Mending His Pen

by PutItBriefly

Summary

Ill-conceived letters and a misunderstanding send Elizabeth and Darcy on missions of virtue throughout Meryton.
"Cousin Elizabeth!" bid an entirely unwelcome voice from over her shoulder. Flushed with embarrassment at being caught out and dreading what those unfortunate lips may say next, she turned and in doing so, nearly bumped into her host and cousin, Mr. Collins. "I see you are admiring Miss de Bourgh's hand," he said.

It was true she had been fixated on a letter penned by none other than Anne de Bourgh, but her attention had held no admiration. Miss de Bourgh wrote with a weak, uneven hand. The envelope bearing the direction had blotted quite spectacularly. When Mr. Collins arrived, Elizabeth had just finished her contemplation of the letter's recipient and moved onto the question of if he could ever expect to receive it.

Disregarding the unfortunate appearance of the missive, Mr. Collins's effusions continued: "Such elegance! Finer writing, I have seen only in her mother, Lady Catherine! Of course, such fine paper and ink is rarely seen, and the combination of excellent materials and excellent breeding can only produce an exquisite product."

"I am to the inn," Elizabeth interrupted. Mr. Collins was evidently insensible to all that she wished him to be ignorant of, but that knowledge did not inspire in her any desire to linger. "Have you a letter to post?"

"Indeed, I do!" he said triumphantly, handing her a thin letter with a flourish. Elizabeth accepted it without comment. "It is so good of you," Mr. Collins added, "dear Cousin, to take on this simple task while you are with us. My Charlotte, of course, is an industrious girl and does it herself with nary a complaint each day. Both my humble parsonage and the great Rosings Park benefit from her travels. Even so, the mistress of any house, even one such as this, has many duties. Your contribution, while small, is still a tremendous boon for Charlotte, as the time you have gifted her allows her to accomplish many other tasks!"

"I am pleased to do it," Elizabeth said simply. "I enjoy it."

He smiled, said a few more words in her praise, then many more in Lady Catherine's, and let Elizabeth on her way.

She did enjoy the task. She walked out every morning before breakfast. It was no hardship for her rambling to take her into the village, where she could peer into shop windows or watch the parishioners go about their daily lives. At the inn, Elizabeth would post the letters, pick up all that had arrived for the Collinses or de Bourghs since the previous day and take the long way back, through the grove. As she walked, she swung her reticule. Being filled with letters and coins to pay for postage gave it a satisfying heft. She looked forward to seeing the villagers again. Watching people was nearly as interesting as admiring a well landscaped park. There was always something amusing happening in Hunsford village.

As she walked, she let her thoughts drift, as they so often did, to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Though she was lately accustomed to berating herself on his behalf, to-day she was more concerned with Miss de Bourgh's letter. Mr. Darcy had left Rosings Park not a se'night ago, after spending several weeks visiting his aunt and cousin. It was rumoured Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh were engaged, something that Elizabeth had good reason to doubt. In any case, neither of them had paid the other any particular attention during his visit. She wondered what had caused Miss de Bourgh to pick up her pen and write such a blotted letter so soon after he had left. It was not as though the two had ever been inclined to speak to one another.
Because Mrs. Collins was normally in the habit of walking to the inn twice a day for the post, a footman from Rosings brought all of the de Bourgh's letters each morning. Lady Catherine was of the opinion that a rector's wife must be industrious. Privately, Elizabeth supposed her ladyship did not want to spare any of her own servants for the time it took to walk to the inn and back. Soon after her arrival, Elizabeth assumed the job of posting the mail. Between the two of them, Elizabeth was the one who especially enjoyed walking. It was no hardship to give her rambles a practical purpose.

When the footman brought Miss de Bourgh's letter, Elizabeth had been seized by a mad whim to copy Mr. Darcy's direction. As soon as she was finished scrawling the address on a scrap of torn paper, it struck her - as whims so often did - as a foolish thing to have done. Miss de Bourgh, by consequence of their being related, may write to Mr. Darcy as often as she chose. Elizabeth, of course, could do no such thing. With half a laugh, she had slipped the scrap of paper in her reticule. Mr. Collins had come upon her immediately afterwards, but thankfully appeared not to have noticed. Elizabeth hurried out of the house before he had the opportunity to think much on the scene he had just entered. Alone, her thoughts returned to Mr. Darcy.

She used to amuse herself with hating him. He was rude, overbearing and above his company. She had never heard him utter a pleasant word until one evening, in a fit of lunacy, he professed to love her, Elizabeth, and asked for her hand in marriage. She rejected him soundly. Against all reason, he had responded with a letter. It had been in her possession for five days now, five days that she had spent reading and rereading, until her thoughts about him were all jumbled around. There was very little about him of which she was certain.

First, Elizabeth knew, Mr. Darcy had a respectable character and her former favourite, Mr. Wickham, did not.

Second, though he admitted to being one of the primary forces to separate Elizabeth's beloved sister Jane from her favourite beau, Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth was willing to concede that the greater responsibility for Jane's heartbreak belonged to their family. To Elizabeth, who loved them and was used to their ways, a nervous mother, indolent father and three silly younger sisters were a minor annoyance, incapable of doing serious harm to anyone. Their oft-displayed ill-breeding, irresponsibility and mercenary ways, however, reflected poorly on angelic, serene Jane. To Mr. Bingley's watchful friend, Jane had - perhaps logically - appeared more like a poor girl in need of a rich husband than a lady in love.

Third, these concessions aside, Elizabeth had no desire to ever see Mr. Darcy again.

Yet, her sense of justice was stronger than her dislike of a young man who was more honourable than he was amiable. She had levelled very serious charges against his character, charges he was able to defend himself against. Though Elizabeth knew writing him to be impossible, she still wished for some way to communicate to him that she had credited his words. Copying his direction was a foolish thing to have done, but the desire that lead her to do so was just.

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"Father," Elizabeth said, "I wish to speak to you on a matter of some urgency."

Mr. Bennet lowered his book, but evidently saw no reason to put it down. She squared her shoulders. A request that required he put down his books and pick up his pen was likely to be too much of a chore for her father to do gracefully - if he was willing to do it at all. "What is it, Lizzy? Has Lydia embarrassed you in front of Mr. Wickham?"

She pressed her lips together. "I have embarrassed myself," Elizabeth replied.
That confession was enough to have her father close his book. "And not one of your sisters saw fit to
crow about it? That is urgent, indeed. Shall I send for Mr. Jones?"

"I am in earnest," she protested. Sitting on an unused ottoman, Elizabeth continued, "It happened
while I was visiting Charlotte."

Her father chuckled. "Dear, do not fret if you made yourself appear foolish in front of Mr. Collins.
He is such fine company for it, you can hardly avoid it."

"No," she heaved. "While I was visiting Charlotte, Lady Catherine had visitors of her own." She
hurried on before her father could interject more commentary. "One of them, in fact, is a gentleman
we are all already acquainted with: Mr. Darcy."

"Lizzy," Mr. Bennet said, "do not let that man get the better of you. We all know what he thinks of
country girls. Nothing you can do will change his opinion for the better and I dare say his opinion
cannot be changed for the worse."

"One evening," Elizabeth continued, forcing herself to disregard her father's ignorant words,
towards the end of his visit, Mr. Darcy called at the parsonage. He said some things that I found
offensive and uncalled for, and I responded in kind. I made some rather serious allegations against
his character. At the time, I thought my information to be very good, but have since learned that it
was not. He wished for me to have this better understanding, but as he was leaving Rosings Park, I
was not given the opportunity to tell him that I had received and corroborated the new information
with another, interested party." She had not actually found consulting with Colonel Fitzwilliam as to
the veracity of Mr. Darcy's claims necessary. The information itself was too damning for him to have
invented it.

Mr. Bennet said, "I don't know what you expect me to do about it. Seems a hopeless business."

"I have his London address," Elizabeth went on hurriedly. "I had hoped, perhaps, you could write a
few lines to him to say that I am sorry for what I said."

Her father sighed. "Lizzy," he said, "your heart is too generous. Your words did not wound Mr.
Darcy. He does not need an apology."

"His sense of justice should demand one," she argued. "As does mine. I cannot wrongfully impugn a
man's character, then ignore it when I learn the truth."

"Tis a pity," her father said drollly. "I believe that is the foremost joy in life for most women."

"You would not have a need to write more than five lines," Elizabeth insisted. "I am not asking that
you begin a regular correspondence with him."

"He would not read it."

"If he chooses not to read it," Elizabeth said firmly, "that is his own doing. My sense of justice
demands I try. I cannot write to him myself nor do I believe I will have any occasion in the future to
be in company with him."

Pointing sharply at her with the tufted end of a quill pen, Mr. Bennet said, "Your sisters must not
know of this. They will have me writing to all their young men. Where is that blasted paper?"

Merrily fetching a sheet of paper for him, Elizabeth agreed that she would not share the secret with
anyone.
Before sealing the letter, Mr. Bennet allowed Elizabeth to review what he had written, though under no circumstances would he write another missive. If she was not satisfied with this attempt, she would have to accept that her apology would go unsaid. On a trimmed leaf of paper, it read:

Longbourn, 10th May

Dear Sir,

Forgive my impertinence in writing you. Miss Elizabeth Bennet wishes it be known she is heartily sorry for her allegations against your character. She knows what she said to be false and begs your forgiveness.

With his daughter's approval, Mr. Bennet signed, sanded and sealed the letter. Considerably cheered, Elizabeth walked to Meryton to post all of Longbourn's letters. Free to look upon her dealings with Mr. Darcy with naught but satisfaction, Elizabeth did so.

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Greedy eyes feasting on a letter from aunt Gardiner, Elizabeth dropped the rest of the morning's post into her reticule. She had all but forgotten the other envelopes until, after relating an anecdote from Mrs. Gardiner at the breakfast table, Mary asked, "Lizzy, were there any other letters?"

"Oh, let me see." Her reticule was in her hands in a moment, placed their by a diligent footman. Producing the rest of the post, Elizabeth announced, "Jane, you have one. Mama. Lydia. And Father."

The letters were passed around the table to their owners, where their seals were immediately broken with the exception of one poor packet that was thrown onto the table with a grunt of disgust. Seated at her father's left, Elizabeth snatched the letter he had thrown down. The familiar handwriting filled her with a sense of foreboding. She hardly need turn it over to know its author, but she did so. An elaborate D was stamped in the wax.

Trying to sound nonchalant, Elizabeth wondered, "You are going to read it, Father?"

"Perhaps in a fortnight," Mr. Bennet said, getting up from the table. "Perhaps not. I have nothing to say to the man, nor do I see why he should have anything to say to me."

Elizabeth slid Mr. Darcy's letter into the sheets from Mrs. Gardiner. Tucking them all into her reticule, she looked up to see Jane frowning at her from across the table. When Elizabeth left the table, she was unsurprised that Jane hurried after.

Catching Elizabeth by the elbow, Jane hooked her arm into her younger sister's. "Lizzy," she whispered, "why did you take Father's letter?"

Though she had told not even Jane that she had begged Mr. Bennet to write to Mr. Darcy, now that she had been caught out by someone, there was nothing for it but honesty. "Because I am afraid of what it says."

"Who is it from?"

"Mr. Darcy."

Baffled, Jane asked, "What reason could Mr. Darcy have to write to my father?"

"Before I left Kent," Elizabeth explained, "I learned Mr. Darcy's London address. I am evidentially a
princess of Serendip, finding things that I was not in search of, but nevertheless are very useful. After much thought, I asked Father to write to Mr. Darcy."

"Whatever for?"

The girls had by now reached Elizabeth's bedroom. Shutting the door behind them, she said, "When Mr. Darcy gave me his letter, he immediately walked away. He has no notion at all of if I read it or if I believed him. The history he related of Mr. Wickham and his poor sister...I could not bear the thought of him wondering if I had read it or what I thought. I asked Father to write a short letter stating that I had learned new information and was sorry for what I had said."

"Poor Mr. Darcy," Jane sighed. "He must be wondering what you told Father. I cannot believe my father would be angry at Mr. Darcy for having written you, but surely he does not know Father's temper so well."

Elizabeth sat on her bed, fighting a swoon. "Jane, I could not bear it if Father knew Mr. Darcy offered for me."

"You do not think Father would be upset at your refusing! He does not like Mr. Darcy! Father would not want you to marry him."

"No," Elizabeth agreed, gripping the nearest bedpost with white knuckles. "But if Father knows, Mama will know. He could not resist teasing me for it. A fortune like Mr. Darcy's would cure all of her worries." She swallowed hard. "Mama would not forgive me, nor could she keep herself from spreading all over the neighbourhood. Poor Mr. Darcy," she said, quite insensible to repeating Jane's adage, "A man's failures should not be the stuff of gossip."

"Father likes to tease," Jane admitted, "but he has a greater sense of propriety than you give him credit for. He would not say anything to Mama."

"Jane," Elizabeth said, her breakfast threatening to return, "I think I must read it."

"No!" Quieter, Jane continued, "Father's letters are his private affairs. You cannot open it."

"If it was the letter of someone diligent in their correspondence, I would agree." Breathing deep, Elizabeth continued, "He will not miss it. He will not wish to read it for weeks yet. If, when he wants it, it has become lost, he will be perfectly pleased."

"And suppose Mr. Darcy has written nothing you object to?" Jane suggested. "How could you hide having opened the letter?"

"If Mr. Darcy had nothing to say that I objected to," Elizabeth replied, "he would have nothing to write. Look, this letter is much too large for a simple 'apology accepted.' No, he has written in reference to what took place in Kent."

"Even if he has," Jane protested, "Father does not want Mama making a fool of herself any more than you do. He will be prudent."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No," she said, sliding her finger beneath the wax seal, "He will not."

As she feared, the letter contained a great deal more than an acceptance of Elizabeth's apology. She read it over twice, before hurriedly getting up. With shaking hands she rifled through her own writing desk, pulling out sheets of paper three at a time, dull pens and nearly spilling a pot of ink.

"Lizzy?"
"I have to write back," Elizabeth said, voice trembling. "I have to write back. I have to say no."

Jane drew back the chair at Elizabeth's desk and guided her to sit. Holding her sister's hands, she asked, "Did Mr. Darcy ask Father for your hand?"

Grateful that, at least, had not been the case, Elizabeth shook her head. "He apologised for his conduct. He does not specify what conduct he means - if it is rudeness or his proposal or writing to me...he must have thought I told Father something - but he offers to make amends in whatever way Father sees fit." She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "Father did not ask questions when I asked him to write my apology. He could not read this and disregard it. I would have to tell him everything. It would be only a matter of time before Mama knew. If she did not demand a marriage, she would demand money."

Delicately, Jane suggested, "Perhaps that is the right thing to do."

"Jane!"

"Mr. Darcy must be very sorry for what he has done," she said, "To have offered reparations shows he sees it was wrong. While I do not agree that Mama should try to pressure you to marry a young man you do not wish to marry, he did risk your reputation by writing to you. If a small gift of money would relieve his feelings, all this upheaval and ill-feelings would be put to rest."

"I will not let it be said in London that the Bennets bleed the young men who are so unfortunate as to fall in love their daughters." Having recovered her equanimity, Elizabeth selected one sheet of paper and returned the rest to the drawer. "I shall simply write to Mr. Darcy to say nothing further is necessary. I will post it myself. No one need know I wrote him."

Jane frowned.

"You must not tell anyone," Elizabeth pleaded. "I would not dare write to him myself for anything less urgent, you know that."

"Oh, Lizzy, I wish you would not do this," Jane implored her.

She wrote:

L-, 22nd May

To Mr. Darcy:

In reference to your letter dated 20th May, no amends necessary. Pray do not worry yourself with concerns on my behalf. If you are willing, I am prepared to Forget & Forgive all. I may even do so without your permission.

God bless you,

E. B.
Elizabeth was fascinated by people. She loved their habits, their vagaries, the unexpected choices they made. She liked to watch the members of the small community in which she lived. Their inconsistencies and whims diverted her, but the ways they proved dependable were comforting. Some people were open about their desires or rigid in their routines. It was often a pleasure to accurately anticipate how someone would behave.

Of course, there were exceptions to every rule. The aspect of her sister Lydia’s nature that was able to turn any circumstance into an occasion for flirting was a dull, uninteresting and altogether irksome chapter in her study of character. The entire walk into Meryton had been accompanied by Lydia’s ceaseless stream of information regarding the officers of the _shire militia and their pattern of appearances at the local circulation library. Lydia was confident she could predict what officers would be loitering there based on the days and times of previous encounters.

Lydia’s conclusion to this speech was the pronouncement, “I don’t know why you go to the library, Lizzy. Mr. Wickham is never there.”

To Elizabeth’s way of thinking, the dependable absence of her former friend Mr. Wickham made the library a more attractive destination. “I thought I would borrow a book.”

“If it is a book you want,” Kitty interjected, “Papa’s book room is full of them.”

With a philosophical air, Elizabeth replied, “Yet it does not follow that those are the particular books I wish to read.”

“I suppose you are wanting Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” Lydia said, “What a bore it must be! How does one tire of fun?”

“If you wish to know,” Elizabeth suggested, “you shall just have to read it.”

Lydia shrugged. “They didn’t have it yesterday, so they won’t have it to-day.”

Elizabeth’s curiosity regarding which of Lydia’s friends must have read and praised the poem enough that she herself checked the library for the first volume daily went unvoiced. A figure she thought familiar was hurriedly walking towards the Meryton inn. Though she tried to disregard it as a figment of her imagination and attend to Lydia and Kitty, the figure drew steadily closer and she was forced to admit he was real.

She scarcely mastered her shock well enough to curtsy before exclaiming, "Mr. Darcy! What brings you to Meryton?"

He seemed puzzled. "You, of course."

She pursed her lips. "Whatever do you mean?" His suit had been rejected. His defence of his actions and history had been accepted. She had offered to forget it all. What could there be left to say that had not been said? She had purposefully included a line in her letter to indicate she would put everything behind her without his needing to add anything more.

Mr. Darcy cast a withering look in the direction of her sisters. “Miss Bennet, perhaps we could speak privately?”

“You can have nothing to say to me that my sisters cannot hear,” she replied. “We are not such
friends as to have secrets between us.”

After some hesitation, he said, “I hope we do.”

“We will walk ahead of them,” she conceded. Though she was not eager for a private audience with Mr. Darcy, her previous comments could rightfully concern him. She would not have him think Lydia and Kitty had been told of his failure to secure her hand or of Miss Darcy’s escape from Mr. Wickham.

“Pray what is your destination?” he asked, offering his arm.

Elizabeth took it gingerly. “The circulation library.”

Divided into two sets, the group continued their walk. If Lydia had any further lamentations on the unavailability of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, they had only the less sympathetic ears of Kitty to fall on. As for Elizabeth, her companion retreated into his habitual silence. She was past frustration at his reticence. A month ago, she would have been driven into a fit of pique by his asking for a private conversation and then neglecting to say anything. Now, she felt all the embarrassment of being in his company after her inordinate misinterpretation of his intentions. She could not expect verbose composure from him.

So softly that she could barely hear him, he said, “I received your letter.”

The scant lines she had written did not require a trip into her part of the country. “I am pleased to hear it,” she ventured, not adopting his hushed tones, “though I had not anticipated otherwise.”

"Miss Bennet," he prompted, "what do you mean by writing to me?"

“I asked my father to write for exactly the reasons he expressed. In light of new information, I know some of what I have said to you was false. I thought you deserved to know that I believed you and that I was sorry.” She cleared her throat. “When you wrote back, I thought you seemed perhaps distressed? You have nothing to fear from me, sir. I am entirely prepared to forget everything.”

Cautiously, he said, "Some would take an unmarried woman, of a marriageable age, writing a bachelor to have great significance of another sort.”

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh, sir, I am sorry -- you must allow me to apologise -- I meant nothing of the kind! No wonder you appeared so suddenly!"

He frowned. "I see."

"I am dreadfully sorry!" Though she was sincere in her apologies, the absurdity of such a large misunderstanding threatened peals of laughter that she contained with limited success. “I hope you have not been inconvenienced in any way.” Mastering herself, Elizabeth advised him, “Now you may return to London with relief. No intemperate women have attempted to ensnare you.”

"Relief?" he echoed weakly. "Miss Bennet, your letter gave me hope.” Sounding disgusted, he said, “It seems you have played me for the fool yet again.”

Ire awakened, she bit, "I have done no such thing! I did not intend for you to come riding into Meryton! I only wished for you to know that had I accepted your perspective regarding…” she faltered, "certain things we have in the past disagreed upon."

"And I am to believe that having your agreement in these matters does not affect your decisions?”
"Yes!" she said. "I did not make the choice I did based only in those things. They informed the decision, perhaps, but there were other considerations..."

"You use me ill, Miss Bennet."

"I do nothing of the kind, for I do not use you at all!"

"You should not write to men!" he snapped.

Alarmed, she looked over her shoulder, fearing her younger sisters might have heard him. They appeared engrossed in a conversation of their own.

Under her breath, Elizabeth replied, "You wrote to me, I shall thank you to recall. If I reply, that is good manners and nothing more."

"That may be so, but I would have you remember that I took utmost care to avoid any suspicion being aroused from my letter. I did not send it by the post."

"I may have used the post," she admitted, "but I did not sign it, write out the location or use my stamp. I know Miss Darcy and Miss de Bourgh write to you. You cannot tell me your staff has been scandalised by the sight of a woman’s hand."

"I trusted your discretion when I wrote to you," he replied. "What am I to think when you not only take it upon yourself to begin a correspondence but involve your father as well?"

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, she replied, "I believe most would let the words written inform their opinions."

"If I were to take you at your word and leave for London," he asked, "how long would it be before you summoned me back?"

"I beg your pardon!"

He sighed. "That is the game ladies delight in, is it not? Push suitors away when they come close and tempt them back when they leave?"

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, struggling to maintain composure, "I can assure you I do not know of any such games among ladies. Perhaps that is what girls do in Town, I could not say. I would not dare behave so to a respectable gentleman."

"Miss Bennet, I shall not profess to patience I do not have. I am not at all of a mind to play along."

His stoic insistence that he would not be party to such schemes was an instant relief. She supposed girls in London must have tried something similar with him and found themselves abandoned. If a man must take it into his head that she was going to discourage, flirt with and discourage him again perpetuity, Elizabeth thought herself fortunate that she had a man who would not tolerate it. He would leave. Better and better, he could have all the enjoyment of thinking himself a victim and relish that he had escaped a lifelong connection to the crude sort of girl he apparently thought she was. His heart would heal much faster that way.

She asked, "What shall you do?"

Though she was braced for a tirade about their relative stations and respectability, it did not come. Instead, he said, "All there is to be done is wait for you to tire of it. I suspect it shall not entertain you long if I am not doing my part."
Unable to make sense of that, Elizabeth asked, “And then?”

“All announcements I leave to your discretion, or that of your parents, but when your spirits have sufficiently calmed, we shall marry.”

Her blood turned to ice, overpowering her with a chill she wanted to run from, but could not. Several false starts were necessary before she managed to say, “Sir, you misunderstand me completely.”

He shrugged and gave her to understand that such a response was exactly what he would expect from a girl in her position.

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Jane found her in her room, a borrowed copy of Belinda lying abandoned on the bed. Elizabeth had returned home alone. Lydia and Kitty’s attempts to obtain popular poetry had been happily forgotten when the party was greeted by a trio of officers at the library. Elizabeth and Darcy had left them there and returned to Longbourn, where she persuaded him not to enter with claims of a headache.

"And then what happened?" Jane inquired patiently, after convincing Elizabeth to come out into the garden and explain what had distressed her so.

The tale of Mr. Darcy's sudden appearance canvassed, Elizabeth went on to relate, "He bought a subscription to the library and walked me home."

"It is surprising he should come all this way," Jane mused, not for the first time.

"Arrogant presumption is what it is!" Elizabeth cried. "I have not the faintest idea how one can convince a man their attentions are unwelcome when every repetition further convinces him otherwise!"

"Surely he must listen to reason," her sister insisted.

"Reason," Elizabeth said tersely, "does not support his view of the world. Therefore, reason is at fault."

Jane wondered, "Did you tell him about my father's letter?"

"I did!" Elizabeth agreed eagerly. "He asked why I had Papa write to him. I told him I asked my father to write for exactly the reasons the letter stated!"

Jane shook her head. "No, Lizzy, I mean that Papa never read the letter Mr. Darcy wrote."

"No, I did not tell him that." Elizabeth shrugged. "It hardly matters."

Jane chewed her bottom lip as she considered that, then said carefully, "You or I would not expect Papa to read a letter promptly, but Mr. Darcy cannot know him as we do. It is quite possible Mr. Darcy thinks he did read that letter, and you wrote your response with his permission."

"That is absurd!" Elizabeth declared. "For a parent to allow their daughter to write to a young man is tantamount to acknowledging an engagement."

Jane grimaced, "Yes."

Elizabeth’s indignation faltered, but she soon defended herself. "What I wrote was not a love letter."

With a distinctly apologetic tone, Jane said, "Oh, Lizzy, it was a bit flirtatious."
"It was no such thing! I said I was prepared to forgive and forget our differences and that I did not need his permission to do so!"

Slowly, Jane said, "It was not worded exactly like that."

"Oh!" Elizabeth exclaimed with frustration, "I suppose my wording was a bit high-spirited but I cannot be expected to say it indifferently when I am upset!"

Taking Elizabeth’s hands, Jane replied, "If Mr. Darcy thinks you wrote a flirtatious letter with Papa's permission, can you blame him for thinking as he does?"

Fiercely, Elizabeth said, "He should, at the very least, listen to me when I say otherwise!"

With her brow furrowed, Jane suggested, “If he believes you are attempting to increase his affection by flirting with him when he is away and being cruel when he comes to you, then you can see why he would not.”

Elizabeth assented. "Then I must tell him that my father knows nothing about it as soon as possible.”

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Not knowing when she would see Mr. Darcy next and not being of a mind to let him dictate their encounters, Elizabeth eagerly absconded with Lydia as soon as the younger girls arrived home.

“Lord, Lizzy! What has gotten into you?”

With a crooked smile, Elizabeth answered, “Our unexpected visitor.”

Lydia laughed. “Mr. Darcy seemed rather keen to see you, I should say. Bet you couldn’t be rid of him fast enough! You are not angry with Kitty or I, are you? Because we left you to deal with him yourself?”

“No,” Elizabeth assured her. “However, in my zeal to be rid of him, I forgot to tell him something important.”

Lydia’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, what?”

“Something about Papa,” she said quickly. “It’s more important than it is interesting.”

Lydia groaned. “They probably have nothing to talk about but farmers and labourers and enclosures. How stupid.”

Letting Lydia’s imagination run free with any explanation of her own seemed to Elizabeth to be more attractive than admitting the truth. “Yes, well, I still need to talk to him, you see.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with me. Go talk to him.”

“I cannot just go to the inn and call on him! As you are such friends with so many of the officers, I thought you could ask one of them to call. He should be acquainted with all of them. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy dined with the officers when they were here last autumn.”

Lydia squealed with delight. “No, no, Lizzy, you should ask Mr. Wickham! It will give you an excuse to talk to him!”

Violently, she said, “No, it cannot be Mr. Wickham!” Her force made Lydia start, and Elizabeth finished, “He and Mr. Darcy do not get on well. There will be a scene.”
“That will be a good thing,” Lydia replied. “If Mr. Darcy is shamed publicly, poor Mr. Wickham can get his inheritance.”

To be reminded of Wickham spreading his story of Darcy’s misdeeds throughout the community only reinforced Elizabeth’s desire to put all between herself and the two men to rest. “That would distract him from my father’s message,” she said.

“Oh, I suppose that’s true.” Lydia thought for a moment. “Mr. Chamberlayne would do it.” She grinned. “He does anything I ask!”

The strong friendship that existed between Lydia and the colonel’s wife was such that Mrs. Forster did not at all mind a call so late in the morning. Their inquiries for Mr. Chamberlayne were easily answered and within an hour the party was walking to the Meryton inn.

Lydia’s instructions were to the point: “Go in and ask for Mr. Darcy. When he sees you, tell him Lizzy wants to see him! We will be waiting…” she looked over the shops they passed, “…at the milliner’s. When you come out, we will meet you, and Lizzy and Mr. Darcy can talk about whatever dull things they talk about.”

Though Elizabeth suspected Lydia had chose the milliner’s shop so that she could admire hats and ribbons, it did have a large window. Under the guise of examining some ribbons, Elizabeth positioned herself by the window and carefully watched the inn. Deeper in the shop, Lydia and Mrs. Forster talked loudly about ugly hats and laughed even louder.

Pitying the disappointed hopes of the proprietor, Elizabeth alighted from the shop as soon as she saw the men emerge. She silently promised to return for a ribbon. She had been pretending to examine them for too long to leave the shop empty-handed. Lydia and Mrs. Forster came galloping after her.

Mr. Darcy clearly relished having Elizabeth adorn his arm. “Miss Bennet, I had not expected the pleasure of seeing you again to-day. I hope you are feeling better.”

“I thank you, I am.” Gathering her wits, she said, “Sir, I am afraid I have allowed you to labour under a misapprehension. I think it best to correct it as soon as possible.” Lydia and her friends had returned to the subject of ugly hats, so Elizabeth continued without fear. “My father did not read your letter.” The admission made her oddly embarrassed. She could hear her words grow faster and faster. “He never reads letters if he can avoid it. He said he would not read yours for at least a fortnight. I could not imagine what you would wish to write to him, so I opened it. I replied without his ever knowing. Pray do not think my father is complicit in anything you believe is occurring. He is entirely innocent.”

“Subterfuge does not become you, Miss Bennet.”

“Disguise is your abhorrence,” she said, “so I should think, in your eyes, subterfuge becomes no one.”

He laughed and said, “No.”

His easy acceptance left her pleased with the outcome of the outing. An oppressive weight had been lifted. Until he said, “Though I cannot condone the stealing of another’s letters, I do appreciate the sentiment.” The shock of this statement was augmented by, “In the future, I shall know to write to you directly.”

She gaped at him in complete astonishment. There must be some way to topple his inexplicable presumption.
“Mr. Chamberlayne!” she called, gesturing that the trio of hat defamers should join her party.

With Lydia on his right arm and Mrs. Forster on his left, Mr. Chamberlayne answered pleasantly, “Yes, Miss Bennet?”

“Pray,” Elizabeth said, “listen to this hypothetical situation and tell me what you think.”

Mr. Chamberlayne, though he appeared willing, did not offer distinct encouragement.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Lizzy wants you to solve a made-up problem.”

“Like a game!” Mr. Chamberlayne declared. “That sounds excellent!”

No longer feeling particularly confident Mr. Darcy would accept the opinion of Mr. Chamberlayne (who was making himself out to be more of a fool that Elizabeth supposed Darcy would suffer), she was forced to continue for want of a more sensible young man. “It is a situation of some delicacy,” she said carefully. “I have noticed some men of my acquaintance holding an opinion about young ladies that I cannot countenance. I ask you only so that I may settle this debate with Mr. Darcy.”

Chamberlayne asked, “Well? What is this opinion you dislike so?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Sir, if I tell you, then I shall influence how you think. If you are instructed to take my side, Mr. Darcy will never accept your opinion.”

The two men traded glances. To have a commission in the militia, Chamberlayne may be the heir of a land owner in _shire, but these days, it was just as likely he was not. Either way, she thought it unlikely that Chamberlayne’s people occupied the same place in society as Mr. Darcy. Darcy was as he ever was, stone-faced and silent. What he thought of Chamberlayne was impossible to determine, though she should be very surprised if it was favourable.

“Let’s have it, then,” Chamberlayne said enthusiastically.

“Imagine that a young man has offered his hand to a young lady,” Elizabeth suggested. “The young lady refuses him. What should the young man do next?”

“Well, Miss Bennet,” he sniffed. “I don’t rightly know.” The answer shocked her, and he continued, “Has the lady encouraged him?”

“He thinks she has, but she has not,” Elizabeth said, rather annoyed that Chamberlayne gave any answer that was not some variation of ‘he should leave her be.’

“Well, has she or hasn’t she?”

Elizabeth’s ankle twitched. For the first time in her life, she was jealous of Lydia’s wild, unselfconscious lack of propriety. It was difficult to restrain herself from stomping her feet in frustration.

Exasperated, she looked towards Darcy, trying to divine what it was she had done that made him so certain of her eventual acceptance. The truth remained as murky as ever. “She must have done something,” she grudgingly admitted, “but it was not done for the purpose of obtaining his admiration.”

Offended on behalf of the hypothetical gentleman, Chamberlayne demanded, “How is he to know that?”
“She told him.”

Chamberlayne shook his head. “If she goes around telling him she won’t have him, he’s going to think she will.”

Elizabeth did not bother looking at Darcy. If he had any reaction to that declaration, it would be triumphant and smug. Young men were, apparently, all of the same mind as Mr. Collins. As long as he thinks himself desirable, a gentleman has no hesitance in disregarding insistent refusals. The slight nods of the women flanking Chamberlayne, Elizabeth found hard to accept. “In your view, Mr. Chamberlayne, women cannot be people of their word?”

He shrugged. “There’s no honour in flirting, Miss Bennet.”

She frowned.

Lydia groaned. “Lizzy -- it’s in Shakespeare! Hamlet! ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

“While that is a fine opinion for Queen Gertrude to hold,” Elizabeth said with some resentment, “it does not follow that the lives of all ladies are nothing more than an inaccurate fiction!”

Brushing aside the marked differences between Queen Gertrude and her counterpart, Lydia asked, “It’s still how people behave, isn’t it? If a lady says she doesn’t fancy her beau once, that’s well enough, but if she goes out of her way to say it again and again, in that case, she does. If she really didn’t care for him, she would avoid him, I suppose, or ignore him.”

Mrs. Forster offered, “I do love Shakespeare!”

A slight twitch of Mr. Darcy’s arm pressed Elizabeth’s wrist against his side. He held it for a heartbeat, then relaxed. “He understood the nature of mankind,” Darcy said. “His contemporaries accurately predicted his enduring appeal for it is the knowledge of character that has guided his works, and it is the manifold facets of the human temper that captivate us all.”

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That evening, when Belinda was in Jane’s hands, Mary was working at her book of extracts and Kitty and Lydia were arguing over whose turn it was to read out loud to the family, Elizabeth remarked to her father, “Your daughters read too much.”

Her father raised his eyebrows. “What a peculiar observation, Lizzy.”
An evening’s reflection was enough to convince Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy's presence in Meryton was nothing worth fretting over. All of her efforts to dissuade him had only further assured him that his own assessment was correct. Everyone, from young ladies to the bard, were all agreed: a woman issuing repeated refusals meant to accept her suitor eventually. If her every attempt at an explanation only made him feel more secure, the only thing she could do was ignore him. Mr. Darcy would grow tired of waiting eventually. Even he could not have the tenacity to court the disinterested. When he realised she found his charms lacking, she would lose desirability in his eyes. He would go, congratulating himself on his escape.

Elizabeth did not precisely relish being considered undesirable, but in this instance, she would happily allow it.

However, she was a big enough woman to admit he had some basis for his interpretation. Between unmarried ladies and gentlemen, it was not the done thing to correspond unless they were engaged or related. But, Elizabeth reminded herself, the content and intention behind her letter should inform Mr. Darcy's opinion of it, not the usual forms of polite society. Even society itself was striking her as hypocritical. If a man proposed by letter, a lady was within her rights to refuse by letter. Should a man defend his character by letter, could not a lady admit to her folly by letter?

As long as there was no convincing Mr. Darcy that he had misunderstood, all she could do was go about her daily life without any reference made to him. Meryton was her neighbourhood. The families there were her community. He would not frighten her into hiding at home. Let him be the one to run!

This resolution was sorely tested the very next morning when he spied her as she walked through Meryton. With a relaxed, natural air, he fell in step beside her. Because there was no polite way to ask him to go, Elizabeth wondered how quickly she could turn a conversation to the London Season. He had only two weeks before the Ton deserted Town. Surely there was something more to his liking found there than in a provincial village.

He intruded upon her thoughts by saying, "Your basket, may I carry it?"

Fingers gripping the wicker, she said, "It is not heavy and I am nearly to my destination."

"Then I amend my question: may I ask where you are going?"

"I am to visit Mrs. Long," she said, "and then my aunt Phillips." Providence could not have provided her with a destination less palatable to her unwelcome companion.

Elizabeth expected him to make his excuses, but Mr. Darcy surprised her by asking, "Are your younger sisters well?"

"Yes, they are very well, thank you," fell out of her mouth by rote. While she could not fault him for making the inquiries, the sudden shift was unexpected.

"And your parents?" he added.

"Yes, they are all in good health."
"I am surprised your sisters are not accompanying you," Mr. Darcy said. "I understood all of you frequently visit Mrs. Phillips."

She nodded in understanding. Mrs. Phillips' salon was one of the more popular rooms in Meryton. The variety of guests attracted the younger girls while familial duty pressed the elder ones into attending to their aunt. "Jane is wanted at home," Elizabeth explained, "to tend to my mother."

"Your mother is well, I thought," he said, puzzled.

"My mother is well," she affirmed. "This morning, however, she has convinced herself she is not. She shall change her mind should someone call." Elizabeth paused to give Mr. Darcy the time to disparage her mother. If he reminded himself of the unsuitability of the Bennets, perhaps this could end sooner.

"My sister Mary," she said pointedly when he was silent, "believes exertion should be equal to its reward." For effect, she hefted her basket. "I am afraid she does not see much reward in bringing vegetables to old widows."

In a swift motion, Mr. Darcy took the basket from her hand. She gaped at him.

"I see no reason for a lady to exert herself to carry a heavy load when there is an able man with her," he said primly. "As for Miss Mary, is not charity it's own reward?"

"Indeed, it is," Elizabeth agreed, gaily swinging her liberated arms, "but Mrs. Long has two nieces who will wish to discuss ribbons and lace for an half hour at least. I am afraid in Mary's view, the exertion of frivolity far outweighs the spiritual rewards of charity. She is the sort who would rather reflect on scripture than act on it."

"The characters you have attributed to your mother and sister are harsh indeed. Pray do not feel you must account for all of your family."

Elizabeth tutted. "You have challenged me, sir! And so I must say something daring." She thought for a moment. Though she wanted to scare him off, he had already chided her for her impertinence in sketching such characters for Mrs. Bennet and Mary. Her entire family often seemed determined to show themselves off as fools, but to imply that she thought them such was insupportable. But as her family was one of the things Mr. Darcy was so repulsed by, should she not remind him of it? She warred with herself, torn between saying something outrageous for his benefit or demurring from anything further for theirs. She settled for what was outrageous, truthful and would have Lydia burst into uncontrollable laughter had she been present: "As we have begun speaking of scripture, I shall continue in that vein: my sister Lydia is not normally in the habit of listening to anyone, so my first instinct is to conclude she has never heard scripture. Upon reflection however, I must concede that she is familiar with the Song of Solomon and has great hopes of employing it as a practical guide. And if she has cause to do so before any of her older sisters, all the better."

Elizabeth watched Darcy's reaction to her statement with a sort of proud mirth. He grew very red, then half-coughed something barely intelligible about the union of Christ and his Church.

Soon after, they arrived at Mrs. Long's rooms. Elizabeth said, "You do not need to accompany me inside." She reacted for the basket, but he did not relinquish it.

"And if I should chose to?"

Elizabeth bit her lip. Mrs. Long was too good a woman to harbour dislike for her fellow man, but that did not mean Mr. Darcy was much favoured by her family. She had infamously sat with him for
half an hour at an assembly, apparently offending him by daring to speak.

Cautiously, she bid, "Are you acquainted with Mrs. Long?"

"The name is familiar," he admitted. "I cannot recall her face."

Elizabeth could not be surprised. Had he known she was to visit the woman who had angered him, perhaps he would not have come all this way. "If I am not mistaken," Elizabeth said, "you were introduced at the assembly when you first arrived last autumn."

He shrugged. "I sought few introductions at that ball. I do not believe she was among them."

She was surprised he sought any.

"No," Elizabeth pressed, "now that I think about it, I am absolutely certain I saw you speaking together."

"She is a widow?" Elizabeth nodded. "My apologies, Miss Bennet, but I do not recall seeking an introduction to a widow."

"You were sitting together. For some time, I think. Perhaps even as long as half an hour."

The light of recognition was in his eyes. "You refer to the woman who spoke to me without the benefit of my seeking an introduction. I found her behaviour quite rude."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "Mrs. Long is the widow of a vicar who served our community for nearly thirty years. She is your elder, sir, and a highly respected woman. Sir William would have been eager to present you to her." He must not have been paying attention.

"I suppose you would wish I beg her forgiveness for her own impertinence?"

"Sir," she said through gritted teeth, "I would have you refrain from speaking for me. Mrs. Long is a respectable elder of this community. That she has had the misfortune to lose her means of support and has been further made to take on two nieces when she can scarcely provide for herself does not make her less worthy of her neighbours' notice. If you cannot speak to her with the respect she is owed, then I must insist you not accompany me into her home."

"Forgive me; I had not known her situation in life."

"You would have known if you had attended to her. Is it your usual practice to disregard your elders?"

"Lady Catherine is among my elders," he reminded her. "I often find it necessary."

"Lady Catherine is unique among women," Elizabeth replied, trying not to smile, "for she seldom requires a response. I am afraid Mrs. Long always expects one."

"I shall endeavour to give her one. Her nieces," he wondered, "have I been introduced to them without my knowledge?"

Like most young ladies of Meryton, Harriet and Penelope Harrington had thoughts of officers dancing in their hearts. They would be too young, too poor and too intimidated to be in company with Mr. Darcy. Between his behaviour towards their aunt and his reputation in Meryton, they probably sorely disliked him.

"I do not believe so," Elizabeth answered. "Miss Harrington is the elder. Her younger sister is Miss
Penelope.

"Those names are not familiar to me."

"They spend much of their time with my sister Lydia and the officers."

"Why does Miss Lydia not accompany you on these visits?"

"If Lydia was to be forever reminding them how much better her situation is than theirs, it would not promote friendship. It would be a difficult thing, to be friends with someone who did not let you forget your inferiority." She caught his eye, held it as long as she dared, and was left wondering if he knew how offensive it was to be treated like she was beneath him. Turning away, she said, "Shall you come in?"

"I should like to pay my respects, yes."

Mr. Darcy rapped smartly on the door. They were admitted by a maid, who brought them to the sitting room. Mrs. Long and her nieces were at their needlework when Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet were announced. Curtsies and bows were traded and the basket disappeared in the hands of a footman.

Penelope, 17 years old and the youngest in the room, was the first to recover from the shock of Mr. Darcy in their sitting room. "Miss Eliza," she squealed, "I have been trimming a hat that you must see." She all but threw down her embroidery and pulled Elizabeth by the hands into the hall.

Once out of earshot, she hissed, "Miss Eliza, why is Mr. Darcy here?"

"He wishes to speak to your aunt."

Penelope scoffed. "That man doesn't wish to speak to anyone unless it is to ruin them! Did you hear about poor Mr. Wickham?"

"I did," Elizabeth answered. "I found it peculiar that Mr. Wickham chose to blacken another man's name when that man was no longer in society. He cannot defend himself."

"Of course he had to wait! Gracious, Miss Eliza, you know what he did to Mr. Wickham when poor Mr. Wickham had done nothing to him! Can you imagine the revenge he would take if Mr. Wickham told anyone the truth and he was still in the neighbourhood to hear of it?"

Penelope had such earnest eyes. Though Mr. Darcy had entrusted his story to Elizabeth, it was not hers to tell. She said, "I do not believe the friendship between two men is something ladies will ever understand, Pen. Perhaps it would be best if we refrained from judgement. We do not know the particulars of the transaction."

"We know enough!" Penelope insisted.

"What a dangerous idea that is," Elizabeth observed. "To decide you know enough without knowing what it is you do not know!"

"Huh?"

Elizabeth smiled tightly. "An observation. Do not let it trouble you. Have you the hat?"

Penelope blinked owlishly. "I am not really trimming one," she pouted. "I only wished to speak with you."
"It shall look rather odd if we return without one."

"I have an old bonnet I can pull apart," she said.

"Fetch it, please," Elizabeth requested. "I do not wish to leave your aunt and sister entertaining Mr. Darcy."

Penelope clucked. "Do you remember when he was so rude to my aunt at the Assembly!"

"That is precisely why I am concerned," Elizabeth said, looking back at the room she had left her hostess and the unpopular guest in.

Penelope hurried off to find the hat, allowing Elizabeth to return to the sitting room. She found Mrs. Long bravely attempting a conversation with Mr. Darcy. Harriet, who did not seem to have regained her bearings, was watching them with an air of suspicion. Elizabeth found a place on the sofa near the elder sister.

Penelope returned to the room brandishing a ridiculous straw bonnet adorned with fruit. She laughed. "Isn't it the ugliest thing you have ever seen? I thought it would look well with a ribbon." She dropped herself onto the sofa attacked the hat. Harriet retrieved a basket of ribbons and the three women set to work on salvaging the unfortunate bonnet.

"...such a charming young man," Mrs. Long was saying. She and Mr. Darcy must have covered the topics of the roads and the weather while Elizabeth was in the hall with Penelope. "Will he come back to Netherfield?"

"I find it unlikely," Mr. Darcy answered, shifting on his chair.

"Dear Miss Bennet," the old woman sighed, "Such a pretty girl and so charming. I cannot say I understand how any young man could prefer London to a girl like Miss Bennet."

"Mr. Bingley has many demands on his time," Mr. Darcy said stiffly.

"And you, sir? Are you not so busy?"

Elizabeth, who never had much of an eye for trimming, fished a yellow ribbon from the basket. Mr. Darcy was answering Mrs. Long's question: "I find my most pressing concern is local."

"Where are you staying, sir?"

"The inn."

Harriet elbowed Elizabeth. She unrolled the length of ribbon and compared it to the hat. Paired with the straw, it had an understated effect. Frowning, she noted that it was much too short.

"Oh, no," Mrs. Long was saying gravely. "That inn is much too draughty. Do you not find it draughty?"

Mr. Darcy shrugged. "Not any more so than any other inn."

"How long did you say you will be staying?"

"I had not."

"You cannot stay more than three nights at that inn. Sir William will be happy to have you stay at
Lucas Lodge. You would do much better to stay with a good family."

Penelope yanked the ribbon out of Elizabeth's hand, rolled it up and tossed it back into the basket. "You aren't attending," she whined. "You're the one that wished to have it here."

Elizabeth blushed. "Forgive me, Pen. My mind is elsewhere."

Harriet went back to the basket, searching for a longer ribbon.

Elizabeth fixed her eyes on the hat, though her ears continued to listen to the other conversation. Darcy had finished whatever deferment he must have made. She could not picture Mr. Darcy imposing himself on Lucas Lodge. He was saying, "I cannot yet say how long my business will keep me in Meryton. It is my hope for a speedy resolution."

"Mr. Goulding has a very nice house," Mrs. Long said.

"Miss Eliza!"

Elizabeth turned to Penelope. Her hat was adorned with a pink ribbon. "I asked you three times what you think of this!"

With a faltering smile, Elizabeth said, "I think it a vast improvement."

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Thirty minutes, an empty basket and a trimmed hat later, Elizabeth escorted Mr. Darcy from Mrs. Long's parlour. He had been neither amiable nor easy, but he had been civil. She had monopolised the attention of the two Harringtons. He had not had to contend with silly young girls, whether it be their fawning or their derision. Though Mr. Darcy had been spared the open disdain of Harriet and Penelope, they were not the only people in Meryton to have heard and believed Mr. Wickham's tales of woe. His importance would protect him from the ire of anyone with sense, but good sense could be hard to come by.

When she first learnt of Mr. Darcy's side of the story, of Mr. Wickham's lies and true character, Elizabeth and Jane had agreed not to spread the news around Meryton. With Mr. Darcy returning to the neighbourhood unexpectedly, something may have to be said in his defence. It was one thing for Mrs. Long or her nieces to be displeased by his treatment of them but another thing altogether for them to believe slander.

"Miss Bennet," Mr. Darcy said, intruding upon her thoughts, "may I commend you for your behaviour?"

"Pardon?"

"If I am not mistaken," he continued, "you do not care for frivolities such as hats or ribbons, either. Yet, you do not use that as an excuse to justify not giving Miss Harrington and Miss Penelope your time."

Self-consciously, she fingered the bonnet ribbon tied under her chin with her free hand. Now that the basket was empty, Mr. Darcy had graciously allowed her to carry it. Her thoughts tended not to her burden, but to the parlour they had just left. Had he noticed she was not paying much attention to the sisters? "I like hats as much as anybody should," Elizabeth said, "it is only, that one was particularly ugly."

He laughed. "My observation is not made only on the basis of to-day."
"Oh?"

"I have noticed while in company, you frequently do not attend to your needlework."

She bit her lip. Needlework was so mindless it was considered the ideal activity for ladies during a social call. Elizabeth's feelings on it were rather different. It was difficult to force oneself to do something so dull when conversation was so much more engaging. At Netherfield, she read in the evenings. At Rosings, she had played. "How observant you are, Mr. Darcy," she remarked wryly.

"Ladies like Miss Penelope are often pulling their bonnets to pieces and making them up new or retrimming their gowns. You rarely do either."

She forced out a chuckle. "Sir, I must confess, I had not known you to be such an avid observer of ladies' habits."

"Is it surprising to you I find your habits something of interest?"

Given that he had a history of staring at her and listening to her conversations, she could not honestly say it was. "Perhaps that you have something to compare my habits to."

He smiled in a way that made her suppose he found that remark pleasing. Did he think she was jealous? As much as she did not care to discuss her feelings on any subject with Mr. Darcy, some confession must be in order, lest he continue to misinterpret her. "It is true that needlework is a skill I do not enjoy. I do not give it the attention I should. Perhaps that is why I am rarely pleased with my results, and do not retrim my hats or my gowns until I must." Elizabeth shrugged. "Though I know what Lady Catherine would say on the subject, I prefer to employ my time elsewhere."

"None could censure you for it. You employ your time serving the community."

She bobbed her head in a nod, then said, "I hope visiting Mrs. Long was not mortifying to your feelings."

"Pardon?"

"It cannot have been how you would choose to spend your morning."

"Miss Bennet," he said, "do you believe me to be unwilling to assist the poor? The poor of any community depend on the landowners to help them. That is as true in Derbyshire as it is here."

She had not meant to offend him. Attempting to alleviate his wounded feelings, Elizabeth said delicately "Surely, you do not visit them yourself."

"Not with any regularity," he admitted. "I am not in the country above half the year. However, my labourers assuredly have bread on their tables. The families living in genteel poverty in the village, like your Mrs. Long, receive their due from me. Had I known her situation, I would have called upon her last autumn."

Chastised, she was quiet.

He slipped the basket from her hand and in doing so, squeezed her fingers. Apparently, she was forgiven. Had she not wished to offend him? Success should not make her dismayed.

"You are to Mrs. Phillips'?" he said softly.

"Yes."
"Shall I accompany you?"

Aunt Phillips was the daughter of one attorney and the wife of another. She had not the uncensored behaviour of her sister Mrs. Bennet, but that was to be attributed to her lack of children and resources rather than a natural inclination to be modest and sensible. Mr. Darcy's attention to the widow Mrs. Long was very admirable, but Mrs. Phillips had a husband to provide for her and no children to cause difficulties.

"If that is your wish," Elizabeth said. Predicting his wishes or habits was well beyond her capacities. Of course, the behaviour of her aunt was not the only thing to make Mrs. Phillips' salon an unpalatable destination: "However, you must know my aunt frequently entertains the officers. I cannot promise you that Mr. Wickham will not be there."

"I understand the _shire is to leave Meryton soon."

"Rejoice, sir, they shall not stay another week complete."

"I cannot abide being in company with the man," Mr. Darcy said darkly. "I would prefer you adopt that opinion."

Elizabeth frowned. "I am going to see my aunt. If I am so unfortunate as to be in company with any men of vicious propensities, it shall not be by design."

He considered that and said, "If you prefer it, I shall come in. I would not have you think I choose to abandon you for the mere possibility of being in company with him."

It appeared to Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy wished for an invitation to continue following her. Even a man as convinced as he that refusals heralded an engagement must desire signs of regard. She could hardly do that. Conversely, his desire to avoid Mr. Wickham was equally understandable. Elizabeth had not actually seen them in company together since the day they met on the street. Mr. Darcy had left soon after. Looking back, she could now recognise the lengths Mr. Wickham went to avoid him until Darcy left the neighbourhood. If Mr. Wickham was not chasing girls at the library, he would be chasing them at Mrs. Phillips’, she knew that. Elizabeth could not find any reason to ask Mr. Darcy to do something as deplorable as feign civility towards Mr. Wickham.

Elizabeth said the only thing there was to say, which was, "I shall not feel abandoned. You may find a more agreeable way to spend your morning without fearing censure from me."

Though it could have been only in her imagination that his shoulders sagged with disappointment, she offered her hand in consolation. Under the circumstances, allowing him to kiss the kid leather of her gloves was inadvisable, but she found herself doing so anyway.

She walked into Mrs. Phillips' parlour unescorted. As fate should have it, Mr. Wickham was there. Upon his drawing close to her, Elizabeth indulged herself by immediately sharing the news of Mr. Darcy's return to Meryton.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Any relation between the title of this fic and the nickname of a character appearing in this chapter is entirely coincidental. Please do not try to find any significance in it. There shall not be a surprise Darcy/Pen Harrington pairing or anything
like that. Beta'd by JrTT and SMAW.
By that evening, the news of a certain gentleman’s return to Hertfordshire spread swiftly throughout the neighbourhood. In a provincial community, gossip was of interest to everyone and news travelled across many tongues. Mrs. Long’s information was soon verified by the innkeeper’s wife. Tender-hearted young maidens sought confirmation from the officers of the _shire militia. The men gravely gave the bad news:

*Mr. Darcy* had returned to Meryton.

Proud and above his company, Mr. Darcy’s society was wished for by no one. First among his crimes was the ruination of all the hopes of Mr. Wickham. Girls whispered Mr. Darcy had come for revenge. Men feigned knowledge of financial speculation. Mrs. Bennet condemned him for appearing though his friend Mr. Bingley did not.

And Elizabeth Bennet listened, quietly relieved.

Gossip linked Mr. Darcy’s name to Mr. Wickham, to Mr. Bingley, to bankers and landowners she had never heard of and half suspected were fictional; but although she had spent two mornings with him, the gossip never mentioned Elizabeth’s name. It should be impossible for a Bennet to walk with an eligible gentleman without anyone’s noticing. They had gone to Mrs. Long’s rooms together. Her well publicised dislike of the man must have saved her. Mr. Darcy was a man so disagreeable in the eyes of Meryton society that it was only natural he should attach himself to the person least inclined to tolerate him.

She was deeply grateful for her past silence. Had she arrived home from Kent eager to defend him from Mr. Wickham’s charming defamation, she could not have been safe from the romantic presumption that so often sprung from a young man and young lady being in frequent company. Mrs. Bennet still thought of Mr. Darcy as the hateful man who slighted her daughter and thought nothing of country life. If she had any idea of his being a moral gentleman with a tendre for her daughter, he would be a house guest at Longbourn before Elizabeth had time to protest.

She did not care to imagine Mr. Darcy at the breakfast table. She could not bear the thought of Mr. Darcy in their best guest room, a place of honour last occupied by Mr. Collins. Mr. Darcy smoking her father’s cigars, drinking her father’s best brandy, reading aloud to the family after dinner… If Mr. Darcy intended to pressure her into a marriage, he must know her mother would be his greatest ally. Elizabeth had been saved by a very fortunate mutual dislike.

The morning after her charity visit to Mrs. Long, Elizabeth elected to stay at home with her mother. Gossip was Mrs. Bennet’s favourite pastime and Elizabeth hoped to be kept apprised of anything said about Mr. Darcy. Although she told herself she was not hiding from him, it was clear that remaining at home was the wisest course. When she had gone into the village, she had met him.

Elizabeth sought refuge in the music room, waiting for callers and news. She had not the disposition of a disciplined performer, but her excited spirits enabled her to pound out notes for above an hour. She did not leave her sanctuary until Lady Lucas arrived. Having lost her oldest daughter to marriage, Lady Lucas brought her younger, sillier children with her. Had pragmatic Charlotte been happily single and at home, Elizabeth suspected her friend would have advice she would not care to hear.
Elizabeth joined her mother and sisters in the parlour to receive their visitors. Gossip and sewing were the order of the day. None of the Lucases had learnt anything new about Mr. Darcy since last night. This did not stop Lady Lucas from repeating all the same information she had related over dinner yesterday. Just as last evening, Mrs. Bennet answered her friend with lamentations of Mr. Bingley. Why could it not have been he who returned? The neighbourhood would prefer it. She could not blame Jane. Jane had tried her best to secure him.

Mrs. Bennet's insistence that Jane was not at fault for the loss of Mr. Bingley's companionship or his 5,000 pounds a year had the curious effect—as it often did-of inspiring an air of contrition in her eldest daughter. Jane had not pursued Mr. Bingley with all the determination of Charlotte Lucas making a conquest of Mr. Collins. Jane had been demure and shy, concealing her feelings admirably. Her meddlesome neighbours had no right to her heart and she had locked them out of it.

Elizabeth had decidedly more pity for Jane's heartbreak than Mr. Darcy's. Jane suffered quietly, refusing to injure any other person with her disappointed hopes. She remembered Mr. Bingley with fond words and praise when remembrances could not be avoided. When discouraged, she retreated. Mr. Darcy had not been so agreeable. These meditations on the correct way to be disappointed in love were put to an end by Mrs. Hill. The housekeeper conferred briefly with Mrs. Bennet, who then made a valiant attempt to throw the entire household into chaos.

"That Mr. Darcy is come!" Mrs. Bennet declared. "He has been shown in to wait on Mr. Bennet even now! I should like to be in that room, yes, indeed! Mr. Bennet will tell him what we have all wished to!"

"My father is not insensible to the demands of deference and rank," Jane said quietly. Her fingers stitched steadily. "Mr. Darcy honours my father by calling on him."

Elizabeth's own hands curled themselves into fists around her scissors. No longer able to contemplate cutting thread, she wondered what the men could be discussing. She had told Mr. Darcy her father had not read his second letter. He should not make direct reference to it knowing it had gone unnoticed. But suppose he felt it necessary to repeat what he had written in person?

"You know what he said about our Lizzy!" Mrs. Bennet howled. With a shake of her finger, she insisted, "Mr. Bennet shall not soon forget that!"

Elizabeth squealed suddenly. "I cut myself on my scissors," she admitted to the many sets of eyes on her. "Pray excuse me."

Jane followed her out of the sitting room. "Are you bleeding? Shall I fetch my court-plaster?"

A thin line of blood marred the pad of Elizabeth's ring finger. "I do not believe it requires a plaster. I had not been attending my sewing. It is a much wanted lesson." She sucked on her finger, appraised it and finding the line of blood to be collecting again, returned the finger to her mouth.

The sound of Jane's sharp intake drew Elizabeth's eyes upwards.

Mr. Darcy was staring at her, red in the cheeks.

"My sister cut her finger," Jane said swiftly.

"I have court-plaster," Mr. Darcy said, "Shall I cut you a piece?"

"No," Elizabeth said, "No, I thank you. It is a small cut. The bleeding has nearly stopped."
"I understand you called on my father," Jane said, turning to Mr. Darcy.

"Yes. I had also hoped to pay my respects to Mrs. Bennet. Is she at home to callers?"

"Indeed, she is. She is with Lady Lucas and her children now, but I am sure the party would be pleased to have you join them." 

Jane lead the way to the sitting room. As she opened the door, the end of a speech by Mrs. Bennet travelled into the hall. It sounded suspiciously like, "...never get a husband!"

"Mama," Jane said, stepping inside, "Mr. Darcy would like to see you."

Though any man, even those worth 10,000 per annum, could expect only the disapprobation of a woman whose child he slighted, those feelings were easily forgotten when he paid his respects to the mother. Primping her hair, Mrs. Bennet bid, "Show him in, Jane!"

Mr. Darcy entered, and lingering near the doorway, bowed. Elizabeth slipped in behind him and returned to her spot on the sofa. The handkerchief she had been working on was in pitiful shape, creased and stained with blood. As she smoothed the wrinkles, Elizabeth felt the cushion beside her dip. She raised her eyes to Mr. Darcy, who had not sat until he was able to pick a place near her. His eyes were fixed on her hands.

She had been safe from the gossip so far, but that could not continue to be the case if he stared at her in her own mother's sitting room. When the usual inquiries about the weather and the roads were made and over, Elizabeth said, "Mr. Darcy, I simply cannot suffer to stay indoors when it is so beautiful outside! Would you oblige me to take a turn in the wilderness?"

He received the invitation with an eagerness that made her heart sink. In trying to prevent her mother's effusions on wealthy and lovesick young bachelors, she had given his expectations cause to rise. Perhaps on Mr. Darcy's grand estate, the wilderness was a suitable place for lovers to do whatever it was he thought to be adequate love making, but her father could only boast of three trees on his.

"Kitty," Elizabeth said, stuffing the wrinkled, stained handkerchief into her workbag, "do come with us. You were saying only yesterday you hoped to take exercise to-day."

Although she looked like she had swallowed something particularly foul, Kitty was made to agree. Mr. Darcy's hopes appeared sufficiently dashed and the selected party promised a disagreeable outing. It would have to do.

Once the trio had begun trampling through Longbourn's uninspired grove, Kitty fulfilled her sister's prophecy of unpleasant conversation by asking Mr. Darcy the same question her mother had asked everyone else: "Why is Mr. Bingley not come back?"

Although he had a lady on each arm, Mr. Darcy shrugged.

"Does he know you are come back?" Kitty pressed.

"You misunderstand the matter, Kitty," Elizabeth burst. "Mr. Bingley reports to Mr. Darcy, but he will settle for nothing less than complete independence from the wants of others."

"Mr. Bingley respects my opinion," Mr. Darcy corrected, terse. "When he asks for my impressions, I give them."

"I do not understand your meaning," Elizabeth replied. "Are we to understand you did not inform
Mr. Bingley or that you are not interested in his opinions, but he was given every opportunity to express them?"

Kitty looked afraid. Elizabeth wished she had brought a braver companion. She would not have forced Jane into the company of the man who stole her beau, and Mary could not have been so easily pressed into leaving her studies. She should have brought Lydia.

"I shall not be made to defend words I did not say," Darcy answered. "You may choose to profess opinions that are not your own, but it is not a predilection I share."

"Did you inform Mr. Bingley of your intentions?"

"I did not."

"Why?"

Darcy hesitated before answering. "Miss Bennet, I would not inform anyone of my intentions until given permission to do so."

Elizabeth blushed. Of course Darcy could not tell anyone he was following her to Hertfordshire. Until the engagement was settled between himself and her father, it would be improper to speak of it. "Of course," she murmured, hoping Kitty would consider anything odd about her reaction to be embarrassment at being found too impertinent. "Please accept my apologies."

"It is true," Darcy conceded, "I am not accustomed to having my movements restricted by others. Even if I had all the freedom to speak of my intentions that I might wish for, the opinions of other parties are not something I relish. Tempers that are easily persuaded may be seen as more amiable than those otherwise, but I prefer my own counsel. This is, perhaps, a failing in the eyes of some."

"You sound as though you are up to something very wicked, Mr. Darcy," Kitty sniffed.

Privately, Elizabeth agreed. But she said, "Mr. Darcy is simply reminding me of a conversation we had with Mr. Bingley some months ago. He believes it is not a virtue to be easily persuaded and that if your friends ask you to do something, you had best do the opposite!"

"Lizzy asked me to take a turn with you! Mr. Darcy, would you like me better if I had refused?"

"I find the most admirable characters to be those with a strong sense of purpose," Darcy declared. "To be dissuaded from your own convictions is no virtue."

"I would much rather go inside," Kitty admitted. "Lizzy made up all that about exercise. I never said that!"

"Let your own mind be your guide, Miss Catherine."

Kitty happily took this tacit permission to drop his arm and return to the house.

"Very opportunistic," Elizabeth observed. "You chose your target well. I do not believe that would have worked on someone who is not afraid of you."

He shrugged. "I should like to have some time alone."

"I should like to know the truth about Mr. Bingley."

That gave him pause. "I have been candid, Miss Bennet."
"With me, perhaps, but not with your friend. You seek a connection to the same family you told him was unsuitable."

"Our circumstance cannot be compared to that of Mr. Bingley."

"I wonder if he would think so!"

Darcy exhaled. "I am quite resigned to disapproval from my friends and relations regarding our connection. There is nothing to be done for it."

"Mr. Bingley was so amiable and kind throughout his stay in Hertfordshire that I would not dare suggest he would disapprove of any lady you might choose. Had you proposed to Pen Harrington, he would wish you every joy imaginable. But even the easiest temper would not be able to overlook your disapproving of one sister while set upon another."

"Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "I was mistaken in attributing your coquettish behaviour to a wish to tease gone too far. If it is a reunion between your sister and Mr. Bingley you require, I shall tell you, I am not convinced it would be in the best interest of either."

Any protest that she was not a coquette would be taken by him as flirting. Elizabeth had learnt that already. "Why is it that you are the party that must be convinced? It is not your happiness that was ruined!"

"If Mr. Bingley was to return Netherfield and found your sister's company not so sweet as he remembered, would you consider the fresh pain something she deserved?"

Elizabeth stilled. The idea of Jane, whose spirits had scarcely begun to rise, wounded further was a bleak picture. Mr. Bingley's accommodating temperament was one Elizabeth had long respected. His lack of conviction was a failing, but the accompanying willingness to listen and respect his friends and family was admirable. It was a weakness of will that caused him to hurt Jane, not a wicked temper. To return to Netherfield and disregard the girl who had once been his favourite would be callous. It would be cruel. It would be entirely unlike Mr. Bingley.

"Your friend is not so cruel as you would suggest," Elizabeth argued.

"I do not suggest that he is cruel," Mr. Darcy protested. "He is a young man with an easy temper. He falls in and out of love often. You cannot assume his feelings have not changed after so many months."

"Have they?"

He seemed taken back by a direct question. "I do not know," Mr. Darcy admitted.

"You should try asking," Elizabeth bit, "when you do not know someone's heart."

"What would you have me say?"

"I would have you confess to Mr. Bingley all that you have confessed to me. You know the deception was beneath you. You should not compound your error by refusing to hold yourself accountable."

"It is not a matter of my wishing to forget my error," he sighed. "If observation does not grant knowledge of what is in someone's heart then we cannot know if further meddling is a kindness or a cruelty. Mr. Bingley may have fallen in love with three other ladies by now. Your sister may have decided a man so easily moved should not be trusted with her future. I would not wish to bid my
friend to return, tell him that he has her heart and have him find that he has nothing."

"Ask him," she repeated. "Ask Mr. Bingley what he wants, I shall ask Jane. I have not shared my knowledge of the affair with her. I thought ignorance of scheming parties would serve her better, but perhaps neither of us are as good a friend as we would wish to be. We should supply our friends with all the information we have and let the choice be theirs."

"And if the response is not the one you wish for?"

"It hardly matters what either of us wish for! I shall support my sister no matter what she decides, even if she could never bear to see him again! I suggest you do the same for your friend."

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The rest of the walk was spent determining how to deliver their information to the interested parties. If Darcy was disappointed that such a discussion supplied him with no opportunity to whisper sweet words or steal kisses, he hid it well. Elizabeth supposed such demonstrations were not characteristic of him regardless.

Because Mrs. Bennet set a fine table and enjoyed hosting, it was late when Elizabeth and her sisters could escape pouring coffee and entertaining the neighbourhood with songs. When the house was finally quiet and the supper guests had gone, Jane linked her arm through Elizabeth's and the sisters went upstairs to retire.

Alone in their bedroom, Jane said, "Oh, Lizzy, I was worried when Kitty returned to the house without you." She spoke with anxiety; the walk had been hours ago, yet she had not been able to ask about it until now. "Were you able to convince Mr. Darcy this has all been a dreadful misunderstanding?"

"In truth," Elizabeth replied, "I did not attempt it. We spoke of Mr. Bingley."

Jane looked away, then recovering herself, murmured, "It is only natural. Mr. Bingley is an acquaintance you share. I hope Mr. Darcy was able to assure you he is in good health."

"Jane," her sister sang, "what would you think if Mr. Darcy invited Mr. Bingley to join him?"

"I should think it would suit Mr. Darcy very well to have a friend in the neighbourhood. Mr. Bingley has every right to come live in a house he has let and I am sure Mr. Darcy must prefer Netherfield to staying at the inn."

"Would it suit you?"

"What suits me cannot have any importance to Mr. Bingley."

Jane was so good. Humble and demure and all the things a lady ought to be. Jane was too beautiful to think herself of no consequence to men, yet she did. Elizabeth knew herself to be vain; she could never have that purity. "I have concealed something from you I ought not have."

Her sister's pretty face was marred by confused suspicion.

"When Mr. Darcy and I were in Kent, we spoke of Mr. Bingley, as is natural, and I learnt his decision to remain in Town was made for reasons other than what we have supposed."

"Lizzy?"
"He thought you were indifferent to him." The words rushed out. "Mr. Darcy convinced him of it! Mr. Darcy thought you did not take any particular pleasure in his friend's company and convinced him to stay in London. Mr. Bingley thinks highly of Mr. Darcy's discernment, and is of an easy character besides. He wants to think well of his friends. He wants to believe them."

Jane's shock was great. "I do not understand."

"I always suspected he had a hand in Mr. Bingley's defection. Oh, I thought his sisters to have the greater share of the blame, but I never thought Mr. Darcy innocent... We had spirited conversations at Netherfield about if it was a fault or virtue to be easily persuaded." The crush of words did little for Jane's spirits.

"When I was in Kent," Elizabeth said, forcing herself to try to tell a clearer narrative, "a cousin of Mr. Darcy was visiting as well. Colonel Fitzwilliam told me that Mr. Darcy was lately pleased to have saved a friend from marriage. I thought the friend must be Mr. Bingley. When I asked Mr. Darcy about it, he confessed."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I could not bear to cause you such grief, to know scheming friends and concealments had ruined your happiness."

Without a word, Jane sat on the edge of the bed.

"If Mr. Darcy were to write to Mr. Bingley and tell him how wrong he was, and Mr. Bingley threw over every other thing to gallop to your side-as he should!-would you welcome him?"

"Oh-oh-yes, of course, Mr. Bingley is always welcome to come to his own house."

Elizabeth eased herself onto the mattress beside her sister. "But would you welcome him? Could you forget that he abandoned you?"

"Lizzy, we don't know what is in Mr. Bingley's heart."

"We could. With your permission, Mr. Darcy will ask him."

"Oh, Lizzy, I do not think that would be-"

"No, you have been suffering from the loss of a man well-suited to answer all of your wishes-suffering because he believed something that was not true. Mr. Darcy will confess his wrong-doings and correct Mr. Bingley's information, but only if you wish for him to do so. If Mr. Bingley still loves you, he will return."

Jane was quiet.

"Others have interfered in the affairs of your heart too long, Jane. I shall not convey anything you do not wish to Mr. Darcy and he shall not write a line to Mr. Bingley without your approval."

"What if he has forgotten me?" Jane's voice was tiny, lost.

Elizabeth stiffened. Mr. Darcy seemed so confident that was the case. "Then we shall laugh at him!" Knocking her shoulder against her sister's, she added, "I shall remind you of every stupid thing he ever did until you cannot remember why you ever favoured such a man."

"Be serious, Lizzy!"
"How can I be serious when you are suggesting such silliness! A man with eyes in his head and sense in his brain forgetting my Jane is impossible."

"It has been many months," Jane protested. "A man so amiable will have made other friends."

It was possible, all too likely and Jane seemed determined to not let her sister dismiss the worst ending out of hand. "Perhaps he has," Elizabeth grudgingly conceded. "But you would know. You would know you had tried. If he really has no intentions towards you, you would know that as well. And then perhaps you could begin to forget him."

Her sister said nothing.

"If you do not wish to try," Elizabeth said cautiously, "that is perfectly all right. Mr. Darcy will not write if you do not wish him to."

Jane laid her head against Elizabeth's shoulder. "Yes, yes, Lizzy, I want to see him again."

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That night, she wrote to Charlotte. It was a short letter, but one she was pleased to post the next morning. She pretended not to notice Mr. Darcy behind a newspaper when she gave the letter to the innkeeper. The visitor was a well-bred man, the sort who was too aware of the edicts of polite society to cut an acquaintance. He folded his newspaper and joined her.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet. I hope you are well."

"I am indeed," she replied, cheerful. "And yourself?"

"Very well. I see you are posting a letter."

"Yes." She grinned at him, too pleased with the knowledge that it was she he was scheming with now. Their code words were not terribly sophisticated, but the entire thing was exciting. "Oh! I must pick up any post for Longbourn as well!" Abashed, Elizabeth admitted, "I nearly forgot!"

As the innkeeper rifled through his mailbag for the post to Longbourn, Mr. Darcy said casually, "I have a letter to write myself. It is long overdue and I confess I have been struggling with it. I am not precisely sure what it should say."

With great pleasure, Elizabeth said, "It should say yes!"

Darcy bowed. His unexpected gallantry as a conspirator made her want to laugh, but she spied something over his shoulder than gave her pause.

"Miss Bennet? What is the matter?"

Gesturing towards the window, Elizabeth drew his attention to the men outside—all in red coats. "I have never seen the officers behave so," she said warily. There were four of them, moving down the streets, rapidly in and out of shops, conferring and separating.

One of the men burst into the inn. It was Mr. Chamberlayne. He appeared out of sorts.

"Good God, man," Darcy said at the sight of him, "what is the matter?"

"Since it is you, sir," Chamberlayne said, "I suppose you ought to know: Mr. Wickham is missing."
Chapter End Notes

This chapter was looked over by SMAW and foreverhyponosis, but I confess after such a long break from posting, I was eager to post and did not give them a lot of time.
Mr. Chamberlayne’s dire pronouncement had little effect on Mr. Darcy. “Explain yourself.”

Though any man dressed in splendid regimentals must be accustomed to receiving orders, to be barked at by a gentleman of Mr. Darcy’s stature made the soldier quail. Elizabeth strained to hear him as Chamberlayne reported, “We suspect he has deserted.”

Mr. Darcy was unmoved. “What you mean to say is you do not know.”

The innkeeper, whom Elizabeth had tasked with retrieving the post to Longbourn, stole her attention for the brief moments she could spare it to put letters in her hand. Absently, she thanked him and exchanged coins for the packets. Not sparing a glance at the letters to learn their recipients or make a guess at their senders, Elizabeth dropped the letters into her reticule.

Out of sorts, Chamberlayne was insisting, “We know he is gone. At such a time, what can one think but desertion?”

Darcy folded his arms. “Can you prove he has no intention of returning?”

“We cannot prove anything yet, sir.”

Stepping towards Darcy, Elizabeth offered, “Mr. Denny is friends with Mr. Wickham. Does he know anything?”

Elizabeth herself was not well acquainted with Mr. Chamberlayne. He was one of Lydia’s admirers and the other sisters knew of him primarily through her. His first object in life appeared to be gaining the adoring attention of young ladies by whatever means necessary. Lydia had endless stories of all things she had coaxed him into doing for her entertainment. Elizabeth did not doubt her sister rewarded him for his service in some manner, but she hoped it was nothing more than a few smiles. By Elizabeth’s measure, Chamberlayne was a pliable man, amiable without thinking much on lofty topics. He was pleased to have the company of girls like Lydia and while that did not make her think poorly of him, it did not inspire her to expect very much from him, either.

She was caught off guard by the resentment that seeped from him at her suggestion. Sneering, he insisted, “Mr. Denny knows nothing. Obviously, we asked him first.”

“Without proof of desertion,” Mr. Darcy interjected, shifting his body in between Elizabeth and the officer, “he must be classified as absent without leave.”

Though Chamberlayne appeared to be the sort of stupid man offended by rational ladies, his ire was nothing to Mr. Darcy’s temper. He turned petulant, almost exasperated. “Mr. Wickham has not shared his intentions with any of the officers, but we hope he has left behind something of use with his friends in Meryton.”

“To ask among Mr. Wickham’s friends has already proved futile. Even should you have the proof or indeed even if you should catch him, you cannot try him. You have not the men for a general court martial.”

“We will have men enough at Brighton, sir.”
From behind him, Elizabeth could see Darcy’s shoulders grow tense. “What does that mean?”

“Do not worry yourself, Miss Bennet,” Chamberlayne said. Though he was respectful enough to Darcy, he spoke to her in a cloying tone. “I know he is your favourite. If we do not find him, we cannot try him, but if we do, a militia court does not have as much power as we would like. I cannot think he would get anything worse than lashings.”

When the militia first arrived, one of the privates had been flogged. Longbourn had buzzed with excitement as her younger sisters bandedied the news about. Elizabeth was not so naive as to think beatings were administered only to the low ranking men, but she shuddered to think of Mr. Wickham being whipped.

With self-assured authority, Darcy announced, “Find a local man willing to join up. I will pay for the replacement. Mr. Wickham’s rank cannot be worth more than thirty pounds.”

Chamberlayne hesitated a moment, then reminded them, “He did not leave notice.”

Darcy betrayed no evidence of concern. “Tell Colonel Forster I should like to call on him before you leave for Brighton.”

“Yes, sir,” Chamberlayne mumbled.

When the officer had gone, Elizabeth wondered, “What have you planned?”

“Desertion is common among the militia. They cannot waste their resources pursuing every man that leaves. To fill his position should be enough to make them forget he has gone.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed. “You would do that for Mr. Wickham?”

“Much as I wish that one hundred lashes would change his disposition for the better, I cannot say with any honesty I believe it would, nor do I believe retaining Mr. Wickham’s service to be in the best interest of the ___shire. He can do no credit to his uniform.”

“Why do you wish to see Colonel Forster?”

He sighed. “Miss Bennet, it was my family that let Mr. Wickham loose upon the world. I cannot but be responsible when good people suffer for his conduct.”

She found Darcy’s answer unsatisfactory. Not simply because Mr. Darcy could not be held accountable for the actions of other men, but because he must have something he intended to do when he saw the Colonel. Mr. Chamberlayne had said Mr. Wickham left no notice before leaving. That was when Mr. Darcy insisted he would call on him.

Very quietly, she asked, “Do you intend to bribe the Colonel?”

“You do not need to worry about Mr. Wickham,” Darcy replied, staring straight ahead. “The militia will not bother him.”

“I am not worried about Mr. Wickham!” Though she found the idea of Mr. Wickham being lashed unpalatable, it was not out of any personal fondness for the man. She would not want any acquaintance of hers to be treated so. Similarly, the idea of Mr. Darcy’s using his influence in an unsavoury manner left her uneasy. Her concern for his integrity was not personal. It was simply at odds with what she knew of him.

“Miss Bennet, perhaps this is a conversation that should not be held in a public inn?”
She let Darcy lead her outside, collecting her thoughts as he did so. He asked that they walk in the direction of the tailor’s shop and once Elizabeth had directed Darcy to the correct lane, she said, “I know the manner of man Mr. Wickham is. I would not want you, of all people, to think me ignorant. I simply disagree that you must prevent Mr. Wickham from being punished for his wrongdoings, especially if you must be dishonest to do it.”

“If he has gone to London, he will not be found by anyone but those who have knowledge of his habits. Let us not ask the _____shire to waste their time and resources so wantonly.”

He sounded as if he had experience. “You could find him.”

Darcy shrugged. “Perhaps. But I would rather pay and have it done.”

“I believe his desertion, if indeed that is what it is, though I suppose you can have no doubt--” Darcy indicated he did not “--to be my doing.”

“Your doing? Miss Bennet, how can that be?”

“He was at Mrs. Phillips’s salon when I last visited.”

“I should have gone with you.”

“No, no, it is best you did not. Knowing what he has been to your family, I would not wish for you to be made to bear his company.” How had she ever believed in Mr. Wickham? Was she truly so blinded by flattery that she could not tell when a charming man was behaving inappropriately? And then she compounded that foolishness by treating Mr. Darcy as the guilty party when it was he and his poor sister who had been so injured by Mr. Wickham’s viciousness.

“He sat by me nearly as soon as I walked in,” Elizabeth continued. “We had been friends before I left for Kent and he had no reason to suppose I would come back disliking him.” Mr. Darcy had trusted her with the secret of his sister’s near ruin. She would not have betrayed that trust by speaking in the most interested society Meryton had to offer. Still, she had been eager to disabuse Mr. Wickham of any idea she might still favour him. She had taken pleasure in finding innocent words that let their target know she was no longer blind to what he truly was.

“He asked me how I liked Rosings Park. I told him you had been there, and that you and I came to understand one another much better than we had previously.”

The corners of Darcy’s lips rose. “Indeed.”

“He took that news with such embarrassment that I could not help but inform him that you had come back into the neighbourhood.”

“Be at ease, Miss Bennet,” Darcy said. “If receiving such information caused him to flee, it was on my behalf, not yours.”

“He has been telling lies about you since you left in November. Though it seems foolish to flee so soon before the regiment is to go to Brighton, that must be why he left. He must fear you would reveal the truth.”

“Miss Bennet, I am not so easily injured as to fear Mr. Wickham’s lies nor would I expect him to think so.”

“It must damage his standing among people he would wish to call friends if he is known to be deceptive.”
“You still think him capable of keeping friends? He has surely voweled every officer in the regiment by now. To avoid me may have hastened his departure, but I suspect it is gaming debts that made him leave.”

“You will not pay his gambling debts!”

He laughed. “No. I have no interest in Mr. Wickham’s honour, such as it is. If he has exiled himself because he cannot pay, all the better for the _____shire.”

“Voluntary exile implies contrition.”

“Inaccurate, then. What would you have me say?”

“I would have you call him the coward that he is and not do whatever it is you plan to do to prevent him from feeling the consequences of what he has done. Knowing he has your protection, though not your friendship, can only encourage him.”

Darcy did not disagree, nor did he have second thoughts. “Allow me this weakness, Miss Bennet. I cannot throw off a man my father loved like a son.”

Her own father was not the sort to show much affection towards anyone but herself and Jane. He was too disinterested to find favourites among the servants at Longbourn. Had he loved anyone beyond his own children, perhaps she, too, would find it impossible to forsake them.

Seeming to know to whom her thoughts had wandered, but not their contents, he asked suddenly, "Miss Bennet, how long does your father let his debts to tradesmen linger?"

Elizabeth, who was not truly privy to such information, guessed, "A year, I would say. Perhaps two."

“And would you say that is common among your neighbours?"

"It is common everywhere," she answered. "Tradesmen should be pleased to have genteel customers with good credit purchasing their wares."

Darcy admitted this was true. They had arrived at the tailor’s shop.

“To what can these questions pertain? Are you in sudden need of a new coat and cannot bear another beautiful piece from London? Surely, you cannot need my word to assure any merchant of your good credit.”

“Perhaps it would be in my best interest to do so, for I fear my intentions will only frustrate you further.”

“On the contrary, this morning, you have frustrated me less than you have on every prior moment of our acquaintance.”

There was a light in his eyes and a smile on his face when he said, “I am so pleased to have your approval. I am pained to inform you, however, that my concern is once again Mr. Wickham.”

“You are not concerned with his honour and the tailor can have no influence in whether he is to be punished by the militia.”

"Militiamen are responsible for procuring their own regimentals,” he explained. "Mr. Wickham would have had to order them from a tailor after joining. The expense is not something men in that
position are usually able to afford. If he has gone without paying the debt, I should like to correct it. I
would not want your neighbours to suffer for it."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I cannot think we in danger from Mr. Wickham's clothing."

"Merchants are in debt to their suppliers, as their customers are in debt to them. Even the best men,
with the utmost intention of repaying, can drive a business to close its doors because they are too lax
on discharging their debts. In a town such as this, your neighbours would be in dire straits if all the
merchants were forced into disclosure by unpaid debts. You have no assurance another tailor or
chandler would open shop as soon as you need one."

Privately, Elizabeth thought the need for candles was far too large for any chandler to be thwarted by
debt. Still, she brought Darcy into the tailor's shop and let him inquire to an assistant about the status
of Mr. Wickham's bill. It was large--forty pounds--and she listened with dismay as Darcy admitted
he did not have that much ready money, but would certainly procure it. He had her lead him to the
chandler's shop to do much the same before seeming to realise they had spent nearly an hour in one
another's company that morning.

"It is getting late. You shall be soon missed, if you are not already. Allow me to walk you to
Longbourn."

Elizabeth assented.

After a pause of some moments, Darcy said slowly, "I would be obliged if you selected a route that
allowed us some privacy."

"There is only one road to Longbourn," Elizabeth replied, "I cannot account for the duties of
labourers. If we are to be seen is out of my hands."

This answer gave him little pleasure. Elizabeth was sorry for his disappointment, but she could not
approve of any plan to wander fields alone with a gentleman. She should refuse his offer to walk her
home at all, given how much they had already been in company together this morning. But, he had
acted with such kindness towards her neighbours that she felt herself unequal to denying a
gentlemanly request to see her home safely.

He gave her his arm and they turned towards Longbourn. Darcy was silent, as he so often was on
their walks. She kept to the paths, not asking him to climb over stiles like she might do if making this
walk herself. But, for a stretch, Elizabeth saw that they were so unfortunate as to see no men
working in the adjacent field. Mr. Darcy noticed it, too. He stopped. Elizabeth, heart pounding,
stilled.

What would he do with his sought after privacy?

Mr. Darcy withdrew his arm. With confusion, Elizabeth watched him unbutton his coat and take
from an inside pocket a folded paper. He held it out to Elizabeth, who instinctively took it. It was
neither addressed nor sealed, so she unfolded it. His familiar handwriting covered the sheet, fine and
tightly written.

Skimming it, she understood it to neither be addressed to or even concerning herself. It was about
Jane.

"You said you had not known what to write."

"I do not," he admitted. "Still, my mind gave me no rest until I had at least composed a draft. Pray,
give this to your sister. I should hate to say anything of her to Mr. Bingley without her approval."
Elizabeth dropped the note in her reticule. "I shall do so as soon as possible," she promised.

They walked on in silence for several more minutes when Mr. Darcy said suddenly, “Miss Bennet, I would be remiss if I were to be silent any longer on the subject of your conversation with Mr. Wickham.”

She raised her eyebrows. “We have discussed it, sir.”

“Yes.” He licked his lips. “But I did not tell you how pleased I am that you let him know to whom you belong.”

Face hot with mortification, Elizabeth cried, “Mr. Darcy!”

“I understand that you are not ready to let me speak so freely of our connection. I shall not. Let me assure you, however, you may speak of it as much as you like. I would not ask you to hold your tongue any time you prefer to speak.”

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said again, “If you are labouring under the impression that I am the sort of lady to show so blatant a preference for a man I am not known to be connected to, let me assure you I am not.”

“Your delicate subtlety makes it all the more masterful.” Darcy took her hand and tucked it once again through his arm. He began walking, setting a leisurely pace.

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. Her reticule felt heavy with the weight of Jane’s happiness inside of it. What was she to say to him? He did not listen when she directly contradicted him. He did not listen when she defended her own character. How was it possible to disabuse a man of a notion he refused to even question?

When Longbourn House came into view, Elizabeth asked him to let her walk the rest of the way home without an escort. She had been away for much longer than expected and even he must understand that although he had given her permission to speak of him as she wished, Elizabeth did not want her mother to do so. Darcy accepted the excuse. With a sigh of relief, Elizabeth watched him turn back to Meryton.

Inside, Elizabeth was dismayed to find she had missed breakfast. The table had been cleared and the breakfast room deserted. The room may be empty, but the house was not quiet. She heard two of her sisters running towards her before she saw them.

“Lord, Lizzy,” Lydia scoffed, coming from behind her, “It does not take that long to get the post!”

“I was delayed,” Elizabeth answered. There was nothing to be gained by disassembling when it came to Mr. Wickham’s disappearance. After a brief internal struggle, she admitted, “Meryton is in an uproar. Mr. Wickham has deserted.”

“No!” Lydia and Kitty cried in unison. The former continued, “There must be some misunderstanding! Mr. Wickham would never desert! The regiment is to go to Brighton! How could he resist the fun to be had there?”

“Evidently, he found the strength.”

“Surely, he has only gone on ahead,” Lydia said firmly. “When I go to Brighton, I shall see him again! We will have such a laugh at your misunderstanding.”

Darcy was convinced Mr. Wickham had disappeared into the underbelly of London. Though
Elizabeth did not doubt her youngest sisters had made a study of the officers, surely Darcy knew Mr. Wickham best. If he thought Mr. Wickham was more concerned by his gaming debts than parties at the seaside, could he be wrong? If Mr. Wickham turned up at Brighton, any argument that he had no intention of returning to his regiment must be faulty. He would avoid a court martial if he was brave enough to appear at Brighton. But was he?

“Let us hope for happy news,” Elizabeth said.

“I suppose it does not signify to you,” Lydia crowed, “You are not going to Brighton! I am going and Mr. Wickham and I will have such fun!”

“Will your other admirers be forgotten so soon?”

“Mr. Wickham is the handsomest among them. I daresay the others will understand.”

“You do them well by admiring their understanding. Tis a far more lasting virtue than a handsome face or looking fit in a red coat.”

“Lizzy, if you are going to start sounding like Mary, I shall go. But first I want my letters. Is there any post for me?”

Elizabeth, who had not read any of the post as thoroughly as she did Darcy’s letter about Jane, did not know. She reached into her reticule to find whose letters she had been carrying. “No, Lydia, my mother and Jane are the most popular to-day.”

“I would not have time to write to anyone, anyway.” Lydia shrugged. “Come along, Kitty, I must call on Harriet and Pen before leaving.”

Elizabeth watched them depart. Her belly rumbled. Strolling in the village with Mr. Darcy had kept her out much longer than she intended, but surely her mother must know she intended to eat! She rang for Mrs. Hill, hoping there was something left from the meal. After Elizabeth had been assured that a tray would be sent up to her room, Elizabeth found Jane and pulled her upstairs.

“Lizzy, why were you gone for so long?”

The door was closed, but in a house like Longbourn, one could not be too certain of one’s privacy. In a low tone, Elizabeth said, “I had gone to the inn to fetch the post, where I learnt that Mr. Wickham has deserted!”

Jane was wide eyed. “How can that be?”

“He has disappeared. Mr. Darcy thinks he has run off because he cannot pay his gaming debts.”

“How shocking!” Jane hissed.

“It is not very shocking, is it? We know what he is.” The first letter from Darcy that Elizabeth had ever received had thoroughly explained what manner of man Mr. Wickham was.

“I cannot believe it. Not even of Mr. Wickham!”

“Mr. Darcy is in every way of knowing Mr. Wickham best. If he thinks that is what has happened, I am inclined to believe him. Others may be deceived by Mr. Wickham’s manners, but Mr. Darcy is not. In fact, I think Mr. Darcy has a good idea of where Mr. Wickham has gone. If he wished to see Mr. Wickham caught and lashed for his desertion, Mr. Darcy could make it happen.”
“Mr. Darcy would not be so cruel to a man his father loved.”

“Indeed not,” Elizabeth said. “I hardly know what to think of that. It is good of Mr. Darcy to be so charitable after all that Mr. Wickham has done to him, yet if Mr. Wickham never feels the consequences of his actions because Mr. Darcy protects him, can he have any inducement to repent?”

“Perhaps there is some circumstance that Mr. Darcy does not know of.”

“Perhaps.” Mr. Darcy’s judgement was not faultless. “Speaking of that man’s knowledge, he gave me this.” She retrieved the letter from her reticule and handed it to Jane.

“What is it?"

“A draft of the letter he intends to send to Mr. Bingley. Anything he says of you must have your approval. You may strike out anything you like and know Mr. Bingley shall never hear of it.”

Jane slowly moved to the writing desk with the letter. Elizabeth sat on the bed and watched her work.

The more she thought on Mr. Darcy’s actions, the more Elizabeth owned he must be correct. If Mr. Wickham intended to meet his regiment at Brighton, he could have no reason for not informing them of his trip. He did not benefit from a temporary, yet unannounced leave. To steal off in the middle of the night was beneficial only to someone who did not wish to be seen again. Lydia may hope for a romantic reunion with a man who had never shown her any preference before, but Elizabeth was confident it was nothing more than a romantic delusion from a girl lovesick towards anyone in a red coat.

As for Darcy’s actions in Meryton, his conduct was above anything she could have expected from him. To guard the prosperity of the lower classes was true gentlemanly behaviour. Much as she did not care for the thought of Darcy holding himself responsible for Wickham’s mistakes, it was only goodness that induced him to do so.

And Jane! He had not wasted a night on uncertainty in that respect! He had written a draft to Bingley before even hearing of Jane’s response, and then went so far as to allow her to edit his private correspondence. Jane was a lady; she would never show an unseemly degree of preference for any man. Now she had even the ability to stop someone else from writing of her inclinations in too spirited language.

Elizabeth went to stand by Jane’s shoulder and see what she had blotted out.

“Jane! You have taken out none of his words about you and crossed out every passage where he owns his own mistakes!”

“Lizzy, I do not wish for him to abase himself on my account. If Mr. Bingley is to return, I would wish for him to return because he truly wants to see me, not to absolve Mr. Darcy.”

“What a singular life Mr. Darcy leads! Of his own mistakes, he is absolved. It is the mistakes of others he pays for.”

“To what does that observation portend?”

“Think nothing of it.”
This chapter has been brought to you by Skydreamer. Skydreamer: Betaing and Constant Reminders Since Last Week.
“No need for that, Miss Lizzy!”

Elizabeth, primed to sweep her bonnet onto her head, froze.

“I sent Fred to get the post.” Dropping her voice, Mrs. Hill added, “Mrs. Bennet told me yesterday she wants a boy to fetch the post from now on. She says you have been missing breakfast too often.”

Elizabeth sat her bonnet on her head and tied the ribbons into a bow beneath her chin. “I took the post on as a chore only because I walk out regardless. You may assure my mother I shall not go as far as Meryton. Francis Bacon may find hope to be a good breakfast, but I prefer a meal, as my mother well knows.” Elizabeth doubted very much if that were truly her mother’s concern. Mrs. Bennet never lingered long in the execution of a scheme. She had neither the patience nor the foresight to plan too far ahead. Elizabeth walked slowly through her father’s park, lost in thought. Mrs. Bennet was not difficult to outwit in theory, but to do so while displaying the deference one owed their parents sometimes presented more of a challenge.

A curious Elizabeth presented herself at the table on time. Even with her promised presence, there was an empty chair. Lydia had left for Brighton with the colonel of the regiment and his wife on Friday. The table was less lively without her animal spirits, but no more quiet. It was only Monday now—not nearly enough time had lapsed for Mrs. Bennet to tire of rhapsodising about the sights Lydia would see and the balls she would attend or for Kitty to forget her jealousy or for Mary to recite every quote in her arsenal about hardship, humility and the sin of coveting the good fortune of others.

Elizabeth wished Lydia had not gone to Brighton, but less out of jealousy than out of concern. Mrs. Forster was scarcely older than Lydia and equally silly. A girl like Lydia needed more supervision than Mrs. Forster was liable to give. Elizabeth thought the colonel wiser, but there would be more soldiers for him to look after at Brighton. He could not dedicate his time to chaperoning Lydia.

Thoughts of the colonel invariably led to thoughts of Mr. Darcy. He had intended to speak to Colonel Forster about Mr. Wickham before the regiment left. Would Mr. Darcy notice Fred wore the Bennet livery? What would he think when he saw a servant collecting the post for Longbourn instead of her?

After breakfast, the ladies of the house assembled in the sitting room. One by one, Elizabeth’s sisters were reminded of reasons why they must excuse themselves. Jane owed a letter. Mary had music to practice. Kitty required no prompting. The friendship of the Harrington sisters and Maria Lucas was nothing without Lydia and she went off to pout about her unwanted, friendless state. Only Elizabeth and her mother remained.

Mrs. Bennet’s stage was set.

“You have been spending a lot of time in Mr. Darcy’s society, Lizzy.”

Pursing her lips, Elizabeth silently reminded herself that gossip was the last pleasure left for for ladies with grown children. If anything, she was surprised it had taken the matrons of Meryton a full se’nnight to realise that she could often be found in Mr. Darcy’s company.
“He is staying in Meryton, Mama.” She shrugged one shoulder, carefully dismissive. Elizabeth pointedly gave her needlework more attention than the idea of Mr. Darcy. “I am often walking to Meryton. We cannot help but meet. You should not prefer an acquaintance to cut me, I hope.”

“No, indeed. That man quite mistakes the matter if he thinks I have forgotten how he treated you when he first arrived!” Mrs. Bennet fumed at her carpet work, complete with loud narration of precisely how displeased she had been. But that event had been months ago—October, in fact, and now it was June. Mrs. Bennet in the summertime could not be expected to submit her feelings fully to the Mrs. Bennet of last autumn, could she?

“My sister, Mrs. Phillips, says she has heard of you speaking to him at the inn.”

“He is staying there, Mama. If he is in the common room when I am to pick up the post, it is only proper we should have some conversation.”

“I find it hard to credit a man like Mr. Darcy staying at that draughty inn for a week complete without any purpose.”

“Of course he has a purpose, Mama. That he has not revealed himself to Mrs. Phillips does not imply he is in Meryton simply to enjoy the particular draughts our inn has to offer. Though, one must remember he is a wealthy man. He is doubtless accustomed to travel and therefore must be accustomed to inns. Perhaps he has a taste for draughts, and means to enjoy them wherever he can.”

Mrs. Bennet was silent after that speech. It would have amused Elizabeth’s father, but he had hidden himself away in his bookroom already.

Then, “You have gone to the circulation library with him.”

“I went to the library with Lydia and Kitty. If Mr. Darcy purchases a subscription, I cannot be held responsible for it.”

Then, “Lady Lucas said she heard you were at the chandler together.”

“Mama, he needed candles and did not know where the shop was.”

“An inn has candles.”

Elizabeth shrugged again. Perhaps later, she would explain to Mrs. Bennet what Mr. Darcy had done, why she had guided him through town. The shopkeepers of Meryton would have no reason to remain silent. Mr. Darcy buying Mr. Wickham’s debts would be spread soon enough. With all of her knowledge of the men’s history, Elizabeth felt she ought not say anything, hating to inadvertently reveal what Mr. Darcy preferred undisclosed. “Perhaps the inn’s candles were not to his liking.”

“He could have sent a servant.”

“You may suggest that to him, if you like. For my part, I was content to take him where he asked to go.”

Mrs. Bennet returned sharply, “He asked to go to the tailor, as well, did he?”

Mildly, Elizabeth said, “Yes.”

“I am sure Mr. Darcy has his clothes made in London!”

“Our tailor can make a jacket as fine as any London tailor.”
Mrs. Bennet’s sense of local pride had been pricked. “I know that to be true but that man! He thinks nothing at all of our Hertfordshire tailors!”

“I see your conversations with him on the subject have exceeded my own.”

For a few minutes, the conversation appeared to be at an end. Elizabeth would have to be more careful in the future if she wished to escape further gossip. But, if Mr. Bingley were to return, surely it would not be possible to promote Jane’s happiness and avoid Mr. Darcy at the same time. It was very likely that she would be seeing more of Mr. Darcy once Netherfield was occupied. Jane’s prospects could explain away Elizabeth’s involvement, but not Darcy’s attention, should he continue to pay it. Perhaps, when he could observe the two sisters side by side and compare Jane, who they all knew to be in love, with Elizabeth, he would begin to understand...

Mrs. Bennet intruded on Elizabeth’s thoughts. “Do you suppose he feels slighted because I did not speak to him after church yesterday?”

Elizabeth rose, discarding her work. “I am sure I do not know how Mr. Darcy feels about anything! If you will excuse me, I wish to go for a walk.”

“Sit right down, Miss Lizzy!” her mother cried. “You are not going to scamper off to meet him! You shall stay at home, and he may come here.”

Elizabeth stared. “Pardon?”

“You have been very sly, Lizzy, but you do not know your own interest. I am as proud as any mother can be that such a wealthy man has his eye on you, but I do not know how you intend to keep his interest, running wild as you do! If he is to marry you, he must see that you are a good girl and will make him a proper wife.”

Her stomach dropped. “Mama, you quite mistake the matter. I have no intention of marrying Mr. Darcy.”

Mrs. Bennet tossed her shoulder. It seemed another person in her life had elected not to believe a word Elizabeth said.

Matters were not helped at all by Mrs. Bennet’s prediction coming true--Mr. Darcy called. Jane, at least, had finished writing her letter by then, so Elizabeth had an ally in the sitting room. The sisters sat together on one sofa, watching their mother fuss over their visitor on another.

To observe her, one would think Mrs. Bennet approved of everything about Mr. Darcy. Artlessly, she applied herself to praising his dress, his mien and his manners. Personal information that had never interested her before was now fascinating. The interrogation included his family, his neighbours, his club. It was a shameless display of poor breeding and even as it made Elizabeth’s face burn, she was determined to let it continue.

Mrs. Bennet wanted nothing more than to aid Darcy in his pursuit of her daughter. Apparently, she felt the way to ensure Elizabeth’s place in his heart was through the fawning approbation of the mother. Such behaviour should be impossible for Darcy to tolerate. Though it seemed it was not within her own power to turn Darcy away from her, Elizabeth supposed the unchecked behaviour of her mother must make her unappealing. He had expressed such a disgust for her connections when he proposed. She refused to rescue him. It was painful to remind Darcy that her connections were degrading to a man of his caliber. Elizabeth was ashamed for herself, embarrassed for his sake, and could only hope it would work.
The poor man sat on the sofa with absolutely rigid posture, answering Mrs. Bennet’s questions curtly. (“My mother’s people are from Yorkshire.” “Pemberley borders Abercorn. The Salisbury family has been there many generations.” “Brooks’s, though I am not a frequent visitor.”) Even as she felt the impropriety of such relentless questioning, Elizabeth could not help her interest in his answers. She would not have guessed he was a Whig. Equally fascinating was his body language. Darcy’s ears had turned a flaming shade of red. His heels were raised, as though he was poised to push off the sofa and flee.

If he were another man, in another time, Elizabeth would have thought up some excuse to drag him away from the onslaught.

He must have noticed how she would not meet his eyes.

And then Mrs. Bennet let loose the culmination of all her scheming: "Mr. Darcy, I simply cannot bear the thought of you staying another night in that draughty inn. You must come and stay at Longbourn. You will find the food and the company much better, I dare say. I am not one to brag, but I know you must have heard it said often that Longbourn boasts of the best table in the neighbourhood. And Lizzy, my Lizzy—" here, Mrs. Bennet gestured to her second daughter, who could not help but raise her eyes at her own name. Mr. Darcy found Elizabeth’s gaze and would not surrender it. “—reads out loud in the evening and I am sure I do not know a better way to pass the time than that.”

Elizabeth could not see her own reflection in his eyes. His sofa was too far from her own for that. But she could see in his eyes that what he saw was not the woman that she was—flushed from embarrassment and indignation— but the coy, appealingly pink creature he wished to see. Her heart thundered and her lips pursed in a silent, urgent no. And Mr. Darcy said, finally looking away from the object of his affections, “You have my most sincere gratitude for your gracious invitation, Mrs. Bennet.”

“You mean you will come stay with us?” Mrs. Bennet’s triumph bubbled out in rapid, breathless glee. “Your apartment has been prepared, my dear sir, let me show you! Jane, ring the bell. Have Hill send someone for Mr. Darcy’s things. Too long, too long have you been at that draughty inn. It is a wonder that you have not caught a chill. Come, come!”

Mr. Darcy did not follow his hostess out of the sitting room without first turning to Elizabeth. She offered him a wan smile. He smiled back, shrugged, and followed her mother upstairs.

With Mr. Darcy out of sight and Jane relaying instructions to Hill, Elizabeth sat for a moment in a useless silence. It had been madness to let her mother say whatever she wished. Mrs. Bennet should have driven Darcy away, but somehow, she had succeeded in drawing him closer. How was such a thing to be tolerated by any of the family? Mr. Darcy had not given anyone reason to like him.

Elizabeth hurried to her father.

“My mother has invited Mr. Darcy to stay!”

The door to his bookroom being thrown open did not stir Mr. Bennet from his book. Nor did Elizabeth’s declaration. He simply drawled, “She has done it already? Pity, I had hoped to be there.”

“You knew of her scheme?”

“His refusal would be a thing to behold! Imagine! Mr. Darcy at Longbourn! Did he obfuscate his outrage with awkward excuses or speak freely of the degradation of being associated with so modest a village as this?”
“He accepted!”

Mr. Bennet snapped his book shut. “Are you certain?”

“Yes! Even now, his men are bringing his trunks.”

Her father smiled, slowly shaking his head. “What a sly thing you are, Lizzy. I thought Mrs. Bennet out of her senses when she told me he was courting you--you have made a fine fool of me. I told her he had never looked at you and was quite insistent on the matter, if you must know. This once, I shall not hold it against you.”

Elizabeth ignored the tease. “You approved of this?”

“I thought it so inconceivable he would accept that I am afraid I did. Thank Jane for being the sweet natured girl she is. Most older sisters would want to be married first, but Jane will not mind you taking her place. I thought she got her sense from me, but perhaps it is my magnanimity she inherited.”

“I am not going to marry Mr. Darcy.”

Mr. Bennet shrugged. “Then he can have no reason to stay long, and that suits me just as well.” He returned to his book.

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The admittance of Mr. Darcy to Longbourn was accompanied by more fanfare than any guest in Elizabeth’s memory. Never before had a man of such consequence stayed at the humble estate. An entire retinue followed Mr. Darcy on his travels: men to mind his horses, to drive his carriage, to press his clothes and dress him.

There had been moments, before, when she had felt trapped. When Elizabeth had wanted to flee from him but found herself caught, unable to move. With time, the nervous roil in her stomach had settled into a sort of assurance. Mr. Darcy would have to leave someday. He could not stay in Meryton indefinitely. She had even begun to appreciate him. He had written to Mr. Bingley. He had taken careful account of the debts left behind by Mr. Wickham. But to endure him in her home was impossible. She would have no means to avoid him, no means to convince him he was mistaken, no means to escape. A houseguest meant the end of family breakfasts and early morning rambles. To Mr. Darcy, it was sure to mean he had the approval of her family and that the refusals he thought to be nothing more than some strange form of flirtation would soon be at an end.

The way his gaze fixated on her before he accepted the invitation… Did he think her blushes were for him?

The morning gave way to evening. Darcy kept to himself, directing his men and arranging his apartment to his liking. It was not so terrible. Her own apartment would be an impenetrable sanctuary if she had need for one. Kitty might consider the friendship of girls in Meryton to be nothing, but Elizabeth was sure she could call on them without Darcy following her. She could walk, she could read. The only time she could not escape Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Darcy working in tandem would be at dinner and in the drawing room afterwards. Seen in that light, she would not be forced into his company for long at all.

It only felt interminable.

The seating arrangements around the dinner table had been done properly. Their guest sat by his hostess. In the absence of a female guest, Jane took her usual place at her father’s right side and
Elizabeth her place at his left. Mary sat further down the table, and Kitty further still. A scheming mother might have been expected to put her daughter by the young man she wished to catch, but Mrs. Bennet was not so transparent a matchmaker. She sought to answer Mr. Darcy’s notions of propriety instead of his baser interests. Though this was an excellent strategy in theory, it left Mrs. Bennet and Kitty his conversation partners. Mr. Darcy was the lone rational voice, surrounded by people with nothing of sense to say.

Intelligent conversation happened at Mr. Bennet’s end of the table, but Elizabeth, though her partners were her favorite among her family, could not attend to it. She wished to trade seats with Mary so that she was on Mr. Darcy’s other side. If only they had upset the seating procession! But Mrs. Bennet would never dream of thinking that it was Elizabeth’s impertinence that had attracted Mr. Darcy! A man of his consequence must want a well-behaved wife, and so Mrs. Bennet was determined to show him how well-behaved the Bennets could be.

If he suffered, he did so without displaying it openly. Darcy ate. Darcy passed dishes to the ladies sitting near him. Darcy spoke. Not, Elizabeth thought, an amiable amount of speech, but enough that he should not be called rude behind his back. She had to admit, he managed himself rather well.

If only the same could be said for Mrs. Bennet.

Mrs. Bennet preferred to manage others. When the ladies withdrew, Mrs. Bennet took Elizabeth by the arm and gave her a litany of instructions.

“When the men come in, you must serve the coffee. Wear a lower bodice tomorrow. Bend over more. Smile. No, no, look up at him and smile. Men like to be tall. Though...Mr. Darcy is tall. Do not slouch, but perhaps you could bend your knees and seem smaller. Mrs. Gardiner must send us magazines. You must style your hair like ladies in London. Smile, but do not laugh. Mr. Darcy does not want to see your teeth. Agree with him. For heaven’s sake, Lizzy, he is not interested in your opinions. In fact, you are going to read, so you shall not have any time to tell him what you think about anything.”

“Mama, it was my turn to read!”

“Mary, no one wants to hear a sermon. Mr. Darcy wants Lizzy .”

Any further entreaties were halted by the entrance of the men. Elizabeth was whisked to the coffee pot. She served Mr. Darcy, and then Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet stood behind them, frantically demonstrating an awkward posture that would give Mr. Darcy a better view down Elizabeth’s inadequately low bodice.

She ignored it.

Next, Elizabeth poured coffee for the ladies, including herself. Mr. Darcy lingered at the table.

“Tell me,” Elizabeth said, needing someone to say something, “was our table dressed to your satisfaction or will we find ourselves without a guest tomorrow night because you must return for the inn’s dinners?”

Darcy laughed. “You can have no fear of that .”

“I have heard again and again that our inn is draughty. No one ever says anything against the food.”

“Perhaps they do not wish to overburden the innkeeper with complaints.”

“Does our inn do anything well?”
“I had enjoyed the postal service, until to-day.”

“Did they lose a letter of yours?”

“A letter carrier.”

“I hope you were not too harsh on poor Fred. My mother was very gracious, letting him get some fresh air.”

“Did you have enough fresh air?”

“I am harder to please than you. One meal, and you are happy. My appetite for fresh air is insatiable.”

Darcy handed her his empty coffee cup. “I am not so easily satisfied as that implies.”

“Shall you have another cup? Rejoice, for we have cold suppers here. That will be two meals. Then you must be satisfied.”

He smiled. “You shall know when I am satisfied, Miss Elizabeth, and shall not question it again.”

“I can tell you have some secret meaning of your own. You wish for me to be desperately curious and try to divine it, so I shall not.”

Darcy shrugged. “As you wish.”

Elizabeth began her next sentence with “I think--” but that thought was to go incomplete.

“Lizzy!”

Elizabeth turned to her mother with a raised eyebrow.

“Do not forget we promised Mr. Darcy that you would read after dinner.”

“I have not forgotten, Mother. Mr. Darcy takes no pleasure in a conversation and I am grieved to have ruined his evening.”

Mr. Darcy said, “Do not grieve on my account, Miss Elizabeth.”

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes remained suspiciously narrow as Elizabeth left the coffee things behind to select a book.

“Lizzy, do not take one of my books,” Mary bid, “even though you are taking my turn.”

“I would not dream of it, Mary.” The third sister’s taste ran towards essays. Prose of any kind was too quiet, too contained for Elizabeth’s purpose. “I had thought to read a play.” Plays, with their varied roles and the necessity of differentiating between characters could not help but be more rambunctious, with sisters leaning over to take on characters and all the girls adopting deep voices for the male roles. It was decidedly not the behaviour that Mrs. Bennet would desire of Elizabeth in front of a suitor. She must either give up on painting Elizabeth as the ideal woman and scold her, or feign agreement.

With a loud buoyancy, Mrs. Bennet cried, “A very fine choice indeed! I cannot abide the theatre, but to read a play in one’s own home, why there is nothing immoral about that at all!” Mrs. Bennet turned to Mr. Darcy, with an eager smile affixed to her face. It was clear that Mrs. Bennet desperately needed to have his concurrence.
“Among one’s own friends of good character,” Mr. Darcy said stiffly, his hands clasped behind his back, “there can be no evil at all.”

“A comedy, Lizzy,” her father drawled when Elizabeth took her first step towards the bookroom. “Richard Cumberland would suit my mood tonight.”

She paused. “I have not read any of his comedies.”

“I have something or another of his.”

With a shrug, Elizabeth went to the bookroom and picked through where her father kept his plays. Mr. Gardiner was often sending him books that had been used at Covent Garden by actors and actresses. Though Mr. Bennet could never rouse himself far enough to go to attend the theatre, he enjoyed plays as literature and did not care to wait for plays to be published for the general public’s consumption.

Richard Cumberland had died a year ago May. Mr. Bennet’s collection of Cumberland books could not keep growing at the rate it once had. Elizabeth had read some of them--*False Impressions* was a melodrama, *The Banishment of Cicero* a tragedy. *The Fashionable Lover* was a comedy, but Elizabeth knew it to be rather sentimental. *The Eccentric Lover* was unfamiliar to her. She picked it up and looked it over. It identified itself as a comedy immediately under the title. The dramatis personae was heavy on male parts. Mr. Darcy would hardly be wooed by Elizabeth affecting as many male voices as she could manage. If she could recruit Jane to play the heroine, all the better. With the selection in hand, Elizabeth returned to the drawing room.

“*The Eccentric Lover*, Father?”

Mr. Darcy was at the window. The ladies had been talking while they waited, but with the exception of a few more laments from Kitty, this halted when Elizabeth returned.

“The very play I had in mind,” Mr. Bennet answered.

Elizabeth sat. The first scene began with two men: John Seagrave and Tom Transit. She gave John a deep, raspy voice. *‘The travels of Tom Transit! Jackanapes! You have not brought a Lady Delroy home.’* Affecting the voice made her cough, which soon sputtered into laughter. With a deep breath, she transitioned into Tom’s part. She had given him a voice closer to her own and as the scene continued, she was pleased it had turned out that way: Tom’s speeches were often the longer of the two. *‘Hold a moment! Don’t be vulgar and call names! Take a pinch of snuff, my boy, and keep your temper. Now for your news–How is the Admiral? Clear of his gout? Out of his element, I should guess--a fish upon dry land.’*

When Widow Blandy entered, Elizabeth beckoned Jane to come read that part. As John and Widow Blandy, the sisters bickered about marriage. John wished to marry the widow, but she felt her husband had not been dead long enough for a second marriage. John was a romantic soul, calling her a sprite or a fairy. Elizabeth enjoyed the character, though the voice she had given him was hard on her throat.

Darcy betrayed little interest in the play. He walked circles around the drawing the room, paying more consideration to the table where the coffee things had been left than the story.

When Elizabeth informed her audience that the scene had changed and they were now in a house, meeting two new characters, Mr. Bennet interrupted her. “Do not give Sir Francis a difficult voice, Lizzy. He has many speeches.”
“Thank you, Father.”

“Jane, Jane,” Mrs. Bennet called. “I need you, dear.”

Jane looked to Elizabeth.

“Widow Blandy is not in this scene,” Elizabeth assured her. “I shall not suffer too much without you.”

Jane repaired to her mother’s side, who had nothing for her to do.

Darcy approached Elizabeth, holding a cup. “May I read Sir Francis?”

“I think it will be better for my voice if you do.”

The new scene began with an uncle and nephew. Elizabeth read the parts for Admiral Delroy; Darcy, Sir Francis Delroy. Reading only one role, Darcy did not disguise his voice. Still, he had a fine voice for reading. Strong and smooth. He spoke from his chest and his lips shaped words crisp and concisely. She wondered about his accent. Was that something he had gone to school to learn or did all people from Derbyshire speak like him? Or was he just particularly careful with his words? She doubted it was the latter, given how many thoughtlessly insulting things she had heard him to say, and yet, he was a diligent person. He was regulated.

Her shoulders slumped when John entered the scene. Elizabeth was regretting that raspy voice. Darcy handed her the cup he had brought—her neglected cup of coffee. Being ignored so long, the coffee was not hot. Elizabeth drained the cup before resuming the role of raspy John.

“Jane,” Elizabeth said, interrupting the story. “The next character is a lady. Come read for her.”

“I could not possibly spare Jane!” Mrs. Bennet cried. “And Mary, I need you, too. Kitty, come.”

Having no recourse but to read the part herself, Elizabeth read Eleanor’s first speech in her natural voice. ‘Oh! are you here?’

Sir Francis responded with an aside. ‘Heavens, what beauty!’

‘Don’t be alarm’d. I’m only passing through.’

‘Suppose I am gratified and not alarm’d,’ Darcy read, ‘will you then pass, or will you not, in passing, pause until I’ve looked upon you?’

‘Why should I, when I am positive you can see nothing you like in me?’ Elizabeth smirked.

‘I like beauty—you are very handsome.’

‘That is what I am not—in your eyes at least is certain I am not.’

‘I admire elegance—you are very graceful.’

‘Nonsense!’ Elizabeth cried, ‘I’m sure you say what you don’t think.’

‘I never said you were very good humour’d.’

‘You never say anything to put me in good humour; so pray let me pass quietly through the room, for I did not seek you and I have nothing to say to you.’ Eleanor was a character Elizabeth was quickly coming to like. Though she was only reading lines that Mr. Cumberland had written for the
stage, she felt honest. Eleanor was severe on Sir Francis, more severe than she, Elizabeth, would be
to Mr. Darcy. Part of her felt guilty for enjoying Eleanor’s lines.

‘Say nothing then, or say what you will, and it shall be nothing.’

‘What signifies telling me I am handsome and graceful, which I have no pretensions to, and saying I
am not good-humour’d, which I know I am? In short, Sir Francis, I perceive you have brought back
the very same temper you took out with you, and a blessed companion truly you must have had.’

‘You’re right; my temper can suit no one but its owner; the sulky thing does well enough by itself; in
partnership, ’twould be intolerable.’

Elizabeth grinned. ‘I perfectly agree with you.’

‘For the first time--so now we are friends, and you may bless your stars, that when my uncle would
have married us, I foresaw all your misery and withstood you.’

Frowning, she read, ‘You withstood me? Oh, monstrous to say that--When did you withstand me?
How did you withstand me?’

‘Very easily.’

‘Worse and worse! Let me tell you, Sir Francis, I am vain enough to think you had not found it quite
so very easy, had I laid out to make it otherwise; but you know in your conscious if I ever did speak
a kind word to you, ’twas only to humour the Admiral and not out of liking you.’

Eleanor and Sir Francis continued in their conversation for another page, debating the meaning of
events that occurred before the play began. It was becoming clearer and clearer that these two
characters had a history and despite all of Eleanor’s speeches to the contrary, it was she and Sir
Francis, not John and the widow, who were the central lovers.

The directions indicated Sir Francis should struggle with his next speech. Darcy whispered his
character’s desire. ‘A kiss--give it to me.’

Elizabeth swallowed. His reading of the line had been so soft, so intimate that she doubted anyone
but herself had heard him. After a heartbeat or two of hesitation, she threw herself into Eleanor’s next
speech, crowing, ‘Before you’ve won it? No; that’s not the bargain. Keep off--Ah! now I hate you
worse than ever: I would I had pepper on my lips to choke you!’ With that speech, the Eleanor
character exited the scene.

‘You have love-powder on your lips, you wicked little witch! Away with you, away with you! I am a
fool to trifle with a kitten; a man gets nothing from such play but scratches.’ Sir Francis exited, as
well. Without the need to share her book any longer, Darcy shifted away from Elizabeth on the sofa,
his ears red.

Elizabeth continued reading. The next scene began with the Admiral and John. When Act I had
ended, she announced that she was finished reading for the evening. They could read Act II
tomorrow night, and Act III the next and so on, if the party remained interested in the story. The hour
was not yet late enough for the supper service, so Mary proposed she should be at least allowed to
play the instrument, if she had been forbidden from reading. Mrs. Bennet, without much grace,
assented.

While everyone else’s attention was on the music, Elizabeth turned to the end of the play. By Act V,
Eleanor and Sir Francis’s frustrations with one another came to a head. One the final page but one,
she admitted her passion, urged Sir Francis to take possession of her heart.
Darcy looked to her. Elizabeth closed the book, lest he read Sir Francis’s reply before the time came.

‘Oh, my acknowledg’d,’ Mr. Cumberland had written, ‘oh, my destin’d wife.’

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been beta'd by JRTT, Skydreamer and foreverhypnosis. Temperance is the virtue of self-control. The overall focus on Darcy's self-control this chapter was very, very minor. Sometimes a story likes to go someplace else and you gotta let it.
Humility

Chapter Notes

Featuring the Beta Talents of: JRTT, SMAW, Skydreamer and Foreverhyponsis!

Humility

The door was secure behind her, shut and latched. Elizabeth leaned against it.

“Two acts remain, Jane, and then our lovers shall reach their destined conclusion!” She let herself smile, a wry expression. “To be a character in a play! Their problems are resolved so quickly! If only I knew how many more evenings I must endure.”

Elizabeth and her stalwart assistant had read three acts of *The Eccentric Lover*. The drama was escalating toward its climax. A rival suitor for Elizabeth’s Eleanor had appeared. Admiral Delroy was fast losing support for his nephew. Even Sir Francis, read by Mr. Darcy, was beginning to doubt that Eleanor could endure him. These setbacks were temporary, of course. Comfortable, reliable storytelling—and an ending that Elizabeth had already peeked at—promised that Sir Francis and Eleanor would embrace one another.

Jane frowned. “I think it is kind of Mr. Darcy to read with you each evening.”

Though Elizabeth did not disagree with Jane’s assessment, she was in no hurry to concur. “Mr. Darcy is a man of great determination. An admirable quality, but I do not feel so inclined to admire it now, given the circumstances. I suppose I must eschew his kindnesses for the same reason.”

Jane sat down at her toilet and began to pull pins out of her hair. Elizabeth hurried behind her to help. These hours after supper were Elizabeth’s only reprieve. When Mr. Darcy had gone to his own apartment and she could be assured of his not coming out again until morning, she could relax. For most of the day, she was too aware of him—where he was, what he was doing, what he must be thinking.

Elizabeth watched Jane’s reflection in the mirror. Jane brushed her hair, eyebrows furrowed and gaze distant. Elizabeth’s idle hands searched for something to do.

“Can you not at least find some relief in the knowledge Mr. Darcy has his own estate?” Jane asked. “He cannot neglect Pemberley all summer. He must leave soon.”

Elizabeth chewed on her lip. “Yes, but--with what feelings will he leave? Will he go expecting love letters that beg his return? Or will he leave knowing this has all been a misunderstanding, and be angry and bitter? I cannot wish for either, but I know better than to expect a man so determined to accept the truth with equanimity.”

Jane sighed. “If only there was some solution to bring about the happiness of everyone.”

Brushing completed, Jane began to plait her hair. Elizabeth batted her sister’s hands away. A plait was quickly accomplished, but at least it gave her something to do. “Oh, no, not everyone. Two
people are to be happy and the rest of us miserable.” She picked a green ribbon to tie Jane’s hair.
“For you shall marry Mr. Bingley. And Mr. Darcy and I shall be your very awkward guests who will
never forget this episode as well as we should like!”

“Lizzy!” Jane turned in her chair, flushed and pouting. “Do not tease! We cannot know what Mr.
Bingley wishes!”

“Oh, I think we can!”

***

However soon Mr. Bingley may have hoped for them to know his wishes, he went about it ill. Ugly
blotches buried many of the words Mr. Bingley had set to paper, words Elizabeth suspected were
only half of what he had intended to write. She returned the missive to Mr. Darcy. Did he anticipate
elation or disappointment? “Are you practiced enough with Mr. Bingley’s style of writing to read
that?”

Darcy folded the letter. “As it happens, no. However, I thought such a letter indicated an extreme
excitement of his mind, the cause of which might better be known by the local estate agent and so I
rode that way this morning.”

“You were very mysterious. No one knew where you had gone off to.” Mr. Darcy’s disappearance
had so agitated Mrs. Bennet’s nerves that she imprisoned both herself and her daughter in her
apartment for the better part of the morning, so that she might berate Elizabeth at her leisure. The
defection of a suitor could only be the fault of a girl too stubborn to shower him with her respect and
gratitude. The mother had no wish, and the daughter no permission, to go downstairs until Hill had
brought word of Darcy’s return to the house. If Elizabeth had blamed Darcy for her predicament that
morning, her returned freedom and his presenting her with an inscrutable letter were together enough
to make her forget.

He frowned. “I spoke to your father.”

“That does not mitigate your offense, sir. My father’s sense of humour is singular. No doubt he
purposefully kept the information from my mother so that he might laugh about it when she learns
the truth.”

“Do you wish to know Mr. Bingley’s intentions?”

“I do! Though I suppose a part of me is apprehensive. It is very easy to be assured that Jane is as
well-loved as she should be when there is no proof to the contrary. If Mr. Bingley wrote to say he
has forgotten her, that he shall never return, I am not so very eager to hear that.”

“Take heart. Mr. Morris has informed me he is to arrive on Saturday.”

“Saturday!” she marvelled. “So soon! Jane must be told at once!”

Darcy swung the sitting room door open, causing Mrs. Bennet to stumble. She righted herself with
all the dignity of someone who had not been caught listening at doors. Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Of
course her tête-à-tête with Darcy had been a contrivance of her mother. Longbourn was too crowded
a house for privacy to have been come upon naturally. Pretending to have noticed nothing amiss,
Elizabeth strode into the hall behind Darcy. Mrs. Bennet latched onto her arm.

“Well?”
Elizabeth sighed. “Mr. Darcy, I am certain a footman can direct you to Jane. If you take her walking in the wilderness, I will find you.”

He hesitated.

“Do not let the name mislead you, sir, it is small and shall not prevent my finding you again.” After a pointed look from Elizabeth, Darcy disappeared.

When she could no longer see him, Mrs. Bennet said, “Did he propose? Are you engaged?” Elizabeth hoped that out of sight also meant out of earshot. “Did he--did he try anything? One never can tell how to secure a man like that. If you give him free rein, he may see no need to say anything that would bind him later, but if you resist, he might not find you worth the effort.”

“Mama, Mr. Darcy is a gentleman. He did nothing of the kind.”

Mrs. Bennet pursed her lips. “Lizzy, do not get it into your head that gentlemen are not men. If your father had ever taken you to Town, you would have seen enough to put any illusions of that right out of your head.” She leaned close to Elizabeth, voice low. “When he does, put up a fight, but not too much of a fight. Resist just enough that his success seems won.”

Elizabeth refused to pay her mother the compliment of engaging her on such a topic. “Mama, he wishes to speak to Jane. That is all.”

Frowning, Mrs. Bennet drew back. “Jane? What could he want with Jane?”

“Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley are good friends. He has news of Mr. Bingley to share with her.”

“Mr. Bingley! Jane has had enough of Mr. Bingley!”

“I wonder if Jane agrees!”

“We can have no use for a man like that--none at all! Mr. Darcy has other friends, I am sure, friends who will treat her better.”

“If Mr. Bingley is the man Jane wants, I hardly think it matters if Mr. Darcy has an entire legion of friends.”

“Mark my words, Lizzy--a girl will regret marrying a man who disregards her.”

“I have no doubt of that at all, Mama. Pray, excuse me.”

Pausing only for her bonnet and gloves, Elizabeth ran outside. Mama was right. Not in her abhorrent advice to pretend to resist a man’s physical advances. But her mother knew the misery of marrying a man who did not respect his wife, one who would not listen to her, or think about her feelings. Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth was sure, cared very much how Jane felt. It was Mr. Darcy who could not be bothered to consider others.

“Lizzy!” Her other hand tucked into Mr. Darcy’s elbow, Jane waved. Elizabeth ran towards them.

“Your mother kept you longer than I expected,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth shrugged. “What mother can resist offering grown daughters advice? Jane--what do you think?”

Jane furrowed her brow. “What about?”
Elizabeth’s eyes darted to Darcy.

“I waited for you.”

“Oh. Jane--Mr. Darcy has news!”

“Yes?”

Darcy cleared his throat. “I have had word from Mr. Bingley.”

“Lizzy is happy,” Jane said slowly, “so I trust it is good news.”

Darcy’s sedate revelation would not do for Elizabeth. Seizing Jane’s free hand, she cried, “He is to return to Netherfield on Saturday!”

Jane lowered her head, the brim of her bonnet hiding her expression. Her fingers tightened around Elizabeth’s.

“Jane?” Wary, Elizabeth looked to Darcy. His expression was troubling. “Jane, this is what you wanted.”

Jane withdrew her hand from Mr. Darcy’s arm and pressed it against her sternum. She took a deep breath, then raised her head. Her cheeks were pink, her countenance disturbed. “I am pleased,” she said, “Of course, I am pleased.”

Elizabeth smiled. She took Jane’s other hand, swinging their arms gaily.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth bid, “you shall not let Mr. Bingley go even a day without being reunited with Jane, will you? What better remedy can there be for a man’s spirits after travelling?”

Jane pressed her lips into a white line.

Darcy answered Elizabeth with a bend at the waist, “I shall do everything in my power to affect a reunion.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Mr. Bingley pays Mr. Darcy such deference that you shall not find a better promise anywhere!”

But Jane bit her lip. “We cannot know what will happen. Pray, allow me to be nervous.”

“Cannot know!” Elizabeth slipped her arm through Jane’s and, bumping shoulders, they walked towards the house. “I beg your pardon, we know exactly why Mr. Bingley is coming back!”

She thought she heard Jane whisper, “Were we all so fortunate.”

***

“Miss Eliza, the door is not going anywhere!” Penelope pouted. “You have told me nothing at all about Lydia’s fun in Brighton, though I have asked so many times.”

Elizabeth turned around, putting her back to the door for Penelope’s sake. She was not alone in her anticipation of Mr. Bingley’s return, nor was Darcy the only man in the neighbourhood to put his ear to the estate agent. Both traits mixed in the form of Sir William Lucas, who, since his elevation to the knighthood, had dedicated himself to knowing the business of everyone, and being pleased by it.
The news that Mr. Bingley was to return to Meryton circulated quickly, and on its heels, invitations to a card party and supper at Lucas Lodge the very night of his return. The promise Elizabeth had solicited from Mr. Darcy was rendered perfectly useless by Sir William’s dependability.

Her eagerness to see Mr. Bingley enter the parlour was making her rude. “Kitty knows more than I do.”

“Kitty will not tell us anything!”

“She’s still so jealous!” Harriet added.

“*You* must tell us!”

“Lydia writes more often to you than she does to me.” Unable to watch the door, Elizabeth’s ears were suddenly more alive than they had ever been. They could not swivel, like a cat’s, but if they could, she was sure they would have every time a chair scraped or a glass was put down.

Penelope crossed her arms. “Her last letter was two lines long!”

“That is two more lines than I have received.”

Over Harriet’s shoulder, Elizabeth could see Jane and Mary. Her older sister was quiet, her movements subdued. Though Jane did not share her eagerness, Elizabeth thought such miserable self-consciousness was surely the sign of someone in love. Morose Kitty refused the society of the Harrington sisters. Mr. Bennet had stayed home. Kitty should have, as well, if this was how she intended to treat her friends.

Mr. Darcy had been cornered by Sir William soon upon arriving, but had evidently made his escape. He approached Elizabeth and the Harrington sisters and addressed the former: "Miss Elizabeth, may I get you anything?"

"A glass of wine, thank you," Elizabeth said, falling into step beside Darcy. "Pray, excuse me." The Harrington sisters were not pleased to be abandoned, but at long last went to bother Kitty.

"Mr. Bingley will come," Darcy said softly.

Elizabeth resisted the urge to turn towards the door. "After a day of travel," she sighed, "one could not blame him if he decided he would rather stay at home."

"No," Darcy agreed easily, "but I do not see that as a likely outcome. Mr. Bingley would not resist an invitation."

"I had hoped not!"

Darcy poured the wine and handed Elizabeth a glass. Jane was wringing her hands. "Poor Jane. She is so nervous. Mr. Bingley is so kind, I cannot think she has any reason to be afraid."

Her companion shrugged. "I expect some would consider discomposure a fortuitous sign."

Elizabeth pressed the fingers of her free hand to her mouth and swallowed her laugh. Darcy looked at her oddly, but she waved him off. The thought his comment had inspired—perhaps her mother’s habitual lack of composure is what made her father think they would be well suited—was not one to share with Mr. Darcy. Perhaps later, when Jane was properly serene again, she would share it with her sister.
If some observers were to consider Jane's discomposure as a sign of continued regard for Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth thought it likely others would take it another way. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, for example, could choose to read whatever they wished in Jane's lack of comfort. Any uncharitable thoughts she had of Mr. Darcy's former confidants, Elizabeth kept to herself.

Doors opened, feet scraped and Sir William's jovial voice boomed, welcoming Mr. Bingley and his party back to Meryton, back to Lucas Lodge. Elizabeth turned.

Mr. Bingley was as she remembered him. Handsome, fashionable, eager. He accepted Sir William's words with warmth and grace. Though he must have spent at least five hours in his carriage, assuming they travelled from London, he did not appear tired, or ill, or anything but pleased to be here.

His sisters, not attending to Sir William's conversation anymore than required, scanned the room. The genteel families of Meryton had not grown more fashionable in their absence. The only thing that had ever pleased them about Hertfordshire society was their own exit.

Elizabeth's avowed goal was to allow Jane and Mr. Bingley the opportunity to make their own choice about their future together, without the input of meddling conspirators. She doubted that Mr. Hurst cared very much who his brother married, but Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were more invested in their brother's prospects than was good for him. Mr. Bingley must be able to converse with Jane, to judge the likelihood of true felicity with Jane for himself. If he was to have the chance to make headway tonight, his sisters must be occupied elsewhere.

Miss Bingley's roving eyes spotted Mr. Darcy. With her sister in tow, she gravitated towards the man who was both the most fashionable person in the room and one she could expect to share her misgivings. A better watchman, Elizabeth could not have asked for. With Mr. Darcy by her side, Miss Bingley would be kept well away from Jane and her beau.

To reduce the power of the sisters, they must be separated and unable to consult with one another. With aggressive amiability, Elizabeth said, “Mrs. Hurst! How good of you to come! It has been so long since we have seen one another!”

The response she received was a blink and the insufficient warmth of mutually false affection. “Yes. We were all so dismayed when we realised we would have to spend the winter in Town.”

“Winter in London provides you with much amusement.” Elizabeth and Mrs. Hurst had never been great friends. A single walk in Netherfield’s grounds was all they could claim. Yet, Elizabeth linked their arms and steered Mrs. Hurst towards a sofa in another part of the room. “You simply must tell me about all the balls you attended.”

“My sister could give you a more interesting account,” Mrs. Hurst protested. “A married woman at a ball has no use but to introduce suitable partners to the single people.”

“You are too modest! I know you have had pleasure in a ball, because I know Mr. Darcy dances with you, even though you are married.”

“My sister claims greater friendship with Mr. Darcy than I could,” Mrs. Hurst replied. “If it is him you wish for news of, I am not best prepared to provide it.”

Frowning, Elizabeth looked towards Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley. Their conversation was assuredly more pleasant than her own. They seemed at ease with one another.

Returning her attention to Mrs. Hurst, Elizabeth insisted, “You have the wrong of me, I assure you!
It is not Mr. Darcy I am interested in in the least. My father does not take my sisters and I to London. My only experience with Town is what my aunt and uncle in Cheapside can provide. So, you see, it is the society that is open to you that I am so eager to hear about.”

The plea of a girl without good connections seemed to rouse Mrs. Hurst’s heart. She was not at all disinclined to brag. Her conversation was tiresome, but Elizabeth continued to ply her with questions about where she had gone and who she had seen. Half-attending to the answers, she was able to watch Jane and Mr. Bingley finally approach one another. Just as Elizabeth had thought, Mr. Darcy was able to stop Miss Bingley from interfering. He looked happy to do it. He was smiling. Elizabeth noticed Miss Bingley seemed look at her much more often than she did Jane.

When the card tables came out, Lady Lucas began directing people to their seats. Elizabeth left Mrs. Hurst to ensure she could produce the best possible foursome for Jane and Bingley. Darcy was called over to join their table. Elizabeth expressed a desire for Whist and a preference that Darcy should be her partner. The rules of that game required partners sit opposite of one another and the conversion exclude any mention of play. And so, Mr. Bingley and Jane were perfectly situated to admire one another and not let idle chatter of tricks and trumps distract them.

***

On Sunday, they saw Mr. Bingley at church. On Monday, he called at Longbourn. He had come alone, and with no one to distract, creating opportunities for him to speak privately with Jane was as simple as suggesting they go for a walk. Outside, Elizabeth tugged on Darcy’s elbow to keep his pace slow and soon the other two were far ahead of them.

“Mr. Bingley behaves as though he never left,” Elizabeth observed happily.

Darcy said, “I would be surprised if his defection was ever far from his mind.”

“He regrets leaving.”

“I believe so.”

“He has not told you?”

“Not directly. He has not obfuscated his eagerness to return, but I have never known him to dwell on his past mistakes. I am convinced in this particular, he considers the crime too great to forget, but I confess that is perhaps coloured by my own perspective.”

“What you mean to say is, you regret it.”

“In truth, that remains to be seen.”

Elizabeth longed to pinch him, but settled for, “What do you mean?”

“If Mr. Bingley chooses to marry Miss Bennet, and their union is a happy one, then of course I shall regret my part in nearly preventing such an outcome. Should they decide they will not suit after all, or marry, but come to repent it, then I cannot regret it.”

“No one would wish for their friends to be unhappy,” Elizabeth said, “but you can at least agree that it is up to Mr. Bingley to make himself happy or unhappy, and not your responsibility.”

“Have I not done everything within my power to place Mr. Bingley in the way of making his choice
without interference?"

“You have. You have made Mr. Bingley’s concerns a priority very admirably, though,” (and here, she could not help but giggle) “I do not know that I can say you have accepted that it is not your responsibility if he is to be happy or not. For, in carefully creating his opportunities as we have, are we not taking undue responsibility for the actions of another?”

Mr. Darcy pulled a deep frown. “Perhaps we should shun him.”

Her laugh came out her nose.

***

Familiarity bred contentment. With every passing day, the vision of Jane with lips pressed white or wringing her hands drifted further and further away. She was replaced with Jane, on Mr. Bingley’s arm. Or, Jane speaking with Mr. Bingley in the quietest corner of Lucas Lodge. Jane, looking out the carriage window with a dreamy smile. Jane at dinner, with her plate full of dishes selected for her by Mr. Bingley.

Mrs. Bennet’s exhaustion at the name of Bingley was forgot as soon as marked attention to her daughter could wipe it from her mind. Every note that came from Netherfield pleased her. Every anecdote Darcy shared about his friend delighted her. Sojourns to Netherfield became commonplace, the men and the women mingling without any pretence that another goal was in mind.

When Mr. Bingley had been in Hertfordshire for about a week, he began to speak of sights beyond Meryton. He and Hurst each had a landau and Bingley claimed a fierce desire to see Berkhamsted Castle. The motte-and-bailey castle was an hour’s ride from the little village. The Bennet sisters visited every summer, and arrangements were happily made for Jane and Elizabeth to escort their Netherfield friends to see the place.

Though neither the carriages nor the picnic baskets belonged to Darcy, Elizabeth was unsurprised that he took to directing the entire venture. They would depart early on Monday from Netherfield. Mr. Hurst, Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were to go in one carriage, and Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, Jane and herself in the other.

On the day, Mr. Bingley handed Jane into the carriage and with a shaky smile, nodded at Darcy.

Rather than handing Elizabeth into the carriage as well, Darcy said in a low voice, “Tell your sister you do not wish to go.”

“Pardon?”

“You have seen the castle too many times to regret missing it very much this time.”

Mr. Bingley stood by, idle, then pacing, then speaking to Jane and pacing again.

“Lizzy?” Still alone in the landau, Jane called to her sister. “Are you coming?”

With an uncertain glance to the two men, Elizabeth said, “No. I--I have come down with a sudden headache.”

Jane stood, as if to disembark, but Mr. Darcy stepped forward, “Miss Bennet, I shall escort Miss Elizabeth to Longbourn. If Miss Elizabeth is to stay behind, then your expertise has become all the
more valuable for the rest of the party.”

“Lizzy, are you sure?”

From the other landau, fully loaded and ready to depart, Mr. Hurst shouted, “Come now! What is taking you so long?”

“Go ahead, Jane,” Elizabeth said firmly. “Do not let my headache ruin the trip for everyone!”

Jane sat. Bingley shook Darcy’s hand, grinned at Elizabeth and leapt into the carriage.

As the carriages rolled away, Elizabeth remarked, “You are too clever. But why did you not tell me of this little scheme?”

“Bingley and I planned the trip as a potential opportunity, but he was not decided that he should take it. The closer the time came, the less inclined he was to let it pass by.”

“The closer it came! You began planning this two days ago!”

“Mr. Bingley’s mind works very rapidly.”

“Do you suppose he will propose on the drive to the castle, or on the drive back?”

“I should be very surprised if he does not do it as soon as the carriages are far enough from one another that he will not be overheard.”

“It will be hours before we know.” The anticipation would be dreadful. “And we have nothing else planned for to-day!”

Darcy tucked Elizabeth’s hand into his arm. "Shall we walk?"

Never one to turn down a stroll, Elizabeth agreed. He led her towards the shrubbery path where she had once come upon him walking with Miss Bingley. Mrs. Hurst had been her companion then, and not a very loyal one. She had abandoned Elizabeth immediately upon finding her better friends. And Darcy, he had wanted everyone to move to the avenue where they could all walk together. But she—Elizabeth—laughed at them. She ran away, happy to be rid of them.

What a thing to have done.

Elizabeth’s fingers pressed down on Darcy’s arm. She was overcome with the urge to apologise to him for such rudeness. It was a nonsensical impulse. She doubted the event made any impression on him. An apology would be meaningless. Though she had found it diverting at the time to comment on the picturesque group the three of them made—charming, like cows on the side of a hill!—it had been petty. He, at least, had wished to be accommodating!

She had long given up on repeating refusals he would not listen to, resigned to simply wait for him to realise on his own that he had been sincerely rejected. How could she endeavour to apologise for a joke and shrug at heartbreak? What was she thinking?

Most likely, her sudden swell of charitable feeling towards Mr. Darcy was the result of his facilitating Mr. Bingley’s courtship of Jane. Darcy offered Jane renewed hope, and so Elizabeth wished to make peace with him. To dredge up old mistakes, especially a petty and meaningless one, hardly seemed like the right way to do so. Why, she did not even know if he had been offended! Why mention it at all?
Still, they needed some conversation. "You have made me akin to my mother, sir."

Darcy raised an eyebrow.

"I am privy to your plotting someone else’s engagement! How is sending a couple off in a carriage alone any better than lingering at doors, hoping to overhear? Well, I will not thank you for such a transformation. If you were wise, you would regret it."

Darcy shrugged.

Yet again, he said nothing unkind about her mother, though she was sure he wanted to. Where was the man who once refused to disguise his feelings? Had he decided she would bat her eyes at him more if he feigned ignorance? It was patronising. Familiar ire seeped into her.

"I know very well what she is," Elizabeth snapped. "I have no intention to pretend otherwise."

He started. "Miss Bennet..."

"She was born the daughter of an attorney. Her upbringing was exactly suited for that station in life. If she has deficits in her understanding or in the formation of her mind, one can hardly expect otherwise. She was not intended to be the wife of a gentleman and my father did not exert himself to educate her."

Darcy summarised this speech crisply. "She married outside her circle."

Elizabeth frowned. "I would not say that. A neighbourhood such as this, they had always been acquainted with one another, though not precisely well enough to understand one another. And, in marrying him, she was not taken far away. She did not have to leave any of her friends. But, by being my father's wife, she rose above her station with no notion or preparation. They took for granted that they would have a son. She failed at her most necessary duty."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I am not any better than my father--I have given up on trying to educate her, too. But I know you think poorly of her, and you should not. She does the best she can with what has been given to her."

Darcy was silent for a moment. Then, "She has the finest table in the neighbourhood."

Elizabeth released a long breath. "Thank you."

"If I am not to be thanked for making you akin to your mother, does it imply I have made myself akin to your father?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, no! As you bear as much responsibility for Mr. Bingley’s current situation as anyone, you have also made yourself like her!"

"My character, then, do you think it very like your father's?"

She stopped short. "I had never compared the two of you. Let me think...My father is a difficult man to comprehend. He is so odd a mixture of different parts. You, I think, are a more straightforward character."

"Perhaps I misunderstood you."

She squared her shoulders. Was it finally here? The moment that Mr. Darcy realised the depth of his misunderstanding?
"My station in life is, of course, decidedly above that which you were born into. I had thought, perhaps, you were trying to tell me that your reluctance stems from some fear that I would not assist you in the transition. I am pleased to have been mistaken. You must know you have no cause to fear-you are up to any task, and I would be remiss in my own duties if I did not offer any assistance you might desire."

A less disciplined woman would have groaned. She should have known better. "I think perhaps it would be best if we returned to Longbourn. We cannot wander all over Netherfield when none of the family is present."

Darcy agreed. His own coach had conveyed the three of them from Longbourn. It took little time to ready it to take Elizabeth home. She was quiet during the ride. She should have known Darcy would listen to the tale of Mrs. Bennet’s mismanaged life and think it a confession. It was true she did not wish for a marriage like her parents, but that was because they were poorly matched in temperament. For herself, she wanted a man well-suited to her needs.

Elizabeth repeated her fabrication about her headache when she arrived at home and went upstairs to lay down. Having no need for rest, she wrote a letter to Aunt Gardiner and read until sufficient time had passed that she could claim to be recovered. She wanted no part of the commotion downstairs that must follow Mr. Bingley and Jane going to Berkhamsted in a landau of their own. The meaning Mrs. Bennet would choose to assign to such an event was almost certainly the correct guess. She would be living in the same wretched suspense as the rest of them.

Elizabeth spied them from the upstairs window when Mr. Bingley’s carriage rolled to Longbourn. From that distance, Jane and Bingley’s expressions were difficult to read, but from the set of their shoulders, the bounce in their steps and the hands that kept searching for one another, Elizabeth was confident all had gone as Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley planned.

The commotion would only grow, of course, but now that it was properly Jane’s, Elizabeth wished to take part. She hurried downstairs.

Mr. Bingley may have wished to speak directly with Mr. Bennet, but a household of women was an impenetrable barrier. In their eagerness for their suspicions to be confirmed, Mrs. Bennet and Kitty plied him with too many questions to let him pass. Mr. Bingley was voluble under normal circumstances and happiness made him even more so.

"Miss Elizabeth!"

So beckoned, Elizabeth joined the group.

"Pray do not be cross with me, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Bingley said. "I must have ruined your morning!" He was entirely without contrition, and she could not blame him for it.

"Mr. Darcy was kind enough to take me on a tour of the shrubbery, Mr. Bingley. What a lovely day it is!"

Bingley grinned. "The loveliest day I have ever seen, by far! Why, do you know I do not believe I have ever been to a place with more perfect weather than Hertfordshire?"

"I am in every way prepared to believe it, sir."

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet entered from the hall. Darcy went for his friend immediately, shaking his hand and ending his entrapment.

For her part, Jane did not smile so wide or proclaim joy in every offered subject, but her body
seemed to pulse with excited energy. She swept towards Elizabeth and greeted her sister with such warmth and agitation that Elizabeth could have no doubts to what had been asked or what had been answered.

Finally, it all burst from Jane in a great torrent of cheer. "Oh, Lizzy! Such happiness! Why cannot everyone be so happy!"

Elizabeth looked at Darcy, who was watching Mr. Bingley and Mr. Bennet depart. "I do not know."
”Lizzy is not used to losing. She would not be so sore if she were more accustomed to it.”

Jane’s smile was thin. ”Yes, thank you, Kitty.”

Kitty shrugged, and bidding her sisters a good night, retired to her own room.

Jane shut her door with a sigh. ”Lizzy, had I any notion that a game would discompose you so, I should never have suggested we play!”

Jane’s words came out with all the rapidity of someone who had ached to say them for too long. The carriage ride home from Netherfield had been unusually quiet. The presence of Kitty and Mr. Darcy had made it impossible for Jane and Elizabeth to discuss anything. Elizabeth’s disquiet had been too palpable for any of them to ignore. Darcy, of course, had wished to attend to her but being enclosed in a carriage left him to offer only awkward, if nicely worded, inquiries after her well-being.

”I shall not entertain any of your apologies,” Elizabeth replied. ”You are a faultless creature and too good to take blame for my caprice.”

Jane bit her lip. ”It is unlike you to lose at a word game.”

”My memory is as fine as it ever was. I was uncommonly distracted.”

A corner of Jane’s mouth twitched. ”What by?”

A foul mood could not persist when Jane appeared to have some idea of what had been so diverting. ”You,” Elizabeth answered. ”You and Charles. I have never seen two people so happy in my life. If I forgot what question had been posed to me or what answer I received, it is because I find your happiness more deserving of my attention than Cross Questions and Crooked Answers.”

Jane chided her, but her mirth made it rather ineffective. ”And yet,” Jane continued when they had both gotten over their fits of delight at the upcoming nuptials, ”that does not explain why you have been so discomfited since we left Netherfield.”

Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth shrugged. ”I suppose Kitty has the right of me. Games of chance I lose as often as anyone, but games of words and remembering--those, I am accustomed to winning.”

”Oh, Lizzy, promise me you will not laugh--” such a promise was not one Elizabeth was the sort to issue, and Jane did not pause long enough to receive one had she been, “--but my poor performance was on purpose.”

A mistake meant a forfeit, and for a lady, the punishment for a forfeit was a kiss. At the end of the evening, Mr. Bingley claimed Jane’s forfeits as sweetly and rightly as any man could. She was his intended. There could be no doubt in anyone’s mind that the evening of parlour games had been suggested for the exact purpose of revelling in such a situation.

”What a sly thing you are!”
Jane blushed. "Bingley and I...we have lost so much time, Lizzy! Imagine if he had returned in November! We could have played parlour games through the winter and been married before the New Year... I know it is foolish to play winter games in June, but you can indulge us in this, can you not?"

Mr. Darcy was to blame for Jane and Mr. Bingley’s lost time.

Mr. Darcy was to blame for the nervousness she could not laugh away.

“You ask for so little. I would not dare deny you! Pray do not think it is unseasonable amusements that make me poor company.”

Jane was too clever to be insensible to the fact that Elizabeth’s problems always seemed to stem from the same source. “Perhaps not the amusements themselves, but rather what they led to?"

Feigning ignorance, Elizabeth asked, “My pitiable performance, do you mean?”

“Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders stiffened. “I suppose we could not have expected any less, so it is silly to fret about it.”

“Lizzy, you must know I would never put you in such a position on purpose. I have never known you to get your questions and answers tangled.”

“Oh, no, I am in the happy state of allowing all my anger to settle exactly on the person it most pleases me to be angry with. If anything, you have done me an uncommon favour.”

“Do you imagine he thinks you lost on purpose?”

“It lines up so well with all of his thinking so far that I must. I cannot stop him from thinking of me as a flirt or a coquette and I shall not try. The more stubbornly he insists upon it, the more he shall have to regret later.”

"We should not play any more parlour games," Jane said firmly. "They are not a summer activity. I am sorry, Lizzy. I did not think how they would affect you."

"Do not apologise to me! You wish to play with Charles. It is sweet and I refuse to disapprove of you for it! If I do not wish to owe Mr. Darcy a forfeit, I had better pay more care next time."

Jane appeared unconvinced. "If you are certain..."

"I am!"

In the dark of night, when the girls had all gone to bed and the candles were put out, Elizabeth’s certainty remained. Jane’s pleasure in her engagement should be paramount. She had not been able to have all the flirting and frivolities of courtship when she should have. Elizabeth could only be charmed that Jane and Mr. Bingley wished for them now. She was charmed when the group sat down to play a silly parlour game, she was charmed throughout the game and when it was time for her to recite which question and which answer she ought, she was a bit befuddled.

Darcy sat to her right. He had asked the question that she had answered. Mr. Hurst sat to her left. He had answered the question she posed. When all the turns had been taken, Elizabeth was meant to recite the question Darcy asked and the answer Mr. Hurst supplied, but instead had repeated the question she asked Mr. Hurst and the answer Mr. Darcy had given Jane. Jane should have recited
Darcy’s answer already, but she, being foolish on purpose to earn Mr. Bingley’s kiss, had said something else.

When the recitations were tallied, Jane owed Mr. Bingley a forfeit, just as she had wished.

And Elizabeth owed Mr. Darcy a forfeit, which she decidedly did not wish.

Mr. Darcy took the kiss he was owed, and had he asked her preference in the matter, he took it in the way she would have wished.

He scarcely took it at all. His only object appeared to be the ability to later claim truthfully that he had exerted himself far enough to go through with it. She might have anticipated that a man who claimed to love her so ardently would kiss her like he had any interest in doing so. But then, he never had found her handsome, had he? Perhaps a brief, grudgingly bestowed kiss was all she could rouse in a man of his opinions.

Why he would wish to marry, so stubbornly insist upon marrying, a woman he had no particular interest in was beyond her. His caprice was titanic. He did not find her worth the effort of dancing with, worth the effort to converse with, nor the effort to kiss properly! Yet he chose to devote weeks of his life to following her around Meryton with the assurance that if he simply waited for her to find his patience unamusing, she would marry him. What was he thinking? He was unfathomable.

More mortifying than the reminder that Mr. Darcy was truly not tempted by her meager beauty was the appalling truth that she wished he was. She wanted nothing to do with him. Yet, he was handsome. To kiss him, she was sure, could be a pleasing experience provided he bothered to do it well enough that one might actually appreciate it.

She wanted more from him than she cared to want.

She did not dare tell Jane.

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“Miss Eliza!”

Elizabeth looked up and squinted. In the harsh midday sun, Caroline Bingley could have been an eclipse. Her bonnet prevented any light from touching her face while the corona of the sun shone stark behind her. “Miss Bingley, what a pleasant day this has been.”

“I do love a picnic! When Charles suggested it, I thought it the most wonderful way to pass the morning.”

“You are not playing battledore and shuttlecock?”

Three rackets had been located and brought to the picnic and so only three ladies could endeavour to combat the forces of gravity to keep the shuttlecock afloat. The Bingley sisters would soon be Jane’s own. Elizabeth had volunteered to be the one to abstain. Perhaps if Jane could spend time with her soon-to-be sisters, they could grow to accept her. Miss Bingley had been playing, when last Elizabeth had observed the ladies, but now her battledore lay abandoned. If she chose not to play, it would be only fair for Elizabeth to take her place.

“I was, but I had so hoped to speak with you!”
The idea that Miss Bingley should have anything to say to her struck Elizabeth as rather ridiculous. Both of them must prefer the company of the shuttlecock to the other. Miss Bingley spoke well only when it benefitted her to do so, so she could not have much to say to Elizabeth. Perhaps she could get this over quickly and let Miss Bingley be the one alone on the blanket. “Yes?”

This was enough encouragement for Miss Bingley to settle herself beside her. Very quietly, she said, “You must allow me to wish you joy!”

Elizabeth recoiled. “I beg your pardon!”

After the space of a moment, Miss Bingley tittered. “Mr. Darcy has told me of your engagement. You need not be coy with me.”

They had packed a cold roast and fruit for the picnic, yet suddenly Elizabeth felt she had eaten the cook’s pestle.

Miss Bingley pressed a thoughtful finger to her chin. “He swore me to absolute secrecy, of course, but it must be safe to speak to you.”

The men were across the lawn, immersed in a hotly contested game of bowls. Elizabeth pictured herself stomping to the carefully cultivated bowling green, hefting one of those balls and throwing it at Mr. Darcy’s head. How dare he?

Miss Bingley was still talking. “Now, he did tell me everything was not yet settled, and I swore faithfully not to tell a soul, and of course I would never betray Mr. Darcy’s trust, but how could he be upset if just we ladies discussed it?”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. Mr. Bingley’s property was rented. Neither his bowling green nor his balls belonged to him. It would be wrong to hurl one at a guest. She breathed deeply. “Miss Bingley, regardless of what Mr. Darcy might have told you—and I beg you not to ask me to account for his words, for I was not privy to any secret conversation you might have had with him—I am not engaged. Perhaps he wished to tease you and you misunderstood.”

“Come now, Miss Eliza! This is quite unbecoming. I know Mr. Darcy well enough to tell his secrets from his teases!”

“One must be cautious with Mr. Darcy. He teases when provoked.”

Miss Bingley appeared to have swallowed something foul. Perhaps it was she who ate the cook’s pestle. “I do not provoke him very often.” She laughed again. “There is a fondness between us, but he is not so mirthful as you.”

“It is a pity.” Elizabeth made to rise. Who was she to ignore the lure of the shuttlecock? Miss Bingley’s claim to her racket must be fully rescinded after so long an absence.

Miss Bingley seized Elizabeth’s hand. “I suppose it is more common that I tease him.”

“Oh, dear, and you yourself told me Mr. Darcy is not to be teased.” Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “One wonders what he made of that.”

She blushed. “Miss Eliza, really. I wished only to wish you joy and you make sport of me. It is most unkind.”

“When there can be no occasion to wish someone joy, I hardly know what to do with such wishes. If my spirit runs wild at such a time, you must forgive me.”
Miss Bingley tutted. “I know what you wish for me to do, and I shall not!”

Elizabeth, who had no aspirations of any kind for Miss Bingley, said, “Then do not.”

Miss Bingley laughed again and nudged her shoulder against Elizabeth’s. She whispered, “You must long to know all that Mr. Darcy has said about you. He confides in me a great deal, you know. We are such friends!”

Elizabeth whispered back, “I would never ask you to betray the confidence of such a close friend.” Nor would she be interested. “Later, you may congratulate yourself on having kept all of his secrets.”

Evidently, Miss Bingley did not forgo battledores and shuttlecocks for her dangled information to not be a thing of interest. “Our first conversation on the subject, if I recall correctly, was about your eyes.”

"My eyes?" Exasperation crept into her voice, though she tried to contain it. “You mean to say you believe implacably that Mr. Darcy and I are engaged because you have teased him on the subject of my eyes and that gives you the ability to, without question, differentiate his serious moments from his teasing?"

Miss Bingley gaped at her. “There is no need to prevaricate with me. I thought only perhaps that you might, as any other lady would in your situation, wish for a friend that you could discuss it with. My own long-standing friendship with Mr. Darcy must make me ideal for such a companion. I have been privy to his every thought and intention about you for months.”

Elizabeth could not help the words that fell out of her mouth. “For months?”

Miss Bingley rolled her eyes, theatrically. “For months. Your eyes and your delicate lashes and your figure. It has all been rather nauseating, really. One would not think Mr. Darcy the type of man to go on so if they had not heard it themselves.”

Elizabeth sat silent, stunned.

“Pray do not think I mean to say he is the type to make a brutish, uncaring husband, either. I am sure you will be very happy at Pemberley and I do hope, when you are so happily settled, you will remember me and what a good friend I have been to Mr. Darcy. I have known him for so much longer than you.”

“Let it be said again, I truly have no intention of going to Pemberley at all.”

“There are times,” Miss Bingley continued, “that I fear you and I have misunderstood one another. Let us be friends! When you come to Town, you will appreciate having Louisa and I to help you.”

The conversation was put to an end by Mr. Darcy’s approaching their blanket. “Miss Elizabeth,” said he, “I hope the sun is not too harsh.”

“Not at all. I enjoy the summer.”

“Is Miss Bennet enjoying the picnic?”

Elizabeth looked towards Jane, still fighting the shuttlecock’s losing battle against gravity. “She appears to be.”

“Mr. Darcy!” Miss Bingley cried, “Is your game of bowls over so soon?”
“I am afraid so. Hurst and Bingley are beginning another end.”

“You must join us if you do not wish to observe! Miss Eliza and I were having a chat.”

Standing over the ladies, Darcy shifted his weight. “I had actually hoped Miss Eliza might importune upon her sister to walk with me. I have not yet wished her joy.”

“Poor Mrs. Hurst,” Elizabeth observed, “she will have been abandoned entirely.”

“Miss Bingley can take Miss Bennet’s place, can you not?”

“But then who would dear Miss Eliza have to entertain her?”

“She shall simply have to come with us.” Darcy offered his hand to Elizabeth. She took it and he pulled her to her feet. Shoulders hunched with resignation, Miss Bingley rose and went off to exchange places with Jane.

“I had not known you were friends with Miss Bingley,” he said after a moment.

“You did not?” Elizabeth asked, with vaguely affected wonder. “Certainly you must remember her teasing me at Netherfield last autumn.”

Jane, graceful girl that did not run across lawns, walked up to them. “Caroline said you wished to speak to me?”

Darcy said, “I had thought we could go for a walk.”

Jane looked towards Elizabeth. “With me?”

Elizabeth’s face grew hot. “Mr. Darcy wishes to speak to you. I am coming along only because I am friendless otherwise.”

Jane took Darcy’s offered arm and the three left the picnic site to walk in the garden. Though Darcy had been the one to request the walk and the conversation, he did not say anything for some time. Jane asked, “How did you negotiate three for bowls?”

Darcy startled. “Hurst and I played, and now he is playing Bingley.”

Jane laughed melodically. “Dear Mr. Bingley! Louisa tells me Mr. Hurst is quite good at bowls. I hope he will not be disappointed.”

“He has appeared to be very happy since you accepted his hand. I do not believe his good cheer will be much affected by lawn bowls.”

“I hope you do not think us as silly as Lizzy does! Playing parlour games and having picnics!”

“No. No, I do not find it silly at all.” After another silence, Mr. Darcy began again: “Miss Bennet, I can go no longer without acknowledging the detrimental impact my actions have had on you.”

“I did read the letter you gave Lizzy,” Jane said softly.

“Yes. You are a difficult woman to comprehend, Miss Bennet. I was surprised at the alterations you choose to make.”

“I am not so selfless as you might be wishing to paint me, sir. I wished for Mr. Bingley to return for my sake and my sake alone, not to answer to your conscience.”
“Nonetheless, I have, since then, apologised to my friend for my interference. However kindly meant, it was officious and insupportable.”

“I understand, Mr. Darcy. I know Mr. Bingley is grateful for your friendship and your willingness to provide guidance.”

“Your sister, had she related our private conversations to you, could tell you how lacking in sincerity those apologies were. I made them because I felt them necessary and expected, not because I repented what I had done.”

“You told me you would repent if he was happy,” Elizabeth interjected.

“Miss Bennet, since your engagement to Mr. Bingley, I can have no doubt that you make him very happy. I have apologised to him again. And even then, I neglected to apologise to you.”

“Since we both wish for Mr. Bingley’s happiness,” Jane said, “I cannot be very angry with you.”

“Some bitterness would be understandable.”

“Mr. Bingley is modest and you are kind to him. You interfered to protect him. Even if you were wrong, and your actions brought me pain, I can appreciate the sentiment. I will not hate the feelings that lead anyone to protect their friends, and I beg you not to ask me to.”

Mr. Darcy opened his mouth, but Elizabeth tugged sharply on his arm before he got further than, “Miss Bennet.” He looked down at her and she shook her head.

Jane announced, “I shall return to the picnic. If Mr. Bingley is playing against Mr. Hurst, he might be in need of encouragement.” She slipped away from Darcy and strode back the way they had come.

“Jane is not so cynical as you or I,” Elizabeth said as she watched her sister disappear beyond the hedges. “To force her to dwell on the human failings of those less perfect than herself can be of no use. It will only bring her pain she does not deserve.”

His attitude took on an air of being suitably chastised. Then he said, “And you? You must tell me what brought about your pain last evening, for I cannot account for it.”

Elizabeth dropped his arm as well. “Silliness. Nonsense and caprice.”

“You cannot think that answer will satisfy me.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Then I shall make no attempt to do so. Here is something else that shall not satisfy you: I am not at all pleased by the information related to me by Miss Bingley.” That alone did not seem to illuminate the source of her anger. “She told me you told her we are engaged.”

He shrugged.

“You promised me that you would not say a word to anyone without my permission.”

She could see immediately he had no defense. His face lost some of its colour and eventually he said, “Miss Bennet knows, I imagine.”

“Of course, I have told Jane everything.”

“Do you expect that I do not have confidants of my own?”

“No.” She was surprised that he would choose Miss Bingley, but she supposed every person must
have someone to share their secrets with. “It is not that I object to you having confidants. It is that you told her something you told me you would not speak to anyone about.”

“I have told her so many things about you,” he confessed, his ears very red, “that I will admit to being eager to share this as well. I apologise for the lapse, but I will say I have always found her to be dependable.”

“I would never describe her so.”

“You and she have often been at odds. My friendship with her is of an entirely different character. Regardless, she behaves towards you as she does because she is jealous.”

“Pardon?” Elizabeth knew Caroline Bingley thought herself firmly above every family in Meryton. What was there to be jealous of?

“I believe ladies, as a rule, do not enjoy hearing men comment on the particular charms of other women?”

How blind had Elizabeth been that she had noticed Miss Bingley aspired to marry Mr. Darcy, could not be unaware of Mr. Darcy’s intention to marry herself and had somehow never realised that Miss Bingley was jealous? Not only did Mr. Darcy have no designs on Miss Bingley, but he confided in her about all the other women he did notice. Poor Miss Bingley. Elizabeth almost pitied her. What an unpleasant thing to have to listen to.

“She said you were actually rather nauseating.”

Some of the red had crept from his ears to his face. “I do not credit that.”

“Oh, no, we have already established that you find Miss Bingley dependable. I am afraid I must credit her after having heard such a character.”

“Truly, my comments were very few. She would tease me for any of them excessively, which must cause her recollections to unreasonably multiply.”

“You said very few things to her and yet you felt compelled, on the weight of all that you had said previously, to confide in her that we have an understanding? I am afraid I cannot credit that.”

“Take pity on me, Miss Elizabeth.”

She laughed. “Why should I do that?”

“A man so in love cannot be expected to have a mind that works as rapidly as yours.”

She stepped back. Mr. Darcy, tall and imperious, suddenly seemed so fragile. “I--very well. What would you have me do instead?”

He appeared to weigh this question carefully. Her belly churned, waiting for his pronouncement. Elizabeth had not meant to give him power that he would take so seriously. When he finally spoke, it was with a gravity that displayed how much significance he put on this duty. “I should like to know what upset you yesterday.”

“It was…” her face must be as red as his ears, “It was very silly.”

“Caprice and nonsense, so you said. Still, I should like to think you would tell me what causes you concern.”
“I was angry at myself.”

That answer seemed to surprise him. “Whatever for?”

“I am a sore loser.” She swung her arms, then clasped them behind her back. “If you thought I gave a foolish answer on purpose, I had not. Jane said the wrong answer and that threw my entire memory of the order of questions and answers into chaos.”

Mr. Darcy nodded. “I find it a better strategy to only attempt to remember that which I will be responsible for, than every answer in the game.”

“A most reliable strategy,” Elizabeth agreed with a shrug, “but when I was young, I decided that was too easy. So you see, my hubris has been my downfall.”

She watch him think.

“Yet, I noticed, you were not upset when you lost the game. It was at the end of the evening you were agitated.”

“The end of the evening is when the forfeits are paid, sir.”

“I had feared that was the source. Your discretion has been impeccable. So public a display must have been irreconcilable to your feelings. I hope you know I would never take advantage of such a situation.”

In spite of herself, Elizabeth laughed. “To take advantage of the situation is why people play!”

He shrugged. “I know. Still, I felt confident you would not wish for me to do so, our circumstances being what they are.”

He was perfectly right. She did not wish for Mr. Darcy to take advantage of the opportunity to kiss her in front of so many of their closest friends. She could never desire such a thing. Yet, the episode had left her rejected, angry and confused.

“As a rule,” Elizabeth said, “ladies do not enjoy being kissed begrudgingly.”

One long stride, and he was not a hair away from her.

“I see.” His voice shook. “I shall do better next time.”

For the first time, Elizabeth became aware of the insufficiency of ladies’ garments. Her bonnet protected her face and her gown protected her modesty, but nothing at all protected her from when a gentleman gently splayed his fingers along the side of her neck or from his thumb gently stroking her jaw.

At first, the touch of his lips was like a feather, so light as to be barely there. Then the boldness born of assurance coaxed him into pressing his mouth to hers more firmly. His other hand joined the first, his palms cradling her face as he kissed her.

Her hands found the planes of his chest, wound into his lapel and still, he did not stop.

He opened his mouth and his tongue fondled her lips until they parted and still, he did not stop.

She pulled back, breathing hard and wildly. In his eyes, she saw the same shock she felt. Her hands were still fistled in his coat. One of his hands fell from her face and caught her wrist. The pads of his fingers pressed into the heel of her hand while his thumb caressed hers.
But his other hand slid in the other direction, cupped the back of her head and drew her to him once more. Her body swayed. She rose on her toes.

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by JRTT, SMAW, Skydreamer and Foreverhypnosis
Their lips parted gently, one of his hands still holding hers against his chest, while the other tipped her chin towards his face. She opened her eyes to see his gaze shift, from meeting her own to looking down at her mouth. Her heart thundered in anticipation as he leaned towards her yet again. Suddenly, he stopped, as if struck, and broke the spell. "I must speak to your father."

Elizabeth slithered out of his grasp.

"No." Mr. Darcy sighed, his arms dropping to his sides. "Not yet. Miss Elizabeth, I cannot disguise my anxiety to have everything settled. Much as I respect your discretion, I cannot understand why you persist in delays. It is not indignation on the part of your sister, for her happiness is assured. You do not fear the future, nor do you demur due to delicacy. What assurance do you need that I have failed to provide?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "There is no secret requirement you must fulfil. Pray do not think I trifle with you for my own amusement."

Darcy scuffled the footpath with the toe of his boot. "We should return to the picnic before we are missed." He turned and retreated without offering his arm.

She knew she should follow him. Her absence must be suspicious to someone. But, if Darcy was going to withhold politeness because his demands went unanswered, she did not care to walk with him. Elizabeth went the other way, wandering through the lush garden until she came upon a stone bench. She sat and watched butterflies dance along the lavender-blue pincushion flowers that bordered the garden.

Slowly, her frustration with Darcy ebbed. What was he to think? Surely to kiss him as she had should indicate that all of his hopes were soon to be answered. Yet her heart remained fixed on her refusal. There simply was no assurance he could provide, no magic promise that would cause her to fall instantly into his arms. Darcy wished to know what he had failed to do, but the simple fact was Elizabeth did not require anything from him. She had no answer to give.

When she had composed herself, Elizabeth returned to the picnic, where she complimented Mr. Bingley on his garden and consoled him for his loss at bowls. To Mr. Darcy, she had nothing to say, and for once, he had no wish to stare at her.

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Mr. Darcy’s unsociable attitude continued through the whole of Sunday. Reactions from his hosts varied among the individual family members, but nearly all were agreed that Elizabeth was the cause of it. Mrs. Bennet berated her whenever the opportunity arose. Mr. Darcy was too great a man to offend, and Lizzy should take care to cater to his wishes better in the future. Jane offered curious glances, but nothing more. She made no attempt to cajole her sister into unwanted confidences about what occurred in the garden. Elizabeth, as it happened, cared to share none of it. Mr. Bennet, typically harbouring nothing but contempt for any person who would stay a guest in his house for nigh on three weeks, could at least find some amusement in his daughter presumably turning that gentleman’s hopes inside and out.
Elizabeth likewise blamed her own actions and could not fault Mr. Darcy for his wounds, but she found the way he chose to handle it childish and beneath him. They ought to talk about it. He had taken her words as a request to kiss her as a man in love should do and she could not argue that interpretation. If he was hurt that she proved to be so fickle, she could not begrudge him that either. But why must it necessitate withdrawing from her? She dwelt on the issue enough to give herself a headache.

On Monday, she awoke with the resolve to let it bother her no more and her sanguinity was immediately rewarded with a letter from Mrs. Gardiner. So much had been going on since she last saw her aunt that Elizabeth had spared very little time for anticipating their Northern tour. Mr. Darcy might not have left Hertfordshire yet, but in a fortnight, she would. It would be absurd for him to remain at Longbourn after she had gone. Surely even he was not so confident that he would decamp only to return after a few months.

*My dear niece,* the letter began. Elizabeth read those words with happy anticipation that was immediately shattered. The kind salutation was followed by such unwelcome phrases as *your uncle’s business prevents us from setting out until a fortnight later than we had hoped and we must be back within a month.* A contracted tour was summarily dismissed because *time available coincides exactly with when we expect Jane will be married.* With profuse promises to take Elizabeth to the Lakes at another, more suitable time, Mrs. Gardiner cancelled the trip.

Elizabeth folded the letter. She would write a reply after she had taken the time to reflect on the change of plans. That she was disappointed could not be denied and she had no wish to hurt her aunt with complaints or petulance. If she picked up her pen while in poor spirits, it was only natural that such feelings should seep into the letter whether she wished them to or not.

Her father, with his attachment to his home and his books, was never one for travel. Every trip Elizabeth had taken was at someone else’s invitation. Travelling as far as the Lake District had been a beautiful dream! Mrs. Gardiner promised to take her another time and Elizabeth knew her aunt promised in good faith, but in her heart, Elizabeth had her doubts. Her uncle’s business concerns would always limit his movement and encroach upon his leisure time. If he could not leave his business this time, how could she believe he could leave it next summer or the next?

Still, cancellation of the trip brought some relief. Had she gone, Elizabeth would not see Jane be married. Of course she must be home! How could she think of leaving at such a time? And there was Mr. Darcy to consider. He had not cared to listen to her explanations before the picnic. She could not really believe that he would have a sudden change of heart and begin to take her at her word. Especially not now, when he did not even speak to her if he could avoid it. Though she would regret the missed opportunity for a long time and she remained skeptical of future invitations, Elizabeth could admit the cancellation was for the best.

She tucked the letter safely into her writing desk and went downstairs to find Jane and share the news.

Kitty accosted her. "Lizzy!"

"Yes?"

"I wished to call on Harriet and Pen and you will never guess what has happened!"

"Then perhaps you ought to tell me."
"Mama says if I am to go, then I ought to take eggs and meat with me!"

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "If we have eggs and meat to share with our friends, then I must agree with her."

"You will take it, won’t you?"

"Kitty, if you had already planned to call on them, certainly you can take a small basket."

"Half a dozen eggs!" Kitty cried. "And a joint of beef!"

"I am sure if you ask Hill, she will find strawberries and tomatoes to add."

"I am very happy we can help them so well, but Lizzy, you know how awkward it is to remind them of all that we have and they lack. I have letters from Lydia and they will not want to laugh and talk if I am bringing them food to eat."

"I will take the basket. If you like, I will even wait for you to take the girls out of the house and give it only to their aunt. They need not know whom their meat came from."

Kitty beamed. "Thank you, Lizzy!"

Elizabeth applied to Hill for more provisions to be added and she was pleased to behold a hamper brimming with eggs, a large cut of beef and a delightful array of summer berries. She and Kitty were nearly ready to set off when Mr. Darcy emerged from the bookroom and asked Elizabeth where she was going.

"Kitty and I are to walk to Meryton. I have a basket for Mrs. Long."

He eyed the hamper. "You are to carry that?"

"Oh, no! It is too heavy for me to carry all the way to Meryton. We are waiting for a footman to join us."

"Nonsense," Darcy said. "I will accompany you."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. "Can you carry such a basket five miles?"

"We shall take my carriage and relieve us all of the burden of carrying it any further than the few steps to her door."

This change of plans pleased Kitty even more than the last. Not only was she freed from the duty of performing work for the poor, but she was to ride in the grandest carriage in the neighbourhood. Elizabeth could not help but tease her. It was awkward to bring her friends goods that they desperately needed and had not the money to buy, but not awkward to call upon them in a finer carriage than they could ever hope to ride in?

"It is not our carriage, Lizzy," Kitty said with a shrug.

The ride into Meryton was short and pleasant. Morose, jealous Kitty, of whom they had all seen too much of since Lydia left, was gone. Being the sole recipient of long letters from Lydia allowed Kitty
to fancy herself quite important and she repeated every line of Lydia’s last letter at least three times before she was satisfied. She anticipated the joy of doing it all over again when she saw her friends. Reticent Mr. Darcy, who had silently haunted Longbourn since Saturday evening, had been replaced with a man who had found his tongue again and exerted himself far enough to use it. They made for a more cheerful party than Elizabeth would have anticipated.

When the carriage rolled to a stop in front of Mrs. Long’s dwelling, Mr. Darcy alighted. He offered Elizabeth a hand, but she refused it. "Help Kitty out, then come back."

Kitty slapped her palm into Mr. Darcy’s outstretched hand, and he helped her from the carriage. She disappeared into the house carrying nothing but her own reticule. Elizabeth began to motion Darcy to return, but said suddenly -- "We cannot be seen! Tell the coachman to let us know once Kitty and her friends have left."

With a quizzical turn of his brow Darcy repeated the message, then climbed back into the carriage. Elizabeth let down the blinds, blocking view of the carriage’s occupants from the house.

Mr. Darcy appeared in dire need of an explanation.

Hurriedly, Elizabeth said, "Kitty does not wish for her friends to be embarrassed. She will take them elsewhere, and we will bring Mrs. Long the basket after the girls have left."

"They did not appear embarrassed when last we visited."

"No," Elizabeth agreed, "but you must remember Kitty was not with us. My younger sisters are friends with Harriet and Pen. My intimacy with them is not much greater than my mother’s, or Lady Lucas. They would be embarrassed to receive the basket in front of Kitty. With the blinds drawn, they need not know anyone but Kitty was ever here."

"The provisions will not make that evident?"

"Perhaps, but mine is not the only family in the neighbourhood that supports them. They will know it has all been a gift, of course, but the girls need not trouble themselves with who it came from. Let them be young and merry while they can."

"It has not been my intention to suspend anyone’s pleasure in their youth."

"No, you simply think I am being silly."

Mr. Darcy shook his head. "I have not made any confession like that, nor shall I defend any opinion others have attributed to me without my consent."

"If you find that others often speak for you, it is your own fault. When you are silent, you give us no choice but to try to determine your thoughts and motivations for ourselves."

"I wish you would not."

She laughed. “Because I never do you credit! I pick whatever is the worst thing I can think of, and then decide that it must be true.” It was hot inside the still carriage, even with the shade of drawn blinds. What was taking Kitty so long? Harriet and Pen must want to stay home to-day and be evading her every attempt to coax them into an outing. An unsteady laugh covered the sudden queasiness in the pit of her stomach. "I did mean to break that habit, but on reflection I do not believe
Elizabeth bit her lip. He had taught her months ago how absurd and blind she was with his first letter. And she—truly, she had wanted to take his lessons to heart. Elizabeth had recruited her father to help deliver her apology. And what had she done in the months since? Only more of the same.

Mr. Darcy reached across the expanse of the coach to lay a hand over hers.

"You are my friend again, are you not? I have tried to understand why you wanted nothing of me yesterday, but I am sure any guess I make would be entirely wrong."

"I wished to be the master of myself."

His hand was large and warm. She could not bring herself to look at his face and so Elizabeth watched his hand. His grip was light, but steady. Almost like reassurance, but what foolishness was that? She was not the one who had been rejected.

"I admit," Darcy continued, "I struggle to understand your hesitance. My own doubts, I have enumerated and endeavoured to overcome. But what of yours? You have given me apologies, forgiveness, sweetness."

She was a girl of decided opinions, a girl who could not be cowed, a girl who would not be silenced. Elizabeth felt called to answer such a speech, but she managed to produce nothing but his name, and that weakly.

But whispers only seemed to encourage him, for he squeezed her hand tighter and boldly continued: "I do not understand your hesitance, but I have always intended to respect it. If my disappointment rends me incapable of doing so, then I had best say nothing until I am the master of it, which I hope I have become."

Elizabeth could not venture to guess if he had mastered himself or not. She had let down the blinds on only one side of the carriage. Feeling herself equal to looking him in the eye, she did, and what she saw reminded her so well of Saturday in the garden that she thought if they had privacy, he would kiss her. Was a man who was the master of his disappointment one who would not kiss her or simply one who would refrain from attempting to settle the terms of a marriage once he had? It was a question that was to go unanswered.

The coachman slapped the exterior of the carriage. Elizabeth started. Darcy dropped her hand.

Miss Catherine and her friends had left.

Elizabeth licked her dry lips and said, "Come, let us not forget why we came." This time, she accepted his hand when he offered it.

Mr. Darcy proved himself capable of carrying the burden of such a plentiful hamper into Mrs. Long’s rooms. Elizabeth fancied that he struggled a little with the awkwardness of a body unused to physical burdens shouldering something so large, but he did not complain. It was very good of him.

Inside, they chatted with Mrs. Long for above a quarter of an hour. Although Mrs. Long was a friend of Mrs. Bennet’s and must have heard all there was to know about Jane and Mr. Bingley from the bride’s proud mother, the old widow asked to hear it all again from Elizabeth anyway. Mrs. Long also made sure to tell Mr. Darcy how pleased she was that he had stopped staying at that draughty
inn before he took ill. After Mrs. Long’s maid had put all the provisions into the larder and returned the hamper, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy took their leave. Darcy carried the basket back to the carriage and had just set it in the boot when he made an exclamation.

A button from the front of his coat was caught in the twisting wicker of the hamper and torn off.

It was not surprising; he had carried it so awkwardly against his body. Elizabeth held her hand out and without appearing to think too much about it, Mr. Darcy dropped the button into her outstretched palm. She admired the shiny button for a moment, then slipped it into her reticule. "It will take but a moment to fix. We should return to Longbourn. You would not wish to stay in town with a button missing from your coat."

He said, "No," and moved with some alacrity to hand her into the carriage before seeming to realise he had not the right. "Miss Bennet, we cannot leave without your sister. Where has she gone?"

"Gracious, I do not know." When she and Kitty made their plans, they had failed to decide when and where their parties should reconvene. "The milliner's, perhaps, or the library." Elizabeth's words rang without any conviction. When the militia was in town and her youngest sisters wanted nothing more than to chase after officers, they could be found wherever the men were liable to be. Without the influx of attractive, available men, the girls were back to their old ways, wandering between shops and the homes of their friends as they pleased.

"We should find her."

Elizabeth agreed, and the two of them set off on foot through the main thoroughfare of Meryton, peering in shop windows to look for Kitty and her friends. No one had seen them at the milliner's or the library--though once at the library, Elizabeth could not resist the urge to browse the shelves. Evenings with Mr. Bingley and Jane had put an end to the usual practice of reading out loud each night, but as all parties became more comfortable with the engagement some informality was bound to return to their daily lives. Quiet evenings at home with a book were sure to return to Longbourn. When it did, Elizabeth hoped to have her own choice in hand to read. She did not want to be found reading lovers opposite Mr. Darcy again.

She eyed books on travel and poetry, sermons and novels in search of something engaging.

"Miss Bennet," Darcy said.

Elizabeth looked up, a novel in each hand. He gestured to the door. Kitty and her friends had just entered. Elizabeth put one of the books down and walked to Kitty.

"Mr. Darcy and I have been looking for you. We did not wish to return home without you."

"Are you getting a book? I wish to get one, too. Harriet said they have that book Lydia wanted--I shall read it and write all about it to make her jealous."

Elizabeth doubted very much that Lydia would feel too jealous about a book. The amusements at Brighton were surely enough to distract her from any literary aspirations. Still, she did not want to discourage Kitty from anything now that she was recovered enough to be enthusiastic. Elizabeth reminded Kitty of the title and waited for her sister to return with the volume before bringing the books to the clerk.

Only a few of the shelves were books to be borrowed. The circulating library did most of its business
in the sales of trinkets: stationery, perfume and little bits of nonsense. Kitty soon took to begging Elizabeth to borrow a bit of money. She had spent all of her own already and spotted something or another that she wanted. Sighing, Elizabeth dug through her reticule for some coins.

From the bottom of her bag, something that did not belong brushed against her coin purse.

Mr. Darcy’s button.

The trio returned to the carriage with their wares, two books and an ornament for a bonnet. The sisters looked at one another’s books, laughed at Kitty’s purchase—which she was already regretting, for it was not very nice after all—and chatted about the Miss Harringtons. They arrived at Longbourn to find that Mrs. Bennet, Jane and Mary had left to call at Lucas Lodge. If Charlotte was still at home, Elizabeth would have regretted being left behind, but that house was no longer such a desirable destination for her. Charlotte had left. Jane was sure to quit the neighbourhood as well. Mr. Bingley was happy to rent Netherfield for now, but his true object was to purchase a country home. Who knew where that the fulfilment of that goal might take Jane? The other young ladies of her acquaintance would go as well, leaving their parents' homes for husbands. How lonely Meryton would grow!

Elizabeth took off her outside things with such gloomy musings. Her reticule could not be put away just yet. "Mr. Darcy, you must give me your coat." She fished the button from her bag.

He held his hand out. "My man will be able to repair it."

"I am afraid he is not able to; you have forgotten an important detail."

"He is able, I assure you."

"I am sure, but I have the button and he does not."

"That is rectified easily enough."

"There is no need to rectify anything. Debating over who shall sew a button on has already taken longer than the act itself of sewing a button. Now that I have fought over it, I cannot surrender. You must give me your coat."

Darcy eyed her uneasily. Elizabeth went up the stairs towards his apartment. Without any other recourse, he followed. He disappeared into his room. Elizabeth waited in the hallway. She did not know how long it took for a gentleman to be helped out of the tight coats that were so fashionable, but she felt that this was taking far too long. Was he changing entirely? How silly that would be! She rapped on the door.

It was answered by a man she had never seen before in her life.

"You must be Mr. Darcy's valet."

"Yes, madam."

"I am come for Mr. Darcy's coat. He has lost a button."

"I do all of his sewing."

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"I do all of his sewing."
Elizabeth shrugged. Did she really have to do this again? "Yes. Well, you see, I have the button. So you really ought to turn the coat over to me so that I can replace it."

"No need to trouble yourself, madam. If you would be so kind as to give the button to me, I shall sew it on for Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy has neglected to tell you that he and I have already had this discussion. It was agreed--or, if you prefer, I said and he did not argue--that I am unwilling to surrender my ideas. At this moment, I have become rather determined to sew a button. If he can hear me, he can confirm it."

The valet did not appear moved.

"You really ought to give me his coat, lest I send one of the housemaids in to collect all of his mending."

The valet bowed and shut the door. She was affronted by this rudeness until the door opened again. Now he had Mr. Darcy’s coat draped over his arm and a spool of thread in his hand. Elizabeth smiled and held her hands out to accept the items. "You are a wise man and you do your master credit."

Victorious, she skipped downstairs. Mr. Darcy's valet had been kind enough to supply her with the thread that matched the rest of the coat, so all she needed was a needle. Her workbox had been left in the drawing room last night and alone with such a simple task, Elizabeth completed it quickly. She ran upstairs again, knocked smartly on the door and returned Mr. Darcy's coat to his valet.

Mr. Darcy himself emerged from the room a few moments later, his dress once again impeccable.

"My man is capable of repairing a torn button."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes "We ladies must earn our keep somehow."

"With your dislike of needlework, I was surprised that you threatened to do all of my mending."

She shrugged, her face hot. "I thought it safe enough. I wager you do not have a pile of torn stockings in the corner of your dressing room."

"I do not."

"How lucky you are, for I am not at all skilled at darning and you would be cursed to have uncomfortable seams over your toes."

He laughed and said, "I shall keep that in mind."

As they went downstairs, their conversation turned to the book she had borrowed from the library. Darcy asked what she had selected and in truth, she did not know! "I picked up two novels and had not looked at them yet when Kitty came in. She wanted Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and I must have borrowed the one I happened to have in my hand. We traded books in the carriage."

Finding Kitty revealed that Elizabeth had borrowed Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded.

Cross at her own carelessness, Elizabeth huffed. "I have read it before!"
The cancellation of the Northern tour meant that not only would Elizabeth be at Longbourn for Jane’s wedding, but also that Mrs. Gardiner would be home in London to help with the purchase of her wedding clothes. Mrs. Bennet was vocally delighted to have occasion to buy Jane gowns of the finest silk and lace. She needed at least half a dozen of every article her mother could think of, excepting the ones where she needed double that.

Until dates for a London trip were settled, Mrs. Bennet’s nerves could not be calmed by the mere anticipation of future purchases. She spent half of every morning writing to her sister, begging Mr. Bennet to approve a larger budget and making sure Jane understood that nothing she currently owned was acceptable for a Mrs. Bingley. When those things failed to satisfy her, Mrs. Bennet—with her daughters following behind like ducklings—scoured the shops of Meryton for items that she could bear to buy locally, like stockings, gloves and shifts.

All the little shops in Meryton appeared prosperous. As long as Mr. Darcy had been with them at Longbourn, Elizabeth had not gone anywhere without him. A young man uninterested in Jane’s wedding finery, he had stayed home with Mr. Bennet. The successes and failures of shopkeepers had never interested Elizabeth much before. With Jane occupied by her mother and Elizabeth’s other companion absent, she could not help but spend her time in town considering the impact her family had on the people under their patronage.

Suddenly, paying with credit was a notable thing. Mrs. Bennet wanted only the finest of everything for Jane’s new life, but she did not have the ready money for it or her husband’s approval. Though she knew her family always paid its debts, Elizabeth could not ignore the financial burden placed on the shopkeepers when their genteel customers wanted expensive items now but could not be compelled to pay for them yet. The debt must travel, Mrs. Bennet to the linen draper, the linen draper to his supplier, the supplier to the source of the kid leather used to make Jane’s new gloves. So many lives were touched, so many livelihoods affected—potentially greatly—by the careless treatment of money by the wealthy.

Many months ago, the exit of the former Miss Charlotte Lucas from the neighbourhood put an end to many things with which Elizabeth had long been accustomed. She lost her confidante, a friend that enjoyed a cynical word, and a partner in observation and teasing. One thing Elizabeth had not lost, to her misfortune, were demands that she exhibit her meager skill at music. Charlotte's enjoyment in having Elizabeth play before anybody and everybody was not forgotten. Although she was unable to torment her friend personally, Sir William had stepped in and taken up that office.

The dinner Lady Lucas hosted was just one in a succession of events created for the occasion of congratulating and spying upon Jane and Mr. Bingley. Both the Longbourn and Netherfield families, along with a few men to fill out the table, had been invited for an evening of food, entertainment and society.

Musical exhibition from the ladies in attendance was one of the proposed entertainments. Elizabeth had been the first young lady called on to play and she did so with Mr. Darcy at her side. It had never been a question in his mind that he should turn the pages for her, settling himself beside her at the instrument the moment it had been opened. She played and sang one song and after having been encouraged by the general reception of her audience to play another, was letting her assistant choose the next piece when Kitty and Maria Lucas nearly threw themselves at the instrument.

"We wish to dance!"
"I have already given Mr. Darcy the choice of my next song," Elizabeth replied. "You can apply to him if you wish, but his taste does not turn to reels."

Darcy raised his eyebrow. Elizabeth could blush at her folly, yet again providing an opinion for him. He danced infrequently, but that did not imply anything about his taste in music.

The young girls did blush. After many elbows were thrown and low hisses exchanged, Kitty said, "You see, Mr. Darcy, we do not have enough men--only Maria's brother and Mr. Robert Goulding said they would dance--and we thought perhaps you might help make a third couple?"

"You could have any lady you wish as your partner!" Maria added, very rapidly and very high-pitched. She appeared extremely relieved after the promise had been made and she was no longer called on to speak to him.

Elizabeth could forget high spirited girls importuning her easily enough, but she was rather cross that they felt able to make requests of Darcy. "Let Mr. Darcy alone."

Darcy answered, "With the freedom of choice I have been given, I would choose this musician. You must see the impossibility of it, Miss Catherine. Without Miss Elizabeth’s efforts here, there can be no music for dancing."

"Oh," Kitty replied brightly, "that's easy enough--Mary will play! Maria, go fetch Mary!" Maria hurried off. "She will probably wish to play something else first, but I suppose we can wait a few minutes if it means it can all go off."

Mary’s eagerness to exhibit her accomplishments left her very susceptible to Maria’s persuasion. No one had any interest in a concerto but since Mary’s primary object was to purchase the approbation of her listeners, an agreement was struck that Mary should play a short song of her choosing and then Ap Shenkin for the dancers. Elizabeth surrendered the instrument with greater reluctance that she could usually be found doing. Much as she disliked making a public spectacle of herself, she liked this scheme less.

When everyone was distracted by the swell of Mary’s song, Elizabeth pulled Kitty aside. Under her breath, she said, "You should have asked Mr. Bingley."

"We did," Kitty whined. "He and Jane didn’t wish to dance."

"And having the refusal of man we all know to be obliging, you decided to pester one who is not?"

Kitty shrugged. "Well, the thing is, Lizzy, Mr. Darcy has been living in our house for almost a month now and I am beginning to think that he’s not so unpleasant after all. He lets us use his carriage and he always plays with you. I thought maybe he would not mind playing with the rest of us, if we asked. The officers were all older and more important than us, but they liked to have fun as much as anyone." She shrugged again. "Maybe Mr. Darcy would, too."

Elizabeth supposed that Mr. Darcy wished to enjoy his life as much as anyone, but that did not necessarily mean he received pleasure from the same amusements as girls like Kitty. He had first come to Hertfordshire for sport. He read. He had enough interest in history and architecture to plan a visit Berkhamsted Castle, but not so much that he insisted upon going when his friend required that he stay.

When the time came for the dance, Darcy claimed Elizabeth’s hand and led her to the floor. He
performed his part with a grace and dignity that was perhaps a bit out of place in such a simple
dance, spontaneously decided among friends. But that, of course, did not make his participation one
iota less generous.

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At home in Jane’s dressing room, Elizabeth must have been too liberal in her praise of Darcy’s grace,
dignity and generosity. Those things were so well displayed that it must be impossible for them to
have been missed by anyone. The private details--his hands, the look in his eye--she kept to herself.
She said nothing to Jane that her sister should not have noticed for herself, even across the room with
Mr. Bingley and the others. Still, Elizabeth could not help but frown because her recounting of the
evening left Jane asking, "Have you had a change of heart?"

"Certainly not. I cannot imagine why you even asked. I can acknowledge how fine a dancer he is
without wishing to marry him, can I not?"

"Of course," Jane demurred. She brushed her hair in silence for a long moment. "It is only...I am
beginning to worry about you, Lizzy."

Incredulous, Elizabeth asked, "Whatever for?"

"You have always been so bright and fearless, but I am beginning to wonder if you fear change."

Elizabeth laughed. "How could I fear something so inevitable? I should never leave the house if I
was afraid of the changing of the leaves."

"I am going to begin a new stage of life soon. I would be very happy if Mr. Bingley purchased
Netherfield Park, but I cannot promise that it will ever be for sale. I wonder if I am leaving you
behind, Lizzy, and I do not like it."

"It is the lot in life of the elder sister," Elizabeth replied wryly. "If you review our histories, you will
find you have reached most, if not every, milestone before me. That marriage proves no different
should not cause you such undue concern."

"Charlotte has left, as well."

"Very kind of Sir William to carry on her tradition of making me play when I would rather not!"

"I just do not wish for you to be alone, living nothing but the life you have always lived, when you
are capable of so much more."

"I understand you, Jane," Elizabeth answered, "but I cannot agree with you. If the loss of my dearest
friends renders me alone, I shall be every bit as alone if I allow Mr. Darcy to whisk me away to
Derbyshire, where I have never been and know no one at all besides him."

"But you would have him," Jane said. "And I worry that you dislike changing your mind so much
that you will not even consider a life with him."

"A partner who refuses to listen to me and will not let anyone forget, least of all me, how much
higher his station is than mine! Jane, you are too kind to him. You overestimate his desirability as a
husband."

"Bingley values Mr. Darcy so much," Jane conceded. "Perhaps I simply wish for everyone to share
my Bingley’s opinions. Lizzy, I would not ask you to marry anyone you do not love and wish to marry, but at least think about what is truly important to you, so that when you find such a man, you will be able to leave home without regret."

She rolled her eyes. "Leaving Longbourn without regret shall be the easiest part."

"Promise me, Lizzy."

Elizabeth agreed. She could not resist relieving Jane’s worry and the way her sister seemed to brighten upon having received such a promise vindicated her. Although she was not in any rush to invent a picture of the sort of man she would like to marry, her promise to Jane made it impossible to set aside the idea aside. She laid awake that night.

Mr. Darcy’s lack of desirability as a husband was, of course, understood. He had a respectable character and his friends all thought highly of him, but that was true of many men. She was not going to marry every gentleman who was well-liked by his friends! There had been a kiss in the garden, but that was nothing more than a miscommunication. She had said something petulant, he felt called upon to kiss her. It was a fair response to her words, which she would own to have been provoking, but that lapse in judgement had not been repeated.

For lack of opportunity.

Elizabeth frowned and rolled over, gathering her pillow in her arms, her chin pressed into it.

What did she really know about him?

He took care of everyone within his influence. The poor in his own neighbourhood were not wanting. He considered the good of the community and its shopkeepers. Mr. Darcy was compelled to protect even Mr. Wickham, so much so that that man was untouched by the rightful punishment of his crimes. Even Kitty fell under his purview--using his carriage to visit her friends and joining a dance when she asked.

He had a strong, smooth voice when reading out loud, but was middling at bowls. He did not know how to properly lift a heavy hamper, but would try anyway. He was generous with his friends, generous with his time! He told her he would wait for her to be ready for marriage and had been waiting over a month so far! A month of following her, hounding her, calling her a coquette. A month of joining her on charity visits, enduring her family without a word against them, reading with her, dancing with her, playing with her, turning the pages for her. Kissing her when she wanted to be kissed, being silent when she needed him to give her space. He knew she hated needlework and laughed at the idea of a future full of poorly mended clothes. But for him--she would do it.

She would.

Elizabeth pressed her face into her pillow.

Mr. Darcy was not perfect. He was, actually, infuriating. Sometimes. But other times, he was generous and good humoured. He smiled so often, and his laugh! And he was dear, always. She could not have loved a perfect man. But she could love him.

Elizabeth rolled over onto her back and tried not to laugh in the dark bedroom. She had to tell him. As soon as possible, she had to tell him.
And someday, perhaps, when enough time had passed that he could laugh, she would try again to explain to him that she really had meant ‘No,’ once upon a time. Her Darcy was so serious, so graceful and dignified. Elizabeth could not help her laughter when she supposed he might be able to laugh at his folly after their tenth baby.

Chapter End Notes

Looked over by the beta crew: Jassodra, Sophie, Lucy & Claire!
Chapter 10

Usually long asleep at this time of night, Elizabeth’s mind raced. Imaginings of what the future would bring were not to be tempered. Darcy’s pleasure at her acceptance! Sitting together in a quiet corner, sharing their hopes! After the marriage, his home would become hers, and though she dared not imagine what she might find at Pemberley or London -- for all her impressions so far had taught her the dangers of assumptions -- she could not help but picture morning calls in a sitting room or cosy privacy in others.

Elizabeth fell asleep to such thoughts. When she awoke, it was past ten! How many hours had she spent on romantic reveries? When she had wished to avoid Darcy, the practice of ladies staying in their apartments until ten with a male guest about had served her well, but on this particular morning she was vexed to have slept so late. She could hardly decide if she wanted to hurry her maid through helping her dress and doing her hair simply or to take care to look her best. She wished to please Darcy with her choice above all and could not guess if speed or beauty would gratify him more. She urged the maid to lace her into her finest morning gown as quickly as possible. Sitting down for her hair to be done, Elizabeth wished for something very becoming, but her impatience to share everything in her heart with Darcy won. She rushed the maid to coif her hair simply.

Bursting from her room, Elizabeth hurried downstairs. The first person she saw was Mrs. Hill. “Pray, where is Mr. Darcy this morning?”

“He has gone out,” Mrs. Hill answered. “I don’t know his business, Miss Lizzy, but if anyone does, it should be Mr. Bennet.”

“Thank you.”

Elizabeth walked away dejected. Where could he have gone? To Netherfield? Surely everyone would know if he had gone to see Mr. Bingley, for he would have taken Jane with him. They had frequently gone to parties as of late. Perhaps he was more friendly with some of the locals than she had thought, or he had gone to Lucas Lodge to thank Sir William for hosting them last night. Perhaps he had written a letter and wished to post it or gone to the shopkeepers to ensure they had received the money he had promised for Mr. Wickham’s debts. He could even have left just to get some exercise.

Perhaps if she went out herself, they would wander into one another’s path. With the resolution that activity must be preferable to waiting at home, Elizabeth ate what breakfast had been saved for her that lazy morning, donned her bonnet, and went for a walk.

Her hopes of meeting with Mr. Darcy outside were not dashed, precisely, but she did not know what direction he had gone in. The paths and destinations seemed suddenly limitless. Elizabeth told her feet to move and they did and after walking absentmindedly for some minutes, she decided to go to Oakham Mount. The view there was spectacular, and even if she did not see Mr. Darcy, by the time such a long trip took her home again, he would certainly have returned. Even without that assurance, the walk was worth going on again. After she and Darcy married, it could be a long time before she returned to Longbourn for a visit.

A more dutiful daughter would be melancholy at that thought, but Elizabeth could only think of the things that would keep her away. She would have to learn her responsibilities at the London house and Pemberley. Some members of Darcy’s family might refuse to receive her, but she must be introduced to the ones that would. A long trip would be out of the question once she was increasing, which she felt was certain to happen before anyone began longing for the rolling hills of
Hertfordshire.

She skipped home with some wildflowers in hand. When she was within view of Longbourn’s facade, Kitty threw the door open and came running towards her.

“Lizzy!” she called as she got near. “There you are!”

Her sister bowled into Elizabeth. “Kitty? What is it?”

“Mama has locked herself in her room and is demanding that you come and we have all told her you were not at home, but she just kept saying you had to come, you had to come.”

“If I can be a comfort to my mother, I am sure I would be happy to do so,” Elizabeth said cautiously.

“She is very angry with you, Lizzy.”

That struck Elizabeth as rather more likely than Mrs. Bennet wishing for her comfort instead of Jane’s. “What have I done?”

“Well,” Kitty took a deep breath, “Lady Lucas called because she’s had a letter from Charlotte and she wished to crow over about how well everything is going for Charlotte because she is married and has her own home and she likes it all very much.”

“My mother cannot still mourn the loss of Mr. Collins as a son when she knows she shall soon to have Mr. Bingley!” And not only him!

“That is what I said!” Kitty cried. “But Mama got very red and said that you were a silly, stubborn girl and that she is very happy for Charlotte, of course, but she wished you were more like Charlotte - knew how to behave when a gentleman made you an offer.”

Elizabeth sighed.

Kitty continued, “And I said that you do know how to behave because you were very firm and knew your own mind – you remember how Mr. Darcy told us he respects that, right? I think I impressed him, but he wanted to know what we were talking about.”

“Mr. Darcy was there! Mama spoke so candidly in front of him?”

Kitty shrugged. “He had gone to Meryton, but he came back before Lady Lucas called. We could not really say, of course, but I think Mr. Darcy got the idea because he said sometimes young ladies are coy and it just appears like they don’t know what they are about, but they really have it all in hand. And I said that some ladies do, but you think ladies that risk their happiness like that are stupid. And then Mama said that he would never have to worry about a lady treating him like that and also, that you are not really so stubborn and you do know your own interest, you just need some direction and of course, you would pay Mr. Darcy deference and be very humble and obliging should there be anything he wished to offer you.”

The ground beneath Elizabeth’s feet seemed to crumble.

“And then,” Kitty announced, “Mr. Darcy stood up and declared that he had to go to London immediately. He said he was glad Lady Lucas called so that he could take his leave of her and he left!”

“Left?”
“Left the sitting room and went upstairs.”

In the distance, Longbourn House seemed very far away.

“Mama thinks you drove Mr. Darcy away! Have you ever heard anything so silly? You were not even there! She went to her rooms before Lady Lucas and Maria even left!”

Elizabeth began to run. Kitty shouted something after her, but Elizabeth paid her no mind. She ran across the lawn, into the house without pausing to take off her bonnet or her gloves, wild flowers scattered in her wake. Gathering her skirts, she thundered up the stairs and ran past her mother’s room to the guest apartment.

She knocked.

When there came no answer, her knocking took on a frantic tone. Unable to bear it, she opened the door uninvited.

Mr. Darcy stood at the window, his gaze fixed somewhere over the park. He did not seem aware of her entrance. She doubted he had even heard her knocking. His coat was thrown over a chair.

Her relief threatened to buckle her knees. Determined to stay upright, Elizabeth gripped the door. “Kitty said you were leaving.” He appeared so still. Of course he was not going to leave her.

“My man is packing.” He sounded tired, sadder and smaller than Mr. Darcy had a right to be. It was true, then. “Worry not. You have long been hoping for my absence, and it shall finally come to pass. It is clear to me that we have been at cross-purposes. I have no intention of importuning you further. I have only shame when I think of how far I have eroded your peace already.”

With frustration, she tore her bonnet from her head and dropped it at her feet. “If my peace is reliant on your absence, then it is worth eroding.”

Mr. Darcy shook his head. “I am incapable of comprehending the meaning you layer beneath your turns of phrase, Miss Bennet. These past months have surely taught you that.”

“My meaning is a simple one. You ought to stay.”

“I cannot.”

“I should like it very much if we could have a proper conversation. I hope the satisfaction of everyone can be achieved.”

“What is there left to say? What must you think of my vanity? You were perfectly direct, and I refused to heed you. There is nothing more to say, Miss Bennet. It has all been said.”

“It has not! The most important things have gone unsaid! You must allow me to speak!”

“I beg you to spare me your contempt.”

Contempt! Frustrating man! His body turned away from her fully.

“Then perhaps it would serve me better to speak to a man of more sense!” Abandoning the door, she strode into the bedroom and across to the dressing room door. She attacked it with the heel of her hand, banging fiercely. “Stop! Stop packing, Mr. Darcy is to stay!”

Elizabeth did not notice her tears until, her head bowed as she furiously pounded the door, one dripped off the edge of her nose. Her hand stilled. How had she come to this? If only -- if only she
had told her stubborn heart to yield earlier. That day in the garden she had no answer to give him, because he had already been everything she needed. Too blind, she had made him wait another se’nnight. Her forehead rested against the door. All this time, his obstinacy had seemed incredible -- but her own was even more powerful. If she had given it over earlier, he would never have been made to see his mistake. They would have been happy.

“Miss Bennet, you should not be here.”

She was agonised. “Stay.”

“I will not.”

His voice was close.

“I am come to understand your horror with me. I have no wish to prolong your suffering, and I have not the strength to prolong my own.”

Elizabeth turned, took the scant steps it took to be upon him, twisted her hands into his waistcoat and rose on her toes to press her mouth against his.

Gentle hands cradling her face pushed her away. “You are crying.”

“Of course I am! You will not listen to me!”

Darcy brushed her tears with his thumb. “I should have listened to you months ago.”

“I was a blind fool months ago! I was a blind fool yesterd ay! Listen to me to-day!”

He closed his eyes. “I am listening.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. As directly as she could, leaving nothing to whimsy or interpretation, she said, “I wish to marry you.” She punctuated this declaration with a kiss that he accepted with much more grace than the last.

His forehead against her temple, Darcy whispered, “How has this change of fortune been wrought?”

“You ask me to account for your goodness? You are everything we have been commanded to be! I have seen your benevolence and generosity! I have seen your loyalty and compassion! I have seen your ethics and your work! I have seen your justice and your honour! I have seen you give your respect! I have seen --” she flushed, “-- well -- with provocation, one might tempt you away from courtly love. And -- I have seen your forbearance. That such a man should make himself necessary to me and then wish to leave me, it is more than I can bear!”

Though his hands were on her hips, and her fingers had again hooked into his waistcoat, such praise seemed beyond what Darcy could believe. “And -- can I believe that you could ever love me?”

“You must believe it, I insist upon it, my heart is yours.”

Darcy rewarded such a speech with a kiss. “You know, you must know -- everything of mine is yours.”

She wiped her face. “I have made a fine acquisition.” Relief bubbled out as laughter. “I am very pleased.”

“You wish to provoke me.”
“I do, I own it freely. You are amenable to being provoked, I hope?”

“By you? Always.”

They lingered in his room. When her desperation had subsided and was replaced with a cheerful confidence that all was to be as she planned in her sleepless musings, Elizabeth could scarcely believe her own boldness. Darcy was in his shirtsleeves! If she were quite so good as him, she should have insisted that he dress himself. She was a wicked girl, an idle thought that she voiced somewhere in the midst of many happy kisses.

Darcy only laughed. “You are delightful! Between us, I am surely the wicked one. What must you think of my vanity! Tell me truthfully!”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Truthfully -- I think you are vain. I cannot think that makes you unworthy of being loved. I wish for all your love for myself and you cannot be surprised that I am vain! If my being charmed by Mr. Wickham is not proof enough of that, then you must remember when you did not pay me enough attention and I became so out of sorts!”

He winced at the mention of Mr. Wickham, but to the other charge, Darcy appeared puzzled.

“At Netherfield,” Elizabeth reminded him. “When we played parlour games, and you did not kiss me well enough. I thought you must not find me handsome enough to kiss properly, and I was very upset about it.”

“I shall be eager to lay those fears to rest at any time you require it.”

With a sage nod, Elizabeth said, “I shall require it often then. I have been meaning to learn a lesson about my vanity, you see, but when I have a man as devoted as you, I have sadly forgotten all about it.”

He murmured, “You are perfect,” and she laughed.

“Yes, exactly like that!”

Another topic they felt it necessary to canvass was Elizabeth’s opinions. Although they were not unalterable, she did not wish to let him think they would always be within his power to change. Elizabeth could not ignore that she owed her current happiness at least in part to Darcy’s presumption. It was a dangerous precedent and not something she felt could be ignored.

“I hope,” he said to this, “that the pain I felt before you came to me has taught me the dangers of closing my ears to that which I do not care to hear. If in the future you find otherwise, pray do not hesitate to remind me of the lesson I should never forget.”

“You are much more devoted to your studies than I am!”

“It is because I have so much more to learn.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “I do not think that is it.”

“Is this an opinion I shall find unalterable?”

“That you are too good for me?” She laughed. “I think so.”

Finally, he asked, “When may I speak to your father?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “As soon as you like.”
The impatience Darcy had felt in the Netherfield garden, an insistent desire to settle everything between them properly, could not have a resurgence now that Elizabeth was so receptive to the request. His idea of a coy Elizabeth who would pull him close and push him away was finally overturned entirely. He had seen the real girl -- stubborn and proud and imperfect, for all his protests to the contrary -- and she was steady in his arms, free with her affection and willing to call herself his own.

They wandered down to the book room in due time, Darcy wearing his coat and Elizabeth having lost her outside gloves during some moment that she could not remember. She knocked on the door. “Father? Mr. Darcy wishes to speak with you.”

The lovers traded smiles and Darcy went in.

Elizabeth sighed.

She really must speak to her mother.

She went upstairs slowly, thinking the more pleasant conversation must be the one happening in the book room. Darcy, she imagined, would very respectfully ask for her hand, detail his feelings in a gentlemanly manner and have his request honoured.

Mrs. Bennet was in her dressing gown, red in the face, in turns ranting and feeling faint. Elizabeth instantly felt ashamed for leaving Jane and Mary with her for so long. While she had been revelling in the happiness of her current understanding with Darcy, her mother, Jane and Mary had all been ignorant of it. Kitty could not even have told them that Elizabeth burst into Darcy’s apartment and behaved shamelessly towards him, for Elizabeth had not waited for her when she ran to the house.

“Elizabeth!” Her mother shouted upon seeing her. Too overwrought to make a sentence, she shouted many half formed exclamations. “Wandering all over the country! Spurning good men! My nerves! I cannot endure such a child!” She moaned. “Mr. Darcy is probably halfway to Town by now, never to be seen by any of us again! How many men do you think are going to want you, Lizzy?” Mrs. Bennet waved a handkerchief at her. “I suppose you think because Jane has a good match, you may run wild and do as you please! Do you think Jane will want to maintain such an ungrateful child as you when you are a spinster?”

Jane said softly, “Mama, please.”

“I cannot bear to think of what you have thrown away! A house in Town! Carriages, jewels and I know not what else. Why your father thinks you are quick, I shall never understand! I suppose he thinks this is quite the entertainment! I told him, I did, that Mr. Darcy was to marry you and we should invite him to stay and he said that Mr. Darcy has never so much as looked at you but to find fault and I said, just you see, Mr. Bennet! And now Mr. Darcy has left!”

Her mother’s ravings finished, Elizabeth judged it safe to speak. “Mr. Darcy is with my father, Mama.”

All of the room’s occupants stared at Elizabeth.

“I spoke to Mr. Darcy the moment I got home. I hope you approve of my marriage, for I believe Mr. Darcy and I shall be very happy.”

Mrs. Bennet rose from her chair, threw her arms around Elizabeth, kissed her and cried, “Oh, how I knew it would be this way!”

After many more hugs and kisses all around, Elizabeth begged leave to go downstairs and see how
Mr. Darcy’s interview with her father had gone. The men were still in the book room when she entered, but the question of her hand had long been settled and now they were discussing the *Edinburgh Review*.

When she entered, Mr. Bennet tossed the latest issue on his desk and declared, “Had you been a bit faster, Lizzy, you could have taken your turn before Jane.”
"Lizzy!"

Hot with embarrassment at being caught and dreading what teasing her foolishness must prompt, Elizabeth turned and nearly bumped into her father. Mr. Bennet raised his eyebrows.

"Lingering outside Mr. Darcy's door, are you? Your uncle Phillips offered the use of his clerks. I am sure Mr. Darcy is in Meryton, sending those poor men on every errand he can think of."

Hastily folding her arms behind her back, Elizabeth said, "The exercise is beneficial."

"I am sure you are correct: Mr. Phillips is concerned only for the health of his clerks and has no mind to ingratiate himself to a very rich man."

"Even if you must attribute such a selfish motive to your own brother, it does not diminish my uncle's service to Mr. Darcy or myself. If Mr. Darcy has the ability to send Mr. Phillips' clerks to his solicitor in Town, he shall not be made to abandon me."

"What enjoyment is there in spending the whole of your engagement together?" Mr. Bennet's eyes twinkled. "Girls like to be separated from their lovers so they may regale their families with their anguish and write many long love letters."

"I shall do without and hope I suffer no lasting ill-effects from too much happiness."

Her father watched her steadily. Elizabeth stood very still under such scrutiny. Finally, he said, almost jovially, "Well, Lizzy, your young man wrote me a letter over a month ago now and what with your engagement being as it is, I thought I ought to read it." Mr. Bennet's anxiety was well hidden; she could only barely detect it beneath a screen of insouciance. "I cannot seem to find it. I hope he will not mind very much, never hearing any acknowledgement?"

Uneasy, Elizabeth said, "He is likely to have forgotten all about it. He has certainly never suggested to me that he feels slighted."

"Keeping his mind occupied, are you, Lizzy?"

"I hope so!"

Her father smiled crookedly. "He can't complain. If his object in coming here has been you - and I think we can all agree it was - I have given my approval and intend to sign everything being prepared. A misplaced letter can be nothing."

Elizabeth suspected she understood her father's feelings. When Mr. Bennet received that letter, he had had no reason to concern himself with anything Mr. Darcy wrote. His information lacking, Mr. Bennet could not have known Mr. Darcy's significance. Now Mr. Darcy was to be his daughter's
husband. Her happiness was to be forever shaped by his character. Mr. Bennet's reception in her future home would be affected by Mr. Darcy's opinion of him. He was no longer afforded the luxury of laughing at Darcy when he could and disregarding him when he could not.

It had been wrong of Elizabeth to steal the letter when her father did not care about it, and doubly so to conceal it now that he was disturbed by its absence. Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth confessed, "You cannot find the letter because I took it."

"You, Lizzy?"

The astonishment stung. Her father must have thought her incapable of betraying him. "You said you did not wish to read it. I could not ignore Mr. Darcy. I should have asked you to read it and tell me what he said, but I could not bear the idea of anyone knowing what was in Mr. Darcy's heart before I did."

Mr. Bennet squeezed her shoulder. "Lizzy, had I known you cared at all about what was in his heart, I would have read it."

She smiled, eyes growing misty.

"The pair of you," Mr. Bennet added wryly, "are difficult on us poor observers. He dislikes you, you dislike him. He leaves, you leave, you return, he returns. Your mother is convinced he intends to marry you, you say never. Then, she says never and you say you will marry him! Who even remembers where the letter was in all of this!"

"Mr. Darcy and I are stubborn, but I will tell you all about it if we may speak privately."

"Of course, Lizzy. Bring that letter, if you still have it."

"I do. Shall I join you in the book room?"

Her father agreed and after he disappeared down the hall, Elizabeth relaxed. The secret she had kept from her father since May was revealed. She felt lighter for it, but she had another. Elizabeth had not come to Mr. Darcy's room to stare forlornly at his door while he was in Meryton. She had a purpose, and the object of that purpose had been hidden behind her back while she spoke to her father. Now, she crouched on the floor and slid it through the crack under his door. When she judged it was not visible from the hall, she went to her own room to retrieve the letter Mr. Darcy had written to her father.

When she arrived in the book room, Mr. Bennet was at his desk. Elizabeth was not accustomed to seeing him idle when surrounded by his beloved books. He held out his hand. Elizabeth gave him the letter. Mr. Bennet grimaced. Two full sheets of paper! His frown grew when he opened it. Elizabeth bit her lip. Mr. Darcy's writing was so small and close!

"I could not have written more than a sentence to him!"

"You will not like it any better once you have read it," Elizabeth said, amused. "Mr. Darcy wrote a lot, but his meaning is vague. I believe he thought me more forthcoming with you than I was."

"On the subject of your argument?"

"Yes." Elizabeth fixed her gaze on one of the shelves behind Mr. Bennet. "You see, when I met Mr. Darcy in Kent, he proposed marriage to me. I refused him. We quarrelled, and I said many terrible things about him. And - I believe I told you that a mutual acquaintance told me how wrong I was, and I wished to apologise, but that was not true. Mr. Darcy himself provided me with better
information. He wrote me a letter."

She dared to glance at her father. Disbelief seemed to render him incapable of taking offence. "He did not post the letter. He handed it to me. Mr. Darcy wanted to defend himself against the accusations I had made. Later, after he left Kent, I happened to find his address on a letter his cousin wrote to him. Since I knew what he wrote to me must be the truth, I asked you to write him my apologies."

Mr. Bennet held up Mr. Darcy's letter. "And he has a lot to say about that, I see."

"Mr. Darcy's way of proposing," Elizabeth said with some hesitance, "it was very bad. Not enough to justify the terrible things I said! But it was unkind. Writing to me was brave of him, but inappropriate. I am sure he thought I must have told you everything, because the letter does not make direct mention of either, only that he fears you might take offence to his behaviour towards me, and offers to make amends in any way you deem appropriate."

"Yet you say he does not care that I have given him no reply?"

"I gave him one. I wrote to him."

"Lizzy!"

She forged on fearlessly. "I told him that we did not need amends and that I would forget everything whether he liked it or not. Mr. Darcy took my writing to him to be in a spirit very different from what I had intended. He thought I was teasing him, that my forgetfulness must include forgetting my refusal, and that I meant to accept him."

Mr. Bennet's anxiety was clear now. "Elizabeth, tell me truthfully - do you wish to marry him? Nothing has been signed yet. If you are only doing this because he will not accept anything less, I will rescind my approval. We will send him on his way."

"Oh!" she cried. "I do, I do wish to marry him! When I refused him in Kent, I did not know him! My ideas about who he was were nonsense. The truth is, he is the best man I have ever known."

Her father sighed. "If that is how you feel, then I suppose I will not condemn him."

"Thank you, Father."

"This was all much simpler with Jane," Mr. Bennet said, leaning back in his chair. "She met Mr. Bingley, she liked Mr. Bingley, she accepted Mr. Bingley. There was some heartbreak in the middle, but it was all resolved easily enough. Nothing like you, running all over Meryton with a man living in your own house and still taking a month to decide you wish to keep him."

Elizabeth kissed Mr. Bennet on the forehead. "You will grow nostalgic for that once we have left."

"I will," he said, "so you must take care to pay me long visits."

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In the evening, the drawing room was crowded. The expanded family party that included the Bingleys of Netherfield was by now a natural enough occurrence that no one felt called upon to treat it as a formal occasion. Jane and Mr. Bingley were joined by Miss Bingley and Mr. Hurst at the card table. Unfettered by Elizabeth's match-making machinations, they were free to play the game that pleased them most rather than one that would require attendance to an assigned partner. The latest letter from Lydia would have been thought by its writer and its primary recipient - Kitty - to hold the
greatest claim on Mrs. Bennet's attention, but the lady of the house suffered to speak with her guests instead. Mrs. Hurst's living so frequently with her brother put her out of the practice of housekeeping. Mrs. Bennet flattered herself that some friendly advice on that score would be welcome. At the instrument, Mary was permitted to play whatever she wished by an indifferent audience. Mr. Darcy said he would like a book. It was not a thing worthy of an announcement, but because it had been announced, Elizabeth was certain he had some purpose behind it, and offered to help him find something of interest.

When they were alone in the book room, Elizabeth watched Darcy unbutton his coat. Whatever hopes she may have had for an intimate rendezvous were shattered when he simply removed a familiar envelope from his inside pocket. "What is this?"

His serious mien made her laugh. "You have not read it?"

"I looked to the bottom for a signature first. Because yours was the name I saw, I resolved that we should speak about this matter evidently so pressing you felt it necessary to commit it to paper when I was only so far away as Meryton."

Incredulous, Elizabeth asked, "What do you think it is?"

He pressed his lips together, then said, "If there is anything causing you distress, concern or doubt, I ask that you would tell me directly, rather than leaving it on the floor of my apartment."

"It is a love letter!"

The tips of his ears turned red first. The whole of his face soon followed.

"I wished for you to have a proper love letter. The one I wrote that beckoned you here was not written in that spirit or for that purpose. I thought you deserved something more to the point."

"I see."

He must think the entire endeavour foolish. Elizabeth almost declared as much before changing her mind. He could think on it how he liked. "Young ladies are often advised not to tell their young men how they feel. There are many books, I know, that would insist that the preference implied by my choosing to marry you and labelling you anything other than impossible to admire is all you deserve. I did not listen." She raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I should have?"

He turned the letter over in his hands. "If that is your opinion, perhaps you would prefer I do not read it."

Teasing man! Of course she wished for him to read it! She would not have written it otherwise!

"You may throw it into the fire if you wish, but that would consign you to an ignorance you must immediately regret. You would be left wondering precisely how clever I am, how many words of four syllables I used, or what great literary works I made reference to."

"Have you cast us as Eleanor and Sir Francis?"

"No!" Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "My enjoyment of Eleanor was all in her speeches in Act I and I feel quite differently about it now. You were never much of a Sir Francis. His sin was inconstancy, which you have never been."

Darcy shrugged. "Perhaps, but I also enjoyed some of his speeches."

"I will remember it," Elizabeth said. "Should you like future letters to be signed 'your destin'd wife'?"
"I would not protest." Elizabeth's reply to that was warm, and afterwards, Darcy continued, "So what allusions have you made? I recall you and I discussing the Song of Solomon. Dare I hope you make reference to - how had you put it - employing it as practical guide?"

"Mr. Darcy!" Feigning shock could not be done long, and she soon relented. "My letter does not make reference to what you suggest - the union of Christ and the Church. If you have another meaning, perhaps we may discuss its inclusion in future letters after we are married."

He had grown immune to her wickedness. Where he should have been roused to some lover-like speech, Mr. Darcy only sighed. "Much as I am loathe to think on it, you are correct: there will be many more letters after we are married. Occasions must arise which will require one of us to leave the other behind. We cannot always be together as we have been."

"Such melancholy will never do! It is true, letters are generally the result of separation, but they give us something to hold onto and cherish. You may always remember the feelings inspired by spoken words, but the words themselves fade. Words written may be permanent. I have kept the letter you wrote to me in April. Perhaps it is too sentimental of me to hope you would cherish this one, but I wished for you to have something of me."

"Knowing that is your wish, I shall cherish it."

"And read it, as well."

After a moment spent in contemplation of something or another, Darcy said, "Yes, of course." He found a chair and settled himself to read her love letter.

Though Elizabeth had imagined him reading her letter, she had not pictured herself being in the room with him while he did. It was awkward. She wished to examine his every expression, absorb his every blush, catalogue all that he felt - but did not care to burden him with such an examination. Elizabeth forced herself to put what attention she could on her father's shelves of books. Inevitably, her eyes were drawn to Darcy and she would try to discern some meaning in the slope of his brow or the turn of his lips before forcing herself to look away.

Eventually, the chair groaned as its occupant stood. Her back to him, the hairs on her neck tingled with awareness of Mr. Darcy's movements. She listened as the letter was folded and hopefully returned to his inside jacket pocket, close to his heart, where it should be.

She turned, something witty and charming on her tongue, but was arrested by his look. He was serious, and such seriousness could not be dismissed by a bon mot.

"I shall cherish it," he promised. "Moveover, I shall cherish you."

Elizabeth smiled. "I had not a single doubt of that."

"Allow me the pleasure of saying it regardless."

"I would not suspend any pleasure of yours."

Darcy's mouth twitched. So predisposed to be amused by her was he that she could hardly fail to do so, yet her heart glowed with pride regardless. He reached for her, and Elizabeth slipped her hand into his. He drew it to his lips where he lingered over her knuckles in a manner too thorough to be called gallant, the look in his eyes not leaving her in any doubt of his knowledge of it.

When he was willing to relinquish the ownership of her hand, Darcy said something about their having been absent from the drawing room too long and made to return.
Elizabeth motioned towards the shelves. "You did not chose a book."

"Your letter, dear to me as it is, has reminded me that I, too, have letters to write. I would wish that my letters will bring as much joy to their recipients as yours has brought me, but I know it cannot be so."

"Because you can not spare an ounce of your praise from me, of course. You are very prudent in the direction of all your pretty words."

"I have so few of them." After Elizabeth had laughed and assured him that he had enough, Darcy revealed his task: "I must write of our engagement to my aunts and uncles. It can be put off no longer."

"I see." The felicity of their understanding - her teasing, his passion - it had all been enough for Elizabeth to put the objections of his family out of her mind. Though he was not beholden to the schemes of aunts and uncles, he could not wish to cause them pain. Her connections, her dowry - she was not an eligible choice of a bride for Mr. Darcy.

"I anticipate any reply I receive will be uncharitable at best," Darcy said, "Pray, do not allow your happiness be ruined by those whose interest exceed their influence."

"If your happiness is not ruined then I should willingly take my cue from you." His hesitance in writing, however, was evidence to the contrary. "But I cannot believe you are untouched."

"If my happiness is to be lessened, it is only because I do not wish for my attachment to you to be the means of your becoming an object of derision among those who should welcome and love you."

This worry had apparently plagued him for some time. Elizabeth hastened to relieve him. "No one can escape being the object of somebody's derision. After all, people take such delight in premeditated contempt. The only fear I could ever entertain would be their disappointment injuring me in your eyes." If Darcy wished to protest that, he soon found no need, for Elizabeth continued for him. "I have seen you together with Lady Catherine. Her opinion does not influence yours. If your other aunts and uncles are much like her, then I would assume you behave much the same. If they are instead people who can satisfy your notions of taste and discretion, they leave me nothing to fear. They would not allow their feelings to influence their behavior."

Once allowed to speak, Darcy said, "You are very far from needing to fear the loss of my respect. Upon consideration, I have thought the opposite - I must grow in respect for you. I have tenderness in abundance, but you will not be made happy by only that."

She laughed. "Do not underestimate it!"

"Elizabeth, tell me if I have the wrong of it, but from my view, every difficulty I have had in securing your regard has been born of my own willingness to dismiss you."

"Or a refusal to flatter me, which given what I have learnt about my own vanity, I am inclined to think a virtue."

"There is a falseness to flattery that I do not care to engage with, but you are being facetious. You know there is a difference between flattery and acknowledging the value of others. I have dismissed your worth because it was not attached to a fortune, dismissed your words because they were not what I would have chosen to hear. To repeat these mistakes or do something else approaching such crimes, as your husband, it would be indefensible."

"I am pleased to have you say so," Elizabeth said, "but pray do not think I require you to be
infallible. Mistakes must occur, even in the best of us. But I applaud your aspiration to make only new mistakes and not repeat any you have done already. If you can achieve it, the necessary vexations of married life will be varied. We shall not be bored by only ever having the same arguments."

"Elizabeth, I have been thinking on this. I mean every word."

"I know you do. But I do not believe that real happiness is to be achieved by the repeated examinations of all of our past mistakes. The things in your conduct that you are not pleased by - you are at your leisure to conduct yourself differently in the future! But you are not able to change what has already been done. We have much to look forward to. By choosing to look only at the past, you do nothing but rob yourself of the happiness you should feel right now!"

"I would hope I would become a better man."

"Strive for improvement all you like," Elizabeth answered, "but take care not to become too perfect. I should hate for you to be without fault when I have so many. I am stubborn and vain and write you letters that deprive you of your ability to think I feel nothing towards you but a vague inclination!"

With a smile, Darcy added, "You do not trim your hats if you can avoid it. You do not attend to your needlework. I do not believe I have ever seen you sit down at the pianoforte with the intention of practicing."

"With such a character as that, your aunts and uncles will wonder why you even want me!"

"I will be sure to inform them," he said with promise, "of the great delight I take in uncomfortable seams in my stockings."

Tucking her hand into his elbow, Elizabeth said, "You laugh now, but it shall not seem so amusing after a twelvemonth or more has passed."

Upon their return to the drawing room, Mrs. Bennet cried, "Dear Mr. Darcy! You did not find a book to interest you? Mr. Bennet - and my Lizzy, for that matter - prize his collection so well! I am vexed you can find nothing to your taste. Mr. Bennet must amend that immediately!"

"I have no complaint to make Mr. Bennet, madam. There is much to my taste in his library," Darcy answered. "Elizabeth, rather inadvertently, reminded me I owe letters and I am resolved to write them to-night."

Darcy seated himself at the writing desk. At his side, Elizabeth surveyed the provisions with dissatisfaction. True, paper and ink was plentiful and there was wax and sand enough, but the pens! "They are all dull!"

Darcy took up a pen. "That may be so, but it is an unavoidable result of writing much, and one that has a simple remedy."

"Very true." She rummaged through the drawers, seeking her knife. When she had found it, Elizabeth slipped the pen from his fingers and mended it.

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