edward, focused on his father's other arguments, had not remarked on it, had dismissed it as so many empty words. But, had he not coped more than ably until that moment? Then again, was not that what everyone would think; every single person who would somehow come across the truth from here on out? Deceit…Was not that what Darcy thought as well?

The axe was pleasantly heavy in his arms, the task barely demanding at first. The only drawback was that his mind was free to roam, and his thoughts refused to let themselves be burned out in the concentrated heat of the activity.

The accusation smarted more than he could have thought it would, and surprisingly, it hurt as much coming from Darcy as from his father.

The axe sunk with a satisfying sound into the wood; sweat was beginning to pool on his brow and
underarms, cold air almost freezing it as soon as it sprang.

He had thought, at one time contemplating full disclosure, that Jane would not be like that, would not think that his whole life had been a disguise, an elaborate prank, but now, he could not vouch for it. He had thought Darcy, and even his father, would be sympathetic, but they had not behaved as expected. Would Jane think all his life a lie? He would not, could not, risk it.

All too soon there was a sufficiently big pile and he had to collect his coat and enter the house. His dishevelled state was good enough excuse to allow him to retire upstairs immediately, but he knew that he would have to face his father by at dinnertime.

And indeed he did, his father entertaining them with his customary dry wit. There was the observation that he was glad to have them home, that he hoped the trip had not tired them, that he expected Longbourn to be too dull indeed for two such ones as themselves, used to the company of the voluble personalities of their neighbours at Netherfield. Edward tried to answer each with an observation of his own, with a smile, but the effort tired him. It had never cost him so much to be merry.

His refuge then was the oftentimes hated day-to-day business of the estate, which had lately showed a tendency to accumulate that he could now exploit. And in that manner he kept himself busy and retired early pleading fatigue.

Such was his strategy for some days. That it was a temporary one could not be denied, for even estate matters are resolved at some point, and relatives aroused to curiosity by a normal person's sudden preoccupation with it. But Edward could not be faulted, he thought, if he left the future to the future's care for a little while; he did not want to preoccupy himself with what he would do if he was not able to bring himself out of his depression before Jane realized something was wrong with him. As it was, he could barely avoid his father's questioning looks for much longer. He did not want to think of the rest of the mess he was in.

The first news Edward had of Darcy was when Bingley, a couple of days later, came to call on Jane. Apparently a letter had come from Miss Darcy. In it, she urged her brother to spend the Yuletide in Derbyshire. Of course, Darcy was completely devoted to his sister and could not but yield to her desires.

He had, Bingley said, tried to convince him otherwise, suggesting that Darcy bring his sister to Netherfield, but Miss Darcy was by nature a very timid person, and her brother did not want to put her in an uncomfortable position. Darcy was not to be moved by any argument and was at the moment occupied with travel plans. He had, of course, vowed to call on the neighbourhood by the morrow, to take his leave before travelling to London from whence he would accompany Miss Darcy home.

Edward knew Darcy would not lie. He was equally sure that Darcy was avoiding his presence. He probably found it impossible to bring a younger, impressionable sister where she would be in contact with one such as Edward. If the damned revelation had been avoided, and there Edward blamed himself, they would all have passed the season together, as Bingley regretted aloud, all grouped in such a charming party.

Knowing when to expect him, Edward managed to be away when Darcy came to say goodbye, deciding it was for the best. Both Darcy and he needed time to recuperate their equanimity, and he guessed that Darcy had made sure Bingley brought the message as a way of arranging that very thing.

From then on, and in the absence of his more restrained friend, Bingley was at Longbourn almost
every day. Meryton's tongues wagged with such a fury, Edward thought it a wonder they did not catch fire.

Since it was him that Bingley visited, Edward could not avoid sitting in the drawing room with Jane and him. It was, he thought, more than it could be asked from anyone to endure: to be forced to spend time with two people who barely knew he existed when his mood was so dismal. The only good thing about the situation was that he was not forced to hide his feelings, as he was when his father was present.

A sudden silence made him look up at Bingley and Jane, who were both standing and looking at him in an inquiring fashion. Edward tried to remember if they had asked him anything, and when inevitably nothing came to mind, he tried to smile. He knew he had not been entirely successful when Jane frowned.

'Are you well, Edward? Perhaps we had better stay indoors today; you are very pale.'

Relieved at the reprieve, as he now could guess they wanted him to chaperone them in a walk, Edward stood and answered as brightly as he could, 'If I am pale, it is because I have stayed inside too much! No, let us go.'

Jane was not appeased and protested, insisting, 'But are you absolutely sure you are well? You seem distracted and are pale as a ghost.'

'Of course, I am well. I was only absorbed in my own thoughts; not very polite, to be sure, but hardly a sign of illness.'

'Let us walk the gardens, then. I know you do not want me to worry, but truly I would be calmer if we remained close to the house. Mr Bingley will agree with me that you do not seem well.'

Edward reply was immediate. 'I am quite sure too that he will agree, but I doubt that that has anything to do with my apparent health or lack thereof; he is quite unable to bring himself to disagree with you. I am fine, but we will do whatever the lady wants.'

Of course, Bingley had no intention of disagreeing with such an eminently reasonable thing, and he said so with such enthusiasm that Jane could not but blush and be charmingly distracted.

They walked out, Edward soon lagging behind the couple, sure that they would appreciate it, but most of all wanting to be alone with his thoughts. His mind returned always to Darcy, evading any effort on his part to distract himself with other matters, and he could not decide if bitterness or regret was the most prominent of his feelings.

He wanted to purge himself of such thoughts by the time they returned to the house. Such an exploit, of course, sounded impossible, given what had recently passed, but he was not a person to enjoy dwelling on grim thoughts and he was sure he could make himself happy again.

So distracted was he, that he had not seen the couple entering the walled wilderness that extended at one side of the house and wandered in himself not much time afterwards. He was then consequently startled out of his musings by the sight of Bingley on one knee in the soil, in front of Jane, who sat blushing on a bench. That Bingley was holding her gloved hands and even kissing them—fervently —was too much for Edward.

Alas, any hope of resolving the situation discretely was dashed, for when he turned around his boots snapped a twig; the noise called the attention of the lovers back to their surroundings and their reluctant witness. At once, Jane blushed violently and stood up. Bingley, for his part, separated
himself so quickly from Jane that he risked tripping over his own feet.

Looking away, Edward vacillated. He could not really go away now that he had been seen, but then again he could not stay either. He turned back at them and just when the silence threatened to become unsupportable, Bingley turned to Jane. They exchanged a few words that Edward could not make out (not that he had any real desire to hear them, mind), and after tipping his hat to Edward with a smile, Bingley set out in a brisk walk toward the house, while Jane went to her brother.

Edward could not help smiling, perhaps his first easy, unforced smile in some days, at the expression of unmitigated delight that he found upon his sister's face. 'So I take it,' he said, 'that I may speak of a wedding in the offing without being a dreadful teasing brother?'

She was still blushing, all smiles. 'Yes, he has proposed!'

'And I take it you have accepted. I suspected as much.' Then, seeing his sister's flushed countenance, Edward could not help gesturing to the now empty bank and adding with a smirk, 'Otherwise that would have been a dreadful breach of propriety, and I cannot see you standing it.'

Jane turned redder, if that was even possible. 'I am so happy! It is too much, I do not deserve so much happiness,' she said, embracing him.

'Nonsense! You deserve that much and more, and I do not doubt your felicity can only increase from now on. Bingley is an excellent man; I do not feel any reserve in trusting him and you with your happiness.'

'He has gone to see my father already. He is the best of men!'

'The best? And so it goes that the brother is relegated to second place easily; for I hope I have second place at the very least. But do not correct yourself, what is said is said. He is the best of men, and I could not countenance giving you up to anyone less deserving.'

'Oh Edward,' said Jane, looking at him in the eyes, 'how I wish everyone could be as happy as I am.' Her tone was wistful.

'No one can be as happy as you, Jane; we do not dare. Until we have your goodness, we cannot have your happiness.'

She looked down for a moment, and when she raised her eyes to meet Edward's again, her expression was serious. 'You can jest as much as you like; I have noted your mood lately.'

'My mood? I have been occupied with boring subjects lately, but not even you can believe that the normal business matters of the estate can bring to gentlemen a fit of sudden dejection.'

'Indeed, I am not saying anything like it. I am not claiming I know what is oppressing you.'

'Nothing is oppressing me, Jane. I have been busy, and perhaps that is making me rather uncharacteristically serious, but it is nothing your and your betrothed's merry company will not cure.'

'Your friend has gone away, too,' she said. And suddenly her eyes on his face felt too keen, too knowledgeable for Edward's tastes. He had to take a step back from her and force a smile before he felt equal to answering.

'He has, but I am sure we will see him soon.' The lie was easier to tell than he expected it to be, and Jane appeared satisfied with the answer. She threaded her arm with his and said, 'Well, then, let us
enter the house.'

When she spoke again she was looking elsewhere, and so she made it impossible for Edward to learn her expression. 'Miss Bingley was sad to see him go, though not as much as she would have been before, I think.'

'Less than before? Why would she?'

'Why? Because she now has other friends in the neighbourhood to entertain her even when one goes away, of course.'

Edward could now see the faintest of smiles hovering at the corners of her lips.

'Ah, that is perhaps understandable. You are a very good friend to her.'

His tone was unconvinced, but he did nothing to change it. He still did not know what to think of the nature of such a friendship, the characters of its members were so dissimilar. Jane was goodness personified, while Miss Bingley… the less thought about her character the better. Jane's next question made that plan impossible.

'And so, Edward, what do you think of Miss Bingley?'

Edward felt entitled to some suspicion. 'I do not think of her. What about her?'

'Well, she is to be my sister and you are my brother. I cannot help but realize that you will be thrown into company more than ever after my marriage.'

'The thought has crossed my mind,' said Edward, with a tone as level as he could make it.

'Anyone would say you do not get on so well, arguing every time you happen to be in the same room.'

Edward looked at Jane. Only her twitching lips gave away her amusement.

'And I would say they would not be wrong,' he answered, and continued in a final tone to forestall any more discussion on the matter, 'but do not worry, I will take care of comporting myself with the utmost politeness towards her in the future. She will be your family very soon, after all.'

Jane beamed, patted his arm, and only said, 'Of course you will, Edward,' before entering the house.

As it was perhaps to be expected, Mr Bennet gave not only his consent but his blessing to the marriage, and a date was settled not three months from then, in the spring equinox.

That same afternoon, Longbourn received Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley's visit. They stormed into the house and were settled in the drawing room in moments, without giving Edward time to escape. They came to congratulate Jane, and to make the final arrangement of the journey to town that was 'absolutely necessary', in Miss Bingley's own words, to outfit Jane for her future as Bingley's wife. It was apparently very important that she ordered her trousseau in town. Miss Bingley knew 'just the modiste to do Jane's beauty justice'.

The decision to travel to town forthwith was taken with barely enough time for Jane to admit that she did look forward to the outing, and without Edward's opinion being requested at all. He would not have minded it overmuch if he had not known he would be required to escort the ladies. As it was, he could not demure after his sister had expressed the wish to go. He could not find it in himself to deny her anything.
Nevertheless, the conversation bored him, and he could only follow it with half a mind. The moment he deemed them sufficiently distracted he went to the window as a step before escaping. He could not plead estate business when he knew Jane wanted him to feel part of the proceedings. She clearly had the idea that he would feel excluded if not consulted for every decision.

It followed the enumeration of every purchase that needed to be made and the discussion of every particular fabric and cut, in or out of fashion. Edward, who had grown up giving his opinion to Jane over almost all matters, including her clothes, did not hesitate to do so when he felt like it, to Miss Bingley's astonishment.

He intervened from time to time, barely turning from the window, sarcastic more often than not, entertaining himself with what was at hand; wishing himself away yet at the same time knowing he would not go until he could perceive Jane would not worry when he did so.

'Not many gentlemen understand feminine fashion and are disposed to discuss their opinions of it at length!' said Miss Bingley, surprised he had a decided opinion on the colour of his sister's gown.

'Length is a relative term. What more can be said about it after I clarified my opinion? The decision rests with Jane, and discussion would lead us nowhere; half the world does not understand the taste of the other half.'

'Well, I certainly do not think that fashion is solely a subject of personal opinion. Individual styles are all very well, but they cannot be fashionable if they do not follow some general guidelines!' And then she smiled, mischievously, and added, 'But you are right on one account, discussion would lead us nowhere; strange as it must seem to you, I happen to agree with you. A white dress would be perfect for the wedding.'

At a loss, Edward could only look away, muttering, 'Of course,' and hope all attention would soon be turned elsewhere. He did not understand Miss Bingley's sudden amiability, and consequently, could not like it.

Perceiving himself now under Jane's watchful and somewhat mocking gaze, Edward strove to behave in a spotless manner. He was, he knew, only polite, and the best he could try was to be for the most part silent. He did what he could to be unnoticed, but Miss Bingley made it almost impossible.

'Oh, Jane, do you really think so? Coquelicot is a very nice colour, and suits someone like Mrs Hurst very well, but I do not think it would favour your more delicate complexion at all. Let us ask your brother.' And Miss Bingley, raising her eyes, called Edward, who was still looking out the window, 'Mr Bennet, do you not agree with me? A pale pink, or blue, would suit your sister much better.'

Edward turned around, and stalled a little on what to say. It was disconcerting that Miss Bingley would make his task of being polite to her so easy; he was so used to being sarcastic with her that it quite robbed him of speech.

'Of course, I… Jane, perhaps you could have a ball gown of that colour, if you like it so—I'm thinking with gold trimmings it could be quite magnificent—but I agree that a sedate hue would be more flattering to your complexion.'

'You are both right,' said Jane, smiling a little. 'Of course. I just saw how lovely the colour was on Miss Bingley the other evening, and I could not help but like it. Was she not lovely, Edward?'

Miss Bingley's face turned just a shade darker, and she looked at him.
Edward threw Jane a sharp look and muttered, 'Of course.' He was a little rattled, because he had just remembered which dress had inspired the idea of the golden trimmings, and turned to the window again.

All in all, the call was concluded with impeccable manners from all parties involved, and somewhat improved amiability from some. By the next day, Edward was actively attempting to distract himself again, or at the very least to rouse himself from his well of self pity and depression. He had long ago discovered that walks, especially long and rapid ones, tended to tire him, and that so tired, his thought process could not go beyond the day to day concerns.

And so he went, early morning after early morning after troubled night. He could soon deceive himself into thinking he had forgotten all about his erstwhile friend, and he could not bring himself to regret missing his call to take leave of the neighbour. All was well, he decided. Life could go on as it had done before he even knew a Mr Darcy existed.
Chapter 13

If there was a point in time when Edward stopped regretting his last conversation with Darcy, he was not able to identify it. He simply stopped thinking about it and continued with his life. The presence of Bingley, expansive and sociable as he was, greatly helped him.

He thought about it as closing a curtain upon a part of his life that felt slightly foreign; he was nostalgic, of course, but it was a return to normality. Everything had lost some of its lustre, but he imagined it was a direct consequence of growing older. He had matured, or so he believed, and would not jump so easily into things as before.

His sister was too happy, too involved with her soon to be husband to pay more than cursory attention to him, until there was nothing to note any longer. Edward was amiable and cheerful, and would not let himself fall again. The innumerable social calls that were received and had to be reciprocated on account of the engagement proved to be providential in their distracting quality, and his increasingly heated discussions with his father consumed most of his attention.

Mr. Bennet was, for the first time in Edward’s life, maudlin. Of course, in him that humour was conveyed by increasingly weaker jokes about how his children were all going away and finally leaving him to his books. If Edward had half a hope that this would bring him a respite from his father’s insistence that he go to continental Europe and finish the ill-gotten plan of changing back to a woman, it was dashed immediately. His insistence on that point continued on, and finally, it sparked a discussion that began over the dinner table.

Bingley had, for once, left the Bennets to themselves for most of the day, and so they were only the three of them.

It began innocently enough; Jane was talking about the honeymoon trip when she said, “Miss Bingley asked that she be left at Netherfield, which Mr. Bingley thought strange enough. We had considered she would prefer to be left in London, if she did not want to accompany us.”

“I would have thought she would want to be left at Pemberley on your way north,” said Edward with an impish grin. It failed to draw from her sister anything more than a sharp look.

“Then you would be wrong, clearly. She wants to stay at Hertfordshire, and I was thinking that she does not have any friends in the neighbourhood except you two. Mrs. Hurst will stay with her, of course, but she is accustomed to having a more broad society. I will try to encourage her to seek out Charlotte Lucas, Miss King, and the Misses Goulding, but I am afraid they are not really the sort Caroline will openly welcome as her friends.” Jane was speaking in an open, no nonsense tone, but Edward felt that a request would be coming his way rather quickly.

“And what do I have to do with all that?” In his opinion—not that he would speak it openly now, as it would only hurt Jane—Miss Bingley was best left to her own devices. She was not someone who would respond well to being ‘encouraged’ towards people she felt below herself.

“Well, it has come to my notice that lately she trusts your opinion and seeks your advice on rather diverse matters. I am not asking much, just that you help me to convince her.” She paused, and Edward was about to tell her that he could do it, if it made her happy, but that he thought the scheme rather hopeless, when she bit her lips and added, “And that you call on her sometimes, while I am away.”

Edward choked on his wine, but before he could get his breath and wits together, his father spoke.
“I am afraid that, while I consider your desire to help your friend a good and commendable one, Edward will not be able to do it.”

It was his luck that he was not drinking anything anymore, for Edward felt like choking again. He understood that his father would not take kindly to any matchmaking schemes which involved him—Edward shared the feeling, in all honestly—but now they would have to explain, and what would they say?

It would have been much better he left Edward to answer. Did he fear that Edward would gleefully jump at the opportunity of courting a woman—no less a lady that practically hated him?

With a light tone, his father continued, “He has some business to take care for me and my cousin after your wedding, and now that the Treaty of Amiens has been proven to make travel safe, he is going to take his Grand Tour, after you depart with your husband.”

Jane almost dropped her cutlery in surprise. “He is? But why? Neither of you has said anything to me.”

“You were worried enough with organizing the wedding breakfast and adapting yourself to the changes in your life. I saw no need to add to it. Why? Well, that is easy enough. There is no time like the present, and considering that I am feeling older by the minute, Edward’s education must be completed sooner rather than later.”

Edward felt numb. It was, of course, a move that did not actually force him to do as his father was bidding and start wearing a dress, but it would bring the discussion out in the open if he spoke now. He would rather not do it in front of Jane, he would rather wait. And then again, no other words could come out of his mouth, so he stayed silent.

It was good that Mr. Bennet filled the sudden gap in the conversation with explanations of the travel plans, of months in Paris, and time in Italy, or Austria if Edward wanted. It distracted Jane from the latter’s pale—and he could not conceal it, scowling—face. It also spoke of his father’s having made all the arrangements already without consulting him.

Nevertheless, when a bewildered Jane left the table not much after, Mr. Bennet and Edward lost no time in going into the study. Behind closed doors, Edward felt calm again.

“You cannot force me to do it. I can very well go and come back as I am now; you could not expose me without exposing yourself!”

His father sighed, went around his desk, and sat down. He looked at Edward for a long moment before speaking. “I never thought of forcing you. I am only helping you come to the best conclusion sooner rather than later.”

“The best!” Edward could not sit, could not be still, and suddenly pacing the room was his only outlet.

Mr. Bennet’s tone was calm, and nothing could have unnerved Edward more. “You are not convincing me I am mistaken if you just repeat part of my discourse as a response, you know.”

Edward stilled in front of the desk, forcing himself to face the matter headlong. “You cannot be convinced.”

Mr. Bennet looked away. “I have received a letter. I did not want to tell you until I could be sure of it, but your uncle is ill… mortally ill. He is not expected to survive the spring.”
Edward was shocked, his anger temporarily arrested by this news.

“I am sorry to hear it,” said Edward. “I—I owe him more than I can express, and I have visited with him far too little.”

“Of course, he sends his regards to you, as well, but that is not why I was speaking to you about it. This is the moment. If Elizabeth does not appear now, then she will have to die up north, we cannot risk discovery; I could not leave my daughter in Scotland when both her guardians are dead.”

A glimmer of hope then showed itself. “Let her be dead, then. To me she is dead already.”

“Edward, you are being a child. You cannot carry on this way forever.”

Edward sneered; to be accused, now, of being childish, when it was his life on the line, his future. He felt the need to do something extremely stupid, but there was not a thing in reach that he could break; he wondered if his father had predicted his feelings. “And why the hell not? I have carried it on this long—my whole life.”

A long silence followed this, but Edward could not bring himself to regret his words. He had no desire to face his father’s look, though, and the window offered a strangely comforting respite.

When so much time had passed that Edward was about to excuse himself, Mr. Bennet finally spoke. “Do not be irrational, you cannot change who you are, of course this is the best decision.”

“Ha! That is what you keep repeating, what I have always believed; ‘I am who I am, nothing more, and nothing else’. But now I am beginning to think that I am what my father deems appropriate for me to be, at his sole whim. You cannot change me so easily.”

“What, do you want to stay here as Edward forever? Forever being chased around by your sister with unlikely subjects for you to marry? Growing more and more bitter and alone…”

Turning around with sudden insight, Edward said, “Like you, you mean, father.”

There was only a slight pause before he answered. “Of course. Only, unlike me, you will not have your two children to keep you company.”

Edward felt drained of words and so stayed silent, and from this his father seemed to grow strength to expand himself on the subject of the Tour. The dark window pane cool against his forehead, Edward resigned himself to listening.

It was best, Mr. Bennet said, if Edward travelled until the entail matter was entirely settled at the very least before disappearing at sea, and that he, once in London again, went to his aunt and uncle Gardiner as Elizabeth. He had prepared everything on those accounts, and Edward only had to decide the particulars of the trip itself. He went on for what it seemed like centuries, until Edward thought he could take no more, and asked to retire.

“Will you do it then?”

Edward looked away before answering; he could not face his father. “I will go.” And he went out, before any more questions could come his way.

He walked through the dark house as an angry ghost, the energy that had abandoned him until that moment seeking an outlet in his long strides. Jane was standing at the top of the stairs when he reached it.
“Edward, what is the matter? I heard arguing. You and my father never argue.”

He answered her while going into his room, leaving his door open. “There is always a first time for everything, I suppose.”

“But why? Is it the trip? Do you want to stay in Hertfordshire?”

He talked without turning, too preoccupied with finding his gloves. “It is… nothing. We will not argue again; you have nothing to worry about.”

“You cannot tell me that! You know I will worry regardless. You can talk to me, you know; you can tell me anything.”

Edward had to turn to her then, but he was not in the mood for coming up with a lie. He held her gaze and tried to make his tone even. “But it is not important. And the matter is, in any case, resolved.”

Jane then looked away, and her tone was surprisingly bitter when she said, “You always treat me like I am too simple to understand what worries you. Both of you do.”

Edward flinched and looked down. “I do not—I will not argue the point with you now. I was about to go out, I will just be on my way.”

“In the middle of the night!”

“In the middle of the night. I spent the day cooped up; I will not be able to sleep unless I expend my excess energy. Do not worry, I carry a pistol.” And having located his gloves on a low stool, he kissed her cheek quickly, and he went out.

He saddled his stallion himself, and he rode him like the devil. The night was, of course, frigid, and there was little moonlight. He had to stop in a copse when he began to think that if he killed himself in a riding accident, in light of their last conversation, Jane might very well think he had done so in purpose.

After jumping down and tying the horse to a tree, there was nothing left for him to do but pace. And think. How he was tired of it. Not for the first time, he wished he had been born male. He wished… How different his life would be if his mother had survived; perhaps he would have a younger brother. Or a brother of his own age, had his twin lived.

He had always shied away from thinking how his life would have been if he had been raised as Elizabeth, but he could no longer hide from it.

It was initially unthinkable. He, a lady? He, netting purses? He, demurely lowering his eyes and blushing at polite praise? Sitting down, hands in his lap, maidenly waiting to be asked to dance? The idea was preposterous; he almost wanted to laugh!

Then again, if he had been raised to it, perhaps it would not have been so bad. He would be used to it, the idea of being gentleman unthinkable. He smiled bitterly at the night.

He would have, of course, a completely different relationship with every person he had met. No secrets kept from Jane, of course—that did not sound half bad. He would not be his father’s favourite; his brother would hold that position. At that moment he could not bring himself to think he would regret it; his father’s favouritism had not brought him much happiness lately. Bingley would have been perhaps only his sister’s betrothed, later a brother. Darcy… they would have never been friends; no amount of self delusion could convince him otherwise.
He let himself lean on the rough bark of a tree, hands in his great coat pockets.

Gentlemen and ladies were not friends, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances, and he was not thinking, anyway, of being that kind of friend, not even to Darcy. What kind of friend did he want to be with Darcy? They were not... it was not the same kind of friendship he had with Bingley, that much he knew.

He scoffed at himself. There was nothing mysterious in their friendship. He trusted Darcy more than he trusted Bingley because his character was steadier. He respected his mind more; he found him more interesting, the intricacy of his character more elusive. He could argue with Darcy, and not with Bingley, because the latter hated disputes and thought any kind of disagreement a dispute, and consequently, he could talk to Darcy more. It was no more than that, he was sure, but it was more than he could have expected of his relationship with Darcy if he was a woman.

He sighed and let himself slide into a crouching position against the tree. God, he was cold.

He was also not thinking matters through. His uncle was dying. How cold of his father to think of it only as an added problem to be solved; how like his father was to do that, too, to try to forgo grieving altogether. Not that even he would be able, but he would not show weakness to anyone, not even his own son. Edward could not imagine his father crying. Nor he himself, for that matter. He could very well imagine Jane doing it, though not in public of course, and not often. He could even remember having consoled her on an occasion or two.

He was being selfish. He knew his father was right; as long as he kept living like that, he ran the risk of discovery. He did not want to know the legal consequences of this kind of charade. He had the responsibility of helping his father take care of the family, he knew, and if he had to put on a dress the rest of his life to do so, well, so be it. How grieved would Jane be if both father and sibling were turned to the gallows? He would do it, he would do his duty.

Darcy would be proud, he thought, sardonically, that I am finally doing my duty, as a man. Is not that what he considers most important?

But it did no good to try to deceive himself; he did wish Darcy were proud of him, even as he knew it could not be so.

He breathed deeply, trying to get past the knot in his throat; the urge to rage against fate suddenly overwhelming again. He looked up to the indifferent sky through the bare branches, not seeing it. How he wished someone—Darcy—would tell him what to do; but then again, that was what his father was doing, was it not? What he wanted was someone to tell him that he should defy his father, but no one would do so; even he himself thought that he should heed his orders and follow his plan.

He was what he was, of course, physically as well as mentally, but while he could learn to hide what he thought, there was no hope of doing so with his body, not for ever. He had to be responsible; he had to do as he must.

The horse whinnied and pushed against his shoulder.

“Yes, yes, it is cold; we are going.”

He made his way back with more care than speed, the warmth of his bed beckoning him, sleep’s oblivion agreeably near.

It was only a few days after that when he was called to attend his sister to London and back.

The whole party was invited to stay at the Hursts’, and Edward had to accept, being that there was
no polite way to decline. It was not, he had to admit to himself, that the hostess made him feel it—Mrs. Hurst was all that was amiable to him now—but he could not be comfortable.

Bingley took care of taking him out when he could, and when he was too busy to do so, Jane commanded him to follow them while they shopped. Even knowing such a sisterly tyranny was well meant, Edward found it galling.

But shopping was easy enough when one did not care much for the purchases being made, and he resigned himself to making some noises every time Jane or Miss Bingley asked for his opinion, and keeping a steady amount of chatter going. It was comfortably dull.

Walking down the streets, Edward let himself fall behind the ladies. He could not stop himself from looking around for someone he knew could not be there. He lingered in the windows of the shops looking inside when he was in the street and outside when he was waiting for purchases to be decided upon.

“Mr. Bennet,” asked Miss Bingley constantly, or at least that was what it seemed to Edward, “what do you think?”

“Decisions, decisions…” said Edward once, sarcasm seeping into his voice despite his attempts to moderate it. “Should my sister go with crude or white kid gloves? I see it is of momentous importance.”

Jane shot him a severe look, but Miss Bingley did not seem to take offence, and he would have bet that she had not heard him, had he not seen her heightened colour.

Bingley tried to interest him in some sport, and visiting some clubs, and given his friend’s kindly intentions, he could not but agree. Improving his fencing was the only thing that he was able to muster much enthusiasm for, and thus they went to Angelo’s three times in as many days while they stayed in London. They only found someone they knew there on their third visit.

It was, to Edward’s considerable dissatisfaction, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Did the man not have duties? He wondered. The gentleman did not appear to note anything amiss in Edward’s behaviour, and furthermore, seemed to like his company, or perhaps Bingley’s, or both, because after some pleasantries were exchanged he invited them to dine with him at White’s. Edward wanted to make some excuse to avoid it, but of course, Bingley was too agreeable to even lose any time considering it, and he agreed to it at once. It was indeed ironic, but Edward could now find in himself a definite sympathy with Darcy’s position in the early moments of their acquaintance, or better yet, knowing Bingley, in any moment those two gentlemen made new acquaintances together.

Being that there was no other choice, Edward smiled and expressed looking forward to the evening. He still had yet to enter White’s, and Darcy’s cousin was nothing if not entertaining, despite any other faults he may or may not have.

He found White’s much like Brook’s, observing even some of the same gentlemen he had seen in the other club. He looked around, slightly on edge, but no one paid any attention to him, so he quickly stopped paying any attention to them.

The colonel was waiting for them at their table, and showed an inordinate pleasure in their coming, taking into account that they were expected. Though Edward was tempted to suspect design in his actions—given that Darcy knew he had met his cousin, and that Edward had not had a word from him since the fateful last night at Netherfield—it was soon obvious that the colonel was merely a very agreeable man who liked company and found himself with an empty evening. He barely mentioned his cousin at all, for all that he talked incessantly, and Edward had no time to feel angry at
his own disappointment.

It was Bingley who finally asked, after the port had been passed around.

“Say, Fitzwilliam, have you heard of your cousin? I’m quite sure I was the last one to write, some
two weeks ago, and he has yet to respond to me. It is nothing like him.”

Edward tried his hardest to appear uninterested. He had no windows within easy reach, and looking
fixedly at the wood panelling would have appeared bizarre, so he took a long drink from his port
glass, and hoped no one would pay him any mind.

“I am afraid I have not, though I cannot report a similar situation. I think I am in his debt, but I have
no reason to write to him presently. I am sure you can reach him at Pemberley with an express if it is
a matter of importance.”

“Of course, of course; I wondered if perhaps he was away for business and thus had yet to read
mine.”

And that was that. No other word was spoken of him during the whole evening, leaving Edward
drained. He had expected a more challenging experience, and he found he could hear his name with
adequate equanimity. He was profoundly curious about how Darcy was faring, but that was natural
for someone he still considered his friend, and he thought the feeling would pass with time.

Returning to Longbourn, even though it meant facing his father, was a relief. He found he had tired
of city life.

Even though Bingley was, even then, increasingly besotted with Jane, he proved to be a good friend
to Edward. They spent at least a couple of hours of every day in each other’s company going out, or
practicing diverse sports. Edward could not help feeling there was something missing in those
encounters, and soon enough reached the conclusion that the thing Darcy brought to them, that
Bingley was incapable of, was competition. And he refused to think further on the matter.

On one such an occasion they went out shooting on Netherfield’s lands with some local men, a week
before the wedding. Bingley had, like always, killed twice as many birds as everybody else, and now
hung back, giving the others their chance. Or at least that was what it seemed at first to Edward, who
was observing him. Bingley stood to one side, a pleasant smile in his lips and a faraway look in his
eyes. With a sudden inkling of what he could be thinking of, Edward approached him.

“What, Bingley, already tired of shooting, or are you missing my sister?”

Bingley started and looked over to him with a guilty smile. “The latter, my friend; I see I am an open
book around you.”

“That you are, though I do not think it is anything to be ashamed of. Everyone is a fool when in love,
do you not think so?”

“Everyone a fool but you, you would say,” said Bingley smiling broadly, “I would like to see you
suffering from a similar condition.”

“A fool? I believe I am not so presumptuous as to think I am never a fool. On the contrary, I can
easily think myself a Jester.”

“Ah, a magnificent dodge, my friend, but I am no fool, and I will enjoy seeing you in love very
well.”
Edward could not avoid making a face at that. “You and my sister both are very insistent on that point. What is it about people about to get married?”

“Ah, everyone thinks young men ought to fall in love.” Bingley’s eyes were crinkled with suppressed laughter.

“That cannot be true. Surely not all young men fall in love. I will not ask for your experiences, as I know you cannot possibly answer me, but have you ever seen Darcy in love?” As soon as he said it he wanted to shake himself; did every subject have to end up on Darcy?

“Well, Darcy is a special case, of course. I have never seen him make a fool out of himself for it, but I do think he has been infatuated before.”

“Darcy, infatuated? With whom?” Edward was startled; he had never considered it, though of course it was silly to think it outside of the realm of possibilities.

“So many…” teased Bingley.

Edward startled. “You cannot be serious!”

“And I am not, but I am also not at my leisure to unlock the vast Darcy’s secrets for you, I am afraid.” Bingley was smiling, but Edward knew it was true; Darcy would not like to be discussed in that manner.

“I would not be interested in knowing them in any case, if there are indeed secrets,” said Edward, who felt unequal to determine why he was so curious, and in any case did not want to indulge his own feelings in the matter; but he was sure Bingley was laughing at him anyway, and so he continued, “Well, have I succeeded in distracting you from that crippling longing that makes you unable to shoot?”

Then it was Bingley’s turn to make a face, but he only muttered, “You will understand me one day.”

Edward’s mind had stayed doggedly on another subject and he found he did not care if he indeed ever understood Bingley on that matter. “Has Darcy answered your letters?”

Bingley did not appear surprised by the inquiry. “He has, at last. He apologized, too, for the delay.”

Edward made a show of inspecting his weapon, and spoke in as even a tone as he could make it. “Is he coming, to the wedding?”

Someone called out for Bingley, a few yards away, and he hurriedly got out, “I did not insist, but he said he would make the attempt to settle his matters in time to come,” before walking over to the group of men that were discussing where to head next.

Edward only stared at his back, taking a moment to compose himself; the subject made more of an impression on him than he wanted to admit, to himself or even more still, to others. He had thought Darcy would stay away; the prospect of having to face him so soon unsettled him.

He had only a few days to prepare himself, and he did not quite manage. The morning came, and even though he found himself somewhat busy, particularly carrying orders to the housekeeper for Jane, and checking for her that all was as it was expected, and where it was expected to be, he could not avoid a feeling of expectancy that grew as the hour to go to the church came near. He still had not settled satisfactorily the matter of how to act. He thought he had better follow Darcy’s lead, but he could not think how that would be.
The bridal party was not very large, of course, and so he realized soon enough upon arriving that Darcy was not among them. He did not know which of his feelings was greater, his disappointment or his relief. The ceremony passed in a haze of both, part of him thinking that it was surprisingly cowardly of Darcy to not show up in the end, and part defending him still: if not even Edward could imagine how to act, how could Darcy be expected to?

Edward was coming out of the church when he saw him, and he could only stare, incomprehensibly. He must have sat at the back, he thought. He must have waited until we were all inside to enter, he reasoned, and still could not get past the fact that Darcy was there, no twenty paces from where Edward now stood.

Darcy’s back was to him, and he wondered at his own quickness at knowing him anyway. How familiar was his figure! How could Darcy feel so to him and at the same time so much a stranger, Edward could not fathom.

“Mr. Darcy has arrived, then,” said a voice at his side, and Edward realized that he had been staring for what must be an inappropriately long time, and that Miss Bingley had undoubtedly observed it, as he was escorting her.

“Yes, I thought… I thought I may have gone mad. I did not know he was coming.” His tone was not calm, and that would not do at all.

“My brother is so distracted with his wife, he must have forgotten to tell you. But I myself thought he must have changed his mind, when he did not arrive yesterday, as his letter said he would.”

Edward shook his head. “I… perhaps he told me, and I forgot; I have been distracted, as well.” He only realized his mistake when he turned to her, wrenching again his gaze from Darcy’s figure. She had been looking to him, and was now blushing, without turning away.

He could not face her eyes, and so turned ahead, and started walking again. “Come, they will go ahead without us if we do not hurry.”

Darcy was nowhere in sight, and Edward thought he must have gone ahead to Longbourn. He thought he managed to hand Miss Bingley into her carriage passably well, but his hands trembled on his horse’s reins when he mounted, making the animal skitter nervously.

He wished he could get lost on the way, but he thought Jane might note it and worry. The temptation followed him all the way into the house.

Edward could not eat, he could barely speak. He thought he might have offended some of his neighbours with his boorish behaviour, but he could only look for Darcy, and once he found him, talking with Mr. Bennet, he could only concentrate on maintaining his gaze away from him.

He wondered if he should greet him and recoiled from the idea of imposing on him. He had just convinced himself that he should, even if it would have to be done in front of his father, when he looked again, and they were no longer together. He had barely decided how he should feel about it—disappointed—when he turned and found Darcy in front of him.

His heart jumped, and he raised his eyes to meet Darcy’s. Darcy’s gaze gave nothing away.

“Darcy!” Edward did not know how to speak, what to say, what to do. He extended his hand to shake his.

Darcy hesitated briefly and said, “Mr. Bennet.” His voice was level, and he finally extended his.
Bare skin met bare skin, and Edward did not know why, but he blushed violently. He never had before. Vaguely, he thought it was because Darcy knew, and that he could imagine how awkward it was for Darcy, but then again, Darcy was not blushing.

The warm contact lasted for a brief moment and Edward dropped his eyes when Darcy dropped his hand. When Darcy did not speak again, he raised them again and said, “Your sister is in good health, I trust?”

“She is in excellent health, thank you.”

“Was the weather during your journey as dreadful as it was here in Hertfordshire?”

“Not at all, the journey was very pleasant.”

“I am glad,” said Edward, desperately thinking what to say next, and coming up with nothing. The silence was dreadful. “I am glad, you know,” he said, finally, “that you could come.”

“Bingley has been my friend for a very long time; I could not have missed it.”

Edward could not read his tone, and locked his gaze with his. “You are a very good friend.”

It was Darcy who looked down then. “... surely I cannot say. It is for my friends to decide.”

A pain blossomed in his chest and made Edward suck in a breath, and he struggled to keep his tone even. “We may ask Bingley to settle it, but I am sure he considers you a very good friend.”

Darcy startled a little and said, “That is not... that is, Bingley is a very easy person, and we have never had a dispute, I do not doubt he would say so. You, on the other hand, have more things to complain about.” Darcy met his eyes, and Edward fancied that perhaps he was smiling, a very little.

He could not avoid smiling in response, suddenly light, the pain easing as quickly as it had appeared. “I am sure I do not know what you are talking about; I never complain.”

Darcy smiled more fully then, and said, “That is settled, then.”

Edward had to recollect himself, as he thought he may have been staring, and said, “How long do you expect to stay at Netherfield?”

“No more than a day, to be sure, my sister is still waiting for me at Pemberley.”

“You must hate all this flitting across the country,” observed Edward, between curious and hurt that he would not be staying longer.

“A little, but travelling by myself gives me time to think.”

“Of course, because you do so little when you are settled on a place,” said Edward, dryly.

“I surely am not to blame because I cannot be considered the rashest of my friends!” answered Darcy in good humour before asking him, “And you, what do you plan to do now that your sister will be away?”

“My father has arranged for me to go to the Continent.” Edward wanted to say more, but did not quite know how.

Darcy looked away. “That is unfortunate, then; we will not see each other for very many months.”
“I can write,” Edward said at last, because he did not know how to answer that. They would not see each other ever again, in a sense.

Darcy looked away. He seemed to be struggling with himself for a moment, and then said, “I do not doubt it, I’m sure you write charmingly.”

Edward did not quite know how to answer. What did that mean? Would Darcy prefer that he did not write to him? If so, he should not insist. But then, it was not clear, he had not been clear when offering.

“My sister thinks so; but then, you know Jane, she is incapable of thinking less of me.” He hesitated for a moment more, and concentrating his attention on his sleeve, added, “I could write to you, if you would be interested in my impressions of the Continent.”

There was a long silence, and Edward felt it responsibility to speak, to dismiss his own offer, even though he felt like choking on the words. He straightened himself. “That is, I…”

But then Darcy raised his eyes to meet Edward’s, and interrupted him, saying seriously, “Do; I have found myself missing our talks these past months.”

And then Bingley called him away to introduce him to someone, and they did not talk again until they took their leave.
Leaning over the railing of the ship, Edward contemplated the horizon. The wind, that just a short while ago had roared and fussed and kept them ashore, was now pleasantly gentle, barely ruffling Edward’s hair. The water was of the darkest blue, white peaks of foam cresting like chalk cliffs against the ship. He was facing away from the retreating shore, but in his mind, its whiteness was likened to it nonetheless.

It was odd, to be travelling at last. His return to England seemed far away and the intervening months alone on the Continent frightfully immediate. He wondered what his father thought of him now—whether he thought Edward could fend for himself or not. He was inclined to think he did, otherwise he would not have sent him, but a nagging doubt remained. He was almost convinced that his father wanted the matter settled soon because he feared discovery, and that he only deceived himself into thinking it was all in Edward’s best interest. It was, after all, the argument that had convinced him he should obey.

How odd his father was, thought Edward, suddenly wicked. Most gentlemen sent their sons to the Continent and said to them ‘Go, enjoy, and educate yourself, and come back a man’. Mr. Bennet, instead—with a strained smile, Edward lamented that he had not thought of it sooner, though he doubted he would have relented long enough to tell his father. There had been a distinct coldness between them, those last days; Edward barely maintaining a civil façade in front of the servants and neighbours.

His father had kept an understanding, pitying expression on his face since the evening Edward had agreed to his plans, and that infuriated him more. He acted as if Edward was sulking; as if he was humouring a child! Could anything be more insulting?

Edward pressed the whole palm of his hand onto his face, roughly rubbing his eyes in frustration. Taking a deep breath, he looked down into the dark water again.

Travelling across the sea was so amazing and new, Edward did not tire of contemplating his surroundings. It was a more than welcome distraction. He did not want to think more about his father.

The very fact of having water below and as far the eye could see all around was awe inspiring, humbling. He, though hating to be a coward, could not help wish he could have taken Darcy’s offered swimming lessons. But of course, he could not; Darcy’s shock would have been more than great.

His smirk this time was involuntary. It was then that a voice to his right startled him.

“It’s delightful out here, is it not?”

He recognized the girl from before; he had seen her boarding with a tradesman, who Edward supposed, due to their similar features, to be her father, and an older woman. She seemed agreeable enough, smiling up at him, but they had not been introduced, and Edward was at a loss how to behave. He smiled slightly and said, “Indeed,” before turning back to the sea.

He expected her to realize the inappropriateness of their situation, but she did not seem bothered in the least. On the contrary, she went to him and leaned by his side, imitating his previous position with both elbows on the railing. It looked very odd on a lady, but then, she was probably no older than fifteen, hardly more than a girl.
“I cannot convince Mrs. Eyre that it is nice out here. The motion of the boat does not agree with her in the least. I felt a little sick at first, but coming up here made me feel better again.”

Edward had been enjoying his solitude, quite a new experience for him, but a conversation appeared unavoidable now.

Observing her a little better, he thought that the girl was probably not out yet. He did not really know if that made matters worse or better. Turning to look at her once again, he smiled, bowed, and said, “I am afraid we have not been introduced. With your pardon, I am Edward Bennet.”

The girl then blushed profusely and stumbled through a, “Oh, I am sorry, I should not have talked to you like this,” before falling silent again.

Edward’s smile almost froze, but he forced himself to be agreeable. Indeed she should have not. He had occasion to lament she was not a boy—everything would have been straight forward easiness in that case—until he remembered he did not want to be interrupted. He had been managing very well on his own.

With nothing else to do, Edward kept his smile, and wishing the girl would just go away, bowed again, in what he hoped was a mixture of apology and goodbye. He could not turn around until she went, and she did not seemed inclined to do so. In fact, despite turning even redder, she did a hasty curtsey and spoke again.

“I am so sorry. That was very rude of me. I am Amelia Heart.”

That, she seemed to think, was enough of the niceties, and she turned to the sea again. When she spoke again, Edward held back a sigh and imitated her.

“I do love the sea. My father means for us to go to America one day soon, to oversee his business there. Mrs. Eyre is already dreading it, but I think I will love the trip.”

“I have never been at sea before, but as you say, I find it delightful.”

“Never? How strange! Why, I have been to Brighton a dozen times at least, and I’m not yet fifteen!”

Edward looked at his hands on the railing while she spoke, amused but trying to think of a way to end the conversation without offending her. He wondered what Darcy would say, but could not imagine it.

“How pleasing for you,” he observed, trying to keep a serious tone and failing miserably, “that you love the sea so very much, then.”

“Oh, very,” and there was not a trace of irony to be found in her tone, “though Mrs. Eyre says that it is no way to raise a lady, always coming and going, never settling down.”

“Well, it is said that travel is a great educator. Myself, I am sent to the Continent for that very same reason.”

“My father says that as well, but Mrs. Eyre, though she does not say anything to him, disagrees.” And then her tone took a decidedly didactic turn, and Edward guessed she was imitating her governess. “Not all things that are adequate for gentlemen are so for ladies.”

“And you, what do you think?” In his curiosity, Edward could almost forget that he should be annoyed at her presence.
“Oh, I surely do not know,” she said, breezily, “and it just as surely does not matter. I will accompany my father whether Mrs. Eyre is right or not. And she will come, too.”

“That is sad for Mrs. Eyre, if she hates travelling so very much.”

The girl bristled. “Well, she is being paid for her troubles.”

Edward could not help frowning, and looked away to hide it. He had to remind himself that she was just a child.

“Indeed, I did not mean anything by it.” Looking around for something to distract her with, he said, “the dozen times to Brighton aside, do you know the Continent? I could surely use some advice.”

Her eyes brightened. “Oh, no, this is my first time coming to the Continent as well! But I have read The Italian, and I cannot wait to go there.” In her mounting excitement, the rapidity of her words made almost impossible to discern her meaning. “Oh, papa said that we cannot go yet, and that France is even prettier. I am sure he says it to placate me, and I think the French must be very uncivilised. I am quite terrified of finding Napoleon, even though I heard that he was not very intimidating in person. Would you not be? Papa said that I should be very happy we can enter France now, but I do so want to go to Naples, and he said that perhaps after his business is concluded, if I am very good and if Mrs. Eyre does not have to go even once to ask him to convince me to learn my lesson, he would take me. But Mrs. Eyre is so odious, and I am sure she would go to him only to spite me, and make the trip shorter.”

With a sudden inkling about the reason for Naples’ attraction*, Edward looked away to hide the widening of his smile. “Is she so terrible? Would she make a good Marquesa?”

“Oh no, she is nothing like that. She is so very serious all the time.”

“I see, she sounds positively unromantic.”

The girl seemed not to notice his tone. “And Italy is so mysterious, and I so long to meet real Italian people.”

Edward had then to bite his lip to avoid the laughter he felt bubbling up.

“Indeed, though the real Italy is perhaps not half as mysterious as Mrs. Radcliffe’s. Should I feel offended on behalf of our old England, seeing that you have discounted all the English noblemen in your mind and are clearly hoping you would meet a Vivaldi?”

She went as red as her short cloak and protested; to keep peace, Edward eventually relented and accepted that she was looking for no such a thing.

Nonetheless, it was too easy to tease her. “Anyway, I do not think it would be a good idea to extract advice from such a dreadful tale; I think it would prejudice oneself against the place excessively, do you not agree? It could make one terribly afraid of visiting the Monasteries, for example, and only think of the picturesque sights one would miss!”

Embracing the change of topic, and quite possibly thinking he was in earnest, the girl said, “Mrs. Eyre is making me read many travel guides…” but before she could pass along the indubitable priceless knowledge contained therein, she was interrupted by the same lady she had just named.

“Amelia!” was the disturbed cry that stopped their conversation and made them turn.

And then, “Miss Heart! I was so worried; I could not find you anywhere!”
“I was here all this time,” said her pupil, recklessly. “Enjoying the fresh air.”

Edward could not help cringing a little. Regardless of his lack of responsibility over the current situation, it did not look good at all. The older woman almost managed to look fierce, despite looking pale and almost greenish, and Edward felt chastised, just imagining what she must be thinking of him.

“I cannot see what there is to enjoy, with this awful wind incessantly rocking the floor and mussing up everything; just look at your hair! And you know you should not have stood here, ‘enjoying the fresh air’ or at least not alone.”

Mrs. Eyre, even as she spoke, was not looking at Amelia’s hair, but at Edward, eyeing him up and down, as if he was a calf ready for slaughtering, or perhaps a wolf coming to slaughter her calf. Neither of the comparisons that occurred to him appealed in the slightest.

“It is called a deck, not ‘floor’,“ said Amelia.

“Do not sulk, dear, and come along, a deck is not a suitable place for a lady.” And she hurried the girl away, leaving Edward open-mouthed, wondering if anyone had ever been as rude to him before.

They arrived at Calais in short order, and Edward found that the people he encountered there were very similar to those in London. Calais, or at least the places in Calais where he had been directed to, was teeming with Englishmen. He avoided the Hotel d’Angleterre purposely, but found that the Silver Lion was as full of his countrymen as all other reputable inns; he did not find their presence distasteful enough, however, to drive him to lodge in a more uncomfortable place.

Nevertheless, he was anxious to leave his country behind. He longed to forget what he was doing in the Continent, to forget he was Edward, that he was not Edward, that he was English.

The result was that he avoided the common room as much as possible, only dining there and leaving immediately afterwards. He practiced his French with the lowly shopkeepers and common people on the street. He suspected they overpriced his purchases and laughed at his accent, but they were refreshingly French and the sights were quite lovely.

In Paris, his activities made it unavoidable that he cross paths with English gentlemen, and he finally gave up on his reluctance because he did want to continue his training at the Académie d’Armes. He discovered that his countrymen, while they were more outspoken with women, while they got drunk more often, while they were louder at inns and more reckless with their horses, did not become especially interested in other English gentlemen themselves. ‘Who would have thought it,’ Edward mused, ‘I am not unique after all.’

And so it happened that, some weeks into his stay, when he had grown accustomed to his anonymity, someone approached him.

He was resting against the wall of the Académie, having just endured a particularly tiring bout with his instructor. He had his forehead against the dark panelled wood, his breath slowly returning to its normal cadence, and he did not hear the words at first. Turning around, Edward had a vague impression that his instructor was repeating himself.

“Monsieur Bennet, can I trouble you for a moment? La Comtesse showed some interest in me introducing you to her.”

Edward looked up, astonished, and stopped drying the sweat on his forehead; he wondered if he had understood correctly, but his French was not bad enough to consider it for too long. What was that
about? He had no interest in being introduced to anyone. So far he had managed to enjoy his time quite well on his own. For a normally gregarious person, he found that solitude, even if tended to make him dwell on the unfairness of his life, agreed with him. His doubt must have showed, because the instructor seemed scandalized; or perhaps that had been his reaction to the situation all along, and Edward had only just noticed.

He was considering how to phrase a polite rejection, and wondering whether that was possible, when the man spoke again. “Monsieur Bennet, la Comtesse is waiting. You must not worry about your appearance, she has seen much worse.”

Several answers sprang to his mind at this, but Edward realized they would be neither polite nor advisable, not in the least because he was not quite sure of how to phrase them in French. And then, why not meet la Comtesse?

Decided, he looked around towards the site the man had been motioning to. He did not quite know what he had expected, but whatever that was, la Comtesse was not it. Tall, taller than him, and slim, she wore a dress that fell somewhere between being too revealing and almost modest enough. And she was beautiful. And older—older than Darcy, that is. He did not know when he had begun to measure things by their relationship to Darcy, but there it was.

She was looking at him, and though she was too far away to tell for certain, he felt that she was raising a brow in arch questioning.

“Of course, I am sorry for the delay; introduce me.” He considered asking whether she had mentioned why she wanted the introduction, but thought perhaps that would be impolite, or unpolished, or something like that; and he doubted she had told the man.

They walked together to where she stood, and up close, Edward began to regret his decision; she had the sharpest eyes, he could already see that making the acquaintance was a very bad idea.

“Comtesse of Bonnezac, I present you Monsieur Edward Bennet, of Longbourn, Hertfordshire.” The man butchered the county’s pronunciation, of course, and Edward could not help flinching. He had never felt quite so ungainly and clumsy as then, when trying to bow graciously over the lady’s hand. He could only feel grateful for the gloves, which hid the fact his hands were sweating.

At another nod from her, the man bowed and retired. Hating the silence that was sure to swallow them and trying to be brisk without being impolite, Edward met the lady’s gaze and said, “Can I ask, my lady, why you asked for the introduction?”

Her smile, that until that moment had been more a hint than anything, widened. “Very impatient, the English, I see.” Her French was clearer than the instructor’s.

“I have never heard it said so, but I do have it on good authority we do not have any subtlety at all.”

“Are you accusing the French of being too oblique?”

“I would never… at least not while in France.”

She laughed, the sound lilting and pleasing, but did not respond.

“I will own,” said Edward, “to impatience being one of my personal attributes, if you would consent to gratify it.”

“Well, when you ask so nicely, how can I not? I was looking for a sparring partner, and you were the only one available.”
If Edward thought her disingenuous, it was quickly confirmed. They were ridiculously mismatched; she was by far the more skilled fencer.

She moved with an almost feline grace, compensating for his errors, making it more of a dance than a fight. The dress appeared not to hinder her at all, though Edward wondered how that could be.

At the end of the encounter, he could still not imagine the real reason for her requesting it. She thanked him for his time, expressed the desire of repeating the experience, took leave of him quite nicely, and showed no other intentions at all.

In walking to his rooms he convinced himself that he had been mistaken. Perhaps the lady had simply wanted someone to spar with. Perhaps she did not mind tutoring someone if it meant that her time was well occupied.

The third time they met at the Académie, and she asked him to spar with her, he started to feel suspicious again. It could be mere chance that they found themselves there together, but he knew that she asked for him even when there were people with her level of ability free at the time. What her ulterior motives could be was still a mystery, of course. It would not do to suspect something very untoward—perhaps she was curious about England.

He did enjoy her company. She could be wickedly impertinent, and knew many of the regulars; she beat many of them. And so he managed to avoid inquiring after her intentions until a month after their first encounter, when she extended her card to him and expressed the desire he would call on her.

He was leaning against the wall, winded after an especially spirited match that she had, as usual, won. He looked up at her, raising a brow, and asked, “My lady wants to spar with me at her house, then?” He knew it was not so, but wanted to force her to admit it aloud.

“Of course not; the Count wants to meet you,” she said, not a hair out of place, nothing in her tone except polite interest.

He frowned and looked away; he really did not know what to make of her. And of course, when the time came a couple of days later, he went.

The Count was not at home, and though he was half expecting, half dreading it, he could not help but ask, “Should I come back another day?”

“He is attending to some matters in his county; he will not be back this month at the least. Stay, I have called for refreshments,” she said. He could not guess her mood—he hated that listening French, he hardly recognized anything but the most obvious of tones. He did not ask why the Count had asked to meet him and gone away when he was expected. It could very well be that he had been forced to leave by circumstances beyond his control, or that the Countess had invented his desire in the first place. Neither answer would change the situation he was in, in any case.

She did not appear to mind the situation, and Edward wondered if he was not braving waters he would not be able to manage unscathed; or at least, undiscovered. He decided to leave it to her to direct the conversation, and waited for her to begin. There was a long silence, and when the maid came in to lay the food, he took advantage of the Comtesse’s distraction to get up and go to the window. As always, this reminded him of someone else, but he had no time to dwell on it. The maid went away and she finally spoke.

“Are you angry with me? Is this too awkward for you?”
“Angry?” He turned as he said it, and he did not try to hide the surprise in his voice. It had not occurred to him to be angry; awkward—now, that was another matter altogether. He realized suddenly that he had not felt angry in a while; he had not thought of his dilemma or his father in days.

She laughed softly again. He wondered why her laughter never felt insulting, although she was forever laughing at him. There was something in her manner…

“Not angry, then, I see,”—she did not move her eyes from him and he had to force himself to not deviate his gaze to the wall behind her—“but awkward. Why awkward, Mr. Bennet? We are friends, are we not?”

He could count his friends with one hand and still have fingers to hold a cup of tea. “I see you have not heard; more than lack of finesse, awkwardness is an English staple. Almost a national pastime, really.”

“You are avoiding my questions. I thought the English were direct.”

“I will be direct if you will be, as well. Did the Count really want to meet me?”

“I could be angry myself, now, Mr. Bennet; I do not lie.” She made a pause then, and said, “But I would be lying by omission if I would not say now that his absence does not bother me in the least. Will you tell me why it bothers you?”

She appeared sincere, but the last had been said with a playful smile, and Edward feared that his tolerance for being laughed at was very close to disappearing. She was acting as if he was a child, and he failed at repressing the annoyance in his tone. “I would thank you, my lady, if you were not…”—he stopped, bit his lip in thought and then, frustrated at her widening smile, said at last in English, knowing she would not understand him—“so bloody facetious about it.” Returning to French, he added, “You know perfectly well why.”

“That sounded quite bad!” she said, delighted. “You will have to teach me what it means and how to pronounce it!”

Edward could not help laughing himself; she was incorrigible. “I will do no such a thing. I am awkward because…” He decided to say it, what was there to lose? “In England, I would have never been invited by a married lady to call on her.”

“Ah, that,” she said, her smile not leaving her face for a second. “Do not worry, Bennet, you are too young for me. And I have yet to cuckold the Count with any man. See? I can be direct. I… should have been more straightforward before now, I know. You remind me of someone I used to know.”

“Someone?”

“A friend; a good English friend.”

“Ah, it is the nationality then? You must be reminded of him at the Académie all the time.”

She bit her lower lip and looked away. “It is not simply that. She could have been your sister, if not in looks, then in personality.”

Edward coloured. “I suppose I should feel it an insult to my masculinity.”

She let out a short laugh at that. “I certainly hope not! You would not be you if you did! Particular personalities… are not really confined to the sexes, do not think so?”
“I certainly hope not,” he echoed her and turned again to the window, not knowing if he should feel relieved or not.

“Monsieur Bennet, will you let all this food go to waste? What is it on the street that is so interesting?”

He moved to the chair, smiling, remembering himself asking a similar question.

“You have never told me of any friends, Mr. Bennet, and I have told you about one already.”

“So, I have to tell you they exist? I have… perhaps one friend.”

“Only one friend in the entire world?” she asked, sounding surprised.

Edward shrugged. “If we are not counting family. I do not call all of my acquaintances my friends.”

“Oh, now I see why I do not rate as one. You must comprehend a great deal into it. And the ‘perhaps’ was due to… what?”

“I would say that a more thorough mutual knowledge should be achieved. The perhaps is due to…”

“To…?”

“Perhaps I do not want to share to what the ‘perhaps’ is due to,” answered Edward finally, trying to smile and failing.

“I do not know everything about you, that is true, but I do think I know you would not have said it in the first place if you did not want to explain it.” She appeared serious, looking at him intently.

“We have… ‘quarrelled’ is perhaps the wrong term. Not that. I do not know exactly how to describe it. Circumstances are changed beyond repair. I am not really sure what we are now.” She stayed silent, and Edward felt obliged to tell more. Perhaps he did want to talk about it. “I cannot explain in detail, but… circumstances in my life changed who I could be, and I think… I think he does not like who I am after all. Perhaps we did not know each other enough.”

“All that ‘knowing each other’ you speak of… I do not think it is all that necessary; disagreements… they exist even between people who know each other thoroughly.”

Edward looked away. She truly did not know what he was speaking of, but of course, that was not her fault. It was his for thinking anyone else would be able to help without knowing anything about the situation.

After he did not speak for a while, she said, in a softer tone, “Are you sure you are not friends anymore? Disagreements… are just that. Perhaps your friend feels the same way you do.”

“I am not explaining myself properly. It is not exactly a disagreement.”

“But have you spoken with your friend about it? Perhaps… perhaps you can find some common ground.”

Her kindness nearly undid him and he could only turn away for a moment to recover his composure. “Perhaps we can… but I am being a terrible guest. And anyone’s problems make a depressing subject of conversation.”

She smiled again. “You have yet to tell me anything about England. Are your ladies so very different from me?”
He looked at her. “You can not imagine how much.”

“Is that true? How so? How do I compare?” He knew she probably had known plenty of English people before and that she was agreeing to be distracted and distract him from a painful subject, but he could find only gratefulness in himself.

“English ladies would never speak politics, never fence, and never invite young English gentlemen to call, but we have already covered that.”

“And young French gentlemen? Are they allowed to invite them, the poor dears?” she asked playfully, and he laughed and answered her even though she probably knew it already.

“Of course not. Not any gentleman at all, no matter his nationality.”

“That is sad,” she said, her eyes twinkling, “I do not think I would enjoy being an English lady very much.”

Edward felt himself sobering at the thought and could not cover his bitterness. “Nor I.”

He was glad to note that she did not appear to perceive the sudden turn of his humour. She laughed. “A French lady, that is another matter altogether, do you not think? I find being a French lady very enjoyable.”

“I imagine it must be,” answered Edward, politely.

“You imagine it! I think not… I find being female very superior, despite all that talk of women being the weaker sex, but as a man, you cannot imagine it, I know. No man has ever believed me on this; I do not think even one of them would chose to be a woman if they could.”

Edward almost laughed. Indeed, they would not! He could only say, “I find it not at all strange.”

“Indeed, that is why women are women and men are men, do you not think? It would be very sad not to be happy with your lot in life.”

He vacillated, and then forced a smile to ask, “And let us suppose, for a moment… What would you say to someone who was not happy with their lot in life?”

La Comtesse turned suddenly serious, a speculative look in her face. “Well, I know people like that, of course, who does not? I suppose, I would advice them to find a way to be happy. Not very useful, I know.” She looked at him with eyes that seemed to read his very soul and finally she added, “There is no answer to that. It depends on the particulars. I married the Count, for example, who does not mind me having friends. Love tends to make people happy, do you not think?”

He did not quite know how to answer that and mumbled something he hoped was polite. He was a little shocked, that was part of it. Another part, though, seemed to be finding the thought expressed immensely fascinating.

There was a little silence and the Comtesse seemed to be waiting for him to say something. The words were out of his mouth without seeming to pass by his brain. “Why do you find being a female so superior?”

She gave a short little laugh, as if she had not expected to be asked that. “Many reasons, of course. My answer would be perhaps that I am a woman, and I am myself? That is quite obvious.”

She looked at him then, under half lowered eyelids, as if evaluating something. Edward kept his
silence. “It is not a matter of female or male being superior to the other.”

Edward looked away. “Of course not.”

“But you do not see what I mean—I do not say that happiness is being content with our lot. Or at least not if we say ‘lot’ to mean ‘how nature or God have made us.’ It is finding a way to be—happily—who we are.”

At his silence, she continued, “I do not want to lecture. I will say only one more thing: no one else can make us happy but ourselves.”

At his look, she rushed into saying, “What nonsense you make me say, Bennet! No person is the same; but I do think…”

She smoothed her skirts, deep in thought.

He took his leave soon after that, and though he continued to spar with the Countess sporadically in the Académie until he left Paris, he did not call on her again.

It took him almost a week to gather courage to write to Darcy, and when he did, he dared not re-read the letter before sealing it, lest he regretted sending it altogether.

Darcy,

What can I tell you that you have not experienced already on your own Tour? I imagine you did what every proper English gentleman must. I confess that I have been very remiss in that myself. I have spent my time at the Académie de Paris, and I do think that perhaps I can chance the possibility of beating you now.

I _have_ improved my French, though that was perhaps to be expected. Writing in English now feels strangely foreign.

If I were now in front of you, I imagine you would be glaring at me, waiting for me to stop babbling. We both know what I should write about. Only, I wish I knew the words—I am sure you know them already, and it would be mighty fine of you to tell me.

I feel in a limbo between my past and nowhere. Is that not lyrical? I will start quoting the poets to you soon.

I wish I knew what to do. I feel trapped. I feel like a coward by obeying my father, but how can I not? I could hate him for what he is making me do; I partially do already. As his heir I would never have left his side, as his daughter I cannot but stay and obey. I hate that most of all, even if I am sure he has not even considered that point. Perhaps because he has not even considered it.

And I feel the whole weight of your disapproval, as well. There is no way to avoid it now. Whatever I do, whatever decision I make, circumstances have changed too much for us to be friends as we were before.

A friend—and yes, I think that despite how little I know her, she is one—told me I should explain myself to you. I do not think it will help—it will not change anything, for example—but it cannot hurt. I know it probably will not help to change how you feel about my circumstances.

I want you to understand that I truly did not have any choice. I used to feel that if a choice had been presented to me, I would have chosen to be Edward, but I am beginning to doubt it. I have found that it is useless to think how I could have been, and try only to imagine what I could become now.
And I have realized I truly do not know. What does it mean to be a lady? Or more to the point, what does it mean to be a woman? How can I be one if I do not know? Is it truly that different from being a gentleman? Most people would say: yes. But is it true? Is it so different from what I already am? How can I know without trying it? Can I afford not to, and lose everything I care about? Is it weak of me to want it all? My former life _and_ the one I would achieve by changing?

I know I should not speak to you about this, but I had already resigned myself to not having a family of my own. I did not think it a heavy prize for the life I was leading. Now… things have changed in a way I cannot define. There are only questions and no one to answer them for me. I do not expect you will answer them for me.

I feel I am leaving the decision up to someone else by obeying my father; you have said that you think women need guidance. Is it right, then, to leave that decision to him? I wish you were here to tell me what you think, my friend. I do not think I need guidance as much as I need friendship.

You were kindness itself the last time we met, I could not have hoped for a better friend, but I cannot help fearing you have reconsidered. I had given you very little and had inconvenienced you plenty, it is a wonder you still considered me a friend then, and it would be a miracle if you do so now.

I have two possibilities in front of me, and both are terrifying. What is my future as Edward? Can I exist as someone else? I feel like I should perhaps flip a coin and decide my life on its result.

I wonder how God decides who becomes male or female. I wonder what He would make of this situation.

I am tired of this limbo I am living in, and I realize, perhaps for the first time, that life as Edward was a kind of limbo as well, or it would have become one after Jane married and went away. I have said this before: though I know not what I am going to do, I have the feeling I know already what I, perhaps, _ought_ to do.

I close this letter, my friend, hoping to find you and your family well, and that this confused missive does not trouble your peace. I truly cannot order my thoughts clearer than this. I feel that perhaps I should not have written it, but, on the other hand, I know I still owe you a more complete apology, or perhaps a more complete explanation. And I do apologize for deceiving you. God bless you,

E. Bennet

His travels finally culminated in Naples. The best, he decided, remembering the girl in the boat to Calais, left for the end. And the fact that it was a seaport, in which he could easily buy passage for Edward Bennet for France and for another person for England, was decidedly an advantage.

Italy was warm in every sense, and as he had decided to avoid genteel society, he found himself visiting small towns and talking with fishermen and workmen. He found them charming and their life refreshingly simple. They were amiable and pointed out places for him to visit; charming views and excavation sites. They seemed used to dealing with the English.

Despite his life being a succession of wonderful discoveries, Edward felt lonelier than ever. Constant travel threw his lack of a permanent companion into sharp relief. He caught himself time and again turning to speak with someone that was not there. Though he did own to missing a companion, he would not go as far as admitting he always looked for the same person.

He pulled himself together again by reminding himself that whatever future there was, all depended on his actions and the decision he was to make.

Strangely, he felt no sadness in the upcoming changes. ‘Changes are welcome’, he thought. ‘Life as
it is now surely cannot go on forever.’

During his last week in Naples he escaped the city and lived in a retired villa that hung crookedly over the beach. He wanted to be as alone as he felt, and order his thoughts, and he had long wished to try sea bathing in a fashion that soon would not be allowed to him anymore.

He reached the beach by climbing down some twenty feet, the steep drop surrounding one of the most enchanting places he had ever seen.

He divested himself of his boots immediately upon the moment he reached ground level. The sand, warmed by the morning sun, gave in a little, covering his toes.

The water looked inviting and he seemed alone in the whole world; looking around for a place to leave his clothes seemed the natural next step. Against the wall of rock would do, he decided; if the waves came up, it would be the last place they would touch.

He could not help vacillating before shedding his trousers; he had never done so outside. He tried to reassure himself, to tell himself that he was completely isolated, that no one came here. That he was as safe as if he were inside his rooms. He was sure he would hear anyone approaching long before they could see him.

The water was shockingly cold at first against the hot day, raising the hair on his arms. He made it deeper one step at a time, until the water reached the middle of his chest, and then stopped. He still did not know how to swim, after all.

“I could teach you how,” Darcy had said and Edward had laughed nervously and excused himself. The thought warmed him now all over again, and he contemplated the water as if it was challenging him. He noted then, detachedly, that his blush travelled, as Miss Bingley’s had, down below the commonly exposed skin.

And suddenly the sight of his bare body, clearly visible under the clear water drove all other thoughts out of his head.

Here he was. Here she was. He knew this body in an abstract sense, and at the same time, he knew he did not. He had never really thought about it, tried not to, except for a time some years back, when he could only resentfully tighten the wrap over his traitorously growing breasts as if the pain could erase them.

Her breasts. Skin met trembling skin, and it was real.
Chapter 15

Elizabeth stood on the front steps of her uncle’s house, in London at last, surrounded by her luggage.

She vacillated before sounding the bell, not even knowing why.

It was no matter, the decision had been made long ago, and it was impossible to balk from the chosen path now. Nevertheless, she felt that that was the action that would seal off any other options. She chastised herself; she was being silly, she knew, there were no more options anymore.

She had thought previously that she was reconciled to the idea. And she was. It was the enormity of the situation, the enormity of the deception that acutely struck her now. She had never lied so thoroughly before.

She sounded the bell.

She schooled herself into a ladylike posture and attitude.

It would be no problem, she thought, no problem at all to appear frightened and awkward, but she feared being overtly impertinent; her father had often said when she had been merely a child that her courage rose with every attempt to intimidate her. She hoped that it was enough to remind herself that what was considered charming in a young gentleman could certainly be unbecoming in a young lady.

She had only to wait less than a minute before a servant came to the door, and only needed to introduce herself for that servant to grant her instant entrance and send a footman to retrieve her trunks and bandboxes from the street. She was guided to a drawing room and left alone. The servant would tell the Mistress of her arrival, she said.

Elizabeth sat and smoothed her gown. It was a dark grey, suitable for travelling, with a high neck, but she could not accustom herself to the lack of trousers. It made her feel naked. She stood up and went to the window; the overcast day made the lovely English garden appear almost washed out.

There was nothing there of interest and the position reminded her of somebody too well. She turned and went to sit again, only to stand up immediately when a woman of no more than five and thirty entered. She had a warm open countenance, a kind of subdued beauty, and was smiling at her.

Elizabeth tried to curtsy; it was a clumsy effort, complete with blushing and lowered eyes. Elizabeth thought that though it had not been purposeful, it certainly added to the simple country girl image she had to give. She could not help cringing inwardly; she loathed the idea of deceiving these people more than was absolutely necessary. They were strangers, but amazingly kind strangers.

She wondered how her father had been so sure they would welcome Elizabeth into their home; she had the vague idea that the breach in the family was related to him sending Elizabeth north, but she did not know any particulars. She had never asked, she had not wanted to know anything about her mother or her mother’s family, and her father had never volunteered the information.

The lady’s—because it was plain that she was a lady—smile did not waver, and she imitated Elizabeth, much more gracefully, before coming to her.

“You must be Elizabeth Bennet. I am Mrs. Gardiner, your aunt,” she said warmly. “I am so glad to meet you at last. My husband is away on business, but he was very anxious to meet you; he will return tonight.”
“I have been very anxious as well,” answered Elizabeth, because she needed not lie.

Mrs. Gardiner sat down, and motioned to Elizabeth to imitate her. “Do sit down. I have asked for some refreshments, so you can eat something before resting. You must be very tired. We were worried about you, travelling alone.”

“Oh, no, I did not travel alone. My father arranged for a manservant.”

Mrs. Gardiner appeared surprised. “Very good then,” she said. “I am glad he did.”

The conversation stalled until the tea came, which thankfully was not much later, and afterwards Elizabeth was guided into the room she was to occupy and provided with a maid to help her undress. The whole situation was more stressful than travelling had been, and she sank into the mattress gratefully.

She indeed met her uncle and her cousins that evening, and she soon was convinced of liking the whole family immensely; they were rational, amiable people. It was plain that her uncle had been wishing to meet his sister's children for a long time. He searched her face, looking for a resemblance to her mother, and seemed pleased with what he saw.

They did not speak much until some days later, when he called her into his office.

“I am very sorry for keeping you in the city in the spring and summer,” he said, his countenance grim, “but your father has written he would prefer you to remain here for now. Apparently Edward was in Paris on the twenty-second of May, when the Treaty was broken.”

His face softened after she assured him that it was fine. Elizabeth could see that he took offence at every slight her father seemed to make her, and she made the effort to act as if she did not care in order to ease his mind.

She would have preferred to go to Longbourn. She missed her books and her old walks. She missed her horse and the house. She missed her guns. Her only consolation was that she could hardly gone back to be as she had been before, so being in London helped to make the awareness the loss of her former life less acute.

Elizabeth was looking around for something to distract her uncle with, as the subject of Mr. Bennet did not appeal to her in the slightest, when a painting caught her eyes. It was a miniature that standing upon the mantel, of a young lady dressed in an antiquated style.

She stood, approaching it, seeing something of Jane in the conformation of the face, and spoke, thinking she knew already what the answer to her inquiry would be. “Who is this, Uncle?”

“That,” he said, coming to stand by her and smiling down at the painting, “is your mother’s likeness. It was taken when she turned sixteen. She was the beauty of the family. We were all taken with her, and my father commissioned it, even though it was quite excessive for a lawyer’s daughter. Your aunt, Mrs. Philips, was quite, quite jealous. I was very young but I still remember the screaming fights they had about it.”

He chuckled, and Elizabeth, who had always lived with people as sedate as Jane and her father, tried to imagine how that would have been, and failed. She had been the loudest of the three and had stopped throwing screaming fits when she was three. “Was my mother very... lively then?”

“Lively,”—he smiled a wistfully—“she was that, all right; and more. She was a happy, careless child. But I did not see her very much after she married; she was very busy with your sister, and I was young and not interested in babies; I think she must have settled down, though I cannot imagine
it happening. She died very young.”

His voice caught, and he looked away. Elizabeth did not know how to feel. She could not imagine the careless young lady he described being married to his father. She ought to feel sad, she thought, she ought to feel her mother’s absence more than anything now. She felt no such thing, except perhaps a little wistfulness at what might have been.

Her mother was a far away idea upon which she had never let herself dwell. She had been very much her father’s child her whole life, and it did not matter that she could be that no more, the idea of her mother did not make her more real, nor more cherished.

When she was young, Elizabeth had privately thought that it was as if she had sprung from her father’s brain, wielding a lance and ready to take the world at his command. Now that fancy had turned bitter. She had decided to stop obeying him when his last order had been a treachery. She was her own person now.

But looking at the downcast expression of her uncle, she thought that perhaps she could learn to love her mother’s image for his sake.

She looked at the painting again, and its gentle smile made her blurt out, “Is my sister, Jane Bingley, very much like her?” She could not wait to know if they had met her in town.

“Jane? I have never met her, but she had your mother’s air about her when she was a child, everybody said so.”

Elizabeth doubted if she should ask, it seemed awful to pry into something that was probably painful for him to assuage her curiosity, but it turned out, she did not have to.

“And I see you father has not told you,” he said, his mouth turning down in displeasure. “I do not want to stir old grudges, but I think we can hardly hide them. There is a very silly reason I have not met my nephew and niece, and one I am not proud of. My father quarrelled with yours when your mother passed away and he decided to disappear with you three into the north; it was even worse when he learnt that Mr. Bennet had left you there with his relatives. I confess I never had the courage to brave the breach between them until he wrote to me telling me of your coming.”

“And my sister and my brother, they never thought to contact you?” Even as she asked, Elizabeth could only turn away. She was ashamed of herself, and of her father. That he could doubt not one moment that his late wife’s family would receive her, but not try to mend the relationship, was unfathomable. Of his detachment she knew already, but his unconcern for the feeling of others struck her anew.

“They are young, and they have never met me. We received a card some days ago when we were away. You must know your sister married. She is living in London now, and she will come to call on us soon.”

Elizabeth had not much to do during the day, except to try and hide the fact that she could not net a purse or cover a screen, and that her stitches would not pass for ornamental at the best of times. If anyone thought it evidenced something stranger than a normal distaste for such pursuits, they did not speak of it.

Elizabeth entertained herself teaching her young cousins some French and Italian, to the delight and surprise of their mother, who by then insisted on being called aunt Gardiner.

They went to great lengths to amuse her. For her first evening they went out to one of the theatres.
She saw everything with new eyes; her gaze was now drawn to the ladies seated in the boxes, who were as much on display as the actors onstage.

She looked now to imitate. She observed their movements, and despaired of walking like them, of laughing like them: the lilting sound of their voices coyly hidden behind their fans, their gazes turning down to their laps in lady-like humility. It seemed impossible to her.

She did not think anyone would doubt she was a woman, but her pride did not allow her to fail at being a lady. What would Darcy think of her if she did? He already thought poorly of the scheme, what would he think if she failed to be what was supposed to be in her nature?

She wished and dreaded his presence with equal force. She could not help looking for his strong figure among the elegant ladies and gentlemen, but at the same time she wanted the impossible: to avoid thinking what she would do if she would see him.

She could not act as if she knew him, and she doubted that was what he would want. He had decided to continue the friendship—if, Elizabeth thought, in a more distant manner—but that had been before. She was a woman now, a lady. What would he want now?

She could not deceive herself; she hoped he would want to acknowledge the acquaintance, or more. He had not responded her letter, but then, she had not expected him to.

At her most stubborn, she refused to consider that even a friendship between them would be highly unusual; she refused to consider how a desire for it could be interpreted by him. He had been—no, he was her only friend.

She could not dwell on it for long. She should not make herself unhappy about it, and so she decided to avoid thinking on it altogether.

Besides, Mrs. Gardiner was determined to be a friend to her.

She thought it was dreadful, utterly dreadful, that a pretty girl like her had only serious dresses, and said so repeatedly. Elizabeth had finished mourning her guardians, she insisted, and her clothes should reflect it. And so she took to heart her duty as an aunt to a single young lady and took her shopping often, encouraging her to spend the money Mr. Bennet had sent for her.

One such occasion found them both walking down Bond Street, having visited Owen’s, a mercer, and Prother & Co., milliners, when Elizabeth came to a stop in front a bookseller. It had been an incredibly long time since she had bought a book. Mr. Bennet had always had books brought from London, and it was an uncommon occurrence when they had not some new acquisition to discuss.

She turned to her aunt, but she had yet to speak when that same lady forestalled her with a smile, “I know, you want to enter. It is fine, we have time still.”

They did so together, but Elizabeth quickly lost herself trying to find the new publications.

Some indeterminate time later—she only knew that she had found three books that had been published while she had been away—she raised her head, hearing her aunt’s voice. She was talking animatedly with a man perhaps five years younger than her. Elizabeth remembered him from a dinner party; it was one of Mr. Gardiner’s associates and had been very attentive to her.

Mrs. Gardiner had assured her afterwards that the man had not only a suitable situation, but that he had a warm open countenance. Was he not, she had asked, very handsome? Elizabeth could not have said he was. How could she? She could not like anyone she knew so little, and he fell short of every men she knew, except perhaps her father.
Unlike Darcy, he had no wit, and thought it strange in others. He was not tall enough, and not decided enough. He disliked confrontations and thought even the slightest disagreement a confrontation.

She did not want to be prejudiced, but that had been her initial impression of him. Nevertheless, she did not speak of it to her aunt, as he seemed a favourite with her, instead only saying she barely knew him.

Now, she hesitated. She thought she could imagine what the well meaning questioning from her aunt had been about; she had no desire to go talk to him. She had half turned already when Mrs. Gardiner looked up, and catching her gaze, smiled.

There was no avoiding it, so Elizabeth squared her shoulders and went to them.

“Miss Bennet, what a pleasant surprise!”

“Mr. Moore.” Elizabeth curtsied briefly and smiled. “I always knew my aunt avoided telling people I was with her.”

“That is not—” Mr. Moore blushed.

“Dreadful girl! You know I am proud of you to the point of ridicule.”

Seeing Mrs Gardiner smiling, not bothered in the least, Mr. Moore seemed to recover.

“I see you have chosen some books, Miss Bennet. May I ask which ones? I am presently looking for a gift for my sister, and I would be eternally grateful for a hint. What do young ladies like to read?”

Elizabeth bit her lip, tried to smile and said, “You had better buy your sister a parasol, Mr. Moore, or some little trinket you know she would welcome; literary tastes are as varied among ladies as amongst gentlemen.”

“Of course. But I am on a serious mission. I am attempting to encourage her to read for the improvement of her mind.”

“You are completing her education, I see. Is your sister very young, then?” She rearranged her books as she spoke, piling them carefully one over the other.

“She’s three and twenty.”

Elizabeth looked up. “Three and twenty!”

“Indeed, as you see, you are near her in age; I do think your advice would help me greatly.” And with that, he plucked the topmost book from her neat pile. “Independence—”

“A novel,” Elizabeth hurried to clarify. “Probably about some worthless young man who turns out being the lost son of a Duke. Hardly the type of reading you would offer your sister for her mind’s improvement.”

“No, indeed! I thought you much too sensible for this kind of literature, Miss Bennet!”

“I am sorry to disappoint you, sir, but I greatly enjoy novels.” She was about to say more, but she chose to be silent.

“Are they all novels?” Asked he, with a degree of curiosity she found unnerving. Her aunt, on which all her hopes of timely rescue rested, was suddenly nowhere to be seen.
“All novels? Do you mean perhaps all works in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language?”

He made as if to speak, and then stopped. A slow smile formed on his face. “I see now what you are about, Miss Bennet. You delight in teasing people.”

“I was almost entirely sincere, I assure you sir—”

But she had taken too long, and he had already read the title of the next one.

“Sir Walter Scott… Is this book for you, too?”

“It is.”

“A novel, then?” He smiled at her.

“Poems; I like many different things.” She could not more avoid the dryness of her tone than she could stop looking around for her aunt.

And then he was at the last one, Elizabeth not having any dignified way of retaining it.

His brows climbed at an alarming height, his lips pursed.

Finally, he spoke, “I can see that.”

But Elizabeth had glimpsed freedom in the form of her aunt talking to the clerk and lost not one moment more.

“Mr. Moore, pray excuse me.” With a hasty courtesy, she grabbed her books, plucked Edgeworth’s Essay on Irish Bulls from his grasp, and retreated.

A month into her stay in London, she received a visit from Jane. The look of stunned disbelief in her face when she entered the drawing room to find Elizabeth already there froze her smile.

Elizabeth had thought she would feel tempted to laugh, but the feeling of having just made an incredible good joke at her sister’s expense did not flourish. Jane’s eyes clouded with unshed tears, and she disposed of every civility by going to her side and perusing Elizabeth with thirsty eyes.

“You are…You are so alike! I always thought Edward exaggerated, he so loved to tease us all!”

Elizabeth could only manage a weak smile. She had known Jane would suffer, but had managed to make herself forget it, since she could do nothing to avoid it. She suddenly realized that for all of his father’s planning, he had not told her what she was supposed to tell her sister. Perhaps he hoped that she did not tell Jane anything, but it was ridiculous; she could not let her sister suffer for her death when she was alive. The problem was how to tell her.

She was unequal to saying anything, and her discomfort must have been obvious to Jane, because she dropped her hands as burned.

“I am sorry; I should not be taking such liberties. And you barely knew Edward. Of course, this does not make any sense to you.”

Elizabeth’s tone was tentative; she felt she did not know the rules of this conversation. Jane was not in mourning. Could she ask? Should she? “So, they have lost hope?”
“My father has friends in France; they have let him know Edward was not taken, but then, he did not go away either, at least not in any way we can find. And we have not heard from him; under the circumstances, I think that if he could he would have contacted us already. But my father plans to wait for a year.” Jane’s voice was steady, but the words were repeated as though learned by rote.

“I am sorry.” Elizabeth had never felt so inadequate in her life. She had always protected her sister, and now not only was she impotent to offer protection or comfort, but she was the one who had hurt Jane.

“It is not… it is not what I came for. Edward would have wanted us to welcome you home, and we are doing a dreadful work of it. You will have to excuse my father, he never comes to town.” Jane did not mention that he had not sent for her either, if the problem was that he could not come to London.

“My uncle showed me his letter.”

“Good, then,” said Jane, smiling weakly. “I have you all to myself.”

“Oh, no, that pleasure you will have to share with us,” said Mrs. Gardiner from the doorway, “she is in high demand, you know.”

Their aunt appeared to be perfectly unconcerned by Jane’s obvious distress, but Elizabeth could tell she was trying to put her at ease. She talked animatedly and asked for tea, and made it so that Jane, though included in the conversation, was not forced to talk very much, therefore giving her time to compose herself.

Instead, Mrs. Gardiner made Elizabeth talk, skillfully directing her to retell her most amusing experiences in London society. She had attended a public ball and had attracted a little notice, the most remarkable of all being the attentions of a tall, heavy-set clergyman who claimed he was related to the Bennets of Hertfordshire.

All three were soon laughing at the lengths that Elizabeth had gone to avoid dancing with him a second time.

“I saw him looking in my direction and I could feel his resolve from where I was sitting, so I rather prudently turned as though I had heard someone calling me. But I could divine it would not be enough discouragement, so I had the marvellous idea of stumbling! I was not really expecting to be nursing a genuine twisted ankle at the end of the night. That should teach me to feign injury.”

Eyes twinkling, Elizabeth looked at Jane and found her staring at her. She had such an expression of wonder in her eyes, that Elizabeth felt colour flood her checks, and could not but lower her eyes. She felt exposed; she knew she was making no effort to distinguish herself from Edward. Her very gestures were his; her humour, too, but she could hardly change that. It had been easier to be with people who had not known him.

The children came down from the nursery at that moment, and Elizabeth had cause to thank their impeccable timing. They were a fine distraction; though well educated they were still children full of youthful spirit, and they were accustomed to their cousin’s paying them her full attention.

Soon enough, Jane rose and bade them goodbye. She invited Elizabeth to spend an afternoon with her, and Elizabeth could not avoid it. She did not want to; she had missed Jane in the past year. She wondered if it would not be better to let Jane discover it by herself someway, someday, instead of telling her: it was as cowardly as it was safe. Jane was fairly intelligent, and she had been her sister for these one and twenty years; in some ways, she was the person who best knew her.
“Promise you will come! Mr. Bingley is planning for us to leave the city the moment his sisters come back to London, so Miss Bingley can join us in our journey north. I will not be here very long.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Of course. Though no doubt you will tire of me soon enough. I don’t have enough tales of twisted ankles to fill the whole afternoon.”

“We will find something else to do, then.” Jane embraced her quickly and blushed with an embarrassed smile before going out.

Elizabeth did not think that Jane meant for her to hear her soft words, so much like a sigh against her frame. “So alike!”

Elizabeth endured a week of asking herself how to speak to Jane about it, until she could wait no longer. She could no more deny her sister anything now, than she had been able before.

A surprise waited at the Bingley’s townhouse, and it was in the form of a child, a nephew. It was full young still to be able to perceive any resemblance, but the mother pointed out his father’s nose, and his father’s colouring and his uncle’s eyes, with practiced ease.

Elizabeth’s chest constricted at thinking of Jane bearing a child while she was away. No word of it had reached her. Her father must have supposed she would come back earlier if she would have known. If he had, he would not have been wrong.

They sat in the drawing room, and when the nurse took the child away, silence fell over them like an uncomfortable blanket. Elizabeth tried to remember some amusing anecdote, but she had been telling the truth the day before, and had none at all.

Jane broke the silence, suddenly. “Who stayed with you until you could travel, while you were in mourning?”

The lies came easily now, having been practiced time and again before. They were bitter in her mouth: this change, was it not supposed to be done so she could stop lying? She had never felt she had been lying, as Edward.

“Oh, I thought my father would have told you, I had a companion since Mrs. Kemp’s death, and she agreed to stay with me.” Elizabeth lowered her eyes, embarrassed. The moment to tell Jane had passed, missed by her own stupidity and fear.

Jane was sympathetic; when was she not? It made it hard for Elizabeth to breathe. “He did not say. I am sorry; it must have been terrible for you to stay without any family.”

“My father wrote to me, telling me that once my mourning was completed, I would have to come down to Hertfordshire. It was a comfort to know that I would soon see you all.”

“He should have sent Edward, if he could not be bothered to travel.” Jane’s voice was, suddenly, uncharacteristically sharp.

Elizabeth thought with some amusement that her father was making a lot of enemies for actions he could have never taken, though it was rather fair, because he was not making them for the actions he had.

“Oh, no, I would have rather he did not interrupt his Grand Tour for me!”

An undecipherable look passed Jane’s face, and Elizabeth thought suddenly that Jane was probably thinking that if they had interrupted his Grand Tour, he would have been safe and well at home. No
consolation is possible, said Elizabeth forcefully to herself, unless you tell her the truth.

Jane’s next phrase drew Elizabeth’s surprised gaze to her. Her tone was wistful, her gaze in her still hands.

“I hardly ever thought about you. I have no memory of those first years after you and Edward were born; the first time I remember hearing your name was when I was seven years old and put Edward in a dress of mine. And even afterwards, when Edward began to visit you every now and then, I only waited for his return.”

Jane looked up for a moment and then away, frowning. “I used to be so jealous of you. I never remembered meeting you and you were just a shadow, an idea of a sister who had more claim on Edward than even me.”

Elizabeth looked away. And then, it was just a falling away of a false attitude and subtle change in posture—of no longer making a conscious effort to speak softly—before saying her next words as she looked into her sister’s eyes. It was almost unconsciously done. “I am sure that no other person had more claim on Edward’s affections than you, Jane.”

Jane’s eyes widened. She looked her over, she almost stopped breathing with amazement, and Elizabeth could not endure it. It had been foolish—a foolish way to go about it. Now, what could she say? Yes, it is me: I have deceived you. I am not who you think I am. I was not who you thought I was. I was not who I am.

Everything sounded foolish.

Should she wait for Jane to ask? She had never seen Jane’s eyes flashing in true anger. She did not want to be looking her in the eye when her anger was directed at her, so she stood and went to the window. The London street outside was filthy and a slight grey drizzle made it seem even more so.

The moment stretched what it seemed like forever, before Jane appeared at her elbow. Elizabeth felt her presence before she heard her voice.

“Why?”

Elizabeth did not turn. “Why? It was never a choice, not on my part. I did not… my father raised me as much as he raised you. There were practical reasons for his actions, of course, but lately… I think he took pleasure in the fact that I was as much his creation as everyone else is God’s.”

“Practical reasons?” Jane’s voice shook.

Elizabeth drew the curtain open a little more and stared into it, silent.

“What practical reasons could he possibly have?”

“The entail—”

It was as if Jane had been waiting for those words to be spoken. “The entail! What nonsense! Could we not live without Longbourn after he died?”

Elizabeth felt a smile forming upon her lips, and she gave in to the urge to turn. To look at her sister, after all that time! To look at her and to be sure Jane was looking back knowingly, not at some sister by blood that she barely knew, but at her own dear sibling. Because she knew, despite her fear of her reaction, she knew Jane. She would be, despite all, still her dear sibling in Jane’s mind.

Jane stood close to her, brow furrowed and eyes glittering. She wanted an answer and her reasoning was impeccable: could they have not?
“His thinking process, I have always thought, was heavily influenced by the fact he hated life after our mother’s death, and wanted to live it according to his own rules. He was not wise: that, I believe, he saw soon enough, but the path had already been taken, and he could only follow it to its conclusion.”

“Wise? Of course he was not wise. But to warp you? To force you to act as you were not meant to? He did wrong by you, and I was blind to it.” Jane was crying, her eyes overflowing with silent tears.

Elizabeth felt useless to comfort her physically; as close as they were standing next to each other, they were still miles apart.

“I did not disagree with him, Jane. Longbourn is my home. I thought… for the longest time I thought that I was born to be its mistress—its master. I was not made unhappy, Jane, not then.”

Jane took her hands, and drew her close. “But now, you are?”

“Now… now I know not what to feel.”

Jane threw her arms around her and hid her wet face in Elizabeth’s neck.

Their embrace comforted them both.

Elizabeth passed the next week almost exclusively with Jane. No one was surprised by their sudden affinity, as it seemed natural for sisters to be so, even if they had not shared their infancy, nor even met before. Between them, they never mentioned that they had. It did not hang between them as a heavy curtain, as Elizabeth had feared. It was as it had never been, and Jane took care of helping Elizabeth learn all those things that would have been inappropriate for her to learn before, without a word, as if it was natural for her to do so.

They were not abilities that Elizabeth could appreciate. She remembered dismissing them in a conversation with Darcy, and it could not be said that she had changed her mind. She could not be earnest with them, but she made some effort, because they were important to the purpose of being a lady.

They were covering a tea caddy, paper strewn on the table in front of them when a servant came to let Jane know that her sister, Miss Bingley, had arrived. Jane went to receive her and asked Elizabeth to wait for them where she was. It was no punishment for her to do so; what is more, she would have preferred to be spared meeting the lady altogether. Nevertheless, she knew it was not to be if she planned spending any time with her sister.

To Elizabeth, the wait became close to unsupportable very soon; the rolling of silver papers not enough distraction. It was not, she assured herself, that she was afraid of the outcome. Jane would have not realized the truth herself, and she knew Elizabeth far better than Miss Bingley. But she knew that Miss Bingley’s eyes were too sharp by half, and even if the only thing they would be able to see was that Elizabeth Bennet made a very poor lady, it made her uneasy to be under her scrutiny.

Finally, she heard them enter the room, and she stood up to greet and be introduced to Miss Bingley. She raised her eyes and even as she noted that Miss Bingley was more wan and waif-like than what was strictly fashionable, the lady met her eyes for a second, paled even more and swayed on her feet. Elizabeth wasted not a moment in going to her side and so was there to catch her limp body when she fainted. Jane was all astonishment and could not react even as Elizabeth carried Miss Bingley to a settee and searched her reticule for a vinaigrette she knew would be there, smelling of lavender.

Elizabeth gave it up to Jane the second she perceived Miss Bingley was coming to. She did not want
to be close to the lady when she did, and her motive was twofold. She feared for her health and wanted to let her recuperate, and the situation, being that Miss Bingley had undoubtedly recognized her, was too awkward to bear.

“I’m sorry, Jane, to leave you like this, but perhaps it is better that she is surrounded by friends until she gets better?” Seeing her beginning to protest, she added, “I will come back tomorrow.” Hopefully Miss Bingley would be convinced by then that the uncanny similarity between the siblings was natural.

“And you will come to Derbyshire with us?”

Elizabeth had demurred earlier, when Jane had said that not only had she and her husband been invited, but that they were expected to bring their sisters.

She did not think that Darcy could have avoided the open invitation, as close as he was to Bingley. She knew she could not expect a sign from him, but she could not impose herself on his presence or his sister’s without knowing he wanted her there.

Jane looked at her, suddenly shrewd. “Mr. Darcy asked Charles for you especially, you know, as soon as he learnt you were in London and I had met you. He said he is looking forward to meeting you. To see how similar you are to Edward. He was his friend, you see.”

Elizabeth felt herself colour and looked away. Was this the message she did not dare hope for? How could she say no if he asked for her presence?

“I will, then.”

She could only hope he meant it, and that it was not some platitude exaggerated by Jane to make her agree.
Chapter 16

The journey to Pemberley was as uncomfortable as Elizabeth had imagined it would be. Miss Bingley, clearly embarrassed by her fainting spell the first time she had laid eyes on Elizabeth, alternated between cold displeasure and a suspicious look that lingered far more than Elizabeth would have liked.

Bingley treated her much the same as he treated any other young lady who happened to be his sister, and apart from being slightly taken aback with her appearance the first time he saw her, he had apparently accepted it. He mostly rode outside and when he joined them, it was clearly because his wife was with them and he could not keep away from her for too long.

As much as this pleased Elizabeth, his attentions towards Jane did nothing to alleviate the awkwardness of the rest. Jane herself endeavoured to ease the atmosphere by filling it with conversation, but between Elizabeth’s attempt at not being overtly teasing and impertinent and Miss Bingley’s sullen monosyllabic responses, they were never very long. The three days could not pass quickly enough.

But pass they did, and the third afternoon, the barouche stopped suddenly as it reached high ground. A moment later Bingley peered through the window, grinning, and invited them to descend to take in the view. Only Miss Bingley demurred, being familiar with it already.

It was indescribable; a scene of so magnificent, of such natural beauty, that it was laughable to say that it complimented the great house in its middle.

Elizabeth could not help thinking that it explained Darcy’s character better than any friend could. She certainly had never been able to see into him. She could not help wondering how he would act with her. She did not dare to hope for warmth in his manner, and feared the distance her new situation in life would inevitably create between them.

She dimly heard Bingley whispering to Jane, “I wanted your sister to see it the first time as it should be seen,” and she forced herself to turn to them.

She turned, a smile thinly drawn on her face, and said the first thing that came to her head, “I have yet to see a place for which natural beauty has done more, and has been less spoiled by awkward taste.” She feared her voice trembled when she spoke unmasking her confusion, when she had hoped her articulacy would protect her.

Once again inside the barouche she felt unequal to meeting anyone’s eyes and so she resolutely lost her gaze in the passing landscape.

Not much later the carriage drew close to the entrance of the house and stopped. Bingley jumped out immediately to hand his wife and sisters down. When Elizabeth stepped down and raised her eyes, she found Darcy standing to receive them, a young girl at his arm.

Darcy’s face seemed bloodless, and though he greeted Bingley, Jane, and Miss Bingley with some warmth, it disappeared like snow on the first spring day when he turned to her. Elizabeth could barely look at him, she could only guess at how badly he thought of the charade.

Jane did the honours, with a smile on her face which, unaccountably, irritated Elizabeth. How could she not know what a disaster this was turning out to be? “Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy; my younger sister, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”
Elizabeth raised her eyes to his, and almost extended her hand in greeting. Even though the movement was aborted before it begun, she saw Darcy note it and stiffen.

Her curtsy was performed gripping the skirt of her dress, and she could not look at him again.

“Delighted,” said Darcy, bowing, and Elizabeth though she heard the girl—Miss Darcy—saying something as she curtsied, but it was almost inaudible and certainly incomprehensible.

Elizabeth reciprocated with as much grace as she could manage, but the words stuck in her throat and had to be forced out.

They proceeded into the house and were immediately showed to their rooms to refresh themselves and rest. Elizabeth let the maid help her change into a fresh dress but did not even glance at the bed. To sleep now would be impossible.

The knowledge of Darcy being in the same house filled her with restless energy; her certainty that he did not want to see her filled her with dread. Why had he invited her? He could not have felt obliged to do so; he should have avoided it if he did not want to see her.

She was angry with him for a moment, but it could not last. She should have guessed he would not want to see her and stayed in London; he had not been the one in the wrong. The responsibility of lessening the burden of the consequences for everyone involved was hers and her father’s; there was no hope the latter would take them, so in the end, they were hers alone.

Her father certainly expected she would stay in London, and she had not waited for his answer to her letter. She would have not delayed the Bingleys, and her aunt and uncle had had certainly no problem in trusting her to her sister; Elizabeth suspected that they would have done it even if they could have suspected Mr. Bennet would have objected.

Her father had never forbidden her to go to her sister, had never said she was not to see the Bingleys or Mr. Darcy, but she knew she was breaking the spirit if not the letter of the plan. She could not return to Longbourn because she was not to be seen by people who could wonder at her similarity to her brother until enough time had passed.

Her father could not have guessed Darcy knew already, but he should have foreseen that she would tell Jane; she had never been able to see her sister suffer. If he thought she would be so altered that this last fact would not hold true anymore, then he did not know her at all.

When she had had hoped—an unreasonable hope, she knew now—that Darcy wanted to see her, deciding to go to Pemberley had seemed the best decision she could make. She could not leave Jane now, and the thought of resuming her friendship with Darcy at the end of it made the prospect of the journey that much sweeter. Now, though, she wished she had looked ahead and been realistic. She should not be here.

She could not stay still, could not remain seated.

The room was spacious, but she could pace one way and the other only so many times before the walls closed on her, suffocating.

Leaning against the cold window pane offered little comfort, though she considered going outside alone for a moment; the idea of loosing herself in the grounds was attractive, but she did not want to chance coming upon Darcy unawares.

The library was discarded for the same reason.
She turned away, went to the mantel and fingered the small ornaments there. They said nothing about Darcy, except that perhaps he had kept Pemberley’s rooms as his mother had had them; but no, the furniture had to be newer, perhaps his father’s choices?

Turning to the bed, she considered again trying to sleep, but the notion was ridiculous. There was no way she could.

Perhaps, if she asked, one of the footmen would be able to direct her to a solitary place in the house or the grounds.

Finally decided, she let herself out of her room into the hallway.

She had not made three steps when a hurried maid stopped in her tracks at her sight.

“Miss Bennet! I beg your pardon, I was about to see if you wanted refreshments. I can bring them to your room, or you can join Miss Darcy and Mrs. Annesley in the drawing room.”

She acquiesced, conscious that she could not avoid the hostess without appearing rude, and mindful the maid had not named Darcy himself.

In the drawing room, Miss Darcy seemed to take timidity to its extreme. She could hardly speak, and those words that crossed her lips could barely be made out by a bemused Elizabeth. Before, she would have not believed two siblings more dissimilar than Bingley and Miss Bingley could have existed.

Miss Darcy was tall, her features similar to Darcy’s, though in a woman they were less handsome than patrician. He figure was formed and graceful. Her whole attitude, however, was another matter entirely. Only what Elizabeth could only guess to have been a very expensive deportment education seemed to prevent Miss Darcy from cringing into as small a space as possible.

Mrs. Annesley seemed to take it as a matter of course, prompting her pupil with many a significant look to send for refreshments, ask Elizabeth how she had rested, and comment on the weather.

“I do think the weather is quite fine,” answered Elizabeth, at a loss of how else to pursue the conversation. She had never felt so, except with the lady’s own brother, and that for very different reasons.

“My brother said that if you were anything like your brother you would delight in the weather we are having lately, and be outside at every opportunity.” Miss Darcy seemed to regret the low words the moment they left her lips and looked down.

“Indeed, Mr. Darcy is quite right, I do like walking out; especially in grounds as fine as Pemberley’s. The little I saw of them was very pleasant.”

A short silence later Miss Darcy looked at Mrs. Annesley for a moment; after her nod of encouragement, she turned to Elizabeth again, and said, hesitatingly, “You must miss your own gardens…”

“I do! I must say, I felt it much more while in town. London cannot compare to the country.” Elizabeth was rewarded, then, with a small smile.

“I am sure it is not the same; perhaps Pemberley, being situated farther north than London…”

“Will serve to assuage my homesickness? I think you must be right, though I doubt Derbyshire can be as untamed as the beautiful wilds of Scotland.”
“I am afraid we cannot allow that observation to go unchallenged, can we, Georgiana?”

The three ladies startled, perhaps Miss Darcy most of all, or at least most visibly. Elizabeth was, for her part, profoundly moved at the sound of his voice, teasing and full of laughter like it used to be.

Miss Darcy herself smiled when she realized it was her brother, but only coloured in response, and looked away.

At the ladies’ silence, Darcy walked into the room from the doorway to stand beside his sister’s chair. “It is obvious, Miss Bennet, you have not seen Derbyshire at all. Cannot the peaks be called wild and untamed as well as beautiful?”

“I am sure they can, by others that have seen them; as you have correctly surmised, I have not. But in any case, the matter is not if one can apply those qualities to them, but how they compare in those matters to Scotland.”

He smiled, amused, and let his weight rest on his elbow, leaning upon the high back of the chair. “And you seem to be sure they cannot.”

She looked up at him. “I am not sure of anything; I am ready to be convinced by sufficient evidence of either case.”

Both his sister and Mrs. Annesley watched them, the one in alarm, the other with barely disguised curiosity. Elizabeth felt their eyes, but could not look away from Darcy now that he was speaking to her, in much the same fashion as he had done when they had been friends.

“You are? It is bizarre indeed, to find someone who does not have a particular appreciation for their own home, to the detriment of all others.”

Elizabeth smiled. “On the contrary, I find that for many people, the grass is always greener on the other side of the country.”

“And you count yourself among them?”

“I do not, as I said. I only believe the truth.”

Darcy only raised an eyebrow at that, once again unimpressed. “Ah, and you think you can determine it from, as you say, the evidence. You are not an idealist, then.”

“I? Why would you think so? I am a pragmatist.”

“Is that your personal definition of the empiricism?”

“No, that is the position of those who think too much philosophy does not help one to decide which county is prettier.”

His laugh was sudden and rich and the refreshments came in before he could answer. With their arrival, Darcy sat, at his sister’s side, and only participated further by asking for tea.

Elizabeth could not look at him now they were silent, and so she turned to his sister. “Do you often stay in town, Miss Darcy?”

“I do,” she said, and immediately hid herself looking into her cup of tea. Elizabeth regretted then her banter with Darcy, as the girl seemed now more timid than ever.

“And do you prefer the town or the country? Despite my liking the country best, this was my first
time in London, and I found it fascinating.”

“I… very much prefer Pemberley.”

“Her education necessitates she be in London.” Darcy was serious, but his eyes were merely interrogative when Elizabeth looked at him.

At Miss Darcy’s silence, Elizabeth ventured, “Pemberley must be very lonely, too, when your brother is not in residence.”

“It is,” said Miss Darcy, quiet as a mouse, but more surely than before.

“Well, I do plan for us to be in residence here much more in the future.”

There was a silence then, no one quite knowing how to continue, until Darcy asked, “And where does Bingley hide himself now?”

“Mr. Bingley and Mrs. Bingley are resting,” answered Miss Darcy, quietly.

“And so it is. I should have guessed it; now that he is married, Bingley cannot tear himself away.”

“It is the natural course of the thing, Mr. Darcy,” observed Mrs. Annesley, smiling slightly. “Recently married gentlemen have no time for the same old pursuits that occupied them when unmarried; they cannot hold the same charm now. It is lucky that in the usual run of things, men get married more or less at the same time as their friends.”

Darcy stood up then, abandoning his tea to go to stand at the window. “No time! I cannot think he will stop hunting, or playing billiards, nor any of the other things that gave him pleasure before. I cannot think of any one married man that has done so.”

“Not for ever, no. But while the marriage is new…”

Elizabeth could not stop herself from smiling. “Newly married is redefined with every couple, I should think, then, because my sister has been married for more than a year.”

Darcy turned, and looked at her. “Indeed, more than a year. It seems I lost two friends that day; one to travel, and one to marriage. What news of your brother, Miss Bennet, if you do not mind me asking?”

Elizabeth looked down. She did not know what he wanted. Did he delight in making her lie? Was he—who abhorred disguise—looking for reasons to hate her?

She could not look up while she spoke. For some reason, talking about Edward directly was worse that speaking of Scotland as if it were her home. “No news, I am afraid. My father is waiting for word from some friends from the continent, but he had no news the last time he wrote.”

“Many English countrymen have been imprisoned in France; Napoleon claims they number in the ten thousand,” said he, serious.

“Indeed. My father does not lose hope, but he also told us not to expect too much. War is like this, I am afraid. But…”—she looked at Miss Darcy, whose large scared eyes stared alternatively at her brother and herself—“this is no talk for the drawing room. ‘Tis too depressing; my brother would have wanted us to speak of other things.”

“He would,” said Darcy, turning away again.
Miss Darcy wrung her hands, and looked down, silent. The mood was thoroughly ruined, thought Elizabeth, resentfully. Why did Darcy want to make everyone and himself miserable? Was that why he had invited her, to prove thoroughly his point? She should tell him there was no need; she knew perfectly well how low it had been of her to deceive everyone—how low it made her feel to deceive everyone now.

But no, he had been warm before; as scared as it had made Miss Darcy, their banter had been the same, and Darcy had not appeared angry.

Perhaps he does not know what to feel, thought Elizabeth to herself. She certainly did not know either, and had been thinking about it all year. He had had only about a month to get used to the idea. Perhaps he had invited her on a whim, and only now he regretted it. She could not blame him in that case, the situation was complicated enough for everyone.

On an impulse, she decided to try to extract everyone from the uncomfortable situation.

“As we were saying before, Miss Darcy, the day is very pleasant. Do you think I could walk out for a little while? Not very far, to be sure, just a little before dinner.”

“Of course!” said Miss Darcy, and then, a brief look of panic to Mrs. Annesley later, “Do you want me to accompany you?”

“Oh, do not worry! I will not get lost. I will stay within sight of the house. I do not want to trouble you.”

Before Miss Darcy could get encouragement from Mrs. Annesley to say it was no trouble, Darcy intervened. “Do not worry, Georgiana, I will walk with Miss Bennet myself, and take care she is back safe and sound for dinner. That is, if she does not mind?”

Elizabeth looked at him, doubtful of his intentions, but dutifully said, “Of course, I do not mind.”

And so they went out.

Darcy offered his arm for her to lean on while they walked, which made Elizabeth supremely uncomfortable at first. Throughout their friendship, she had never stood so close to him, and certainly not for such duration.

He, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned. She reminded herself it was nothing new; she had never been able to know what he was thinking with any accuracy. For all she knew, he felt as awkward as she with the situation.

Of course, it would have served him right, as this time, it had been entirely his choice. She wondered if he wanted to talk freely now, and whether she should begin. She thought not; she said to herself it was not cowardly to want to wait and see what he wanted before acting.

“So your brother is imprisoned, is he? What was he doing in France?”

She hesitated, but then answered him in kind—if he wanted to keep up the charade when they were alone, it was his choice. She could not blame him if it was how he wanted to make clear to her that they were not friends anymore—she could only try to hide the hurt in her voice. “He was travelling. He liked France very much the first time, and then decided to stay for a few months more before returning to England. He was not wise, there were already rumours of war.”

Darcy did not answer. He looked ahead, and then looked down at her and ahead again. He appeared to want to speak, and then said nothing. Taking advantage of the silence, Elizabeth was decided;
there was no other moment more ideal for what she wanted to do, and she could not not say it.

“I—if you will pardon me, Darcy—Mr. Darcy—” she trailed off, embarrassed.

She could not believe it of herself, to be making those mistakes still. It had taken some time to stop herself from addressing Bingley as Edward would have done, but she thought she had put it behind her, as she had the instincts to offer her hand to ladies to go to dinner, and to ask them to dance.

He did not say anything, did not look at her, and from that she drew strength to begin again.

“I am afraid I must betray a confidence. My brother would want to apologize to you, if he were here, for his last letter. He would have wished your last communication had been happier, I am sure.”

“He said that, did he?”

Elizabeth could not help looking at Darcy with incredulity, but no, there it was, amusement on his gaze, as plain as the beautiful day around them.

“He did—we were in constant communication before he disappeared.”

Darcy bit his lower lip, and suddenly stopped walking and said, “I can now better appreciate what it must have cost you to talk to me about it! This is ridiculous. We both know who you are.”

“We do. I thought you wanted—”

“I did not—I only wondered how to broach the subject. And you do not help matters…”

“I do not help matters?”

“Indeed,” he said, and started walking again, looking ahead. “I thought—more than a year ago, I thought I had gotten used to the idea. And now, here you are, in a dress, and seem like another person, and at the same time, exactly as I remember you…”

“The dress does need some getting used to. It makes me feel—” She was about to say naked, but caught herself. “Unprotected somehow.”

He looked at her, for a long moment, and looked away again. “You do not seem more timid.”

“You though I would?” She could not help being amused.

“No, indeed, though I considered the possibility. It is a difficult situation, the one you are in. I expect little time to pass before you receive a proposal.” He looked at her steadily for a second, and Elizabeth looked away, but before she could wonder and laugh at the ridiculousness of the idea—indeed, no man she had met since becoming a woman had been able to stand her awkward manners for long—he changed the subject. “How did you like the Continent?”

“I liked it well enough. I missed—England, I believe, and my friends. It can be lonely, travelling alone.”

“I liked it well enough. England, I believe, and my friends. It can be lonely, travelling alone.”

“Oh, indeed, it can.” He looked at her for a moment, and then, serious again, said, “You were not in France when the seizing occurred, did you?”

“I was not… I heard there would be trouble, and thought it prudent to buy passage, but I never actually took it.” She looked away—she disliked talking about the deception with Darcy, waiting to hear what he would say about it, unwilling to change the subject for fear he would think her deceiving him.
He cleared his throat, and changed the subject again. “I wanted—I did not want to give you the impression I was avoiding you.”

“You did not.” She was truthful—she had not known what to think.

“I—we should not be too free with ourselves.”

“I understand.” She did, she thought she did, even as she wanted to send the world to the devil.

He stopped, but she could not look at him, even as he moved to stand in front of her, even as she felt his gaze on her face. She coloured, but she could not look at him; she could not show him that she did not want to understand, that she had hoped—against all rational thought—that he would still want to be her friend.

“I think you do not.” His voice was low, intense. “It may be my fault—I am not explaining myself. I do think we ought to be careful, but, I meant what I said then. I am still your friend, if you will have me.”

And then they were called, a footman sent to tell them the hour for dinner neared, and they should go in.

Elizabeth had no time to answer, had not raised her gaze quickly enough to catch Darcy’s expression before it changed to his usual serious mien. She could not know if it had been so all the while, could do no more than catch his eyes and smile, a more shaky version of her usual one, before accepting his arm again and walking the path back to the house.

Dinner was a quiet affair, Bingley and Jane living inside their happiness as if it were a bubble, Miss Bingley with her despair settled around her like a cloak, Miss Darcy too timid to talk much with so many around, and Elizabeth herself, always wanting to turn to Darcy but always stopping herself just before.

She caught him watching her sometimes, when she turned to him, and once or twice he smiled in sympathy, prompting her to reciprocate.

Elizabeth tried to speak for everyone else, but she found herself falling into introspective silences—thinking… The reason sat not four feet from her, spoke seriously to Mrs. Annesley, and looked at her every now and again.

Sleep that night came late and was not entirely restful. She did not know why she was worried now. Everything had turned out as she could have wished. Her sister knew and understood. Darcy—incredibly—wanted still to be her friend. She could not guess why her mind could not rest, and returned once again to his look at this or that moment. Her head was full of him.

The next day, Elizabeth was left to her own devices. She woke up late, having had a poor night, and Jane was too wrapped up in her child to notice anyone else, except perhaps her husband.

Elizabeth refused to search out Darcy; it would be the opposite of careful, even if she could not understand why it would matter when there were only their two families present. If she did not care at all for her own reputation, she knew Darcy did for his.

She did not know what to do; she was restless. She could not read; she did not know where Darcy was to avoid him.

The house was almost completely quiet, but for the faint sound of a pianoforte. She followed it, knowing, by Darcy’s proud account of his sister’s dedication, who she could expect to find
practicing.

She found Miss Darcy alone in a music room, her eyes closed, oblivious to the world. Elizabeth slipped quietly in, not wanting to disturb her and drifted to the window seat, looking over the magnificent grounds. The music was delightful, and Elizabeth let herself be transported to other worlds by it.

A gasp, clear against the room’s sudden silence, brought her down to earth again.

Elizabeth turned. Miss Darcy sat still at the pianoforte, pale, looking at her quite fixedly. She looked down the moment Elizabeth met her gaze.

“Miss Darcy, I hope you will excuse my intrusion. I could not rest and the sound drew me here. You play beautifully.”

Miss Darcy blushed. “You are too kind.” She spoke so softly that Elizabeth had to strain to hear her.

“I see you are thinking me similar to Mrs. Bingley; that will not do. If you knew me better you would know that I am never too kind. I rather err on the other side.” But she immediately saw that her lively response had rather frightened her timid interlocutor, and she softened her tone. “I do love your playing. It is been several months since I have had the opportunity of hearing an instrument or an interpreter of this quality.”

“The pianoforte is a gift from my brother.”

“He is very good.”

Miss Darcy did not speak, and trailed her fingers over the keys, nervously. Elizabeth did not know quite what to do. She should go, surely, and leave the girl alone…

She was so painfully shy, when her brother was anything but. She had not guessed she was like this from her brother’s description; she had imagined a softer copy of Darcy, a headstrong girl, a little egoistic and spoiled, perhaps, but with good principles. How could this Miss Darcy have made trouble for her guardians? It was inconceivable.

But surely they could keep each other company, while everyone else was God knew where. They could play, for example; Elizabeth missed the piano.

“The sound is magnificent, I am sure it would even make my playing tolerable to hear. May I try it?”

Miss Darcy scrambled to her feet in haste and Elizabeth was sure she could almost hear an “Of course,” but not quite.

“Oh, no, do not go on my account. Would you be so kind as to turn my pages? I could not remember anything right now. Unless it would bore you, of course.”

Miss Darcy acquiesced, and Elizabeth sat beside her.

Soon enough she reached a place in which the fingering was too complicated for her to play at an adequate velocity and was forced to slow and eventually stop.

She tried the piece a second time and faltered at the same place. This time, she was truly bothered by it, because it was a song she could have performed before without a hitch, and she refused to think she had lost so much proficiency in a few months. Looking over the troublesome part, she went through it slowly, barely touching the keys, concentrating.
Once satisfied, she began again at a normal pace; when she stumbled at the same place as before she had to swallow strong words. It would not do to scare Miss Darcy further. She threw her a self-deprecating look and said, “As you see, Miss Darcy, perhaps you were wise to try to leave. It is been even longer since I have played.”

“Oh, no, not at all. Perhaps…” she stopped. Her voice was not strong, but it was a little surer than it had been at the beginning of the encounter.

“Perhaps?”

“Perhaps I could help you. I looked and I think I know why you are having trouble with it.”

“Of course; I would be in your debt!” Elizabeth was surprised, but gratified, and though the offer did not mean that Miss Darcy was at all outgoing after that, they got along quite well, and by the time they decided to stop for refreshments, they were trying out duets.

The days that followed were more or less the same, so that Elizabeth quickly accustomed herself to seeing Darcy at meals, to playing the pianoforte in the afternoon, to spending her time alone or with Miss Darcy. She would have not believed it before, but it was soon quite a routine.

She found it vexing that amongst this quiet life, living in the same house as Darcy, and seeing him two or three times a day, she still found it in herself to miss him.

During one such afternoon, she was sitting on a bench by the stream, after abandoning the pianoforte for the library and finally the library for the outdoors, when a voice interrupted her.

“What are you reading?”

She closed the book, keeping a finger in between its pages, and turned it up to show him the title. He moved to stand a little closer, and his shadow fell over her. The sun was behind him, and she could not make out his face.

“The Complete Angler! That is my father’s acquisition, I think.”

“I had not read it before. I find the endeavour of attempting to explain the practical arts in a written form to be interesting by itself. Have you read it?”

“Of course…”

Elizabeth smiled, playfully. “That is, of course you have read it because you have read every book in your library?”

He watched her; she could feel his eyes on her face even though she could not make them out. “Of course I have read it because it is about fishing. Are you enjoying it?”

She thought she heard amusement in his voice, and leaned back a little, attempting to look at him. “It is entertaining enough. Do you remember the tale at the beginning? An angler, a hunter and a hawker…”

“Yes, I think so, why?”

She looked at one side, smiling. “Nothing in particular, it reminded me of you. The hawker accused the angler of being a dull fellow.”

“Pray, when I have accused so any fellow man?”
Looking up at him again, she wished she could see his expression. “You have not, to my knowledge. You are an angler... you would be the one accused, in any case.”

His voice was steady. “Ah, I see; I am the dull fellow.”

Elizabeth decided to change the subject; he would not be able to understand how she had seen him at first, how she had changed her mind, so soon after. “That is not what I meant and you know it. How could I laugh at someone enjoying the sport? I was thinking of how little we understand the pleasures of our fellow men. Few would be able to appreciate how much I enjoyed...”

“You enjoyed what?”

Had Darcy’s voice been a little softer, or had she imagined it? “Our fishing together, of course.”

There was a silence, then, and Elizabeth looked down. She thought that perhaps she should not have said it, it had perhaps violated the terms of their friendship, but she did not know what they were anymore. “And now you see why I hesitated to speak. I have offended you.”

“You have not. I was thinking. Is that why you come out to read this book by the water?”

Now she was amused. She had not thought she was that transparent, had not thought to wonder at her own desire to be outside and by the stream while reading it.

“It could be so, now that I think of it. It was just a very nice place with a pleasant prospect to seat and read.”

“It is a very pleasant prospect,” he said, and sat by her, looking out at the water. “It is also quite filled with trout at this time.”

She looked sidewise at him, not knowing what he wanted. “Do you want me to regret the fact I cannot fish anymore?”

He rested his elbows at the bench’s back and leaned on them, looking straight ahead. “Who said you cannot? It is true we ought to be careful, and you certainly cannot do it here, within plain view of everybody, but I am not everybody. And no one will question me if we disappear across Pemberley’s lands for half an afternoon.” He did not straighten up, only looked at her turning his head slightly. “What say you to an afternoon of fly-fishing?”

She almost demurred—she thought she should be more offended by his sudden amiability after days and days of distance; of only offering her his arm at meals, and making polite, boring talk at dinner. She found she could not.

She smiled—she feared, too widely for indifference—and said, “I say I would be delighted, if you could contrive it.”
Chapter 17

The days that came before Elizabeth’s outing with Darcy passed unaccountably slow. She went about her routine trying to act as she had done previously, but found herself falling into a daydreaming state, wishing time would pass faster. Perhaps she could not be blamed; her only entertainment was ladies’ work and ladies’ talk, and barely any of that. The drawing room was as confining as ever.

Darcy, meanwhile, did nothing that evidenced that they had spoken. She realized he acted the gentleman, and what was more, that he often took her in special consideration, but the social platitudes bored her; she wanted him as her friend, not as a polite if distant host, no matter how charming the latter one was.

She found herself irritating in her disquiet, and wondered at everybody else’s forbearance. But the worst thing for her was not knowing when the outing would be. Darcy had promised to arrange it, but he had not fixed a date, claiming he would decide the moment it seemed they could go unnoticed, or nearly so.

A letter from her father came in the intervening days, jolting her from her other concerns and making her think, again, of him. It filled her with an old, restless anger, that she could not convince herself her father deserved. She was perturbed beyond all possible comfort, her feeling varying from duty to hate and back again—but no, she could not hate him.

He was careless; he was egoistic; he expected that she would love him because he had made her, a modern Prometheus—but most of all, he did not understand. That much was clear from his letter.

Dear E., it begun, how happy I would be to be able to say to you ‘I am glad you are come back, my child.’

And then Elizabeth had to contain herself, least she ripped it in a thousand pieces. When she had just returned to London, perhaps then, such a missive might have been better received by her.

She had no desire to return now; even the confusion, the wretched anticipation that Darcy threw her into, was infinitely preferable to returning to Longbourn and under her father’s power.

She was perhaps as powerless here as there, but there was only one place where she trusted the master to respect her and that was not her childhood home.

So she kept the letter in the bottom of her trunk, out of sight, and waited for Darcy to give her a sign, any sign. How she wished she could go on her own, to be able, in a moment’s notice, to decide that sport was the most agreeable way to spend the afternoon…

Mrs. Annesley’s voice called her, startling her and making her turn away from the window.

“Did you tire of working, Miss Bennet? The day is very beautiful, perhaps…”

“Do not worry about me,” she answered as soon as she could with an even voice, walking back to her seat and picking up her work. “My mind tends to dwell on the outdoors, it is true, but I should work for a little longer still. For what are we aunts, if not for providing our nephews with as many little socks as they can use in a lifetime?”

She thought she had been successful in hiding the bitterness in her voice. The other aunt in the room, Miss Bingley, did not answer, but kept her eyes upon her stitches.
“Indeed,” said Mrs. Annesley with a smile, “it is happy work, is it not?”

Elizabeth readily assented, but she could not avoid returning to her work with less than a smile.

There was silence then; a dullness, to which Elizabeth could not accustom herself, filled the room.

“My brother plans to spend all his day outdoors, Mrs. Annesley,” said Miss Darcy at last, softly, and Elizabeth had to restrain herself to avoid raising her head. “He suggested we returned Mrs. Langworth’s visit.”

“Your brother is all solicitude, concerning himself with our plans,” said Mrs. Annesley, not unkindly, but Elizabeth could perceive she was really annoyed.

“He is,” concurred Miss Darcy, without a trace of irony, and seeing Elizabeth smile, continued in a fit of uncharacteristic boldness, “He is so very considerate with everybody. I wish you thought so too, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth could not but be amused as well as moved by it; she simply said, “Why do you think I do not?”

Miss Darcy blushed and lowered her eyes again. She appeared to hesitate, and when she spoke, it was with even less voice than before. “I—I do not want you to think he is always as he is with you. He does not mean to intimidate.”

“And I am not easily intimidated, so you have no cause for concern, Miss Darcy,” said Elizabeth. She lowered her eyes, feeling Mrs. Annesley’s curious gaze upon herself, and dared not to reassure Miss Darcy further, lest the kind lady suspect something untoward. Not a moment later, Elizabeth began to fear she had, after all.

“Would you not like to come with us, Miss Bennet? Mrs. Langworth is a very pleasant woman, and a principal lady in the neighbourhood.”

Elizabeth did not know how to demur, or even if she should. Darcy had arranged for them to go; did he want her to leave with them? She tended to think he would have said something if he did, but even as she thought herself decided, she doubted.

Only the fact that she had to answer made her speak. “I am sorry, Mrs. Annesley, I should stay in case my sister needs me.”

It was a weak excuse, she knew, as Jane and Bingley rarely left each other’s sides, and never required anyone else’s attention. Mrs. Annesley looked at her steadily for a moment and Elizabeth could only lower her eyes, feeling her colour rise.

Miss Darcy and Mrs. Annesley left soon after, and Elizabeth retired as well, citing the oppressive heat as her excuse. She could not stay with Miss Bingley; in her presence she felt a strange mixture of guilt and pity, and that disgust with her character that had never left her. She could not like herself when in her company, could not avoid thinking she had hurt more people than the ones she had control over, even as she justified herself.

She had flirted, even by the meanest of definitions of the word, and she had enjoyed the confusion she had caused. At the time she had considered it harmless fun, but had she been a man, any man, would it not have been ignoble to awaken hopes she did not mean to fulfil?

Had she been a man perhaps her own responsibility for Miss Bingley’s present state would have
pushed her to make amends, to answer to her family. But the fact was that she was a woman, and there was nothing and no one to make her accountable for her behaviour. Not even her conscience could—as there was no manner, no way she could return to Miss Bingley the suitor that had never existed.

When Darcy finally came looking for her, he was hurried and animated. The knock on her door startled her, and she opened it in high colour, already guessing who would be on the other side.

“Come, we have to leave quickly if we want this to work.”

“What to work?”

He smiled. “You will see.”

He guided her through hallways she had not used before and they reached a door to the stables without having come across anyone. But then, instead of going out, he pointed to a side door and said, “There, go in there and change.”

“What? Why?”

“Did you plan to go fly-fishing in a dress?” He smirked and looked away, but still said, “I am afraid I can imagine only one way for you to keep it dry.”

She blushed and went in without another word; the problem had not occurred to her. Inside the room, over a chair in a corner, she saw breeches, a linen shirt, a waistcoat… in short, everything a gentleman would need to dress himself for an outing. On the floor there was also a pair of high Hessian boots.

She hesitated only for a moment before shedding her dress and underclothes, and then stood shivering, doubting the wisdom of the plan. She could dress the part—indeed, a part of her looked forward to it—but what if she should be seen?

Would not anyone recognize her as Miss Bennet? Would that not invite talk and, finally, expose her? Her very hair would betray her, dressed as it was—and if she should wear it loose and tied back, in the old gentlemen’s style, would she not be looked upon oddly by her maid when she returned? Her hand hovered over her pins, and drew back again; she did not dare do it; she could not have reproduced the style on her own for a kingdom.

But the clothes—she had almost forgotten to feel exposed in women’s clothes, but now that the alternative was possible, it called to her. In the end she could only trust Darcy’s good sense. He would not have suggested it if he thought discovery possible.

When she was almost ready she felt dressed for the first time in months, but also… uncanny. She indeed had started to get used to skirts. There was a knock at the door, and she fumbled the cravat once, twice, before she got it as she wanted.

She opened the door to find Darcy pacing. He stopped in front of her, started to say something, and looked away. She bit her lip; why couldn’t he meet her eyes?

“I am ready.”

“Yes… I…” He still did not look at her, but pulled himself together and started walking again before she could formulate a question. He called back at her, “Let us go, the horses are ready.”
She followed, without answering, her insides in a tight knot, and they were soon jumping on top of the horses and going away. There had been no one in the stables, and no one in the grounds just outside of them; Elizabeth suspected that Darcy had arranged it so.

They were away in moments, riding side by side like they used to. The wind was exhilarating against Elizabeth’s face, dissolving her nervousness, and she could not help spurring her horse forward, faster, until she could smirk in Darcy’s general direction as she surpassed him.

They continued in the same manner until she heard him fall back; she imitated him and saw he was reigning in his steed to a more normal pace towards a small hill. Elizabeth spurred hers until she reached his side.

“Is the place we are going to very much out of the way?”

“Are you asking if we are there yet?” He wore a slight smile, but although it did not anger her, it did nothing to calm her fears.

“I was asking if we were under much danger of being discovered,” she said in an even, low voice.

He lost his smile, and she regretted her words for a moment, and then was angry at herself for doing so; it was her reputation, her life, she was endangering, was it not? She had a right to be privy to his plans.

He was silent for such a long time that she considered apologizing, but had not finished formulating the words when he spoke. “I am sorry. You are right; you should know where we are going.” He paused for a moment, and then continued, “It is an embankment of the river; I do not think anyone goes there but me, so it should be safe enough.”

He had the power to make her hate herself for her hasty words, more than any other person of her acquaintance, and that included Jane. “No, I am sorry. I did not doubt you took care that it be safe. I just—I cannot accustom myself to be in the power of others.”

“You never cared for it, it is true,” he said. He was smiling, and just like that all was right with the world again.

When Elizabeth returned his smile their eyes met, and for a moment she did not know what to do. She looked away, her colour rising.

“There will be a ball at the Assembly Hall, next week. I was considering attending, given that my guests are rather fond of dancing.” Darcy’s voice was casual, and he looked straight in front of him, directing his horse carefully over the rising ground.

“That would make Bingley very happy, I am sure,” said Elizabeth, imitating his tone.

He looked quickly at her and away again, smiling. “It would—he is rather too fond of dancing. Though now that it is not proper for him to dance three times a night with his wife, I wonder if he will find it so.”

“I rather think that the good people from Lambton will be lenient, given they are just lately married.”

“I doubt they would be, when it would mean depriving the local unmarried young ladies from their turn at the floor,” he said, looking at her. He was smiling too broadly for neutrality; she laughed.

She looked at him, glad that with both of them in the saddle the difference in height was not as pronounced and she could meet his eyes effortlessly. “You could be a good friend and take up his
slack.”

He did not respond, but looked at her steadily, with a slight smile.

“I should have assumed you would not; you never liked the amusement too much,” she said, at last, because he did not appear to be about to speak.

His gaze did not move from her. “Indeed; I do not enjoy the activity unless I am particularly interested in my partner. Bingley can have his dances; I would much rather dance mine.”

Elizabeth could only look away and blush. She did not dare to credit her ears, and then she could not make up her mind. Had she heard what she had heard? Had she understood?

She had not decided yet on what to believe when they arrived at their destination, and she had to take care of tying her horse away from the river. She was so flustered, so out of her right mind, that Darcy had to remind her to choose a place to stand where her shadow would not fall across the surface of the water.

She could not look at him, and every one of his normal, casual words—‘here is the tackle,’ he said, and, ‘I do hope my rods leave me in as good standing as yours left you in Hertfordshire’—were weighted and analysed for a second meaning that was not there.

It could not be, she decided; he had meant nothing by it. She could not have believed it of herself, but the moment she concluded so, she felt a fierce pang of disappointment. What a silly creature she was! All this turmoil, this wretchedness—for an offhand comment from a friend.

But—oh! What a relief it was, to be able to immerse herself in sport, in the simple, barely taxing task of letting the fly—the small Hawthorn-fly, Darcy had said, that he hoped would be effective in the bright day—just disturb the surface of the water as it was slowly dragged by the current.

Almost knee deep in the cool water, she could ignore for the moment the heat of the lowering sun; most importantly, she could ignore Darcy’s presence a few feet away, no less distracting, and no less warm.

Moving down the stream, they both had little luck, until the sun fell some more and Elizabeth was called to attention by the nibbling of the fish; she jerked her hand in a smooth movement she had had little occasion to practice in some time, and secured it.

Darcy was at her elbow with the landing-net in a moment, and once she netted the beast, he lost no time in proposing that they have something to eat, and fished with dead rods for a while.

She could not refuse, even as she felt nervous flutters in her chest, and was sure she would not be capable of swallowing a thing.

They sat down not too far from the edge of the water, even though there was no shadow near, and Darcy brought back cold cuts and fresh fruit from his saddle. He also went to recover a bottle of mead from where he had laid it down when they had arrived, secured in a shallow of the river to keep it cold.

Elizabeth lay back, trying to get comfortable with the layers of stiff cloth that were entirely too restrictive. Damn the cravat, in any case! Who was the deuced torturer that had devised it? Those were her thoughts when she felt a shadow fall over her, and—

“Well,” Darcy said, looking down, “Are not we comfortable.”
She thought she could perceive he was amused, and sat up to answer. “Indeed, it is a very pleasant place,” she said, looking up at him. He tugged his cravat, once, and she was amused to note she had imitated him by reflex; their gazes crossed, and held, and he smiled.

“I had imagined that the next time we would find ourselves in this situation, we would have been free to get rid of the damned things,” said Darcy, laying himself by her, both in posture and voice perfectly relaxed.

He was looking over to the water, leaning sideways over his elbow, and Elizabeth was yet again thrown into doubt about his meaning. But there was no time now to guess and fret, and so she said what she would have said if they had been Bennet and Darcy, two friends in a fishing party.

“Why would we not be free to do it?”

There was a silence, and Elizabeth almost bit her tongue. What a stupidly simplistic thing to say, when the answer was self-evident! She almost rose, wanting to leave, but she could not, at least not without apologizing.

She tried to speak in an even and light voice. “It is quite possible that the sun has addled my brain.”

He looked at her, but his expression was inscrutable. “Then it is equally possible that the sun has addled mine; we have both spent the same amount of time under it, if I am not mistaken.”

Elizabeth tried to smile, but could not. His attempt at levity was welcome, but she was too rattled by her own emotions to express it.

“You are right, of course; there is no reason for us to swelter under our cravats and coats,” he said at last, and begun to go about the business of getting rid of them. He did not look in her direction as he did it, concentrating in disentangling the linen at his throat.

After a moment, she realized she had been staring and looked away. If anyone would have asked—no, if anyone would have asked she would have answered nothing—but if she would have had occasion to ask herself, she would have wondered at it. Had she not seen plenty of men in linen shirts, to be enthralled by the sight of a friend divesting himself from his coat?

But she did not then wonder; she looked down and lost no time in imitating him, fingers clumsy on the knots.

After that there was a silence, and Elizabeth fancied that Darcy felt as awkward as her; he kept arranging and re-arranging the food in the space between them. It did not serve to put her at ease in the least.

He served and offered her a glass, and their hands touched a little when he handed it to her. She endeavoured to be calm, and so managed to only smile and colour slightly when he passed her an orange.

The refreshments gave them an excuse to appear easy, eating and drinking, talking very little but with an excuse for it. They hardly looked at each other. When her appetite disappeared, Elizabeth sighed and lay back on her elbows, looking at the sky.

“Do you often come here to fish?”

“At every opportunity during the summer, if I am at Pemberley; it is out of the way and usually well stocked.”
A silence again; how she tired of it!

“We must paint a classic picture, the rods abandoned to fish by themselves and the two fishermen sleeping.”

Darcy did not respond, but she felt him watching her.

“We should return to our rods—your trout seem too acute to be caught with the fly resisting the current.”

“We should,” said he, but his tone was rough; he made no gesture to get up.

“It is your mead’s fault, you know—nothing worse than mead or wine to murder any desire to give up the grassy hill after a picnic. One is too drowsy to—” She talked nonsense, she knew. There was nothing else she could think to say.

“Let us go,” she said, at last, and sat up. She felt his gaze, but did not turn. She did not move again, did not dare move, for some reason.

She felt him at one side and behind her, and she could not repress a shudder when he kneeled, far closer than he had been before.

“We could be quite pastoral,” he said, and his voice was the same rough tone as before, “but for your hair.”

She closed her eyes. She did not know why—she could not think—

His fingers on the nape of her neck, first, softly—so softly, she was not sure they had been. But then they were at her head, at her pins, at her bandeaux, and were pulling them; there was no doubt they were his fingers, carefully removing everything that held her hair high. She did not dare breathe until it was done, and it fell in soft waves just below her shoulders.

She almost did not feel his hands leaving her head, but bowed it, all the same, wanting to avoid his eyes. She felt grateful when her hair fell over her flaming face and covered it. She thought she dreamed a light caress, and then—

“Here,” he said, his voice low, but demanding all the same. “Here; tie it back.”

He took her hand in his and opened her fist, put in it a simple black silk ribbon, and then moved back. She could still feel him breathing; she still was acutely aware of him. She rallied, straightened, and tied her hair back with trembling fingers.

“There, if the observer is not too close, we may pass for regular fishermen.” He still spoke in a low voice, as if it was a secret between them, or as if she might be scared and run away at any moment.

That thought more than anything made her recover, turn her face his way, and ask, “Why, what would an observer that got too close see?”

His eyes tracked her features with unnerving intensity, but she did not turn away. “Nothing amiss, perhaps…”

“Perhaps?”

He smiled—a quick, broad smile—and looked at his hands, which held her bandeaux still. He absently reached and put it away in one of his coat’s pockets. “I do not quite know. You are different
somehow, but I cannot put my finger exactly on where the difference lies.”

She could not imagine, for a moment, what was the problem, and then, blushing, she did. Darcy had not thought to prepare something for her to bind her chest. She had not thought it very noticeable, but perhaps… It would not do to call attention to it.

“It must be the hair,” she said, and then coloured even more, because thinking of her hair made her think of what had happened just before.

“It must be.” He appeared to hesitate, and then said, “I know you received word from your father.”

“I did,” she said, and looked away. She looked back at him after a moment; she wanted to say something more substantial, but did not know where to begin. “He does not understand what he has done, either time—he understands so little, that were I a stranger to him, I would suspect him of wilfully deceiving me about it.”

Elizabeth looked down, not knowing whether to continue or not, but Darcy said nothing.

“He still has this idea of me—of his favourite child. It is not—I know it will sound childish—but it is not fair of him. I cannot hate him because he is so completely unaware of what he has done.”

“Ignorance has never been a valid excuse for a having caused an injury.” He paused, and continued a moment later with more strength, “Hell is paved with good intentions, and in his case, even that—” There he stopped and stood.

She could make no answer. He walked a little, moved away from her, and then turned back.

“Even that—he cannot claim he did not know what he was doing. He cannot.”

She was miserable; she could not avoid reading censure of herself in his words. Should she not have stopped it, when she gained conscience of what they had been doing? Surely she should have. She could not speak.

“You cannot—I cannot believe you think he is an innocent in all of this. He has done you ill—not once, but twice.” He talked in a fierce, low tone.

He paced, never going very far, until he came to stand in front of her again, his silhouette against the setting sun. He was frowning, and in his anger, he was an awful sight.

“Do you plan to journey to Longbourn?”

“I know I should.”

“You know not such a thing. If you want—if you need—to see your father, then go. But you owe him nothing.”

She could make no answer again, but this time it was gratefulness that silenced her, not despair. Darcy crouched down besides her.

“You need not depend on his kindness anymore; he can be nothing to you, if you so desire it. Bingley and your sister, I am sure, would gladly have you in their home forever; Pemberley itself will be at your disposal while I am its master.”

His tone was matter of fact, as if there had never been any doubt about it; even though he was not smiling, she could not help throwing her arms around him and embracing him.
She felt him holding his breath against her, tentatively encircling her in his arms, and then they were hugging, and nothing had ever felt more right. After some moments—Elizabeth could not have said how much time had passed; it was all like a dream—she lightened her hold on him.

“Thank you.” She did not more than whisper the words, but she was sure he heard her. He did not release her, instead falling to his knees and pressing her closer.

She hid her head against his chest, and felt him exhale. “‘Tis almost evening,” he said, his voice not quite steady, “We should be heading back.”

She drew back a little, and he let her go. They were awkward for a few moments, their eyes not meeting, until she spoke.

“I am a selfish creature. My friends and my pleasure all reside here; I do not think I will go to Longbourn, at least not now,” she said, her face warm, with a nervous smile and a quick look up at him.

He smiled back. “No more selfish than I am. I had hoped someone would keep me company and protect me from Bingley’s evil schemes of making me dance every dance with strangers.”

He touched her shoulder lightly, stood, and went to pick up their tack.

She set out herself to gather the remaining food, the glasses and the half full bottle. “You forget that I am rather fond of dancing myself; I would hardly protect you when I am of the same mind as him regarding the entertainment. I see nothing to fear from it.”

They were both mounting when he answered her, with a smile that lightened his features and sent her heart racing. “It was my hope you had not changed in that regard.”

When they arrived at the house, he accompanied her to the room where her clothes remained, and then waited for her outside. He had a few words of advice before parting, regarding what to say to the maid. (Nothing—he had already taken care of it.)

Coming back to the normal run of things was difficult. She could hardly avoid turning towards him with every thing she thought of, and he seemed to be likewise afflicted. They received a few odd looks from Mrs. Annesley, but if she thought something about it, she did not share it, at least not with Elizabeth.

Georgiana seemed to take their new, more public understanding with more pleasure than surprise. Anything like strife distressed her, and their banter had gained an edge of careful consideration that it never had before, which served to avoid wakening her fears.

Though she was progressively more comfortable with her guests, she never appeared so with her role as a hostess, and came down with dreadful head ache the evening of the Assembly.

The Rooms were crowded and merry; so similar was the demeanour of the people attending to her old neighbours that Elizabeth felt more than a twinge of nostalgia.

The Pemberley party caused quite a stir, and there were several families who approached Darcy, taking him away in a whirlwind of older ladies that exclaimed over his presence, and asked after his sister, and introduced him to a virtually endless parade of young ladies.

Elizabeth, who had accompanied Jane to a chair, could not help tracking with her gaze his progress through the crowd—beyond being circumspect.
She saw him talking, in a corner, with an imposing matron, and watched him walk to get her some refreshment. She was distracted for a moment by Jane, and when she turned back she saw him hand back with perfect manners a dance card that the daughter had dropped, and smile at her.

The young lady looked down, coy, and then she said something and handed the card back at him.

Elizabeth forced herself to look away, to pay attention to the man Jane was introducing her to, but her mind was away with him. She could only smile, weakly, and curtsy.

The first dance was about to begin, Jane said, and the man said something else, which she did not hear.

She could not avoid stealing another look across the room.

Their eyes met. She could not breathe, for a moment, until he smiled. She blushed. He looked back at the ladies and said something to them; a perfect gentleman, because Elizabeth saw them smile at each other in complacency.

Jane was talking to the man at her side, but she could not look at them, could not look away from Darcy, at the other side of the room.

He then walked a straight line to her. “Miss Bennet, may I ask your hand for this dance?”

She readily assented, beyond caring about what her happy, rosy countenance would betray.

He offered his arm, and guided her to the formation. The music began soon enough, and there were a great number of couples. Unlike former times, she had no cause to fear that they would be forced to face each other in silence.

Indeed, he began talking almost immediately. “I have always thought the expression particularly curious. ‘To have someone’s hand’, ‘to ask for someone’s hand’.”

“I truly had never meditated upon it,” she said, “but now that you mention it, it is quite curious.”

“It is, of course, symbolic,” he said, affecting thoughtfulness, but not serious at all, “Dancing is, after all, quite the metaphor for marriage.”

She blushed, and looked down, but she could not allow herself to feel intimidated by the subject. “Indeed, the similarities are striking.”

“They are?” said he. “I had only thought that one represented the other in society, not that the activities are related. Do you care to defend your position?”

She could never back down from such a challenge. “You have to agree the parallels are blatant: in both the man has the advantage of choice, the woman only the power of refusal, in both it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution.”

He laughed. “It seems you are right then, or that I was more right at my first observation than I had surmised.” He paused, and then locked their gazes. “Though I hope you will grant me that the seriousness of one commitment is not diminished by the frivolity of the other.”

She could not help herself and said, trying to suppress a smile, “Of course, the sanctity of dancing cannot be understated.”
There was a moment of silence, and then Darcy spoke in the driest tone imaginable. “That is a relief; I should not doubt your respect for the serious matters.”

It was their turn to make the figures then and they went down the dance. Darcy initiated the conversation once they were standing in front of each other again.

“I could not help meditating, how this metaphor of yours—“

“Mine? I merely elaborated on yours, sir,” she said, a teasing smile on her lips. “Do not try to skirt your own blame on the matter now.”

His smile was quick and easy. “Fine, then; mine. I was thinking how it would apply in a case such as ours, where you are protecting me. It is a queer marriage, the one in which the wife must protect her husband.”

He did not lose his smile, but his was an expression she could not quite recognize, and even as she spoke, she was not sure she knew what she was answering.

“I should think that in a true marriage of the minds, any and each of the members of it respond equally for the safety of the other.” Uncertain, she continued, trying to lighten the tone, “Though, indeed, I fear no wife ever has courage to protect her husband from dancing with unknown young ladies.”

“Indeed, few women could,” he said, his gaze intense on hers.

The second two Elizabeth danced with her brother, and the third two with a neighbour of Darcy, a kindly older gentleman which had been introduced to her at the beginning of the evening.

She saw Darcy partnering a very pale Miss Bingley and another lady she did not know. They looked at each other fleetingly whenever the figures made it possible, and once Darcy made a face, making her laugh, and in another occasion he was frowning in prodigious seriousness.

The fourth two Darcy asked her again.

“You are indeed in great need of protection, it seems,” she said as he rejoined her.

“I am surprised you admit it. Was it not you who said that you saw no great danger in the entertainment?”

“No life and death danger, no, but I see you are in the direst danger of losing your good humour.”

They danced. Their hands touched, but they were gloved, and though his warmth seeped through the fabric, still she wished it was not there.

The fifth two, she danced with the son of Darcy’s neighbour, who had asked her before. He was a gay young man, but she could not be comfortable, because in his haste to be agreeable and attentive, he asked far too many questions about her family and her home.

The next two, she was surprised to be asked by Darcy again, but they stayed silent throughout, so she could not be sure of its meaning. He was perhaps only doing what he had said, using her for protection.

Afterwards, Darcy took to the floor with the eldest daughter of Mrs. Langworth. The matron had a pinched look, and watched Elizabeth like a hawk. She suddenly felt the crowd and the many eyes on her, and the lack of the ones she most wanted. The need for fresh air was overwhelming.
The rooms were opposite to the town’s green and she could not breathe until she was outside and sitting on a small bench a little into it, besides a horse-chestnut tree.

Once there, she was easier. She took off her gloves, dropping them beside her. She leaned back on her hands, fingers hugging the cool rock, and looked up at the stars for a long while, struggling not to let her mind meander too much into the reason for her distress.

She did not want to dwell on it; she did not want to recognize that the last days she had come to hope—nay, she would not think it. To think it would make its ridiculousness painfully obvious.

But—Perhaps Darcy could have felt himself attracted, if fleetingly, to an awkward creature like herself, to someone who was neither here nor there, who was never something completely. Not a man, of course, but never a woman either. For herself, she did not hate it. She mourned Edward fleetingly, and she certainly did not abjure what she had become. But for him—for how such an association would be seen by the world—she regretted it.

For how preposterous would it be, for a proud man like him to dwell on it, to travel the path between attraction and desire, from desire to love?

No—she would not dwell on it, she said to herself, even as she thought it, and tears blurred her vision; even as she refused to allow them to fall, eyes unmoving looking at the stars.

Ridiculous creature that she was! Nothing had changed; nothing, except that she had suddenly, forcefully admitted to herself something that she ought to have known months ago.

She heard a noise behind her, and she breathed, deeply, to calm herself.

There was a rustle, and steps coming closer, and a dreadful moment of uncertainty, till—

“Here you are. I wondered where you had gone to.” Darcy’s tone was low, and she heard him come even closer, to stand just behind her. She felt his warmth at her back, and saw his dark silhouette hiding the stars over her.

At last, she turned, straightening and pivoting over the bench. “The rooms are crowded.”

“Indeed, they are. Quite unsupportable I should say; even more after my protector vanished.” He moved, and came to sit besides her, looking over the green. He took off his gloves with unstudied elegance, and laid them down between them, over hers.

She tried to make her tone teasing; she feared it came up brittle. “I thought my work had finished for the evening; for us to dance any more dances would have been quite scandalous.”

“We have already sent the tongues wagging, I am afraid; I was subjected to such a sly but through questioning that I was forced to run. See? I still need protection.”

Elizabeth smiled. “You did not look it.”

“I am a man of great self possession; I never look it. But then again, that does not mean that I never need it. What am I to do, if my champion abandons me to the wolves?”

She could not but laugh. “If I can be so bold, I think you may overstate the danger.”

“Indeed? I should think not—it scared my protector away, and I know her courage rises with every attempt to intimidate her.”
She looked down and smiled weakly, knowing he would not see it. “Your protector was not scared, I do not think,” she said; when she looked up, he was watching her intently.

His hands went to her elbows, and he covered her shoulders with her wrap. She could not turn away; he raised one hand to her face, and trailed a slow line from her forehead to her lips. “Your eyes are bright.”

He did not say, ‘you are crying,’ nor did he ask why, and for that she was immensely grateful. She could have made no answer; she could not speak.

His finger trailed over her lower lip and then Darcy seemed to recollect himself, and moved back. He looked away and stood.

“I can never tell what you are thinking,” he said. “I never know what you will say.”

She breathed out a trembling laugh. “I?”

“You. I had hoped… I had been waiting for this evening.”

“I had, as well,” she said, because it was the truth.

“I wanted…” He came to stand in front of her. “You are so much more courageous than I am—my champion.”

She was about to protest—indeed, she was quite the most cowardly person she knew—but he began again.

“I have wanted to ask since before it would have been prudent—and yet, the fact that I do not know what you think of me… I am your friend,” he said, and stopped.

“You are—but,” and then she hesitated for a moment, until her own recent discovery almost burst forth, “you are so much more.”

She felt the silence something dreadful, and at the same time, she knew she had gone less than halfway. He was listening, and sat again by her side, serious and pale, but said nothing.

“I—words are not enough to express what you are to me; what you have been to me for months now. You say I am brave—I am not. I am cowardly to the extreme. I hid from it, and, even now, hesitate to admit it.”

She took a shuddering breath, and yet he did not answer. She looked down. “I love you—there it is; I have said it. Even those words mean nothing in comparison to what I feel.”

She felt him close and she raised her eyes; his face was almost against hers, his mouth against the side of her mouth. “If I am so to you, then it cannot be a surprise that you are so to me. I cannot lose you, and I cannot hold back any longer. My beautiful champion; my most precious friend; my dearest Elizabeth, will you marry me?”

The happiest of confusions almost overcame her then, but she had no trouble in relieving him from his distressed suspense. She moved, rosy and warm, and kissed him with the fiercest of passions.
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