Such Terms of Cordiality

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Darcy and Elizabeth meet for the first time in the summer of 1795, at Ramsgate, over tea and a near-elopement; with few of the prejudices that plagued the original courtship, they quickly and easily become friends.
Chapter 1

‘I do not see why we could not go to town, or Bath,’ Lydia said petulantly. ‘The sea is so dull.’

‘You could stay inside, with the others,’ Elizabeth offered, shielding her eyes against the spray of the ocean. It was a chilly day, and, much as she loved her family, the prospect of spending hours cooped up in such a small establishment with her sisters and two small cousins was rather more than she could bear. Lydia’s company, while irksome, was nothing in comparison.

‘Or not,’ her sister said decidedly. Mary and Lydia had been at loggerheads all morning, and then some crisis with a ribbon had shortened everyone’s tempers -- except Jane’s, of course.

They walked briskly along the seashore, enjoying the wind against their faces, and the rush of the ocean to the east. Elizabeth and Lydia were the most active of the sisters, and had hurried out as quickly as they could, Mrs Bennet’s expectations of rain notwithstanding. At first they thought this particular strand entirely deserted, but when they hurried into a small shelter, they heard from beside them the sound of voices. Elizabeth would have gone past, but Lydia, always eager to eavesdrop, stamped on her foot to keep her in place. She was rather overenthusiastic and her sister fell unceremoniously.

‘-- if you truly love me,’ a man was saying. How very caddish, Elizabeth thought, sitting up with a pained wince.

‘Oh, I do,’ a lady replied anxiously, ‘but, I cannot -- I am sure it would not be right -- ’

‘My darling,’ he whispered, ‘in such a situation as this, nothing could be less wrong. I will return tomorrow -- a look, a word, will tell me your decision.’

This had Lydia sighing rapturously. Elizabeth glared at her sister as she rubbed her aching foot, before standing tentatively. Everything appeared to be in working order.

‘Lydia,’ she hissed, ‘we cannot stay -- ’

‘Oh, hush, Lizzy,’ Lydia replied. Elizabeth paid her no mind, and began pulling her forward, when they heard the man’s footsteps hurrying in the other direction. The lady turned around, caught sight of the two of them hiding underneath the eaves, and burst into tears. Elizabeth’s compassion was immediately provoked, and she easily reversed her decision, hurrying up the stairs.

‘Excuse me, ma’am, but is there anything we can do for you?’ she asked. ‘Is there someone we could bring to you -- I beg your pardon, but you look very ill.’

The lady shook her head. She looked hardly fit to be seen by any man but the most intimate relation, bareheaded with her dark hair dressed only in a single heavy plait down her back. Shawl, bonnet, and gloves were all cast aside. Elizabeth could not make out her face, but thought she must be very young or very rich, to throw aside propriety, decorum, everything, with no greater cause than the ungentlemanlike person they had overheard.

‘There is nothing anyone can do for me,’ she said dramatically.

‘Oh-h-h,’ cried Lydia, ‘how wonderful! It must be dreadfully exciting. Is he very handsome?’

The lady lifted up her head in astonishment, and Elizabeth saw that, although she was as tall as a small man, and well-grown, she was only a girl, Kitty’s age, or even younger.
‘Lydia!—my sister is very romantic,’ she said apologetically to the girl, who smiled weakly.

‘So am I, or at least, I thought I was.’ At this, she burst into tears again. Somewhat at a loss, Elizabeth gently guided her to a bench, placing the shawl around her shoulders, as the prophesied rain seemed to have arrived.

‘Well, you must tell us all about it,’ Lydia declared, plumping herself down beside the girl. ‘Why, this is a very smart bonnet. Did you make it all by yourself?’

‘I -- I bought it like that,’ the girl said in bewilderment.

‘We would not wish to force any confidences,’ Elizabeth said, ‘but if there is anything we can do for you . . .’

‘I -- I wish there was someone I could talk to,’ the girl said wistfully. ‘My companion is no use at all, and I am starting to almost think that perhaps she does not think so well of my brother as she ought.’

Before Elizabeth could say anything, Lydia’s attention was diverted by this. ‘Oh, you have a brother? Is he handsome?’

‘The handsomest man in the world,’ the girl said stoutly. Then she blushed. ‘Except Mr Wickham, of course.’

‘Well, you must tell us all about Mr Wickham, then,’ Lydia exclaimed. ‘I adore men, especially the handsome ones.’

The girl looked shocked.

‘You need not say anything you do not like,’ said Elizabeth, with a stern look at her sister.

‘I . . . I should very much like to confide in someone. I do not know what to think.’

‘Well,’ Lydia laughed, ‘that is never our difficulty. We always know what to think.’

‘My name is . . . Georgiana,’ the girl began haltingly. ‘I usually live in town -- ’

‘In town! How wonderful!’

‘Lydia, stop interrupting,’ hissed Elizabeth. ‘Please continue, Georgiana.’

‘Well, I was very ill this spring, and I do not like London, so -- ’

‘How can you not like town?’

‘Lydia!’

‘So my brother thought I might like to come here, with my companion. Anyway, I had only been here about a week, when I saw Mr Wickham. He is the son of a very respectable man, and Papa was his godfather. I was so glad to see him, because I was rather lonely although my brother writes faithfully, and Mr Wickham has almost been like another brother to me.’

Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up.

‘When I was little,’ she said hastily. ‘Now . . . now we have fallen in love. He asked me to marry him, and I have accepted him.’
‘Do you not have a guardian? Your father, or your brother?’

‘Papa died almost five years ago,’ Georgiana said, sniffling. ‘My brother is my guardian -- well, and one of our cousins, but I do not see him so often -- he is in the army.’

‘Why does Mr Wickham not ask your brother’s consent, then?’ Elizabeth inquired.

‘Well, it is obvious, Lizzy,’ Lydia said, with a particularly inane laugh. ‘He must be rich, and you poor -- oh no, the other way around, with that bonnet. Your family will never allow you to marry him, so you must run away to Scotland and defy them all, and live happily ever after with Mr Wickham. Oh, how romantic.’

Georgiana stared. ‘Well . . . yes,’ she said reluctantly. ‘You see, my brother . . . oh, I do not want to sound proud, Mr Wickham says I am proud like my brother, that is why I do not wish to elope, but it isn’t pride, not really, it is only that everyone has such expectations, we all do, really, and I would rather do anything than disappoint my brother, he is the best man in the world -- ’

‘Better than Mr Wickham?’ Elizabeth inquired gently.

‘Well . . . I am certain George would be as good as Fitzwilliam if he could be,’ she admitted.

‘George and Georgiana!’ Lydia giggled. ‘How droll!’

The other girl bit her lip. ‘Er, yes. He calls me “Georgy” though. I am supposed to remember to call him ‘Mr Wickham’ always, but I forget. He was always George when we were growing up. But you see, my family is -- my great-great-grandfather was too proud to accept a title when it was offered, but we are very old, Papa said that the first D -- the first one of us came over with the Conqueror, and we are respectable and wealthy and well-connected and all of that. And George is the son of our steward.’

Lydia gasped. ‘It’s just like a novel!’

‘If I had known it would be so dreadful, I would never have read any!’ Georgiana declared. ‘I just know my family will not approve, even my brother. Mr Wickham says that if I really loved him, I would marry him, and let the family go hang, but . . . oh, I do love him, I do! Only, I love my brother too, and my family -- he cannot understand about family, Mr Wickham I mean, he has no brothers or sisters and his parents are dead, and he isn’t even friends with Fitzwilliam any more.’ Something furrowed her brow. ‘He will not talk about it, and my brother wouldn’t either. Oh, I wish he were here. He always knows what to do!’

‘Mr Wickham?’

‘No, my brother.’ She looked pleadingly at them. ‘Oh, what do I do? I already said I would, but then I thought about it and asked for time to think about it, and he was rather angry. But my brother always warned me . . .’ She hesitated.

Elizabeth forestalled Lydia, although she could see that her sister’s behaviour was driving Georgiana toward decorum and caution more thoroughly than a hundred lectures and sermons ever could. ‘What did your brother warn you about?’

‘I am sure George does not want my fortune -- he wishes I was poor, so that we might have only ourselves to please -- but my brother always said that only a fortune-hunter would ask a lady to elope with him. Mr Wickham isn’t, of course he’s not, but I cannot help but . . . well, why should he not at least try and ask my brother?’ Before either could speak, she went on eagerly, ‘Fitzwilliam can be very strict about some things, but he has always let me have my own way
when it was important to me. If he could be convinced that Mr Wickham really loves me, I am sure he should give his consent.’

‘You seem to care more about your brother than Mr Wickham!’ Lydia said indignantly. ‘Why, if I --’

‘Excuse my impertinence, but what is your fortune, Georgiana? Does Mr Wickham have much to gain by marrying you without a settlement?’

‘It is not that -- he loves me, I am sure of it!’ she insisted. Then she lowered her eyes. ‘I . . . I have thirty thousand pounds.’

Lydia’s jaw dropped. ‘Good Lord! I think you’re the richest person I have ever met. You could have anyone you wanted with that kind of money! I’d hold out for an earl if I were you. Unless I was in love, of course,’ she added belatedly.

‘Grandpapa was an earl,’ Georgiana confessed. ‘He was Lord Lieutenant and everything. That’s why it’s so difficult. I hate disappointing them all. I do wish I -- not that I was poor, that would be dreadful, but that I didn’t always have to wonder if people like for me or for my brother or for our money.’

‘Goodness, I never care about why people like me, as long as they do!’ said Lydia.

Elizabeth interposed, ‘Georgiana, what do you wish?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Do not think about what your brother wants for you, or what Mr Wickham wants from you. If you could have any wish, in this moment, fulfilled instantly, what would it be?’

‘I don’t want to think or argue or cry,’ Georgiana said slowly. ‘I -- oh, I want my brother! I hate decisions, I just want him to be here and tell me what to do.’ She looked near tears again.

Lydia snorted. Elizabeth ignored her and said, ‘You said your brother corresponds faithfully with you.’

‘Yes. He is over ten years older than I am and we have been apart most of our lives, it is how we talk to each other best.’

‘Have you written him lately?’

Shamefacedly, Georgiana shook her head. ‘I could not think of anything to say. He is so clever, I am sure he would guess something.’

‘He must be very worried about you.’

‘I am sure he is,’ she replied, and began crying again. Elizabeth handed her a handkerchief. ‘I -- I wrote a letter today, but I was not sure whether to send it. I said that Mr Wickham was here and I had seen a great deal of him . . . that was not dishonest, was it? To George or Fitzwilliam?’

‘Certainly not,’ Elizabeth said warmly. ‘What I think you should do is tell your brother how much you long to see him, and send that letter express.’

‘How silly you are, Lizzy,’ pronounced Lydia. ‘It shall be just like a novel, your brother shall separate you for years and years and you will meet up again only one of you will have consumption and die just as you catch sight of one another. It would be far better to marry him
now and enjoy yourself.’

‘My sister,’ said Elizabeth, ‘can think of no greater luxury than living in every distress that poverty can inflict, with the object of one’s tenderest affection.’

‘I am not afraid of being poor,’ Georgiana said bravely.

‘Spoken like a true heiress!’ exclaimed Elizabeth, smiling to lessen the sting of her words. ‘Write to your brother, Georgiana; you are still young, this is hardly the end of the world.’

She looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded. ‘You are right. I trust him. Thank you so much. Oh! what time is it?’

‘It must be noon by now.’

‘Oh dear, Mrs Younge will be wondering where I have gotten to. You won’t tell?’ She began gathering up her things.

‘I promise,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Nor I!’ chimed in Lydia. ‘That would ruin the surprise when he dies at your feet, Georgiana.’

Georgiana smiled weakly and whispered, ‘Thank you so much, Miss . . .’

‘Bennet,’ said Lydia. ‘I am Lydia Bennet, and this is my sister Elizabeth.’

‘Miss Bennet, Miss Lydia.’ She curtseyed and hurried away as quickly as her long legs would take her.

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It was a great injustice, Elizabeth decided, that a man, already strikingly handsome, and judging by his equipage well-born into the bargain, should have such eyes. It was too dangerous when they had so much else.

The person attached to the eyes met her gaze, then withdrew his coldly. She was fully prepared to be piqued, but had no time; he bent his head down, and instead of vanishing into the mass of tourists, he and his unseen companion worked their way through the crowd toward her. She scarcely knew what to think, before she heard a voice cry,

‘Miss Bennet!’

It was Georgiana! Was this the mysterious Mr Wickham? Or her equally-enigmatic brother? She opened her mouth to reply, but realized she did not even know how to address her.

‘Miss Bennet,’ Georgiana said breathlessly, ‘I am so glad you are still here! I owe you so much.’

‘Thank you, but it was really very little,’ Elizabeth replied, but the younger girl earnestly protested,

‘Oh no -- but you cannot know. I will always be indebted to you. Oh! May I introduce you?’

‘Of course,’ she said smilingly.

‘Miss Bennet, my brother, Mr Darcy. Fitzwilliam, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who I have been telling you about.’
‘Miss Bennet, it is an honour,’ he said in a quietly resonant voice, with a look full of such gratitude that she could not keep herself from blushing fiercely. If a man must have eyes like that, they should at least not be so . . . so . . . expressive.

‘Mr Darcy.’

So, she mused, in the end, Georgiana had trusted her brother more than her lover. Elizabeth was glad of it.

‘Please, Miss Bennet,’ Georgiana was saying, colouring as she did so, ‘may we have the honour of your company, and of course your aunt’s and uncle’s and your sister’s, at our home this evening? Or tomorrow, if that is more convenient for you?’

She stole a look at Mr Darcy, who was smiling reassuringly at his sister, his manner distinctly protective. Possibly over-protective, Elizabeth thought, but after such an event she could not blame him. ‘I would be delighted,’ Elizabeth said, ‘and my aunt also. Lydia, I am afraid, has other engagements both this evening and next.’ Or she would, if Elizabeth had anything to say about it. She would not subject poor Miss Darcy to Lydia a second time.

‘We look forward to seeing you,’ Mr Darcy said quietly. Elizabeth coloured but met his eyes squarely with her own.

‘Thank you, Mr Darcy.’

Georgiana, glancing from one to the other, smiled archly before dropping her gaze. Elizabeth belatedly added, ‘And Miss Darcy, of course -- thank you very much for your kind invitation.’

‘It is the least we can do,’ said Mr Darcy, and with that, brother and sister took their leave.

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‘Mr Darcy!’

‘Miss Bennet?’

It was only a dinner. A dinner with three strangers, no less, the only known face that of his fifteen-year-old sister, who after the events of yesterday, and the last six weeks, seemed scarcely capable of speech, and then only when there was least danger of being heard. Usually, he loathed such occasions; although age and experience had largely stripped him of his childhood shyness, he retained a vestige of it in the intense discomfort he felt among unfamiliar people or in unfamiliar situations.

Yet there was no stiffness or reserve at all. Ideas and conversation flowed freely, at first owing almost entirely to the efforts of Mr Gardiner and his niece. They were a naturally gregarious, friendly pair, and so evidently fond of society that society could not help but be fond of them. Miss Bennet paid more attention to Georgiana than to him, while the Gardiners showed the deference due him as their host, and no more. Fitzwilliam Darcy had never been less flattered in his life. He was delighted.

To be sure, he had the vaguely uncomfortable feeling that they were not quite his sort. Although dressed fashionably, their clothes were not rich -- but that signified nothing. His own severe apparel was hardly indicative of his fortune. Perhaps it was an occasional awkward construction -- he could not say, but he felt certain they were not the kind of people he would associate with in town.

For now, however, they were not in town, and the company of such sensible, intelligent, truly
well-bred people was such a rarity, he determined to enjoy it while it lasted. He might have been less liberal-minded had he been more fully acquainted with the Gardiners’ antecedents, but as it was, he remained in blissful ignorance. Shortly after forming this resolution, happy chance revealed that he and Mrs Gardiner had more in common than greater reserve than their companions.

‘Derbyshire?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, that is my own country, Mrs Gardiner.’

She blinked. ‘You are Mr Darcy of Pemberley, sir?’

‘Yes, I am. Are you familiar with my home, ma’am?’

‘I was born and raised in Lambton, sir. It is – ’

‘-- but five miles from Pemberley!’ He blushed at his own uncharacteristic effusiveness. ‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Gardiner.’

They immediately and enthusiastically commenced discussion of Derbyshire’s many beauties, its general superiority to all other counties, the particular charms of various rocks and trees to be found in Lambton, and above all, the pleasure to be found in merely looking at Pemberley. Darcy was accustomed to compliments to himself and his estate, but few so heartfelt and warm as Mrs Gardiner’s. By the time they realized the degree to which they had dominated the combination, the doctor’s niece and the master of Pemberley were well on their way to becoming fast friends.

Yet, despite his affinity with Mrs Gardiner, and the majority of the evening’s conversation spent with Mr Gardiner, it was Miss Bennet who, over the next few months, he could not forget. Perhaps it was only gratitude, and admiration. She was a clever, sensible girl -- not a bluestocking, but he suspected she might have been, had the opportunity presented itself. He was, to be honest, somewhat alarmed by her liveliness, but soon discovered that although a little too prone to laugh at everything and everyone, she could think seriously on serious subjects. Her opinions were thoughtful and in general well-reasoned, their delivery notwithstanding; her manners, while not fashionable, were unaffected and engaging; and although he could not miss the imperfections of her face and features, there was a beautifully intelligent expressiveness in her eyes that drew his own to look more carefully, and then to look again. He could only call his feelings bewitchment, enchantment, and similarly disagreeable terms, for he felt as if his reason and reserve and everything that made him himself was being slowly stripped from him, and he could not say he entirely cared for the sensation.

He had never even imagined himself in love before. If he had, he might have been better able to describe his feelings, and even to overcome them. He felt himself to be -- floundering. Fitzwilliam Darcy was not in the habit of floundering. Neither was he in the habit of forming sudden likes and dislikes. He was thoroughly bewildered, bothered, and bewitched, and very much disapproved of all three. He tried not to think of her, and had almost succeeded. If Georgiana did not bring her up, he sometimes passed two or three days without thinking of her. He really felt he had practically overcome the whole -- whatever it was.

‘Mr Darcy?’

And now! To find her here, of all places! The Almighty, Darcy decided, had a very singular sense of humour. Why did he have the ridiculous idea that their paths would inevitably cross, no matter where he decided to go? He resigned himself to it, and managed a polite bow.

‘Miss Bennet.’
Chapter 2

It was only a dinner. Why, then, had he remained in her mind? More so, even, than his sister, who by all rights should have had the greater share of her thoughts? Elizabeth Bennet had always expected to marry a gregarious, pleasant man, someone like her uncle Gardiner.

Why was she thinking of marriage?

Fitzwilliam Darcy, in any case, was as far from those men as could be imagined. His manners were well-bred, quite civil and polite in the formal sense, but wanted warmth and liveliness and spirit. If his eyes were too expressive, he made up for it by an unbending reserve which pervaded every word, look, even his silences. She perceived a distinct trace of hauteur in him, which she strongly disapproved of, and the gravity of his demeanour was less than appealing. His appearance was at first difficult to criticise, but she quickly decided that his flawless good looks were a flaw in and of themselves. His features were too perfectly balanced, his hair too tidy, his complexion too unblemished, his figure too well-proportioned. There was nothing striking in his manner of dress, for he was dressed as plainly as a Quaker, barring the signet ring which betrayed his lineage and independence to all and sundry. No, he was not the sort of man she liked. She had only spent so much time thinking about him because, despite his failings, he had -- not charm, for people were as often drawn away as towards him -- but charisma. When he was there, nobody failed to notice it; when he walked somewhere, a path simply appeared before him. No, he was not her sort at all. She was utterly indifferent to him.

She pressed her trembling fingers against her skirts as she curtseyed. When their eyes met, she knew how ridiculous she was being, and could have laughed at herself. Instead she smiled at him, and prepared herself for the inevitable. She could only thank heaven that he had met the Gardiners first, rather than her mother and younger sisters.

Elizabeth felt a half-dozen stares settling on her. Sir William heartily said, ‘I see that you are already acquainted with Miss Eliza, Mr Darcy!’

Introductions were quickly passed around. The first of the men, good-looking in an almost boyish fashion, was the famous Mr Bingley, tenant of Netherfield Hall, while the others were his family - - his two sisters, and the husband of the eldest. Even their attention to Jane did little to endear the ladies to Elizabeth; with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve of them, and within a very few minutes found nothing to alter her opinion. Mr Bingley was good-looking, although not striking -- neither tall nor short, heavy nor slim, dark nor fair -- and he seemed very agreeable. In fact, Elizabeth suspected his entire character could be summed up in the word. After one look at Jane, he was all smiles and friendly conversation for the rest of the evening. Mr Hurst merely looked the gentleman.

In his turn, Darcy could not have been less impressed by all but Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. Considerable abilities enhanced by a solid education and a tendency towards objectivity had given him a naturally reliable judgment, but this was one of the rare occasions where his expectations were not only met, but exceeded. He pitied the eldest Bennet girls for such a mother; even Lady Catherine did not compare. And, fortunately, there was only one Lady Catherine, but Mrs Bennet was joined by her two youngest daughters, shameless flirts the like of which he had never laid eyes on in his life. Miss Mary was not nearly so . . . painful, except when she performed, for her voice was weak and affected and her playing spiritless and dull.

That Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth should have come out of such a family was little short of remarkable. Darcy remembered the charming, sensible Gardiners, and guessed that Mrs Gardiner
must have been a good influence on her two eldest nieces at a particularly opportune time. Darcy had rarely, if ever, been so impressed upon such short acquaintance -- with people utterly unconnected with him, no less. He thought he should like to know more of them; although he preferred to associate with those of his own station, he did not carry it to extremes -- he was willing to set such considerations aside when the situation warranted, as he had with Bingley. His family, except for his father, had strongly disapproved of the connection -- they still did, in fact, and lived in fear of a nearer one. Quite ridiculous, of course; it was 1795, after all.

Georgiana was never far from his mind. He had not wanted to leave her -- only his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam's insistence, coupled with her own earnest entreaties, had persuaded him to go with Bingley at all. She stayed now with his uncle and aunt in town -- they remained ignorant of the affair, and Darcy suspected that at present, he was little more than a constant reminder of the folly she had come so close to. It was a painful, but not improbable, conjecture. Nevertheless her correspondence was as prolific as ever -- it was a comfort, if a scant one.

His thoughts were so occupied when Bingley accosted him. ‘Come, Darcy,’ said he, ‘I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance.’

He was very fond of Bingley, but sometimes his inability to realise that not everyone in the world took pleasure in his own favourite pursuits was distinctly tiresome. He still found it incomprehensible that Darcy found the company of strangers draining rather than the reverse.

Through a sharp pain in his head, he replied: ‘I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this, it would be insupportable. Your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in the room, whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with.’

Miss Bingley caught his eye at that very moment, and gave a long-suffering sigh. He withdrew his own coldly and revised his opinion. It would be a punishment to stand up with them, too.

‘I would not be so fastidious as you are,’ cried Bingley, ‘for a kingdom!’

*And I would not be undiscriminating as you are, for an empire,* Darcy thought, but without rancour.

‘Upon my honour,’ Bingley continued enthusiastically, ‘I have never met with so many pleasant girls in my life, as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty.’

His opinion was the same at every assembly or ball or, for heavens’ sake, invitation to tea -- he had never enjoyed himself more, the ladies were the handsomest he had set eyes on, et cetera, et cetera. The throbbing ache in Darcy’s head increased.

‘You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,’ he said, with a look at Miss Bennet. She was quite as pretty as most of the ladies they saw in town, and seemed a sweet, well-bred girl, but did she ever stop smiling? He could not help but doubt the sincerity of someone with so unvarying an expression.

‘Oh! she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld!’

Darcy sighed. *Not again.*

‘But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I daresay, very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.’

‘Which do you mean?’ and turning round, he found his eyes met by Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s.
scathing retort was on the tip of his tongue, but before it escaped, he reconsidered. She was close enough to overhear, and plainly listening to the conversation with considerable interest. If she were a stranger, he would not have cared -- what did the opinions of such people signify? they could have no effect on him -- but she was not a stranger. Georgiana’s frightened voice came back to him. I did not know what to do, Fitzwilliam -- I was so confused, if I had not met Miss Bennet, I do not know what I would have done -- I think I would have told you, but I do not know -- she convinced me to talk to you, she convinced me to think it over more carefully --

Elizabeth Bennet might very well have saved Georgiana from a fate that might reasonably be considered worse than death. He, however little he liked it, was in her debt. What was a dance? Just a little thing -- it was the least he could do, when she sat there, slighted by other men.

‘We have already been introduced,’ he said patiently, ‘but I believe I shall.’

Bingley blinked in astonishment. Not for a moment had he actually expected his friend to take up the offer. ‘I shall, er, return to Miss Bennet, then,’ he said awkwardly.

‘Very well.’ With no further ado, Darcy turned on his heel, and gravely requested the honour of Miss Elizabeth’s hand. She met his gaze steadily -- a rarity even among men, whether because of fear of him, or simple disinclination to pain their necks -- and with no trace of coquetry. He noticed, idly, that even the imperfections of her face and figure added to the character of her appearance. Intelligence and spirit and beauty could not be neatly divided up in her, as they could in other women, but seemed inextricably bound together, all part of the greater whole. It was impossible to say what had come first, the appeal of an intelligent expression or engaging manners or a pretty face.

‘Thank you, Mr Darcy,’ she said, and accepted.

Elizabeth, for the first time in her life, was not entirely certain what to think. It was impossible to deceive herself any longer. He might not be the sort of man she usually liked -- and she would not call her feelings liking yet -- but to claim indifference would be absurd. She was pleased when he asked her to dance (for given his general behaviour, she had rather expected an icily polite demurral). It meant nothing, she knew -- placating a friend -- but she could not be unaffected. He was a graceful, elegant dancer, for all that he disliked the amusement in general, and exerted himself to talk with her. She was surprised to find the set of dances over almost before they had begun; he was far from a scintillating conversationalist, thanks to what she quickly perceived as great natural reserve and gravity, even stiffness, on his part, but aided by her liveliness and his thoughtfulness, as well as considerable intelligence on both sides, what passed between them quickly absorbed them nearly to the exclusion of all else.

As gentlemen were scarce, Elizabeth again sat in want of a partner. Darcy did not ask her again -- not that she expected him to -- but he did stop in his perambulations about the room, and engage her in conversation. She had always preferred the company of men more akin to herself, in understanding and temper. Men who were lively, gay, and friendly to all. Yet she had gone out of her way to divert their attention from herself, when she felt the relationship approaching a dangerous point. She was not the sort of ‘elegant female’ who took pleasure in tormenting a respectable man; and she had been unable to entertain the idea of accepting any of them. All, nearly all, seemed to be lacking something; it had been similarity to herself that had drawn her, and yet they were not fully equal to her. Few, if any, possessed her quickness of thought or perception, and although she had rather enjoyed her mental superiority over all but her beloved father, she did not have his capacity to delight in it over the course of a lifetime.

Darcy was in every respect unlike those young men she had always danced and flirted with. It
was their differences, rather than similarities, that drew them together -- yet, in the ways that she had always found the John Lucases and William Gouldings of her world wanting, he was not. For all his stiffness and reserve, he was perfectly straightforward and direct with his opinions, and more than that if challenged directly. He talked to her as her father did -- as if he had forgotten, or did not care, that she was a woman and a lady, instead treating her simply as a rational creature. Their opinions were frequently dissimilar, but debate only made the intelligence and sense each possessed the more apparent, and added animation to their conversations. Elizabeth had rarely, if ever, enjoyed the company of so intelligent a person of either sex. She knew better than to think he meant anything serious by it -- she was neither young nor romantic enough to imagine herself an object of interest to so great a man -- but she meant to enjoy the experience as long as it lasted.

The evening altogether passed off pleasantly to the whole family. Mrs Bennet had seen her eldest daughter much admired by the Netherfield party. Jane was as much gratified by this, as her mother could be, though in a quieter way. Elizabeth felt Jane’s pleasure, and of course, her own. Mary had heard herself mentioned to Miss Bingley as the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood; and Catherine and Lydia had been fortunate enough to be never without partners, which was all that they had yet learnt to care for at a ball. They returned therefore in good spirits to Longbourn, the village where they lived, and of which they were the principal inhabitants.

‘Oh! my dear Mr Bennet,’ cried Mrs Bennet, as she entered the room, ‘we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Everybody said how well she looked; and Mr Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. Only think of that, my dear; he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time. First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her; but, however, he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can, you know -- ’ Elizabeth flinched -- ‘and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So, he enquired who she was, and got introduced, and asked her for the two next. Then, the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and the two fifth with Jane again, and the two sixth with Lizzy, and the Boulanger -- ’

‘If he had had any compassion for me,’ cried her husband impatiently, ‘he would not have danced half so much! For God’s sake, say no more of his partners. Oh! that he had sprained his ankle in the first dance!’

‘Oh! my dear,’ continued Mrs Bennet, ‘I am quite delighted with him. He is so excessively handsome! and his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses. I dare say the lace upon Mrs Hurst’s gown -- ’

Here she was interrupted again. Mr Bennet protested against any description of finery. She was therefore obliged to seek another branch of the subject, and related, with much enthusiasm, and some exaggeration, the shocking compliment of Mr Darcy.

‘For he seemed, at first, so high and so conceited that there was no enduring him! He walked here, and he walked there, fancying himself so very great -- at least, that was what Mrs Long said, but as you know, Mr Bennet, I have no opinion of her. I expect it was only because he sat so long by her, without saying a word, but he seemed to like Lizzy very much, for she was the only lady he danced with besides Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, and then he sat by Lizzy and they talked for, oh, quite an half-hour. Well, I thought him a charming man, and so handsome! did I not say so, girls?’

‘You did not,’ cried Lydia, ‘you said he was nothing to Mr Bingley, and sickly -- ’

‘I said nothing of the kind!--for you should know that a fair complexion is infinitely superior to a brown. Look at your elder sisters. Was it not Lizzy, rather than Jane, who had to sit out three dances?’
Jane looked apologetically at Elizabeth, who simply smiled.

Lydia sniffed. ‘Well, I do not think a man is anything without regimentals, and I cannot imagine Mr Darcy joining the army, although -- ’ she giggled -- ‘he would look very nice in them. Do not you think so, Lizzy?--for although he was so proud and severe, he looked quite different when he was with you. I suppose he liked you, Lord knows why.’

‘Lydia!’ cried Jane.

‘Jane, do not you think every man ought to wear a red coat, if he can?’

‘I do not,’ said Jane, ‘I far prefer a blue o -- ’ she stopped, flushing as the two younger girls giggled. She retreated to the safer subject of Mr Darcy’s looks. ‘I think he looked quite well as he was -- as handsome as Mr Bingley.’

‘As handsome as Mr Bingley!’ cried her mother. ‘Why, do you not know, Jane, that Mr Bingley has only four thousand a-year, and Mr Darcy at least ten!’

Jane blinked.

‘Although I would be very glad indeed to see you well-settled at Netherfield, Jane dear, since Mr Darcy seemed scarcely to notice you.’

Later that evening, Elizabeth joined her father in the study. Mr Bennet quickly put her king out of its misery. ‘Lizzy, Lizzy,’ he chided, shaking his head. ‘I hope your mother’s nerves have not contributed to your execrable strategies this evening?’

Elizabeth managed a faint smile, avoiding her father’s piercing gaze. She picked up her fallen king and queen, and set them both aright. ‘No, Papa,’ she said, then her mouth twisted slightly. ‘My own nerves are quite enough to be going on with, let alone hers.’

‘Then what is so occupying your thoughts?’ He re-set the board carefully. ‘Lizzy?’

‘It was an eventful evening, that is all. Restraining Lydia and Kitty, Mr Bingley seeming so partial to Jane, and -- ’

‘Mr Darcy seeming so partial to you?’

Elizabeth’s eyes darted up, and she smiled uneasily. ‘Mr Darcy’s partiality, I do not doubt, sprang only from his displeasure in the rest of his company. He seems to be a man who likes intelligent conversation.’

Mr Bennet chuckled. ‘Something in short supply at such events.’ He moved a piece. ‘Ten thousand a-year, eh?’

‘So it is said.’

‘You could do worse, Lizzy.’ He smiled to himself.

‘Papa, Mr Darcy means nothing by it.’ Her hands were clenched in her lap. ‘He was only bored.’

‘Poor little Lizzy. Shall I have to call the man out, for trifling with your affections?’

Somehow Elizabeth found it difficult to laugh, although the necessity was obeyed. ‘I am in no danger, Papa.’
'Good. You are too sensible to be led astray by such a man’s attention; he can mean nothing by it, all the more fool him.'

Elizabeth had already confessed this to herself, but it was quite different coming from without, and particularly one whose opinions and understanding she so valued. ‘It is strange,’ she said, in a tone that caught her father’s attention. ‘He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter. So far, we are equal. But that is not very far, is it?’

Once upon a time, James Bennet had believed himself violently in love with a girl he met while visiting his godmother. Young and idealistic, he thought her a Greek goddess -- tall and raven-haired, she was quite the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on, and brilliant and refined into the bargain. His heart was lost long before her friends took it upon themselves to explain why no match would be tolerated between the son of a country squire and an earl’s niece; long before her father inherited the earldom, and Miss Fitzwilliam became Lady Anne, they had both known nothing could come of it. He returned home, in a vulgar phrase, ripe for the picking, and found himself married to Jane Gardiner before he had quite realised what happened.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, it is not.’
Chapter 3

When Jane and Elizabeth were alone, the former expressed to her sister how much she admired Mr Bingley.

‘He is very much what a young man ought to be,’ she said calmly, ‘sensible, good-humoured, lively, and I have rarely seen such happy manners -- so much ease, with such good breeding.’

‘He is also handsome,’ replied Elizabeth, ‘which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete.’

‘I was very much flattered by his asking me to dance a second time. I did not expect such a compliment.’

‘Did not you? I did for you.’

And yet, Elizabeth thought, Jane’s liking never seemed to go further; it was applied freely to everybody, and except for her fondness for family, she rarely showed any distinct partiality. It was not that she lacked the capability for it, Elizabeth was certain; her sister’s feelings, though little displayed, were fervent. No -- she had simply not found anyone capable of engaging those feelings. Her tepid, flattered approval of Mr Bingley was very much characteristic.

‘Dear Lizzy!’ Jane said fondly, and Elizabeth laughed her concern off. Jane was only two-and-twenty; there was time yet for her to find one worthy of her regard.

‘Oh! you are a great deal too apt you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I have never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life.’

‘I would wish not to be hasty in censuring anyone; but I always speak what I think.’

‘I know you do; and it is that which makes the wonder. With your good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others! Affectation of candour is common enough;--one meets it everywhere. But to be candid without ostentation or design -- to take the good of everybody’s character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad -- belongs to you alone.’ She clasped her sister’s hand affectionately. Dear Jane! She was not truly gullible, not easily-led, for she clung to her own ideas with tenacity at least the equal of Elizabeth’s own, even in the face of much evidence to the contrary. The sisters were in disagreement as often as not, but with such an excellent understanding between them, perfect accord was neither necessary nor desirable.

The morning after the assembly brought the eldest Miss Lucas, a sensible, intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven, to hear and to communicate. ‘You began the evening well, Charlotte,’ said Mrs Bennet, with civil self-command. ‘You were Mr Bingley’s first choice.’

‘Yes;--but he seemed to like his second better.’

‘Oh!--you mean Jane, I suppose -- because he danced with her twice. To be sure that did seem as if he admired her -- indeed I rather believe he did -- I heard something about it -- but I hardly know what -- something about Mr Robinson.’

Elizabeth suppressed a sigh. Charlotte was too used to Mrs Bennet, and to her own mother, to take offence, but it was impossible not to blush at such transparency. She glanced at her sister, and to her surprise found Jane looking quite preoccupied, her dark brows knit together and her lips pursed in what passed for a frown with her.
‘Perhaps you mean what I overheard between him and Mr Robinson; did not I mention it to you? Mr Robinson’s asking him how he liked our Meryton assemblies, and whether he did not think there were a great many pretty women in the room, and which he thought the prettiest? and his answering immediately to the last question -- Oh! the eldest Miss Bennet beyond a doubt, there cannot be two opinions on that point.’

‘Upon my word!--Well, that was very decided indeed -- that does seem as if -- but however, it may all come to nothing you know.’ Jane raised her eyes and met Elizabeth’s, her distress clear. Elizabeth understood perfectly; Jane liked Bingley and was flattered at his clear admiration, but had no intentions of encouraging him further, not yet. Jane, Elizabeth conceded, generally knew her own mind very well; no matter how convenient it would be for them all to have her well-settled at such a short distance as Netherfield, Jane’s feelings must determine the outcome.

‘Lizzy?’

Elizabeth snapped out of her thoughts. ‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘I was just telling Charlotte of your partner, Lizzy,’ Mrs Bennet said gloatingly. Elizabeth flushed and said,

‘Oh, but Mama, you know how fond I am of dancing -- surely you do not intend to tell Charlotte about every one of them, when she saw well enough herself?’

Mrs Bennet abused her stupidity. ‘Mr Darcy never danced with anyone else outside his own party,’ said she, ‘and after he danced with Lizzy, he sat by her and talked with her for the rest of the evening. You know, if he takes a liking to her, it might mean that the girls could be thrown into the paths of other rich men -- less fastidious ones.’

‘Mama, it was only a few minutes,’ Elizabeth protested. ‘You cannot imagine that Mr Darcy, of all people -- who never looks at any woman, except to see a blemish, and probably never looked at me in his life! -- has intentions of anything more serious than passing time while he is here.’

‘That is certain, if you do not help him on,’ Charlotte said seriously; ‘he likes you undoubtedly, but he may never do more than like you, if you show no partiality towards him. There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself. We can all begin freely -- a slight preference is natural enough; but there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better show more affection than she feels.’

‘Your plan is a good one,’ replied Elizabeth, ‘where nothing is in question but the desire of being well-married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I daresay I should adopt it. But these are not my feelings; I am not acting by design.’

‘Oh!’ cried Mrs Bennet, ‘I beg you would not put it into Lizzy’s head to set her cap for him. He is a handsome man, to be sure, and quite rich -- a grand estate in Derbyshire, they say -- but everybody says he is ate up with pride, and I daresay he only danced with Lizzy because he had nothing better to do, and Jane was dancing with Mr Bingley.’

Jane’s eyes widened a little, and she looked at her sister apologetically; Elizabeth was too accustomed to her mother’s ill opinion to be much bothered by this. Morever, she knew perfectly well that he could have danced with Jane had he wished it, when instead he had paid her the undivided attention of a well-bred man, and indeed seemed scarcely aware of Jane’s existence. She did not mind for her sister’s sake -- Jane had enough admirers, and she did not think they were well-suited in the least.
‘If I were as rich as Mr Darcy,’ cried a young Lucas who came with his sisters, ‘I should not care how proud I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day.’

‘Then you would drink a great deal more than you ought,’ said Mrs Bennet; ‘and if I were to see you at it, I should take away your bottle directly.’

The boy protested that she should not; she continued to declare that she would, and the argument ended only with the visit.

The ladies of Longbourn soon waited on those of Netherfield. The visit was returned in due form. Miss Bennet’s pleasing manners grew on the good will of Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley; and though the mother was found to be intolerable and the younger sisters not worth speaking to, a wish of being better acquainted with them, was expressed towards the two eldest. By Jane this attention was received with the greatest pleasure; but Elizabeth still saw superciliousness in their treatment of everybody, hardly excepting even her sister, and could not like them; though their kindness to Jane, such as it was, had a value as arising in all probability from the influence of their brother’s admiration.

It was generally evident whenever they met, that he did admire her; and to her it was equally evident that Jane, although at first a little attracted by his pleasing face and happy manners, soon met him as only a common and indifferent acquaintance. She liked him, above all the gentlemen of her acquaintance, but she could not feel more. Mrs Bennet ignored Jane’s protestations of disinterest, and many nights the two young ladies stayed awake talking the matter over. Elizabeth knew that if it came to a proposal, and necessarily to a refusal -- Jane, obedient and eager to please as she was, would never marry without affection -- her sister would need all the support she could receive. Their father could not be counted upon, for he looked upon it only as a good joke at Mrs Bennet’s expense, and to a lesser degree Bingley’s. Elizabeth fretted about it quite as much as Jane herself could do.

She was happily somewhat distracted from her worries by Mr Darcy’s partiality for her. Without any indelicate display of regard, or any peculiarity of manner, where their two selves only were concerned she could not be left in any doubt, however much he attempted to conceal it. He first listened to her conversations with other people, but distanced himself, not taking any part in them himself; Elizabeth was startled by his reticence, for he was too forthright in his opinions, too confident in himself, to be really called shy. She quickly realised, however, that in addition to reserve, or rather inspiring it, was a discomfort in the presence of strangers or large crowds, a difficulty in catching the tone of a conversation, or expressing interest, even when he did feel it, let alone when he did not. His consciousness of this likely only intensified the effect. Much as it pained her to agree with Miss Bingley, she had to admit that her report of Mr Darcy as never talking much among company, but perfectly agreeable among intimate acquaintance, seemed essentially correct. For a man of such pride, this deficiency of nature must be all the more irksome; to those who felt themselves his inferior, it might give the impression of him being disagreeable and ill-natured, but Elizabeth did him justice and, pitying him, did her best to draw him out.

One evening at Sir William Lucas’s, she began by turning to him and saying archly, ‘Did not you think, Mr Darcy, that I expressed myself uncommonly well just not, when I was teasing Colonel Forster to give us a ball at Meryton?’

‘With great energy; but it is a subject which always makes a lady energetic,’ he said, smiling a little in response. She was pleased, without caring to meditate too deeply on the cause for it.

‘You are severe on us.’

‘It will be her turn soon to be teased,’ said Miss Lucas. ‘I am going to open the instrument, Eliza, and you know what follows.’
‘You are a very strange creature by way of a friend!—always wanting me to play and sing before anybody and everybody!—If my vanity had taken a musical turn, you would have been invaluable, but as it is, I would really rather not sit down before those who must be in the habit of hearing . . . the best performers.’ At the last moment, she kept from mentioning his sister. Georgiana had been persuaded into playing a song for them, and her great natural talent was perfectly evident within two or three bars; Elizabeth knew well that her own could not compare. On Miss Lucas’s persevering, joined by a slightly hesitant request from Mr Darcy, she consented to play, ‘Very well; if it must be so, it must.’

Later on, when Mary played some Scotch and Irish airs, several of the company, including Kitty and Lydia, began to dance at one end of the room. Elizabeth stood apart; she liked to dance, but she had no interest in the officers, and she certainly did not wish to be lumped together with her younger sisters in anyone’s eyes.

Mr Darcy’s posture was similar, and he seemed lost in thought, except when the dancers caught his eye, at which times a flicker of disdain crossed it. Elizabeth stifled a smile; he disliked dancing enough when it was the purpose for gathering, but undoubtedly his antipathy was worse still when he had not expected it. More amusing was Sir William Lucas, who approached him tentatively, rather as she had done with birds when she was a child, looking this way and that, opening his mouth, shutting it, and finally pronouncing with every appearance of joviality, ‘What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr Darcy!’

Darcy started a little, clearly unaware of his surroundings. Elizabeth smiled. Darcy’s grave stern demeanour, the force of his personality and his general air of stately dignity, all gave the impression that he was older than he was, but his smooth face, thick hair, and fine teeth made it unlikely that he was thirty, if that. ‘There is nothing like dancing after all,’ Sir William was saying, ‘I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies.’

Darcy seemed quite annoyed at being so forcibly drawn from his own thoughts, and replied acerbically, ‘Certainly, sir;—and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world.—Every savage can dance.’

Sir William only smiled vapidly, and Elizabeth smothered a giggle. Of course poor Sir William had not deserved such a response, but as he could not comprehend the quick and convoluted paths of Darcy’s mind, it hardly signified. For a moment silence reigned; then, as they saw Bingley join the group, Sir William continued, ‘Your friend performs delightfully; and I doubt not that you are an adept in the science yourself, Mr Darcy.’

At the faint twist of his handsome mouth, Elizabeth guessed that Darcy had many opinions on the ‘science’ in question, none of which would dignify it by that word, but that he judged Sir William unworthy of the effort. He said with quiet restraint, ‘You saw me dance at Meryton, I believe, sir.’

‘Yes, indeed, and received no inconsiderable pleasure from the sight. Do you often dance at St James’s?’

Darcy said sharply, ‘Never, sir.’

Did he use ‘sir’ or ‘madam’ every single time he addressed another person? She wondered at his formality; for even, it seemed, when he intended to give offence, his manners remained unfalteringly well-bred and polite, as if he was not only unwilling but incapable of giving them up. Doubtless they had been drummed into his head with history and grammar.

‘Do you not think it would be a proper compliment to the place?’
‘It is a compliment which I never pay to any place if I can avoid it,’ said he, his voice coloured by a faint trace of irony.

‘You have a house in town, I conclude?’

This leap was unworthy of a response, apparently; Darcy only bowed.

‘I had once some thoughts of fixing in town myself -- for I am fond of superior society; but I did not feel quite certain that the air of London would agree with Lady Lucas.’

Doubtless the superior society of town would have made him feel his own insignificance rapidly. Darcy looked as if he had never been less interested in the conversation of any one. Elizabeth took pity on them both and moved towards them, only intending to add something to the conversation, and was startled to be instantly addressed by Sir William, who called out,

‘My dear Miss Eliza, why are you not dancing?--Mr Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner.--You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is before you.’ Without any further notice, he took her hand and would have given it to Mr Darcy, when she instantly drew back, and said with some discomposure to Sir William,

‘Indeed, sir, I have not the least intention of dancing.--I entreat you not to suppose that I moved this way in order to beg for a partner.’ No matter how well she liked dancing, and how well she liked dancing with him, she would rather anything than to be asked out of pity. Every instinct recoiled at the thought.

‘Miss Bennet,’ Darcy said, with grave propriety, ‘I assure you, I would be delighted to have the honour of your hand.’

Elizabeth hesitated; she was inclined to think it mere politesse, but there was a flush on his pale cheek and he lifted his eyes up to gaze at her earnestly. Sir William instantly seized on the opportunity.

‘You excel so much in the dance, Miss Eliza, that it is cruel to deny me the happiness of seeing you; and though this gentleman dislikes the amusement in general, he can have no objection, I am sure, to oblige us for one half-hour.’

‘Mr Darcy is all politeness,’ said Elizabeth, smiling, and Darcy’s lips curved very slightly in a faint reciprocal expression.

‘He is indeed -- but considering the inducement, my dear Miss Eliza, we cannot wonder at his complacence; for who would object to such a partner?’

Darcy simply looked at her expectantly, and she acceded to his request. As they went down, she said dryly, ‘I daresay you are little in the habit of going to such trouble to acquire a partner, Mr Darcy.’

‘It was no trouble,’ he instantly said, then added with a peculiar flicker in his eye, ‘although I will confess that it is usually a simpler business.’

Elizabeth only smiled; she was beginning to suspect that, once, he’d had a sense of humour.

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When at first, Darcy felt no sentiment superior to gratitude and rational admiration, now his feelings had passed through bewitchment and into -- he knew not what to call it. He thought he was going out of his mind. Within a bare four weeks, he had gone from thinking her pretty but no
beauty, to one of the handsomest women of his acquaintance. He no longer saw, nor cared about, her flaws and imperfections; something was clearly wrong with him. His judgment was almost never affected by his hopes and wishes, and yet now his reason seemed well and truly overthrown.

Except -- that was not quite true. When he was with her, and even occasionally when he was not, there was a greater quickness and clarity to his thinking. He felt as if he could see all the clearer, everything thrown into sharp relief; it was only when he fluctuated between that state and one of bewilderment and, if he were perfectly honest with himself, fear, that he fell into a muddled confusion. He could have no serious intentions, of course. Mr Bennet was a gentleman, to be sure, but not a person of any consequence in the world. Darcy owed it to himself, to his family, to his children, and to his estate, to marry well. He had never been romantic, and neither was he mercenary; he intended to marry a lady of his own social sphere, one whom he could harbour both affection and respect for. He felt no urgency on that score; at twenty-seven, he was younger than most of his acquaintances, when they began to consider marriage. The Darcys, except for his father, were a long-lived family. There was time yet.

He meant to remain detached from Elizabeth. He liked her, and although his fortune and name and good character were sufficient to win any woman’s approval, she peculiarly seemed to like him -- his disposition, his personality, for no reason that he could fathom. It was a singular sensation -- he was admired, yes, respected, yes, but he could not say that very many people, if any, liked him on his own merits. Darcy inhaled. And yet, despite his gratitude, despite the sincere affection he felt for her as a person, and the other feelings for her as a woman, he truly thought it best to avoid her. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing more contemptible than men who took advantage of women. Ever since he was child -- or rather, since he was old enough to understand what he had seen as a child -- he had promised himself that he would never be one of those men. Elizabeth Bennet was a fine woman, intelligent, kind, beautiful, witty, everything a man could want -- not considering wealth, birth, and connections, of course -- and he thought far too highly of her to ill use her in any way.

And yet . . . there was something almost like carelessness in her manner with him -- as if she liked him well enough, but had no other expectations. His vanity was slightly pricked, but he knew it for the best. If it was understood that he felt only friendship towards her, and no intentions of anything else, then they could safely enjoy each other’s company and conversation. He restrained himself admirably, and if he felt the impression of her hand on his, long after their impromptu dance at the Lucases’ had ended, he shook the sensation off.

While all this was passing through his mind, he was accosted by Miss Bingley. He had realised for quite a while that she did not possess the critical faculties he had once attributed to her, but only a wish to think meanly of the rest of the world, with which sense and intelligence had nothing to do. There was a crassness to her that repelled him, and although he was easy enough with her, out of sheer familiarity, he did not like or approve of her.

‘I can guess the subject of your reverie,’ she said archly. Darcy could not help but contrast the affected expression with Elizabeth’s more genuine one.

‘I should imagine not,’ he said, instantly reverting to his customary cold detachment.

‘You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner -- in such society; and indeed I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed! The insipidity and yet the noise; the nothingness and yet the self-importance of all these people! --What would I give to hear your strictures on them!’

Darcy perversely did precisely the opposite, partly because he had no desire to hear her vapid criticisms, but largely out of sheer contrariness. ‘Your conjecture is totally wrong, I assure you,’ he
said, with considerable enjoyment. ‘My mind was more agreeably engaged. I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.’

Miss Bingley immediately fixed her eyes on his face, and Darcy, with the unerring instinct of the hunted, took a firm step backwards. She insisted on being told which lady had the credit of inspiring such reflections. Darcy replied with great intrepidity,

‘Miss Elizabeth Bennet.’

‘Miss Elizabeth Bennet!’ repeated Miss Bingley. ‘I am all astonishment.’ He did not doubt it. ‘How long has she been such a favourite? And pray, when am I to wish you joy?’

Darcy sighed. ‘That is exactly the question which I expected you to ask. A lady’s imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment. I knew you would be wishing me joy.’

She immediately began teasing him as to his prospective mother-in-law (Darcy suppressed a fastidious shudder at the idea of Mrs Bennet at Pemberley, but would not have obliged Miss Bingley for the world). As his composure convinced her that all was safe, her wit flowed long. She could not know that Darcy did not think she deserved the compliment of rational opposition.
Chapter 4

More than once did Elizabeth in her rambles meet Mr Darcy, and wishing to remain indifferent, she took care to inform him at first, that it was a favourite haunt of hers. How it could occur a second time therefore was very odd! Yet it did, and even a third. Only then did she realize how he had likely taken her information - not as an invitation to avoid the park, but rather the reverse, a suggestion of a rendezvous. She blushed again and again at the thought, but immediately following it came the understanding that if he had taken her remark this way, he did not seem to think any the worse of her for it. Quite the opposite; he talked more frequently and more cheerfully with her, although not at all consistently so. He veered from contributing to their conversations with unaffected pleasure, to his usual stiff, cold, reserve, and then back again. He remained quiet - she always talked far more than he did - but Elizabeth concluded that it was not, as she had sometimes thought, solely a consequence of displeasure in his company, but rather an innate quality. He was lively enough with her, until he remembered himself again, but never easy.

In company, he was careful to avoid anything that might expose her to the suspicions of the impertinent, yet his preference was clear, at least to her. In general he seemed only to be enduring others’ presence, but when he became aware of her own, the shuttered expression of his eyes became animated, his pale cheek flushed, and he often smiled when he looked at her; not the sort of smiles one might expect of him, but sudden warm ones that invariably took her aback, and sharply reminded her that beneath the layers of gravity, consequence, and reserve, he was simply a young man, no older than Charlotte. It was nothing so obvious as Bingley’s ever more unwelcome admiration of Jane, but rather a dozen small things seen only by their two selves - and Charlotte, whose frequent admonitions on how best to ‘catch’ him only pained her.

In an unguarded moment, Darcy had spoken briefly and vaguely of his family. There had been some idea of his marrying a cousin when they were children, since discarded by everyone but his aunt, the cousin’s mother. ‘She is not the most sensible person,’ he said tactfully, and Elizabeth smiled to herself. There seemed to be a relation like that in every family. Hers was remarkable only for having them in such abundance.

‘Mama,’ cried Lydia, interrupting Elizabeth’s thoughts, ‘my aunt says that Colonel Forster and Captain Carter do not go so often to Miss Watson’s as they did when they first came; she sees them now very often standing in Clarke’s library.’

Elizabeth sighed, and heartily wished the militia had never come to Hertfordshire, let alone Meryton. She would have been perfectly content to never hear of them again. Her wish was partially answered; Lydia’s effusions were interrupted by the entrance of the footman with a note for Miss Bennet; it came from Netherfield, and the servant waited for an answer.

‘It is from Miss Bingley,’ said Jane, smiling, and then read it aloud.

‘My dear friend,

‘If you are not so compassionate as to dine today with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives, for a whole day’s tête-à-tête between two women can never end without a quarrel. Come as soon as you can on the receipt of this. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers. Yours ever,

‘Caroline Bingley.’ ”

Elizabeth frowned. Did Miss Bingley think that Jane existed only to be at her disposal? Undoubtedly, were the men not gone, she would never have invited her ‘dear friend’ at all.
Nevertheless, all the others, including Jane, took the invitation as a compliment rather than the reverse, and Jane was soon gone on horseback. Elizabeth was uneasy for her - Jane did not have a strong constitution - but her mother was delighted. The rain continued the whole evening without intermission; Jane certainly could not come back.

‘This was a lucky idea of mine, indeed!’ said Mrs Bennet, more than once, as if the credit of making it rain were all her own. Till the next morning, however, she was not aware of all the felicity of her contrivance. Breakfast was scarcely over when a servant from Netherfield brought the following note for Elizabeth:

‘My dearest Lizzy,

‘I find myself very unwell this morning, which, I suppose, is to be imputed to my getting wet through yesterday. My kind friends will not hear of my returning home till I am better. They insist also on my seeing Mr Jones - therefore do not be alarmed if you should hear of his having been to me - and excepting a sore-throat and headache there is not much the matter with me.

‘Yours, & etc.’

‘Well, my dear,’ said Mr Bennet, when Elizabeth had read the note aloud, ‘if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr Bingley, and under your orders.’

‘Oh! I am not at all afraid of her dying. People do not die of little trifling colds. She will be taken good care of. As long a she stays there, it is all very well. I would go and see her, if I could have the carriage.’

Elizabeth, feeling really anxious, was determined to go to her, though the carriage was not to be had; and as she was no horsewoman, walking was her only alternative. She declared her resolution.

‘How can you be so silly,’ cried her mother, ‘as to think of such a thing, in all this dirt! You will not be fit to be seen when you get there.’

‘I shall be very fit to see Jane - which is all I want.’ Elizabeth turned sharply on her heel, only realizing after she had fetched her cloak that the mannerism was more like Darcy than herself.

Elizabeth walked as far as Meryton with Kitty and Lydia, then the rest of the way alone. She was shown into the breakfast-parlour, where all but Jane were assembled, and where her appearance created a great deal of surprise. Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley, of course, would never have dreamed of sending such a distance for each other - not, at least, if it entailed dirtying the lace that had sent Mrs Bennet into such raptures. Both women’s eyes were fixed on Elizabeth’s hem; she cared nothing for their opinion, ill or otherwise, and acknowledged their hypocritical reception politely, and Mr Bingley’s good-humoured one with more genuine warmth. Darcy only greeted her with his usual taciturn civility, while Mr Hurst said nothing at all. The former was divided between admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion, appreciation of her affection for her sister, and doubt as to the occasion’s justifying her coming so far. The latter was thinking only of his breakfast.

Elizabeth found that her sister was still very unwell, and could hardly speak. She only managed vague expressions of gratitude towards Miss Bingley, who accepted them as her due and sent for the apothecary. Once it was decided that Jane could not be moved, Miss Bingley reluctantly extended a longer invitation to Elizabeth, and sent for her clothes. At six o’clock, she was summoned to dinner.
Even had she no cause to worry over Jane, Elizabeth would not have enjoyed the occasion. She disliked being the focus of the ladies’ attention even more than she disliked being pointedly ignored by them. Their lamentations over ‘poor Jane’s’ illness quickly turned onto themselves, and shortly afterwards, they seemed to have forgotten her existence altogether. Darcy limited himself to a polite enquiry; she did not blame him for his disinterest, for he was accosted by Mr Bingley’s sisters almost from the moment he entered the room. Miss Bingley was engrossed by him, Mrs Hurst scarcely less so. As she talked with Mr Bingley, made somewhat uncomfortable by his excessive anxiety for Jane, but pleased by his attentions to herself, she entertained herself by watching the changes in Darcy’s expression, from his usual reserve, to forbidding, and finally to thorough detachment. Mr Hurst, apparently, lived only to eat, drink, and play cards, and when he found her to prefer a plain dish to a ragout, had nothing to say to her. Elizabeth had no more patience for him than he for her; of some pleasures, a little goes a very long way.

‘Well, I cannot like her,’ Miss Bingley began decidedly. ‘Her manners are remarkably bad, do not you think, Louisa?’ Before Mrs Hurst could reply, her sister continued, ‘They are a most abominable mixture of pride and impertinence. She has no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty. To think that she is our dear Jane’s sister!’

To think that you are Bingley’s sisters! Darcy thought. He disliked both of them heartily, Miss Bingley only slightly less than Mrs Hurst, as she could at least think for herself, however unpleasant those thoughts might be. That Bingley, the least ill-natured human being Darcy had ever known, who never looked except to admire, so easily led and influenced by his steadfast belief in others’ goodness, should have such relations never ceased to astonish him. His own family, despite some differences, were far more akin. Even Lady Catherine reminded him uncomfortably of his mother and uncle, and even himself in some of her lesser qualities.

He had paid no attention to the sisters’ ramblings until he heard his name. ‘You observed it, Mr Darcy, I am sure,’ said Miss Bingley; ‘and I am inclined to think that you would not wish to see your sister make such an exhibition.’

His mind went blank for a moment, as he had only the vaguest idea of what they were talking about. Of course, he would not wish Georgiana to wander about the countryside if he were taken slightly ill - but she was five years Miss Elizabeth’s junior, sheltered, shy, and as the previous summer showed, far more vulnerable. He said shortly, ‘Certainly not.’

Darcy smiled faintly at Bingley’s response to his sister’s renewed attacks. He should know the futility of it by now, surely. They derided his stupidity, and Miss Bingley turned to Darcy, lowering her voice. ‘I am afraid, Mr Darcy, that this adventure has rather affected your admiration of her fine eyes.’

‘Not at all,’ he said vindictively, his patience thoroughly exhausted. ‘They were brightened by the exercise.’

She blinked, apparently unable to think of any reply to this. Darcy idly noticed that her eyes were the same colour and shape as Elizabeth’s, and yet not remotely similar. Expression, he supposed, went a long way, and he returned his wandering attention to the conversation just in time to catch Bingley’s latest defense of the Bennets.

‘If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside, it would not make them one jot less agreeable!’

Darcy’s eyes narrowed slightly. It seemed more than Bingley’s native good temper was speaking. He had, of course, seen his friend’s partiality for Jane Bennet, but it was perfectly unremarkable - she was the prettiest girl in the country and that was usually enough to win Bingley’s affections,
for awhile. Nevertheless some caution might be called for.

‘But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world.’

Unfortunately, this encouraged Bingley’s sisters to further mockery of their dear friend’s vulgar relations. Darcy turned away in contempt and said nothing until Hurst suggested a game of loo.

Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth returned downstairs, and declined an invitation to join them. Darcy bit back a smile at his companion’s astonishment that anyone could prefer reading to cards.

‘Miss Eliza Bennet,’ said Miss Bingley spitefully (and, in Darcy’s opinion, rather vulgarly herself), ‘despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else.’

As if she knows anything about Elizabeth’s preferences, he thought, then started, so slightly that no one noticed. He had been careful to maintain a proper distance, even in his thoughts, guarding against anything more than the awkward, formal friendship between them. When had he started thinking of her as simply Elizabeth?

He snapped back to attention as Miss Bingley addressed him. ‘What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr Darcy!’

Now that Miss Elizabeth is here, he decided, I should not at least try to keep my mind on the conversation. His mother had lamented his absent-mindedness since he was a small child - unless something particularly caught his notice, he rarely bothered to keep his mind fixed on it, instead wandering to more interesting areas.

‘It ought to be good,’ he replied carelessly, ‘it has been the work of many generations.’ Not that she would know anything about it, beyond the size of the room and colours of the books’ spines.

‘And then you have added so much to it yourself, you are always buying books.’

‘I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these.’ He caught Elizabeth’s - Miss Elizabeth’s - half-speculative, half-amused glance, and coloured slightly. What he had said was true, of course, but it was not the entire truth. In fact his frugality and austerity in nearly every other regard was entirely abandoned in his passion for collecting. They had already spoken of books on several occasions, usually joined by her father; undoubtedly she guessed that his enthusiasm was not entirely due to the plethora of works being published.

‘Neglect! I am sure you neglect nothing that can add to the beauties of that noble place!’ cried Miss Bingley. ‘Charles, when you build your house, I wish it may be half as delightful as Pemberley.’ Darcy winced and saw Elizabeth bite back a sympathetic smile. In any other circumstance he would have detested being the object of pity, but in this, he was in complete agreement with the sentiment. Miss Bingley saw nothing at Pemberley beyond wealth and grandeur. Idly, he wondered what Elizabeth would think of it.

Miss Elizabeth. And, of course, she will never see it. Unless Georgiana invites her, of course - as a gentleman’s daughter, she would be an acceptable friend, and - he shut down that line of thought harshly.

‘I wish it may,’ Bingley said tactfully.

‘But I would really advise you to make your purchase in that neighbourhood, and take Pemberley for a kind of model. There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire.’

Except Middlesex, perhaps. Darcy was quite comfortable in his knowledge that Pemberley was
utterly inimitable. Over seven hundred years of history could not be replicated, even if the architecture could. Miss Bingley was deluding herself in any case, if she believed Bingley’s one hundred thousand pounds would stretch to such an endeavour.

‘With all my heart; I will buy Pemberley itself if Darcy will sell it,’ Bingley replied.

*Never,* thought Darcy fiercely; *not were it mortgaged to the hilt and nothing left but ruins falling about my feet.*

‘I was talking of possibilities, Charles,’ Miss Bingley said, and her brother, with a smile at Darcy that showed how easily his thoughts were read, replied,

‘Upon my word, Caroline, I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation.’

She was effectively silenced, but the respite was cut short by Elizabeth, who closed her book and wandered over to the table to pay closer attention. Darcy smiled to himself; her behaviour, although she probably did not realise it, was strikingly like his own near the beginning of their acquaintance, although undoubtedly she would be less shy of joining the conversation. His limited ability to focus on his cards was abruptly rendered still less. Although she stood between Bingley and Mrs Hurst, not next to him, he could sense her presence nearly as acutely as if she were right there. Her dark eyes wide and dancing with amused interest, her cheeks flushed, several rich curls loose about her neck. He felt suddenly quite chilly, and his eye was caught by her hand. Her hands were always warm, somehow, just as his were always cold - he was seized by an impulse to snatch it up and press his lips against her wrist. For a moment he was entertained by the idea of what everyone would think, and could barely respond to Miss Bingley’s query about his sister - yes, of course Georgiana was Elizabeth’s height, except taller. What would *she* think?

He frowned and shook his head slightly. *I must be going mad,* he thought.

Late that evening, an express rider arrived at Netherfield. Darcy snatched on a robe and went out to meet him, knowing all three Bingleys could and would sleep through so trifling an interruption to their slumber, while Hurst was undoubtedly lost in drunken nightmares.

‘Mr Darcy?’

Darcy glanced up from the letter, which was addressed to him in his uncle’s hand, and froze. Elizabeth stood at the top of the staircase. He could not have thought of her as Miss Elizabeth Bennet for anything, at that moment, with her hair in a long plait over her shoulder and wearing only a robe over a shift.

‘Miss Bennet,’ he said thickly, ‘do not be alarmed, it is for me.’

‘Oh, I see.’ She did not, however, move, and he tried to think of something else to reassure her. Was she ill? Her colour was quite high. Miss Bennet’s illness was not contagious - was it? ‘I . . . I will leave you to your letter, then,’ she said, with a peculiar awkwardness he had never seen in her before. Darcy only nodded, then stared in bewilderment as she remained fixed where she was. She seemed to realize the discrepancy between her words and her behaviour then, and blushed even more fiercely before turning and hurrying away with a mumbled, ‘Oh! - forgi . . . good night, Mr Darcy.’

How very strange. He managed to force his attention back to the letter, which was written in an uncharacteristically messy scrawl. Then, as he read, nearly all thoughts of Elizabeth Bennet vanished from his mind.
‘Has everyone except me gone mad?’ he demanded to the black silence, colour draining from his face. Very early the following morning, as soon as his servants could be made ready, he left a quick note of explanation for his friend, in a hand nearly as lamentably bad as Bingley’s own, and departed for town.

It was not very far, and he arrived at his house in time for breakfast. The servants looked either confused or distressed, and almost the only sound he could hear was the click of his boots against the polished floor.

‘Fitzwilliam!’

A tall woman hurried towards him, disturbing the silence. With a smile lighting up his face - one that Elizabeth would have recognized - he clasped her extended hands and kissed her.

‘My love,’ she said, ‘I am so glad you are here, we are all at odds and ends.’

Darcy laughed. ‘So I hear.’
Chapter 5

Elizabeth was probably the least surprised of anyone at Netherfield, when Bingley discovered Darcy’s note in lieu of that gentleman’s presence. It did not say anything she had not guessed, or hoped, already; an express had arrived the previous evening, informing him of urgent family business which called him to town, but he expected to return shortly. In fact, she only bothered to glance at it out of curiosity as to what his handwriting looked like.

The next two days passed very slowly. Elizabeth spent as much time as she civilly could with Jane, who, though feverish and nearly silent, was still much better company than any of the Bingleys. The sisters, of course, thought only of themselves and, though fancying themselves the very embodiment of polished society, were almost uncivil to Elizabeth; Bingley’s fancy for Jane seemed unabated and Elizabeth could think of no way to preserve her poor sister from such a single-minded man’s attentions. If only Jane would care for him! He was amiable, good-natured, and rich; but as he seemed completely oblivious to Jane’s utter indifference to him, he was probably neither very sensible or clever. Mr Hurst, of course, might as well not be there, for he was merely a snoring presence on the couch most of the time, when he was not bidding preposterous amounts at loo and losing nearly all of it to his sister-in-law.

It was strange that the disappearance of a quiet, absent-minded man could make such a difference. Elizabeth, despite her friendship with him, would never have guessed it. She had not realized how often she glanced at him, sometimes half-defensively looking for disapprobation, but lately enjoying a peculiar camaraderie. She could smile at Miss Bingley’s ridiculous declarations, or Mr Bingley’s transparency, but she was used to smiling at Darcy, and seeing the amused glimmer in his eyes. She had never wanted another’s presence to enjoy absurdities - it was itself absurd, surely.

Moreover, Miss Bingley’s constant lamentations kept him firmly in mind. However, the image of him that sprang to her thoughts was not the Darcy she knew, as severe as a Quaker, every aspect of his appearance as neat as a pin - rather it was the man she had met the morning, or evening, before his departure. He had obviously been asleep moments before, awakened at the same moment as herself. He was pale, his dark hair rumpled, and unshaven - he had simply thrown a robe on, as she had. She had wanted to reach out and touch it. Of course, it was very pretty, but she knew perfectly well that it was not the robe that had inspired that impulse, because immediately afterwards she had fixed her eyes on his bare neck and felt herself flushing from head to toe, seized by the most irrational desire to . . . well, she was not certain what, exactly. Pressing her lips against it sounded about right.

Elizabeth was still blushing hours later at the thought. What would he have thought of her? She shuddered. It was just her good fortune that she had been at the top of the stairs and he at the bottom. Not that she would have acted on it, but he might have guessed, or something. Of course, he might not have. Men could be very oblivious to that sort of thing.

About this time, Elizabeth would force her thoughts back to her book, or Mr Bingley (who was fussing over the absent Jane - oh please let it only be infatuation!), or even tormenting herself by trying to talk to Mr Hurst. Unfortunately, she had such little presence of mind that she agreed to play at one of their expensive card-games, without realizing it.

Well, as a point of fact, not unfortunately. Elizabeth left the table twenty pounds richer.

Jane, thank heavens, began to mend, and seemed for the first time alert on the second morning after Darcy’s departure. The previous day had been, Elizabeth decided, unalloyed torture. It was bad enough simply suffering the Bingleys as well as concern over Jane; then she had been forced
to send for her mother. Elizabeth did not care about the Bingleys’ opinion of herself or Mrs Bennet, but that did not make it any more pleasant to see her mother expose herself before such people. She had distinctly warmed towards Mr Bingley by the time her mother and sisters departed. His good humour in dealing with her family was only a further testimony to his character.

She related it all in full that morning. Jane smiled wearily. ‘Mr Bingley is all kindness,’ she said. Elizabeth briefly clasped her hand. ‘I am sorry you cannot care for him. He is such a good man; but I will say nothing more about it. You cannot help your feelings.’

A trace of mischief curled Jane’s lip, and she said, ‘Speaking of good men, I have not heard you say anything about Mr Darcy. Has he disappeared? I cannot think anything less would take him out of your thoughts this long.’

‘Jane!’

‘Lizzy!’ Jane laughed. ‘You have been very circumspect in company, but you have spoken so much of him in our conversations, I really feel I know him almost as well as you do.’

Elizabeth frantically thought backwards. She could not clearly remember. She usually talked to Jane about whatever was on her mind; and certainly Darcy had been on her mind lately. Yet - had she been that absorbed in him? ‘I . . . we are good friends,’ she said.

Jane slanted her a sideways look. ‘Oh, yes. Very good friends.’

‘Jane, what has happened to you?’ Elizabeth shook her head. ‘You are becoming as much a tease as I.’

‘My own love affairs are so uninspiring,’ said Jane. ‘I am enjoying yours.’

‘I am not having a love affair!’ Elizabeth lowered her eyes. ‘Jane, I cannot . . . I will not deny that I am . . . that I like him, I esteem him . . .’

‘Like him? Esteem him?’ Jane stared. ‘I have never heard such tepid words from you in my life!’

Elizabeth flushed. ‘Jane, I am not the romantic you are, you know that. Nothing is worse than a marriage without affection, it is true; but I do not ask anything more. With respect and fondness, and a comfortable income, the rest will come with time.’

‘You sound like Charlotte, Lizzy.’

Elizabeth shook her head. ‘I do not think a comfortable income alone is enough to make one happy, but - you have seen how some of the people near the Gardiners live. Can you imagine being happy in such a life?’

‘There is poverty, and then there is poverty,’ Jane said primly. ‘Of course, one must have a . . . a competence, enough to live on.’

‘That is all I mean, although my idea of what is “enough to live on” may be a little different from yours. I am a gentleman’s daughter and I mean to be a gentleman’s wife.’

‘Mr Darcy is a gentleman.’

‘Oh yes - a gentleman who has three uncles in the House of Lords. As if he would marry me!’
‘Why shouldn’t he?’ Jane demanded perversely, sitting up.

‘I should not tire you, I will go downstairs - ’

‘I am not tired. Answer me, please.’

Elizabeth turned away. ‘Papa has been talking to me,’ she said in a low voice. ‘About our different spheres, about what is expected of Mr Darcy, that a man in his position owes it to his estate and himself to marry well, that he can have no intentions towards me. He is always warning me to guard my heart, because if I fall in love with him, I can have no happiness.’

Jane took her hand in her hot one, and said gently, ‘If, Lizzy?’ She shook her head. ‘I do not know what our father is about. He does not like Mr Darcy but it is not his way to act so underhandedly. But Lizzy, others may not have seen - Mr Darcy may not have - but I have. You know, do you not, that is not a matter of if any more?’

Elizabeth raised her eyes and met her sister’s. ‘Jane, you must be mistaken. I cannot be in love with him.’

‘I know you, Lizzy.’

‘I . . .’ Elizabeth shook her head. She had not had a name for the odd wistful emptiness she had felt the last two days, nor how it seemed something small, but vital, had gone wrong, and it would only be right when he returned - oh, she knew her partiality, she knew that she was attracted to his person and his mind (although not his manners), but that was not the same - that was infatuation, that was - her thoughts rattled around in her head, until she sat up straight and took a deep breath. ‘Jane, please,’ she whispered. ‘You must try and get better quickly. I must get out of this house.’

‘Lizzy?’

Elizabeth stood, her hand shaking. ‘Go back to sleep, dearest. You need your rest. - And please, do not talk of Mr Darcy any more. I do not want to hear of him.’ Yet even as she left, she knew the last for false. She longed to pour out her feelings on her sister’s ample shoulder - but that was impossible. Jane had enough concerns, and perhaps, if she did not acknowledge them, this erstwhile attachment would disappear. Had not she always read that to survive, love must be nourished? She would starve hers into oblivion.

#

‘She threatened to elope with Lord Burke?’ Darcy repeated. ‘I - please start at the beginning. Tell me everything.’

Conflicted was not a very apt description of Lady Anne Darcy’s customary state of mind, but it was most assuredly how she felt at the moment. Torn between the niece she loved as a daughter and the brother she loved as a . . . well, a brother, she had deliberated and considered and thought and rethought, and finally decided to persuade her brother to send for her son. It was easily accomplished and she had rarely been so happy to set eyes on her child as this morning.

‘We all knew Eleanor was attached to somebody, but we never guessed at this. Apparently they have been secretly engaged for nearly a year, if you can imagine it.’

‘I can,’ said Darcy. Lady Anne’s blue eyes narrowed slightly.

‘You knew?’

He considered this. ‘Well, that is rather too strong a word. I did not know his name. I knew that he
was respectable, honourable, someone the family would not approve of but not too low - oh, and tall, but not as tall as I am, black-haired, and green-eyed. There were any number of little details about his appearance and how she felt about them. Eleanor is nothing if not thorough.’

Lady Anne shot him a disapproving glance. ‘It is not the time to be flippant, Fitzwilliam.’

He sobered. ‘I know. It does seem very strange. Did something provoke her to this?’

‘Someone - I think a maid - discovered her most recent letter. It was dated over a year ago, but that did not mollify your uncle.’

‘Didn’t she go with Milton last month to Ireland?’

Lady Anne nodded. ‘I suppose she met Burke there and . . . well, apparently it made her careless. Or she was tired of waiting and she meant to be discovered.’

Knowing his cousin, that was just as likely. Darcy sighed. ‘I suppose my uncle demanded that she break the engagement?’

‘It was very foolish of him,’ said Lady Anne. ‘I do not like the idea of her marrying him any more than Edward does, but he went about trying to persuade her in the worst possible fashion.’

Darcy tilted his head. ‘Do you really think any one could persuade her, once she had her mind set on this?’

‘You could, she listens to you. So does Edward.’

‘No more than she does you.’ Darcy caught his mother’s faint flush and lowered eyes. ‘Have you already tried?’

‘No,’ she said, with more asperity, ‘it has been the most I can do to keep Eleanor from running off this moment, and Edward from disinheriting her. I . . . I did not know what to do.’ The words were spoken as if she could scarcely believe them herself. Darcy repressed a smile and wondered at his own peculiar mood.

Darcy hesitated. ‘Madam, I do not quite understand what is so terrible about their attachment. He is not of her rank, to be sure, but he is of our sphere.’

‘Darling, he’s Irish.’

‘So are you.’

Lady Anne stiffened. ‘I most certainly am not. My father and mother were both English, and so am I. So is your cousin.’

‘The Fitzwilliams are an Irish family, Mother,’ he persisted. ‘My grandfather was the first to be made an English peer. It is not so far off.’

She stared at him. ‘What have you been reading, Fitzwilliam’ You have never spoken like this.’

Darcy shifted uncomfortably. ‘Mother, I simply think that Ella is . . . she is seven and twenty. She never cared anything for anyone before Lord Burke, and I do not think she will again. He is rich enough - ’

‘ - Four thousand a-year, if that - ’

‘Very well, he is comfortable enough to support her, he is a Lord, his family may not be quite of
our place in society, but it is respectable. If there is enough affection between them to sustain an engagement for this time, with scarcely any contact between them, it should be sufficient for her happiness.’

‘I cannot agree with you - you are young, and idealistic,’ Lady Anne said firmly. ‘She could do better.’

‘I am not arguing that. But Lord Burke’s situation is . . . adequate. Some disappointment is to be expected, but I do not understand my uncle’s reaction. She does not deserve to lose her fortune over this, and he has no right to take it from her.’

‘That is so. Edward is . . .’ She frowned vexedly. ‘If you repeat this to your uncle I shall deny it, but he has been a selfish, autocratic fool. I do not approve any more than he does - although I certainly do not think she would be any better off with the Duke of Albany -’

‘What?’

‘Oh, he has proposed too. Did not I tell you?’

‘No, ma’am,’ Darcy said through clenched teeth, ‘no, you did not. He cannot be serious.’

‘Your uncle? Well, I suppose he can think of no bliss superior to addressing his daughter as your Grace. Ridiculous - the Duke is a man of vicious conduct and I have no desire to see him in the family. Neither do I approve of Lord Burke. If only one could know if he would make her happy, if their affection will last beyond the novelty of secrecy and the first flush of passion.’

‘One can.’

‘I beg your pardon’ She stared at her son. ‘What do you mean?’

_I love you dearly, but sometimes I think I am the only person in this family with any sense._ ‘Allow them a long engagement, known in the family but no further. They will be able to correspond openly. Whatever excitement that comes from secrecy will be gone. If it lasts another year, they may marry and presumably will be happy together. If not, the world shall be none the wiser.’

Lady Anne frowned, considering. ‘Your uncle is set against it.’

‘He could be persuaded. I am convinced that he loves her more than he loves rank.’

She smiled. ‘He does, I am certain of it. But it would take tact, and subtlety, dear.’

‘Then you manage him, you are better at it than I. I will talk to Ella, she requires nothing of the sort.’

#

Mother and son breathed a collective sigh of relief as they returned to Darcy House late that evening.

‘I love my family dearly,’ Lady Anne announced, ‘but they are very trying. Poor Ella, a year seems a very long time.’

Darcy politely hid a yawn. ‘She will manage, she did not really wish to elope.’

His mother set down her glass of wine. ‘Now, dearest, you must tell me what has so preoccupied you in Hertfordshire.’
Darcy was exhausted and longed to say so. Good breeding prevailed, however, and he instead echoed, ‘Preoccupied?’

‘Your letters have been very short, for you.’

He laughed, knowing that weariness and wine had wreaked havoc on his restraint. ‘Would you believe me if I said that I have been bewitched by a penniless girl of no consequence in the world?’

Lady Anne looked at him quizzically. ‘Yes, if only because you have yet to tell a convincing lie.’

‘We are only friends - she is the lady who helped Georgiana.’ Her face darkened at the memory. ‘I thought her only tolerable at first, Mama, not handsome enough to tempt me; but I thought to be kind in payment of our debt.’

‘Our debt will never be repaid,’ Lady Anne said sharply. ‘Georgiana could have been ruined forever.’

‘I would never have let her go.’

There was a brief moment of silence, in which both considered all that this might have entailed. Then she said, ‘Tell me more about your young lady.’

‘She is not mine, but she is intelligent, sensible, lively, witty, and very pretty.’

‘I thought you said she was only tolerable.’

‘She grows more appealing, as you spend more time with her. She has the most expressive dark eyes - If only she were someone other than a Miss Bennet of Longbourn.’

‘A Miss Who?’ Lady Anne sat upright, her cheeks pale of all colour. Darcy stared.

‘Miss Bennet. You do not know her, I am sure.’

She calmed at this. ‘No, I do not.’

‘They are nobody of consequence. Country gentry, not even very old. The mother is the most vapid, vulgar woman I have ever met, and an attorney’s daughter to boot. Miss Elizabeth’s uncle, Mr Gardiner is an excellent man, but in trade near Cheapside - ’ Lady Anne blanched - ‘and Mrs Gardiner is from Lambton, Dr Evans’ niece. Another uncle inherited the family trade and is the town’s lawyer. Two of her younger sisters are appalling flirts - they cannot be a day over seventeen - while the middle daughter is a plain, prosing prude, with neither talent nor taste.’

‘How delightful. The lady herself must have considerable charms.’

‘She does.’ He frowned. ‘There are two others, though, that are . . . well, her father is . . . he is nothing to the rest of them, but his behaviour is also reprehensible. He mocks his wife in public. Even if he is unhappy in his marriage, it is far too common a mistake. I think he must have some other cause of bitterness. Thankfully, Miss Elizabeth’s elder sister is a paragon. She is not very accomplished, but beautiful and sweet-natured and perfectly proper.’

‘You sound as if you are half in love with her,’ Lady Anne observed.

‘Oh, no. Bingley is.’

‘Again?’
He sighed. ‘I shall have to take him in hand, I daresay. She is not a fortune-hunter, but might feel bound to accept such an offer. No, Miss Bennet is too placid for me, ma’am. I am so grave and dull myself that I prefer lively people.’

‘And Miss Elizabeth is lively?’

‘Oh, yes. If only . . .’ He sighed unhappily. ‘I would have married her by now, if her birth were only a little superior to what it is. She is the most enchanting lady I have ever known, and she would be a wonderful sister to Georgiana. I think I must leave.’

Lady Anne straightened. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘My feelings are beginning to overcome my reason. I do not think I can safely stay there much longer. Her low connections, her family’s utter want of propriety, her tiny fortune - I love her enough that sometimes they seem scarcely to matter. I have been too unguarded in my partiality. If I have no intentions, it is very wrong to encourage her, but I . . .’ He took a deep breath. ‘It is not safe. I shall convince Bingley to return here and . . . stay with Georgiana. I have not been with her enough.’

Lady Anne, a strange smile playing across her mouth, stood. ‘It is very late, my love, I am going to bed.’

He rose without thinking. ‘Of course. Good night, madam.’

‘And, Fitzwilliam?’

‘Yes?’

‘When you propose, do not mention the disadvantages attending her, however sorely you may be tempted.’

Elizabeth focused on her book. Darcy had arrived that morning, and spoken even less than his wont. He often stared at her, but it seemed as much absent-minded as anything else - they had been alone in the library for nearly an hour now, and exchanged perhaps two sentences. She devoted herself to turning the pages of her book at regular intervals, and not looking at him.

How could she ever have mistaken this for friendship? Even something that might pass? Oh, when he was not in the room, he occupied her thoughts, but not to this extent. She was herself, she could think of things beyond him. Now, it did not matter that he had been so quiet and indifferent - that she accepted her father’s greater understanding of the world, knew he would - what would he do? It would certainly not involve her. Elizabeth blinked rapidly, and finished the chapter. It blurred before her eyes.

She glanced at Darcy. There was a quality of complete stillness to him, an impenetrableness to ordinary human weakness - no, that was too much, he was as subject to simple likes and dislikes as Lydia or Kitty - rather, it was a consummate poise she envied. Oh, she was better in society than he, she knew it, she was more comfortable, easier, happier - but just as she had occasionally wished for Jane’s tranquillity, she wistfully thought that she would not mind a dose of Darcy’s impenetrable composure.

Elizabeth jumped as he snapped his book shut, his cheeks somewhat flushed, and rose. ‘Miss Bennet,’ he said, sounding almost breathless.

Well, perhaps not entirely impenetrable. Elizabeth lifted her eyes. ‘Mr Darcy?’
He let out a breath, then said, quite quickly, ‘Miss Bennet, it will not do.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.’
Elizabeth’s head whirled as she stared at him. She noticed everything about that moment - an erstwhile curl fallen onto her shoulder, a smudge of dust on her knee, the sunlight pouring through the window, Darcy’s dark sober clothes, the high colour on his cheek and the animation with which he spoke - except his words. She was so astonished, so overwhelmed, that for a long moment she heard nothing, simply stared at his lips moving.

It was only when he paused, as if reconsidering something, that she managed to regain her senses, and really began to hear him. ‘These things, however, are of no consequence,’ he said. She blinked. ‘They are nothing to my affection for you. I . . . I have been sadly inconsistent, I fear, in my manner towards you. I meant to guard against expressing my partiality, I am very careful about not raising expectations, usually, but . . . as I became more acquainted with you, I realised my feelings came not only from your kindness to my poor sister, although they certainly began with that, but from your wit, your intelligence, your liveliness, your beauty, your compassionate nature, the warmth with which you treat everyone, not only myself, and your confident, well-bred ways. And . . . there are other things, which I cannot put into words . . . but suffice it to say, I love you, and I hope my affections will be rewarded with your acceptance of my hand in marriage.’

He stood very still and upright, the sunlight illuminating him. Elizabeth became aware of hot scalding tears running down her cheeks. She had never dreamt, not even when she had stopped insisting on her indifference to him, that this moment might come. She had been determined to be happy even with the misery of unrequited love. And now! - not only was it not unrequited, but he had stepped over that gulf her father declared impassable, he did not care, he loved and admired and respected her, everything that she had ever hoped for and more than she had ever expected.

‘Miss Bennet?’ Darcy took one step forward, out of the shaft of light, and he became himself once more. With the first hint of uncertainty that she had seen thus far, he said, ‘Georgiana says that sometimes women cry because they are happy. I hope this is one of those occasions?’

Elizabeth laughed, and wiped her tears away. ‘Yes, it is. I - I wish I had thought of something clever and profound to say on such an occasion, but I confess, I had not.’ She lifted her eyes and could not keep herself from smiling unrestrainedly and holding out her hands to him. Darcy wasted no time in eliminating the proper space between them and taking them both in his own and then kissing them passionately. Every sense seemed sharpened, so that she could feel the slightest shift in the pressure of his smooth fingers enveloping hers, the friction of his lips, which were a little dry, she could see his pupils dilating a little, that his dark eyes were actually blue shot through with gold, his lashes dropping against his flushed cheek as he pressed his lips against her palm -

She stood on tiptoe and whispered into his ear, ‘If you are still wondering, sir, I gladly accept your proposal.’

She could feel his laughter against her chest, they were so close together. Darcy seemed to recall himself then, and though not relinquishing her hand, took several steps backward. ‘Other men have claimed to be the happiest in the world, but none with such justice,’ he said, kissing her wrist. ‘No one but you makes me laugh.’

That, somehow, was better than the most eloquent and romantic proposal could have been.

#

‘Glory to God, glory to God in the highest, and peace on Earth. Glory to God, glory to God, glory to God in the highest . . . good will, good will, good will . . . la la la . . . towards men.’ Elizabeth
hummed past the difficult spots and sang out, ‘Glory to God!’

‘Lizzy?’ Jane peered around the stand of trees. ‘Are you feeling well?’

‘I feel wonderful,’ she said happily. It had been over a week since they had returned from Netherfield, much to her father’s relief. She and Darcy had agreed that since, to all appearances, their acquaintance was so short, it would be better to keep their attachment quiet for a few more weeks. She didn’t mind; in fact her sense of humour was agreeably engaged by the situation. Her disposition was a naturally cheerful one, but never had her spirits been so elated. Even Lydia had noticed.

‘I had . . . apprehended that much,’ said Jane, walking towards her. Elizabeth felt a twinge of guilt as she saw Jane’s slightly strained expression. Bingley had inquired after her only the day after their return, and frequently since then - which was perfectly proper and to be expected. Nevertheless Mrs Bennet’s effusions had nearly made Jane cross, which said a great deal about how upset she was. ‘Lizzy, you are horrible at keeping secrets, you always have been. What has happened to you?’

She could not keep a smile off her face. ‘Oh, Jane. I should have known you would guess. I am the happiest creature in the world.’

Jane was not the cleverest young lady, but she had plenty of good sense. ‘Mr Darcy? Has he asked to court you?’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘No, dearest.’ She wrapped her arms around herself, and hummed again. ‘And his name shall be called wonderful . . . oh mighty God, the everlasting power, the Prince of Peace . . . unto us, a son is given . . .’

Abruptly, the words brought the idea of a rather different child’s birth into her mind. At this time next year, perhaps -

‘If it is not Mr Darcy, then . . . it cannot be anyone else. You love him.’ Jane’s brow furrowed.

‘Yes, I do,’ Elizabeth said easily, pulling a leaf off the nearest tree and twirling it in her hands.

‘Elizabeth!’ Jane cried. ‘Will you please explain yourself?’

‘Very well.’ Elizabeth could hardly keep herself from spinning around. She silently blessed Lydia for the impertinence which had led to the date of Bingley’s ball being set. ‘Mr Darcy did not ask if he could court me, he asked if he could marry me.’

‘What?’ Jane stared. ‘You . . . you are engaged? To be married?’ Then a smile lit up her face. ‘You are going to marry Mr Darcy. Oh, Lizzy, I am so happy for you.’ She embraced her. ‘You will be very happy, I am sure of it.’

‘So am I. We are just going to wait a few weeks, until our acquaintance is longer, then he shall ask Papa for his consent.’

‘Is it a secret?’

Elizabeth shrugged. ‘Not really. He meant to write Miss Darcy and Lady Anne right away, and he always does what he means to do. And I just told you. But Papa has been so strange about him - I am very surprised he has been so cold. Not that he is usually gregarious, but it seemed they would get on well, and Fitzwilliam has been friendly enough . . .’

‘Fitzwilliam?’ Jane held one hand to her head. ‘Lady Anne?’
Elizabeth coloured. ‘That is his name - it was his mother’s name - his mother is Lady Anne.’ She laughed nervously. ‘I know hardly anything about her, except that she encouraged him a little in pursuing me, and he loves her dearly. I mean to, if I can. It’s a little frightening. Papa exaggerates, but in some ways I really will be moving into a different world. Yet I am so happy. He loved me all along, can you believe it?’

‘Of course I can believe it! There is nobody more deserving of happiness than you, Lizzy.’ She hugged her again. ‘It is a pity you cannot tell Mr Collins.’

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. ‘That odious creature.’

‘Oh, speaking of him, that is why I came out. We are walking to Meryton - we are Lydia, Kitty, Mr Collins, and I - and, of course, you must come along.’

Elizabeth sighed. ‘There is no need for our sisters to go to Meryton every day.’

‘Mr Bingley means to call on me to-day, and Mr Darcy always comes with him. We might happen across them,’ Jane said slyly.

‘You are very wicked, Jane . . . even Mr Collins, I suppose, is worth enduring for that.’

By the time they got to the town, however, she was thinking the pleasure dearly-bought. Elizabeth was far too much in the clouds to pay much attention to what transpired, until-

‘ - Wickham.’

She started, almost cried What? Then she turned her head. She had never, of course, seen him, and she could not deny the curiosity she felt. Undoubtedly encouraging his vanity, she gazed at him for several moments.

He was not tall, but he was dark and handsome: the only man she had seen as handsome as Darcy. He had gentle, agreeable manners, a sweetness of demeanour and generally delightful address. Even Mary blushed at his attentions. Elizabeth could understand how he had managed to sway Georgiana, but the very fact he had done so would have rendered her impervious to his charms, even had she never laid eyes on her brother.

Kitty flirted shamelessly, Jane, of course, knew no better and seemed to like him well enough, Mary was deeply touched by the first display of interest she had ever received from a young man, and Elizabeth was in transports of anxiety. She quite forgot the temptation which had brought her here, until it came to pass.

Darcy was just determining to not look at Elizabeth when he set eyes on Wickham; she saw it happen, and felt his pain and fury almost as acutely as he could do himself. She was vindictively pleased to see Wickham turn white with fear; an angry flush rose to Darcy’s cheeks, and he was barely capable of returning Wickham’s greeting.

Then he met Elizabeth’s eyes. She hardly knew how to look; she felt the danger of simply being in the other man’s presence, as any thinking person might feel before a dangerous, uncaged animal, and she wanted the reassurance of his company and protection, but at least as ardently she wanted to spare him the distress of this meeting. Elizabeth glanced at Lydia, who was uncharacteristically silent; she eyed Wickham as if he were caged, some curiosity displayed for the entertainment of the masses.

Darcy got off his horse, to Elizabeth’s chagrin, relief, and astonishment, almost immediately followed by Bingley. Jane addressed the former warmly.
‘It is a pleasure, sir - and Mr Bingley,’ she added. He was not at all distressed and beamed at her.

‘Thank you, Miss Bennet,’ Darcy said. ‘Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary, Miss Catherine, Miss Lydia.’

‘Mr Darcy, Captain Denny was just introducing us to his friend,’ Lydia said, with an innocent look. ‘Wouldn’t you like to meet him?’

Two pairs of dark eyes met; beneath the veneers of composure, Wickham looked frightened, and Darcy livid. Elizabeth went to his side as soon as she could with any discretion. Lydia smiled, impressed with her own cleverness.

‘I did not trust him, not for a moment,’ she whispered. He smiled faintly.

‘I did not doubt you.’

Bingley, overhearing the murmured conversation, blinked, then turned to Wickham with his most engaging smile and began polite enquiries. Jane gave him a grateful look. As soon as it could be managed, they left the officers to their own devices and walked back to Longbourn together, Bingley with Jane and Elizabeth with Darcy, as was their established habit by now. Jane’s joy at seeing Elizabeth’s happiness made her less reserved with her own admirer than she had yet been, while Lydia was pleased to know more than Kitty did for once.

‘I am glad you stopped,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I hardly knew what to do.’

‘I could not allow your sisters to fall prey to such a man,’ he replied, a bitterness in his voice that she had never heard before, and which struck her as very unlike him.

‘There is a very real danger,’ Elizabeth told him, ‘we have each been left to follow whatever influences we would, encouraged to do nothing but catch husbands.’

His brow furrowed as he looked from Mary, to Kitty, to Lydia, to Jane.

‘I do not know what will happen when Jane and I are not here to watch them. My mother - well, she is no example, and my father does as little as any father could do.’

‘Do you think,’ he asked carefully, ‘that Miss Bennet is likely to leave soon?’

‘No,’ she said flatly, ‘at least - I cannot break a confidence, but with all my heart I hope she does not. But if she were forced into a decision, I do not know what her final resolution would be.’

‘Bingley possesses a great natural modesty,’ observed Darcy, ‘with a greater dependence on my judgment than his own. I confess, I have often seen him in love before. I would not wish to see your sister injured by his want of resolution.’

‘Yours is an unusual friendship,’ she said with a smile; ‘you have all the resolve and he all the appearance of it.’

He glanced down, startled. ‘The appearance of it?’

‘Oh yes. He prides himself on the alacrity with which he makes decisions and acts on them; you must have noticed.’

‘I would not call that resolve.’

She laughed. ‘Not all men have your steadiness. My father has been warning me against you for weeks now, since the night of the assembly.’
‘I am sorry he has such a poor opinion of me.’

‘I do not think he has any opinion you, he scarcely knows you; but he has very firm opinions about those in your sphere of life. I understand that there was an imprudent attachment many years ago, before he married my mother, and the lady’s friends separated them.’

‘A very common story, I fear; my own mother could not marry where she wished and has been warning me against the dangers of “imprudent attachments” for years.’

‘I am surprised she encouraged you in your courtship of me, then,’ Elizabeth said, in as lively a tone as she could muster.

‘Well - she has thought highly of you since Georgiana told her about your acquaintance at Ramsgate. My mother has very decided opinions, but she wishes to see me happy in marriage.’

‘And if my father were not, despite everything, a gentleman?’

Darcy looked away. ‘Then her opinion would be very different.’

_As would mine_, he thought.
Chapter 7

Mr Bennet poured the young man in front of him another drink.

‘Is that so?’ he said.

‘Yes . . . should have been mine,’ Wickham added. ‘All of it. Pemberley. He loved my mother, you know.’

Mr Bennet blinked. ‘How . . . interesting.’

It was impossible not to detect the growing attachment between Darcy and Elizabeth. Mr Bennet had done all that he could to discourage it; but in this as in so much else, Elizabeth had gone her own way. Wickham’s arrival was a positive godsend. Even without the benefit of the considerable amount of alcohol he had consumed by now, he was more than eager to talk about his childhood companion. In fact, he seemed to think of nothing else.

Mr Bennet found Wickham’s tales frequently contradictory and certainly preposterous, but that did not exclude the possibility that his intimacy with that family might provide something useful.

‘Then Fitz . . . that’s Darcy . . . hated being called that, he always did . . . then he should have taken care of her. Mr Darcy promised . . . he promised we’d be taken care of. He loved her, and I’m her only son . . . it should have gone to me.’

Mr Bennet smiled to himself. ‘Did you inform young Mr Darcy of your opinion on the subject?’

‘Bah!’ Wickham gulped down the entire glass and wiped his mouth. ‘I told him, yes, I told him. Selfish . . . self-righteous prig, he said . . . do you know what he did?’

‘I cannot imagine,’ Mr Bennet murmured, deeply amused.

‘He agreed with me. Said his father had loved my mother. Course he did. We both knew it. And then he said, he said his father may have loved my mother, but he’d married his. Bastard.’

Mr Bennet forebore to remind the sot that any illegitimacy was likely to be his. ‘What did Mrs Darcy think of this?’

Wickham snorted. ‘She’d have given you a look to freeze you dead if you’d ever called her that. She never let anyone forget for a moment that she was the Lady Anne, thank you very much. But she, she and her lot, they always doted on her precious Fitzwilliam.’ He held his glass out. Mr Bennet’s hand shook as he obligingly filled it again.

He sat up very straight, watching the younger man, every trace of warmth leaving his body. ‘Fitzwilliam?’ he said carefully.

‘Darcy’s name. Bloody ridiculous one too, but oh, she was so proud of being a Fitzwilliam and earl’s daughter. Him too.’

Mr Bennet’s thoughts chased each other round and round. Of course there were more than enough Fitzwilliams in the world . . . and Anne was a common enough name. But Mr Fitzwilliam had inherited the earldom. And there were not more than enough earls surnamed Fitzwilliam with daughters named Anne.

Of course she had become the Lady Anne. Of course she had gone and married the most
respectable man who would have her. A Darcy of Pemberley must have suited their ambitions admirably.

Mr Bennet took out another glass.

‘Only need one at a time,’ mumbled Wickham.

‘I think I’ll join you,’ said Mr Bennet, and gladly fell into the oblivion glass after glass of wine finally afforded him.

#

Mr Bennet’s head was pounding. He cherished distinctly unkind thoughts towards Wickham, never mind that he’d intoxicated him on purpose.

It had bad enough to think of his Lizzy taken in by a random aristocrat, repeating his old error. All the warnings in the world could not have stopped her. What she saw in him . . . who knew? He was nothing like the sort of young men she usually liked. He was reserved, cold, haughty. Not what Mr Bennet would wish for Lizzy at all. But clever, as the others had never been. Clever enough, and proud enough, that he had no fear of intelligence in a woman. If he had been a comfortable squire, Mr Bennet would have been happy for her.

_Her_ son. Mr Bennet shut his eyes tightly and rocked back. He had missed it. How could he have missed it? He still remembered everything - her hair, the glossy dark strands catching in his fingers, the look - that hauteur, which had so amused him at the time, for in her it had been coupled with a carefully hidden sweetness of temper - the strong patrician features; they were all the mother’s as much as the son’s. But even the young girl in his memory had been set in her ways, her fiery temper crystallizing into an icily obstinate one. She was a Fitzwilliam, the family was always first. Before herself, before him.

And now her child was trifling with the affections of his. The long buried, long forgotten, bitterness surged up in him again.

And somebody knocked on the door.

‘What is it?’ Mr Bennet called crossly. There was a moment of hesitation.

‘It is Mr Darcy, sir.’

_Damn._ He set down his glass. ‘Come in,’ he said.

#

‘He said what?’ Elizabeth stared at Darcy.

‘He said, and I quote, “You are the last man in the world I could ever be prevailed upon to accept as a son,” ’ he replied, with very little more than the _appearance_ of his usual sedateness.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said blankly. ‘He has been constantly warning me against you, but - but from before he had ever laid eyes on you, when he knew nothing of you except your name! Why he should take such a dislike, when he has put himself to such little effort to get acquainted?’

‘He thinks you are infatuated with either me or my “circumstances,”’ or possibly both,’ Darcy added. ‘I told him you had not yet returned home from your walk - I wanted to warn you before you had to face . . . that.’
‘Let us walk a little more,’ Elizabeth said, holding tightly to Darcy’s arm. How could he think so, of her? Had their camaraderie all these years been nothing more - she an entertaining, sometimes useful, companion to a man worn down by the lack of intelligent conversation? Had he no respect for her, his own child?

In that moment, she felt more sympathy towards her mother’s complaints than at any other.

She shut her eyes and gathered her composure. She scarcely dared look at Darcy. He was silent at her side, but she knew how offended he must be - he, who could have almost anyone he chose, and who had chosen her. He must be thinking of a way to extricate himself from this disastrous union. Her mother and sisters were nothing to it, nothing at all.

She went on tormenting herself for several minutes before Darcy finally spoke.

‘When is your birthday?’

Elizabeth started. ‘I beg your pardon?’

He almost visibly withdrew. ‘Forgive me, I did not mean - I would not wish you to do anything you did not like - ’

Her mind felt slow and muddled. ‘I do not - my birthday?’

‘You will be of age then, will you not?’

‘Oh,’ The immense relief she felt told her instantly of Darcy’s importance in her life - that she would rather anything, even a quiet marriage, against her father’s wishes, with none of her family, than an estrangement from him. They had had such a short amount of time together, and yet - she sighed. ‘I will not be one and twenty until the seventh of May.’

‘That is problematic,’ he said. ‘You must speak with your father, of course, but I confess I doubt anyone will sway him.’

‘I - I think you are right,’ she said, flushing. ‘Then what is to be done?’

‘I see three options,’ Darcy replied briskly. ‘There is compliance with his demand, which I think can be dismissed out of hand.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, and he smiled for the first time that day. She just managed one in return, feeling foolish, insipid, one of the milksop heroines that she had always detested, but above all bitterly ashamed.

‘There is - Scotland’ - he looked deeply uncomfortable here - ‘or there is waiting until you are of age and then marrying without his consent.’

Elizabeth hesitated. ‘I - I shall talk to my father first. I must make myself clear to him, I have not spoken of - of this at all, to anyone but Jane.’

‘Miss Bennet knows?’ His expression altered, to one that was part curiosity and part apprehension.

‘Oh yes. She thinks very highly of you.’

‘I am glad to hear it.’ He frowned, looked down, clearly wanted to speak but did not dare.

‘What is it?’
‘It is . . . I would not ask you to betray a confidence. But I am . . . concerned, now more than ever, about Bingley and your sister.’

‘Concerned?’ She glanced up.

‘He . . . Bingley is not - he is a fine man,’ he said hurriedly, ‘but he is not - steady. His present feelings for your sister may last, or they may not. Given what I know of his character, the latter seems the more likely. Beyond that, I have watched Miss Bennet. Her looks and manners are open, cheerful, engaging, but without any symptom of peculiar regard.’ He hesitated. ‘You must have a superior knowledge of your sister, Elizabeth. You have already said - ’

Elizabeth eagerly seized on the opportunity. ‘Yes, I - oh, I cannot tell you how glad I am to hear such an account of Mr Bingley’s feelings. I have talked to Jane, and she says I may - I may confide in you, that she would even be grateful. She is fond of him, she likes him, but she is - we do not know if she will ever do more than like him. She - I can see that she feels a partiality for him, beyond what I have ever witnessed in her - but nothing more, and she is such a romantic that she cannot be easy with so little.’

‘She seems a most amiable young woman, but my impression is that her heart is not easily touched.’

‘That is quite true. She is not very like Bingley at all - not in that way,’ Elizabeth told him. ‘She is so serene and sedate, it gives quite the wrong impression of her heart, I think. Her feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them; they are steady and deep, but slow to arise and slow to change.’ Elizabeth stopped, a little breathless. ‘She has a calm temper but her feelings, though little displayed, are fervent. I have heard people say that nothing affects her, even that she is cold and proud beneath her amiable appearance, but it is not so.’

‘Then I have the deepest sympathy with her,’ Darcy said quietly. Elizabeth looked up at him, realising what she had said.

‘Oh, I -’

‘Elizabeth.’ Both turned at the harsh voice speaking from a nearby stand of trees. Her father, his face set, stood there. ‘I would have expected such behaviour of your sisters, but not you. You will return to Longbourn this instant.’

She was suddenly overwhelmed by fury, as much for Darcy’s sake as her own, and longed to resist his authority, to show that she would not be so easily constrained, she knew her own mind.

‘Bingley is leaving on business tomorrow,’ Darcy said, paying her father no mind.

‘Yes, you told me.’ Her brows knit together. ‘You still must go with him?’

‘I think so. I . . . I must advise him, away from . . . here, on - the matter we were just speaking of - I will not tell him what you said, of course, only give my own opinion. We will back in time for the ball.’

She nodded. ‘Of course.’

Mr Bennet, both astonished and outraged, walked towards them. Elizabeth lifted her chin, holding on to Darcy’s arm.

‘There is no need to alienate him further, and I must go; you might as well return home with him,’ Darcy said clearly, making no attempt to avoid being heard.
‘Your sense of propriety is truly a thing of wonder,’ Mr Bennet said dryly. ‘Come, Elizabeth.’

She hesitated only a moment. ‘Yes, sir.’ She turned to her betrothed and kissed him, her lips lingering only a moment before she whirled and walked towards her father.

Darcy, deciding that he had greatly underestimated the virtues of defiance, bowed courteously to Elizabeth and met Mr Bennet’s gaze with a triumphant look and a smile.

#

‘What have I done that is improper?’ Elizabeth demanded. ‘What has he done to so turn you again against him? You do not know him, and I am starting to think you do not know me.’

Mr Bennet’s expression briefly gentled. ‘I know you better than you know yourself, Lizzy; if you will not guard yourself from heartbreak, then - ’

‘Heartbreak! And so you refuse to allow me to marry the man I love? You have a very strange method of showing it, sir.’ Later, she would scarcely believe herself capable of such behaviour; at the moment, she was so alight with fury that she could scarcely think of anything else.

‘Love,’ Mr Bennet said dismissively. ‘This sort of romantic infatuation passes soon enough.’

‘I do not doubt that you know all about infatuation,’ Elizabeth told him, ‘I have seen the effects daily all my life. No man who felt anything deeper, who was capable of anything deeper, would expose his wife to the ridicule of her own children! And that tells me that you know nothing of what it is to properly love a woman. I would far prefer advice from my uncle, who cares for his wife and children and treats them all with the respect and affection they deserve.’

He looked stricken, and she felt pity and the beginnings of self-recrimination for a moment. ‘You have said quite enough, Lizzy. I had thought you more sensible than your sisters, but clearly I was mistaken. You are under my authority; I will not permit this engagement to persist. You may only leave the house in Jane’s company. There will be no correspondence with that man. If you dance once with him, you will only be allowed to stand up with your sisters until you have proved you can spend ten minutes in a sensible manner. Do you understand me?’

She flung her head back, her face overcome by a cold hauteur as she said, ‘Perfectly, sir.’

#

Mr Bennet was forced to lock himself in his study. The matter did not end with his talk with Elizabeth, nor then with Jane when he explained her duties to her sister. Elizabeth instantly went to her mother and told all, that Mr Darcy had made her an honourable proposal of marriage, which she had accepted (‘Oh, my precious Lizzy!’), but her father would not give his consent. From then on Mrs Bennet was never silent. All of Elizabeth’s sisters were horrified at the situation and had no reserve in expressing their outrage to Mr Bennet - except Lydia, who thought it the most romantic thing in the world and had no compunctions to prevent her from writing about the whole affair to Miss Darcy, whom she had not exchanged a word with since that day at Ramsgate. Only Mr Collins managed anything like civility, and his approval was nearly as bad as the combined disapproval of everyone else.

Of course they could not understand. Mr Bennet knew how the matter would develop. Mr Darcy could have no honourable intentions; he knew the type well enough. There would only be small liberties at first, but they would grow by degrees until he had taken her honour, and vanished. And nobody would be much surprised.
And his poor Lizzy - Mr Bennet’s chest ached at the mere thought.

He was glad to be alone, the curtains shut and the room dim, alone to nurse his torment. She would understand - someday.

Mr Bennet sighed, and as he finished his wine, walked to the window. He could not read without more light. He pushed the curtains aside, frowning at the grand carriage there.

He easily recognized the arms.

*Darcy.* Did the man never give up?

Mr Bennet, filled with righteous anger, got to his feet, and unlocked the door. Then he blinked. Molly stood there, appearing terrified (as did most of the servants these days). At her side was a tall woman, about his age, with black hair liberally streaked with silver and the sort of fine aristocratic features which would ensure her the description of ‘a handsome woman’ until the day she died. She also seemed vaguely familiar; he looked quizzically at the maid.

‘Lady Anne Darcy to see you, sir,’ Molly squeaked.
Chapter 8

Sluggishly, Mr Bennet dismissed the servant and managed to seat himself before he succumbed to the sort of nerves that would make his wife stare. ‘What an unexpected pleasure, your ladyship,’ he said.

‘Unexpected I daresay,’ she replied. She had changed a great deal; there was no trace of the girlish prettiness that had first captivated him, nor of the sweet delicacy he remembered with an incomprehensible mix of resentment and fondness. But the blazing blue eyes were the same.

Whatever superficial resemblance had once existed between his wife and one-time lover was gone, however. His own eyes hardened.

‘Whether it is truly a pleasure is yet to be determined.’

She flung her head back. ‘Indeed. May I enquire after your daughter Elizabeth?’

So — battle, then. ‘Elizabeth? Well, I had assumed that you did not come to seek forgiveness. It is always pleasant to be proved correct; this is a very promising beginning.’

‘Forgiveness?’ The fire in her eyes instantly froze. ‘The events of thirty-five years ago have nothing to do with my present actions. I am not so mean as to resent the past. I am here only out of concern for my son, and your daughter.’

‘Concern for my daughter? Why, thank you, your ladyship, for your gracious condescension in concerning yourself in my family’s affairs. It quite rivals your sister’s.’

‘Your daughter will be mine in a very short period of time,’ Lady Anne said. ‘Why should I not feel concern for her?’

Mr Bennet laughed. ‘Do you really expect me to believe that you and yours will permit your son to marry my daughter? She is no better off than I was.’

‘My son is his own master. He will marry whomever he chooses — and since he has inexplicably attached himself to a girl so far beneath him — ’

‘Beneath him? In what respect?’ Perversely, he said, ‘I am as much a gentleman as your son.’

‘Oh, I rather think not. And though you are a gentleman, in name, at least, who is your wife? Who are her brothers and sisters? You cannot imagine me ignorant of their condition, so decidedly beneath my — my son’s. Why should he take any pleasure in the prospect of a connection to them? Yet he has made your daughter an honourable offer of marriage, one that a man of half his consequence would not have lowered himself to.’

‘I suppose I should express a sense of obligation that your son is so willing to lower himself — that my daughter wishes, at least, to connect herself to a family so full of pride and conceit — ’

‘You are hardly one to speak of conceit, Mr Bennet. You, who have unjustly and ungenerously been the means of dividing two young people, of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of my most beloved child — for no other reason than your arrogant gratification of useless and blameable distrust! What do you know of my son?’

‘And what do you know of my daughter?’
Lady Anne lifted her chin. ‘I know that she enjoys long walks — Shakespeare’s comedies —
dancing — whims and inconsistencies. I know that she is clever, and kind, and particularly
devoted to Miss Bennet, and I know that she met my son over three months ago at Ramsgate, that
they renewed their acquaintance when they met here, and that she told none of this to you, her
own father.’ She could not resist adding, ‘It must be a great trial to have children with no
confidence in you.’

Coldly, he said, ‘I fail to see how any of these accusations are relevant to the subject at hand. I
have no intentions of allowing this farce of a courtship to continue. Strange though it may seem to
you, I would prefer that my daughter’s honour be left intact, that she not be involved in misery of
the acutest kind.’

‘Farce of a courtship? I suppose you would know,’ replied Lady Anne. ‘A respectable
gentleman’s wish to marry a girl of intelligence and integrity must be quite beyond your
understanding. I suppose I should have expected no better, after all that I know of you — of your
vanity, your conceit, your selfish disdain for the feelings of others. I had thought that your
affection for your daughter would tempt you to think beyond yourself — to allow them to try and
prove their affection, even if you will not countenance a regular engagement — but then, I have
been wrong before.’

‘I see,’ said Mr Bennet, ‘that your son has not confided in you all of his interactions with my
daughter, his intentions for her.’

Her blue eyes opened wide. ‘My son has some sense of decorum and discretion,’ she said coldly.
‘Why, were it not for your youngest daughter’s letter, I might only have known the bare bones of
their acquaintance, of your daughter’s virtues and your refusal of consent.’

Neither knew what might have been said next, though it might be reasonably assumed that the
conversation could only decline from there. Instead, Mrs Bennet whirled into the room with a
broad smile.

‘It is such a pleasure, your ladyship,’ she cried. ‘You are dear Mr Darcy’s mother, I understand?
What an honour. I am sure you understand that this little inconvenience can be smoothed over in
no time. Such a charming young man! So handsome! So tall! He is certainly a credit to you,
madam.’

Lady Anne smiled at this. ‘Thank you, Mrs Bennet.’

The other woman ploughed on, ‘I cannot understand how there could be the slightest objection to
his marrying our sweetest Lizzy. I am sure it is some great misunderstanding and they will be
married very soon.’

‘I was just telling your husband,’ said Lady Anne, ‘that if he has so little faith in their attachment,
perhaps they might be permitted to prove themselves with a long engagement.’

‘A long engagement?’ Mrs Bennet wilted, then brightened. ‘That would give us plenty of time in
which to plan the wedding. It will be the finest thing Meryton has ever seen!’

‘I am certain it shall.’

Mr Bennet, considering for the first time the damage to Elizabeth’s reputation if any of this came
out, and, given the two mothers, the certainty that it would, cleared his throat. ‘Not a day under a
twelvemonth,’ he said, comfortably assured that Darcy would never consent.

‘A twelvemonth!’
'I should think six months more than adequate,' Lady Anne intervened, ‘particularly since they may not be inclined to wait for very long beyond Miss Elizabeth’s birthday. It is the seventh of May, is it not?'

‘That is very sensible, your ladyship,’ said Mrs Bennet, much relieved.

‘Thank you, Mrs Bennet. I am only glad to see this dreadful affair settled so peaceably.’

Mrs Bennet nodded happily. ‘As are we all, I am sure. Would you care to stay for dinner? My other girls would be simply delighted to meet you, and I know that my daughter Lydia is great friends with Miss Darcy.’

Lady Anne, who knew perfectly well that Lydia and Georgiana’s acquaintance consisted of one very peculiar conversation and the former’s gossipy letter, smiled and said, ‘I would be honoured, Mrs Bennet.’

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‘Miss Elizabeth,’ said Lady Anne, ‘there seemed to be a pretty kind of wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company.’

‘Go, my dear,’ cried her mother, ‘and show her ladyship about the different walks. I think she will be pleased with the hermitage.’

Elizabeth, who had spent the last hour in an agony of curiosity and distraction, longing for intelligence of her betrothed, and certain that his mother would possess it, sprang up almost immediately. Thankfully, Lady Anne showed no interest whatsoever in the hermitage.

‘Miss Bennet,’ she began coldly, ‘you may not comprehend what has brought me hither, and I must beg your leave for the liberty I take.’ There was not the slightest trace of apology or uncertainty in her face. Elizabeth inclined her head, her fingers tightening slightly around the handle of her parasol.

‘You are quite right, madam,’ she said. ‘I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here.’

Lady Anne walked a short distance, then turned to face her once more. ‘I have heard a most remarkable report,’ she announced. ‘It seems that you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, are shortly to be united in marriage with my son.’

Elizabeth looked directly into the lady’s face. Her expression was set, her dark blue eyes icy; and while Elizabeth had originally been struck by the resemblance to Mr Darcy, at this moment she could scarcely see any of it. The young man who had so frequently smiled and bantered with her was nothing like the severe autocratic woman staring fiercely down at her.

‘Your son has made me an offer of marriage, which I have accepted,’ she said, with all the dignity at her command.

‘I see.’ Lady Anne gazed at something over Elizabeth’s left shoulder. ‘Tell me, Miss Bennet, how could you have caused my son to so take leave of his senses? What remarkable qualities do you possess that could have so ensnared him?’

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ cried Elizabeth, standing very erect, ‘but I do not believe Mr Darcy has taken leave of his senses. Nor am I prepared to sing my own praises, even to you. I am very sincerely attached to him, I assure you.’
The lady studied her face for a moment far shorter than it seemed. Then her harsh features softened a little. ‘I am delighted to hear it, Miss Bennet. I would hate to humble myself to your father.’

‘You have seen my father?’ Elizabeth’s eyes darted upwards. ‘What did he say? That is — I am sorry, I did not mean, but — ’

‘He has consented to a long engagement,’ Lady Anne replied.

‘He has?’ A radiant smile lit up her face. ‘Why, how — your ladyship, I scarcely know what to say. I do not know what you said, but it must have been — thank you. Thank you very much. Is Mr Dar — ’ Elizabeth swallowed the desperate question.

‘Fitzwilliam was not aware of my coming,’ Lady Anne said, not without sympathy. ‘I am sure he will be very angry when he discovers it.’

‘Angry?’

‘He was forming a plan to win your father’s consent. It was very complex.’

Elizabeth burst out laughing. ‘Forgive me — but that is so — yes, it would be, wouldn’t it?—I am sorry, he is well?’

‘As well as can be expected,’ his mother said, ‘and his health is excellent. It usually is. He has not been ill since he went to Eton.’

‘Oh, really? I did not know where he went to school — he, he never said.’

Only then did Elizabeth realise that despite everything, however well-acquainted she might be with the essentials of his character, there seemed to be a great deal he never said.

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