Summary

When Mr Bennet is struck down by a fatal illness, Jane and Elizabeth learn the truth of their relationship to the Fitzwilliams of Yorkshire - and each other.
April 1773

"Were they gypsies?" Richard demanded.

"No, they — "

"They must have been French, then," said Ella decidedly.

"No, I — "

"Were they madmen escaped from Bedlam?" Henry burst out. "Or —"

"Be quiet and let him talk," snapped Edward, at seventeen their undisputed leader. Fitzwilliam took a deep breath.

"It was just a gentleman and his wife. There wasn't anything special about them, and I was looking for Alfred anyway. I didn't pay much attention."

The other five waited.

"I only noticed them at all because the lady's voice was so loud. She said something about being nervous, I think, and how unfair tails are." He shrugged, perplexed. "I don't know. It didn't make any sense. I turned to look at her — I didn't look at him at all."

Richard leaned forward. "What did she look like? Was she as ugly as a witch?"

"I don't know, I didn't see her very well." Stung by the disappointment in his cousins' faces, he concentrated as hard as he could, and managed to dredge up a vague picture. "She was pretty — not as pretty as Mama," he added loyally, "but her eyes were big and brown. She was tallish, taller than Lady Milton, but not as tall as Aunt Catherine, and her cheeks were pink."

Edward looked at him intently. "Do you think you'd know her again?"

Fitzwilliam hesitated, biting his lip. "Maybe," he said. "If she looked the same."

"Perhaps you'll see her soon," Richard put in hopefully.

"That's not very likely," said James, "is it?"

Fitzwilliam Darcy was in a spectacularly poor mood before he so much as set foot in the assembly hall. His toleration for Miss Bingley's antics was growing thin, Mrs Hurst's shrill laughter grated on his ears, Hurst was already intoxicated, and even Bingley's unconquerable good cheer wore on his nerves. Were it not for Bingley, he would never have come to this Godforsaken place anyway, certainly would not have left Georgiana.

Georgiana. Meaningless social niceties were trying enough in the best of times, but since the summer, he had found them positively maddening. He sighed. No doubt Fitzwilliam was right, he could hardly drag her off to a strange and likely vulgar new neighbourhood, but that didn't keep him from imagining everything that could go wrong in his absence, or detesting the sheer triviality of social discourse.
It also didn't help that the only thing he disliked more than dancing with strange women was being gawked at by a crowd of vulgar fortune-hunting sycophants.

He easily made out fragments of conversation.

"Four or five thousand — "

"— his sisters and brother-in-law, and a friend — "

"Ten thousand, I heard — "

"Stand up straight, Jane!"

He stiffened. The shrill, high-pitched voice was at least as disagreeable as Mrs Hurst's, and he glanced over in mild curiosity at its source. She was a tall, plump woman, about forty, with grey-streaked brown curls and large bovine eyes. Her face was not familiar, though he had formed a half-expectation that it would be; something tugged at his memory, but he could not recall, and it did not seem important in any case. For a moment he gazed at her with icy contempt, the intensity of his loathing surprising even him, but he shrugged it, and her, off.

Then his eyes fell on her companion, and all the blood drained out of his face.

Mama.

He returned to sanity almost immediately; she was too young, younger than he was, and looked as his mother must have in her own girlhood, years before this girl's birth. Besides, she had fair hair, while Lady Anne's, like all the Fitzwilliams', had been coal-black. Yet it was his mother's face, her eyes and features beneath the golden curls. Something niggled at his brain; there was something he should know, should remember.

His eyes jerked back to her mother, and he just caught Sir William Something-or-other's cheerful blather - principal family in the village, four pretty girls, his own Charlotte and Miss Eliza as thick as thieves -

"Who is that?" Darcy said abruptly, his eyes fixed on Mrs Bennet's wildly gesticulating hands. "The young lady with the light hair."

After wending his way through the appropriate compliments, Sir William smirked and replied, "That, sir, is the eldest Miss Bennet - our local beauty, as I am sure you observe. Her husband will be a very happy man."

The knight had all the subtlety, grace and efficacy of a glass sledgehammer, but it was not his ill-bred manners which sent Darcy's gut hurtling towards his throat. She was a beautiful, elegant woman, and the very idea of - anything - had him desperately trying to keep his last meal down.

Muttering his excuses, he fled across the room, pacing here and there until he had regained something of his usual sedateness. At some point he talked to Bingley, who apparently felt that everybody had to enjoy dancing and flirtation because he did, and would not leave until Darcy snapped at him. Vaguely, Darcy thought a particular girl had been involved in the conversation, but he could not remember her and, in any case, was far too preoccupied with his own concerns to care.

Several days later, Darcy had not yet determined whether to send for his sister; there might be no positive malice here, but there was a mean-spirited vulgarity which he found difficult enough to endure, let alone Georgiana. He could protect her from men easily enough, but not the likes of Lady Lucas, Mrs Long, and that detestable Bennet woman.
Thanks to Sir William, he had finally been introduced to them all, and their large broods of girls. The Miss Longs were almost as plain as they were insipid, the Miss Lucases little more than a mass of faces and appropriate appendages, and the younger Miss Bennets as dim-witted as their mother.

Their elder sisters, however, were another matter. He had sought an acquaintance with Miss Bennet, which Bingley's infatuation made easy. She proved the perfectly amiable, pleasing young woman he had thought her, her manners cheerful and engaging with but a faint touch of reserve, and at close quarters, her face bore only a strong resemblance to Lady Anne's.

Bingley subjected him to a fierce and jealous inquisition on the lady, and Darcy found that his visceral revulsion had not faded in the slightest. He actually recoiled, turned faintly green, and swallowed the bile which seemed prepared to take up permanent residence in his mouth. Bingley, well acquainted with his friend's utter inability to act, was satisfied.

As it happened, Darcy's inclinations had already settled on an entirely different object - specifically, on Miss Elizabeth Bennet. When Sir William first pointed her out as a great beauty, Darcy could scarcely believe his ears. Yet he found himself constantly studying her, unable to look away - studying her flaws, admittedly, but after only a short time in her company, they had somehow turned into virtues. Though by no means a beauty, her face was certainly pretty, her figure light and pleasing. More over, she had a vivacity fully equal to Bingley's or Fitzwilliam's, and rather superior understanding; they were by no means deficient, but Elizabeth was clever.

He liked her - and for him, this was rather more unsettling than mere attraction or admiration. He was not in the habit of liking people, and certainly not attractive young women. Within what seemed a very short time, he realised that, were it not for her lamentably inferior connections, he might well be in danger of falling in love with her.

However, there was no doing away with the low relatives, so instead he amused himself at Caroline Bingley's expence. He talked about Elizabeth's fine dark eyes, the quickness of her wit and elasticity of her walk, provoking Miss Bingley into such pretentious, obsequious displays of nonsense that he almost laughed outright. It was not, perhaps, the sort of enjoyment most men would have found in the situation, but Darcy had long ago reached the satisfying conclusion that he was nothing like most men.

It was a matter of happenstance which, improbably, succeeded in driving Elizabeth Bennet right out of his mind. While he and Bingley dined with the officers, Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley maintained some modicum of peace by inviting Jane Bennet to join them. The invitation was accordingly accepted, and Miss Bennet - for reasons known only to herself, or as Darcy thought more than likely, her mother - rode to Netherfield in pouring rain. Naturally, she fell ill with a cold, and before any of the Bingley party quite knew what had happened, Miss Elizabeth had arrived to care for her sister.

Within three days' time, Darcy was determined to never again share the same dwelling as Caroline Bingley while Elizabeth Bennet resided there. At every possible turn, she vented her envy in criticisms of Elizabeth's looks, dress, speech, while teasing Darcy in a manner she undoubtedly thought flirtatious. At the same time, he knew he was partly at fault. He had shown his preference too openly; provoking Miss Bingley was one thing, but to encourage, nay, create vain hopes in a blameless lady was the kind of thoughtless, dishonourable cruelty he despised in lesser men.

The next day, Miss Bennet had recovered enough to come downstairs. She was still pale and wan, perspiration dotting her forehead. Something stirred in Darcy's memory; he had seen her before, not the elegant Miss Bennet of parlours and assemblies, but like this, sickly and feverish, damp hair clinging to her face and neck.
"How are you, Miss Bennet?" said Darcy, banally, and looked directly into her dark blue eyes, the size, shape, colour - everything - identical to his own. She stared back, brows furrowing into the same perplexed frown she always wore in his presence.

"I - much improved, sir, but - may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

She had been a frail child, he thought wildly, just like Anne, just like him, always falling ill.

Searching his eyes, Miss Bennet said, "Please forgive my impertinence, Mr Darcy, but I am convinced we have met before. Am I mistaken?"

The scattered impressions, memories, and sensations all fell together. He was eight years old again, sitting with his cousins and desperately trying to turn the pictures in his head into words, and just as desperately trying not to think that he had been there, right there, while it happened. His sister's name had been a litany in his frightened brain.

Jane.

Jane Bennet was not merely another Jane, a Jane with golden hair and his eyes and an uncanny resemblance to his (their) mother - she was the same Jane, stolen by people who did not even bother to give her another name. Apparently he had lost her to the most incompetent kidnappers in existence.

Darcy felt a brief impulse to confront them - to rush to Longbourn and demand an explanation of Mr Bennet - and just as quickly discarded it. "No," he said, "no, I do not believe you are. I think we were both at Houghton, many years ago."

"Houghton?" said Jane, almost scowling in concentration.

"Houghton Park, in Yorkshire - it is the Earl of Ancaster's seat. You were very young, so you may not remember much of it. There was a folly you liked to play in, even though the steps were too tall for you."

"I tore my skirt!" she cried, her eyes flying open. "It was a new dress - almost everyone laughed at me for being so proud of it, and then I tore it when I fell down the stairs. I was terribly upset; Edward insisted I must have twisted my ankle, I carried on so."

Darcy caught his breath. "You do remember, then."

"Only a little," Jane admitted. "That is perfectly clear, only - I know Edward was worried that I might have hurt myself, but I don't know who he was! - a neighbour, I suppose? I do know that Mama and Papa lived in Yorkshire for a time, before my grandfather Bennet died."

"He is o - my cousin, Edward Fitzwilliam. He was about seventeen then."

"Yes, of course," she said, and suddenly grinned. "He used to walk with a girl under that enormous oak, and you convinced us all to climb up, wait for them to pass, and throw acorns at their heads! You and I laughed so much, we almost fell out of the tree."

"It was very amusing," said Darcy in his primmest voice, and smiled at his sister.

Elizabeth had never in her life been so relieved to return home; indeed, she usually felt nothing more than resignation at the prospect. On this occasion, however, she would have gladly fled to
the ends of the earth to escape the Netherfield party.

Miss Bingley had progressed from disagreeable to intolerable, her sister and brother-in-law cheerfully following her lead, while Mr Darcy - for all his deficiencies indisputably well-bred - was a still greater irritant. Apparently, he did not feel that icy civility adequately communicated his disdain of the company, so to the general repulsiveness of his manners he added a habit of censuring everyone around him. Nobody was exempt, not even his own friend, and certainly not Elizabeth, who he seemed to take a perverse pleasure in quarrelling with.

To make matters worse, his gaze was now as frequently directed at Jane as at Elizabeth herself, and she saw them engaged in conversation more than once, their faces earnest and animated as they talked. She did not imagine that even her sister could be an object of interest to so great a man, but Mr Bingley was undoubtedly ignorant of such mean considerations. With his sweet and amiable temper, would he not be discouraged by his friend's pursuit? She could only comfort herself with the thought that he was unlikely to see it as such - Darcy's cordiality, unusual as it seemed from him, was nothing to Bingley's own attentions.

Besides, she could do nothing about it. Elizabeth put such inchoate difficulties out of her mind and amused herself at Miss Bingley's expense until they could escape back to Longbourn.

Once home, however, she found herself in the midst of new difficulties, far more distressing - and definite - than those at Netherfield.

Mr Bennet was ill. He had no fever, no cough, nothing to interest his wife and younger daughters - only an inability to breathe without wheezing, or move without gasping for air. Several times he became so dizzy that only their quick action prevented him from falling to the floor; Elizabeth stayed with him as much as she could, but since he slept even longer hours than Lydia, she had in fact very little to do.

In the midst of this, they were favoured with the presence of their cousin, Mr Collins. At another juncture, Elizabeth might have enjoyed him heartily, for his character combined obsequiousness and vanity to a point of rare absurdity. As it was, she laughed with Mr Bennet and tried to ignore Mr Collins' acquisitive glances at his cousin's home, silver, and daughters. She found herself escaping the house while her father slept, wandering far beyond her usual circuit as she tried to make sense of it all.

One day not long after Mr Collins' arrival, she returned to find Mr Bennet not only awake and alert, but conducting business of some kind in his study.

"The gentleman came - oh, over an hour ago now," Mrs Hill told her.

"Mr Collins?"

A peculiar look crossed the housekeeper's face. "No, ma'am - the one from Netherfield. Mr Darcy."

"Mr Darcy?"

"He said it was urgent that he speak with my master, and as Mr Bennet was looking so well, I didn't see any harm in it. I thought he'd just get rid of him if he had any trouble, like he always does."

Elizabeth sighed. "Has there been any trouble, Hill?"

"No, ma'am - that is, I did hear raised voices, at first, but not long, and nothing since. Even then, I couldn't make it out, except something about Mr Darcy's sister. That Sally might have heard
"Of course not," said Elizabeth absently, her mind racing. She barely took time to greet Jane before whisking her father's tea away. The study was not quite silent, but nearly so - she caught only the murmur of male voices.

She hesitated, then pressed her ear against the door.

"I must speak with my wife first," said Mr Bennet. "She is quite mad, as I am sure you realise - " Elizabeth almost dropped the teatray - "but I shall be able to get the truth from her. I daresay I shall rather enjoy it. Then I will tell them; you have my word, little though that means to you. However, I do require a favour."

Darcy's expression must have spoken more eloquently than words. Mr Bennet, after a deep, rattling breath, hurried on. "You and your family will undoubtedly wish to reclaim them immediately. I ask that you do not. I ask that you do not breathe a word of what you have discovered, not to them, not to the Fitzwilliams, not to anyone."

"I have hated you for eighteen years," Darcy said thoughtfully, "and I do not blindly accept requests even from people I like. Why should I do you any favour, Mr Bennet - let alone this one?"

"For your sister's sake," said Mr Bennet. "This will be a great shock to them both, but particularly, I think, to her. I need to prepare them for this. I need time."

When he spoke, Darcy's voice was tinged by compassion. "How much time do you have, sir?"

"Unfortunately, young man, you shall not have the pleasure of immediately dancing on my grave," said Mr Bennet dryly. "I expect to live another few weeks, at least. Would you care to place a wager on the twenty-sixth of November?"

Elizabeth jerked away. The rest had seemed unreal, somehow, perhaps a dream. She could easily imagine Darcy hating someone for that length of time, and rather liked the idea, but reason said otherwise. He was young, only about twenty-five - eighteen years ago, he would have been a little boy, and certainly unknown to her father. The rest was equally ludicrous. What had Mr Darcy's sister to do with anything? Silliness did not a madwoman make. Her father was not dying.

Then he made a joke of his own death, and it was exactly what he would do, if... if, and she knew it was all real, even the nonsense, and she still hadn't brought the tea.

Elizabeth lifted her chin and rapped on the door. "Papa?" she called. "I have your tea."

She opened the door to a flurry of motion. Darcy, without thought, sprang to his feet and steadied Mr Bennet over a chessboard.

"I must consider it, sir. - Checkmate," he said quietly, then turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet. I hope you are well?"

"Very well, thank you," said Elizabeth, handing Mr Bennet his cup. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please. And your... your sister? She is quite recovered?"

"Oh, yes. Papa, while we are speaking of health - "

"Not so poor as to merit comment. Set up the board, Lizzy," said Mr Bennet crossly. "Mr Darcy, you will undoubtedly have to rescue me from my daughter's clutches. I am no strategist."
Elizabeth's lips thinned, but she obediently moved to the chessboard and moved the pieces back to their original places. She only glanced up once, meeting Darcy's eyes over her father's head. She expected censure - she always did, from him - but even she could not perceive anything in his expression but sympathy. She flushed, dropping her gaze to the board.

After the palpable awkwardness of the game, Darcy said something about Bingley and business, and Elizabeth accompanied him to the door. He paused, waiting for Mrs Hill to vanish, then said,

"I am sorry about your father, Miss - Bennet."

So am I, she thought helplessly. "Thank you, Mr Darcy."

"My mother had a weak heart," he said. "Garlic helped, she said, before she . . . she always said it helped with the pain."

Startled, Elizabeth looked up, directly into his haughty face, and felt furious that his eyes were kind. He was the man who did not think her handsome enough to dance with - she had refused to see anything else in him, and had enjoyed doing so. She wanted to dislike him, to repay him for disliking her, and now, he had taken away even that pleasure. How dare he show all the compassion and sensibility of a real person?

Then she caught her own folly, and was disconcerted - and finally, she felt only gratitude that someone who did not share her grief cared about it.

"Thank you," she said again.
Chapter 2

The next day, Mr Bennet bestirred himself so far as to order Mr Collins and all of his daughters out of the house. Lydia and Catherine, already setting out for Meryton and their aunt, shrugged and declared they could tolerate Jane and Lizzy easily enough, and even endure Mary if they must.

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then shut it again. If Lydia could be governed by anyone, it was certainly not her - she been so much with the Gardiners in recent years that her sister regarded her as little more than a rival beauty crossed with a particularly tiresome governess. Yet nobody had much influence over her now - only their father, who refused to exercise it.

When he dies -

"- Miss Elizabeth Bennet - "

Elizabeth started. They had reached Meryton, and one of the officers - Mr Denny - was introducing them to another young man.

"May I have the honour of introducing to your acquaintance a very old friend - Mr Wickham."

The civilities performed, they returned to doing what they each did best. Lydia flirted, and Kitty imitated her; Mary scowled disapprovingly; Jane bestowed radiant smiles; Mr Denny simpered; - and Mr Wickham made a little polite love to them all. Elizabeth stood back, a little, and observed it all.

Mr Wickham had beauty, to be sure, flawless features and an elegant figure, but that was not where his peculiar charm lay. - Darcy had that much, and height into the bargain, and nobody would call him charming. No, it was air, and countenance, that warm, smiling, open friendliness combined with an evident fascination in whoever he talked to. He made an art of being agreeable.

His character decided, Elizabeth returned to her previous thoughts, nodding and smiling at appropriate moments. For the first time in her life, she wondered what would happen to them, afterward. Were it not for Mr Bennet's parsimony, her mother would have driven them into debt years ago. If she could not live within their present income, how would she survive on a tenth of it?

" - don't you think, Lizzy?"

"I am sure he will," said she, absently. Two hundred a-year. Of course, it could be much worse; they did have the Gardiners, who would do what they could. They might take Elizabeth herself in, as they had done so many times before, but - to be nothing more than Mr Gardiner's penniless niece! - She, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a gentleman!

Still, it was better than the alternative, she thought, with a brief sidewise glance at Mr Collins. Mary might be prevailed upon to accept him, but even if he had shown any interest in her - which he certainly had not - she did not think it would be a happy marriage. No woman of sense or feeling could be content with such a man.

Besides, Elizabeth thought practically, Mr Gardiner never stopped bringing home new friends. She was much more likely to meet someone acceptable in London.
Jane, of course - she thought fondly - need not worry over any of this. Her future was all but settled.

"Mr Bingley!" cried Jane, her left cheek dimpling as two horsemen rode towards them.

Elizabeth glanced up. Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy were staring at one another in horrified recognition. The former turned a dull greyish white; the latter coloured furiously, his eyes blazing. Mr Bingley seemed only bewildered.

Then Wickham nodded, and after a moment, Darcy deigned to return the greeting, almost as if he had forgotten how. Bingley, always gentlemanly, explained that they were about to call at Longbourn, to ask after Miss Bennet's health, and -

Darcy's expression changed, and he dismounted, his friend gladly following suit. Much to her amusement, they both attached themselves to Jane's side - then, after barely thirty seconds, Darcy left them to their own devices and determinedly engaged Elizabeth in conversation. He asked after her health, her mother's and sisters' - and, with rather more sincere concern, her father's. He asked if she often walked to Meryton, if she enjoyed the walk, if Miss Bennet usually accompanied her, if she liked the bonnet in the next window.

Elizabeth felt no particular desire to speak with Mr Wickham, but it certainly would have been impossible had she wished it - Darcy monopolised her entirely until their new acquaintance took his leave. Then, he seemed content to relapse into his usual silence, so Elizabeth amused herself by making minute enquiries after his furniture.

"My aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has a very grand chimneypiece," said Darcy, his mouth twitching, "but I -"

Mr Collins gave a sort of screeching gasp. He had been introduced to Darcy, but apparently had been as oblivious of the connection as Elizabeth herself.

"Mr Darcy!" he said shrilly. Elizabeth winced. Although she had always enjoyed her cousin's absurdity before, somehow she no longer felt any desire to see Mr Collins expose his deficiencies - not to Darcy. "Mr Darcy, I have not words to express my apologies. I am shockingly remiss, but I had no idea that I - that we all! - are being honoured by the presence of a nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

Darcy stared.

"Moreover, I have the great pleasure of informing you that Lady Catherine was in excellent health last se'ennight."

"Forgive me, sir," said Darcy in some bemusement, "but how are you acquainted with my aunt?"

Elizabeth hastily interjected, "Mr Collins was recently recommended to Lady Catherine's notice, sir, and received the living of Hunsford from her."

Darcy, to nobody's great surprise, had no chance to reply. Mr Collins seized the opportunity to sing Lady Catherine's praises for the next half-hour.

"Why, she has condescended to advise me not only on parish matters, Mr Darcy, but on my beehive, the garden, even the furnishing of the parsonage-house. - All unasked-for, too! Her graciousness knows no bounds!"

"I am so well convinced of my aunt's discernment," said Darcy, smiling at an astonished Elizabeth, "as to be certain she could never bestow a favour unworthily."
"Well, upon my word, sir, that is a very handsome thought - very handsome indeed!"

"Are you much acquainted with Mr Darcy?"

For quite the first time in her life, Elizabeth wished the attentions of the most agreeable young man in the room on somebody else. She had no objection to Mr Wickham, none at all - she simply had no attention to spare for a flirtation, no matter how captivating the gentleman.

"No," said Elizabeth, "I would not say that." How could she, when he showed different colours at every turn? Certainly, he betrayed the cold arrogance she had once considered his only quality - yet, now she remembered the flashes of kindness and brilliance and dry wit just as easily.

She was too preoccupied to see a hint of disappointment cross Mr Wickham's face.

"Yet he has been here a month?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Perhaps I do not express myself well. Mr Darcy and I are certainly not strangers. We have spent four days in the same house. It is just that he is so odd a mixture, of - of quick parts, sarcastic humour, and unbending reserve that I feel I hardly know him. However, I am persuaded that, in essentials, he is a very good sort of man."

"I believe your opinion of him is widely shared," said Mr Wickham. "I have no right to give mine; it is impossible to be impartial."

"Indeed!"

"Yet, in all honesty, my disappointments at his hands are my own fault. I have a warm, unguarded temper and - and I hope you will not think too ill of me, Miss Bennet, but I confess I have not always lived as I should. Darcy is a man of such uncompromising integrity that he can neither understand nor forgive the vices and follies of others."

"I do remember his speaking one day, at Netherfield, of the implacability of his resentments, of his having an unforgiving temper," Elizabeth said cautiosly.

Mr Wickham managed a small smile. "His father, the late Mr Darcy, was one of the best men who ever breathed, - more than that, he was my godfather, and excessively attached to me. He brought me up at his own expense, and even bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. Unfortunately, I always knew the church was to be my profession."

"Unfortunately?"

"I was terribly spoilt, I am afraid - with no need to earn any privileges, I felt myself entitled to them, born for expence and enjoyment. Darcy, of course, has always been a model of virtue - irritated as he was by the preference which was often given me, it has probably served him better in the end.

"Regardless, what others might consider the casual errors of youth, he believed proof of a depraved character. Perhaps they were; I certainly was not worthy to be a clergyman then, and nothing could change his mind afterwards. He chose to give me a small sum in lieu of the living."

"Oh!"

"You must not think too badly of him, Miss Bennet. He knew me only as a vicious young scapegrace, and obeyed the rigours of his own conscience; in return, I treated him infamously. The
things I said! It is wonderful that he can still bear to look at me."

Elizabeth felt briefly tempted to believe everything was as he presented it. She wanted to - it would be so pleasant, so flattering, and yet -

"I am not quite satisfied with Mr Darcy's conduct in this affair," said she. "I should think his pride, at least, would lead him to act more generously towards you, whatever you may have done years before."

"His pride has often been his best friend," Mr Wickham allowed. "It has often led him to be liberal and generous, - to give his money freely, to display hospitality, to assist his tenants, and relieve the poor. Among his equals in consequence, he is just, sincere, rational, honourable, even a conversable companion if he thinks it worth his while. However, there are stronger impulses than pride."

"I do not believe I have heard such a panegyric from his friends," said Elizabeth. "You are remarkably generous, sir."

Mr Wickham quickly disclaimed the compliment. With tears standing in his eyes, he said, "It grieves me to the soul that we should now meet on such painful terms, but I verily believe I could forgive him everything, not merely on his own account, but my godfather's. Till I can forget Mr Darcy, I can never defy or expose his son."

He looked handsomer than ever as he said it. Elizabeth stared.

What was she to Mr Wickham? What did he know of her? She would like to think he perceived something in her, something which made her worthy of such detailed confidences, but she knew he could not. She was a perfect stranger. For all he knew, she might as well have been as discreet as the town crier.

For all he knew, he was in the very act of defying and exposing the son to a young lady who would carry his tale to every corner of Meryton. Undoubtedly he hoped she would.

*What a perfectly ridiculous story,* she thought, looking at Mr Wickham anew. A handsome face and affected, ingratiating, rather appallingly ill-bred manners - there was nothing more to him. *What a perfectly ridiculous little man.*

While Mr Bennet's cousin and daughters enjoyed Mrs Phillips' hospitality, he sat quietly at home and lost another game of chess to Mr Darcy.

"I have spoken to my wife," he said, watching the younger man re-set the board.

Darcy paused. "Indeed?"

"Perhaps I should say that I have attempted to. The stupidity with which she is favoured by nature always makes it rather a futile endeavour, however much her ignorance and folly usually contribute to my amusement."

"That is hardly the sort of happiness which a man, in general, would wish to owe to his wife," Darcy replied.

"I am a philosopher, young man; I derive benefit from such sources of entertainment as are given."

Darcy remained silent. He considered Mr Bennet a weak man, negligent as a father, indecorous as a husband, and thoroughly disapproved of him on both grounds. Nevertheless, he rather liked him;
certainly he did not hate him. He now knew that it was Mrs Bennet who had perpetuated the primary deception, insisting that Jane and Elizabeth were orphaned sisters she had saved from drowning. It was half-true; Elizabeth did fall into the pond, and would have died, as the Fitzwilliams always believed she had, but for Mrs Bennet.

I daresay she thought Jane her reward, Mr Bennet had told him, almost as dazed as Darcy himself. She meant to leave Lizzy there; I was the one - I would not let her. I was fond of Lizzy from the first.

"Speaking of whom," said Mr Bennet, "she still insists - at some length - that both girls were orphans."

"She is lying," Darcy snapped. "My mother died over four years later, and my father in 1788 - both of them convinced to the end that Jane and Elizabeth would be returned to us. In his will, Mr Darcy spoke of his younger daughters; my cousin and I were even appointed guardians to them."

"Your cousin?"

"My mother's nephew, Colonel Fitzwilliam." At Mr Bennet's expression, Darcy reminded him, "Mr Bennet, I am but seven-and-twenty. Six years ago, when my father made his last will, I had not been of age a month. My sister Georgiana was nine."

"I see."

"Fitzwilliam must be told," said Darcy abruptly. "However, for Jane and Elizabeth's sakes, I will convince him to remain silent until they know of it themselves."

Mr Bennet smiled. "You seem very certain of your powers of persuasion."

"I am." Darcy's eyes hardened. "In return, I demand that a certain gentleman is barred from this house."

"Does this gentleman have a name?"

"George Wickham," Darcy said. "He is my father's godson, and arrived in Meryton yesterday. He will no doubt come prepared with a tale of his many misfortunes at my hands - he always does. You must keep him away from Jane and Elizabeth. I insist upon it."

Mr Bennet's eyebrows shot up. "Is there a reason for such precautions?"

"He is not to be trusted," Darcy said, his pale cheeks flushing. "I hope you understand, Mr Bennet, that I will never allow him near any of my sisters, no matter what the cost - and if you have half the sense I believe you do, you will be glad of the excuse to keep him from your own daughters, as well."

"How extraordinary," said Mr Bennet. "I seem to have taken up residence in a novel. Enter wicked Wickham, the dashing but nefarious villain of the piece, scourge of virtuous maidens and honest tradesmen. I don't suppose he is the son of a lord? There really should be a duplicitous lord somewhere, or at least a baronet."

"His father," said Darcy, "was steward of the Pemberley estates."

"The son of a servant? Even better. I shall be quite happy to play the disapproving father for such a specimen." He peered at the chessboard. "Will you play black or white, sir?"

Darcy laughed. "White," he said firmly.
Chapter 3

Elizabeth had not heard her father raise his voice above twice in her life. Certainly she had never heard him rant and storm with all the fury of a young lover; until now, she had not believed him capable of it.

And even now, she and her sisters could scarcely believe their ears. Mr Bennet, as indifferent to his wife as any man could be, was shouting at her, his voice easily carrying past the walls of his study. Jane, after one shocked glance at the door, whisked Kitty and Mary away.

"Good God, woman, what were you thinking? How could you - even you - conceive of such a mad scheme?"

Lydia began to giggle. "How droll!" she cried. "What do you suppose she's done now? It must be just dreadful. He never cared about anything she did before."

The two of them, more strangers than sisters, stood in awkward silence for a moment. Then Lydia, unable to consider anything for more than thirty seconds, drifted away, and Elizabeth knocked on the door.

There was a long pause. "Lizzy?" said Mr Bennet.

"Yes, Papa, I - "

The door swung open. Her father stared at her blankly for a moment, seeming hardly to recognise her, then managed to summon up a rictus of a smile. "Mrs Bennet was just leaving," he said. "Send for your sister Jane. I must speak to you both."

"I am doing no such thing!" Mrs Bennet burst out. "I shall remain here until - until - "

Her indignation dissipated at one swift look from her husband. She scuttled away.

"Forgive me, Papa," said Elizabeth, "but surely this can wait? You look exhausted, and Jane and I are not going anywhere."

Mr Bennet's only response was a brusque nod at her usual chair.

Jane joined them a few minutes later. "I hope nothing is wrong, sir?"

"Sit down, Jane," he said. For one sickening moment, Elizabeth felt certain he was to finally tell them what he had already confided in Darcy, of all people. Then she thought of Mrs Bennet's pinched, nervous face and Mr Bennet's furious voice. His illness could hardly be attributed to a scheme of hers.

"My father and I," said Mr Bennet, "were not on the best of terms after my marriage. He sent us to live in Yorkshire, where he owned a small estate. I was a dilatory correspondent even then; he did not hear from me more than three or four times a year.

"Those few letters contained little more than accounts of the weather and enquiries after my mother's health. I certainly never mentioned that Mrs Bennet had conceived and lost two children in rapid succession."

His elder daughter's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Papa," she whispered, reaching for his hand, "I am so sorry. You must have - "
"I do not wish for compassion," he said, brushing her fingers and sympathy aside. "I say this only because it is difficult enough already, without pausing to explain how we accomplished what we did. In any case, we had been in Yorkshire for almost four years, married for nearly five, when I took your mother to see Houghton Park, the Earl of Ancaster's seat. This was eighteen years ago."

Jane caught her breath.

"Close your mouth, Jane," said Mr Bennet. "You will need all the shocked expressions at your disposal when I reach the skeleton behind the veil."

"Forgive us, sir," Elizabeth said. "We thought you said Houghton, not Udopho - we had not realised skeletons were involved in the story."

His eyes crinkled at her; then he sobered. "She had never seen it, and since it had been raining that day, we were the only visitors. We went all around the grounds, and while I was admiring the architecture, your mother vanished. You may gasp now, Jane."

"I - do not - understand," she said, frowning. "There must be a mistake. Mr Darcy said -"

"Mr Darcy takes an eager interest in your affairs, Jane," said Mr Bennet dryly. "Did he tell you about Houghton?"

"A little," Jane confessed. "It was that day at Netherfield, before we came home. I have had the oddest feeling that I know him, you see, and I kept looking at him, trying to remember, and would find him staring at me, in exactly the same way. Finally, I asked him about it, and he said - he said we used to play together, when we were children - at that same place you just mentioned, Papa. I remembered all sorts of things after that, things he did not talk about, things he did not even know about. He could not have known that Mama used to hover over my bed when I was ill, singing lullabies, and her hair would hang me around like a black veil."

Mr Bennet turned ashen. It was left to Elizabeth to say, "I am sorry, dearest, but you must be mistaken. Mama's hair was the same colour as Mary's and Lydia's when she was young, I have heard my uncle and aunt say so."

"I am not mistaken!" cried Jane, a mulish expression settling over her face. "Her hair was as black as yours, Lizzy. She called me Jenny, and sang and laughed and cried - she did, I remember it."

"This is one of those delightfully rare occasions when nobody is wrong," Mr Bennet said, in something more akin to his usual manner - but his hands were shaking. "Not even your friend Mr Darcy, Jane. You see, Mrs Bennet returned in due time, with a pair of ragged little girls clinging to her skirts. All three of them were soaked to the bone, and one - the younger of the two children - seemed to have misplaced most of her clothing.

"I looked at my wife in considerable bewilderment, as you might imagine, but she explained before any of the rest of us could say a word. She told me that the children were orphans - sisters - whom she had rescued from drowning. I wrapped my coat over the younger girl, and said,"

"Tell me, child, do you have a mother or father?"

"The poor thing was frightened out of her wits, so the other answered for her."

"'No,' she said, 'they died last year.'"

Mr Bennet met their astonished gazes and gave a wry little half-nod. "Indeed. I would like to say that your mother persuaded me to take you, but in truth, I required very little persuasion. You
could hardly have presented a more pathetic sight, and after Mrs Bennet saved your lives, we felt a sort of responsibility for them. At the same time, I knew that my father longed for grandchildren, and presenting a pair of daughters would heal the breach more quickly than anything else.

"You were so grateful, Jane, that you would have done anything Mrs Bennet asked, and Elizabeth went wherever you did. It was easily done; we had seen no one but a boy of perhaps nine or ten, and that some time earlier. We simply took you in our arms and left, quite unnoticed. There were moments of anxiety, of course; at first, you were always crying - Jane, for your mother, and Lizzy, for a cat, of all things." He paused, rubbing his drooping eyelids. "In time, however, you seemed to forget what had gone before, and we brought you home to Longbourn."

"You are quite serious, sir?" Elizabeth asked. "Jane and I are - are foundlings?"

"Well," said Jane matter-of-factly, "we knew that already."

Elizabeth and Mr Bennet both stared; then the former said, with some asperity, "We knew nothing of the kind!"

She had imagined it, of course, as children do. The young Elizabeth knew she must be a foundling - and the grown-up Elizabeth knew better. How could she possibly have supposed otherwise? There were dozens of logical reasons why she should not resemble any of her family but Jane, why Mrs Bennet liked her so much less than the other girls, for all of those things. This one, irrational and improbable in the extreme, happened to insipidly perfect heroines, not to real people, certainly not to her.

"Why, my grandmother Bennet told me," Jane was saying. "She knew because of your hair, Lizzy, and some things you said when we first came to Longbourn, but - but she said it did not matter, so I never thought of it. Should I have?"

"Oh, Jane," said Elizabeth. "Only you could discover such a thing and think nothing of it!"

Brimming with curiosity, she hardly knew what to ask first - not that it mattered. Her father had fallen asleep again.

"Jane, of course I do not blame you," said Elizabeth for the fourth time. She stared at the pale, wide-eyed stranger in the mirror, brushed her fingers over the high cheekbones and small upturned nose, as if to make certain they had not changed. Somehow, she thought, they had.

"Lizzy?"

Elizabeth turned around; Jane sat forlornly on the bed, arms wrapped about her knees. "Yes?"

"Why does it matter? I can see that it does, somehow, but I still do not understand why. It was so very long ago, and it is not as if there were anyone to miss us." She took a deep breath. "I do not even see why it is so important that we know, now, when everything is finished and done."

"My dearest Jane," said Elizabeth, trying not to betray any of the incredulity she felt. "Papa's intelligence signifies little in and of itself. If we knew nothing else, if Mr Bingley had not brought his friend into the country, this would be another situation entirely. Instead, you and Mr Darcy recognised each other after eighteen years. You still remember playing with him, playing tricks on Edward - on the earl's son! Whatever I may be, whoever I may be, you were not poor and you were not friendless and -" she hesitated only a moment, then flung her head back - "and I do not believe you were an orphan, either."

"Oh dear," said Jane, covering her face with her hands. "It cannot be true, Lizzy, it cannot! Such
a lack of decency - it is beyond imagining!"

"I certainly would not have imagined it."

"How could they abduct a stranger's children?" Jane cried. "It is too fantastic to be believed. It must not be true. Besides, our parents cannot be alive. Papa did ask, and -"

"Jane," said Elizabeth, her expression gentle, "he asked if my parents were dead; you merely answered for me. Besides, there is something else. I heard Papa talking to Mr Darcy about all this."

Jane dropped her hands, peering over them with red, swollen eyes. "You knew, Lizzy?"

"No, of course not. I did not understand what it meant, then." She scowled, trying to recall that incoherent, terrifying conversation. "Papa was saying that he would tell us something, but that he needed time, and asked Mr Darcy to keep it secret." Despite the fog of memory, she could hear the cold, clear response perfectly. "He - Mr Darcy - said, 'I have hated you for eighteen years, and I do not accept requests even from people I like. Why should I perform any favour, let alone this one?' "

Her sister went a ghastly shade of grey. "Eighteen years," she said. "That - that cannot be coincidental, can it?"

"No," said Elizabeth, and reached over to clasp her hands. "Papa told him to think of Miss Darcy, and he said he would consider it. Since nothing has happened since then, I suppose he agreed. Now do you understand? If this is true, if I am right, you were part of a family. Can you imagine what it must have been for them, for a little girl to simply vanish?"

Jane blinked tears away. "We must not exhaust Papa with any further questions," she said, with something of her usual resolve, "or he shall never recover."

"Jane -"

"Mr Darcy is several years older than I am. He remembers it all much more clearly than I do, and he is the only reason that Papa ever discovered this - this dreadful misunderstanding. If he is at Mr Bingley's ball, we must ask him to tell us the entire truth."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then closed it again. "Very well."
Fitzwilliam Darcy strongly believed that anything said aloud could be expressed as well, or better, on paper. This occasion, he decided, proved the inevitable exception.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, his cousin, friend, and confidant, gaped at him.

"Naturally," Darcy said, "I felt that you must be informed, so I told Bingley that urgent family business called me to London, but that I would return in time for this - " he gestured incomprehensibly - "this thing he wishes to subject me to."

"A ball?" hazarded Fitzwilliam.

"Unfortunately, yes."

The colonel paused, then said, "You are quite certain?"

"Quite," Darcy replied. "When I explained to Jane that we played together, as children, she immediately recalled falling down the steps of the folly, and when I told her about Edward, she told me about the day that I convinced everyone to throw acorns at his head. Do you remember that?"

"How could I forget?" said Fitzwilliam. "You and Jenny sat in that tree, chortling like lunatics, while my brother looked as if he might very well kill us all. I didn't sleep for a week."

Darcy only laughed, his eyes alight with mischief. "You need not have worried. Miss Adams' screams could have raised the dead."

"Do try and keep from pulling your sister's hair," the colonel said, then sobered. "If you are so certain of their identities, why do you wish to keep it secret? The others would gladly welcome them back - think of my father, of Georgiana - "

His cousin considered the fire. "I am thinking," said he, "of Jane and Elizabeth. Despite Mr Bennet's . . . failings, he has been a very affectionate father to them, especially to the latter, and he is dying. His estate is entailed upon a cousin whose idiocy and obsequious egotism defy the power of words to describe." Darcy, remembering Mr Collins' raptures, suppressed an uncharitable smile. "To take them away now would be an insupportable cruelty, and I will not stand for it."

"Very well," said Fitzwilliam grudgingly. "Shall I join you in Hertfordshire once the legal business is done? Mr Bingley - "

"- considers guests little short of manna from heaven. Is James still tending his flock in Yorkshire?"

"My father brought him with us - kicking and screaming, I might add. Darcy - of all the people concerned, he - "

"He must be told, yes. I shall perform that task myself." Darcy rose, and suppressed a yawn. "I will expect you both by the fifth of December. I doubt Mr Bennet can live much longer."

Fitzwilliam's lip curled. "Forgive me if I do not put on sackcloth and ashes."

Jane Bennet was afraid.
She had not been afraid as a child of four - she could not remember feeling so, at any rate - and she had not been afraid as a girl of ten, when her grandmother kindly and patiently explained that, of course, she and Elizabeth were not really Bennets. She had not even been afraid at her first ball, nervous and shy and barely fifteen.

Until now, she had always known the best and happiest things to believe, to think, to do. So she was not afraid.

Until now.

Now, she knew not what to think about herself, her parents, her sister. She had not been rescued, but stolen; the mother who sang her to sleep was not Mrs Bennet; Lizzy did not think they were sisters at all.

Even Mr Darcy was not merely a half-familiar acquaintance, but the man who made her remember. Every day, now, seemed filled with sight and smells and sounds that brought fragments of that other time, that other family - that other Jane - back to her. She had only to close her eyes, and memories exploded behind her lids.

She did not blame him, of course. He could not help remembering any more than she could. - She did not even regret it, not wholly. How could she? Contented tranquillity pervaded each new recollection, keeping her hands steady and her manner serene.

"Jane! Jane, Kitty stole my dancing slippers!"

Jane sniffled into her favourite blanket, and said plaintively, "Tell me a story?"

"Una volta c'era un rè," said Fitzwilliam, grinning down at her. Jane giggled.

"A real story, with kings and princesses. English kings and princesses."

"Well," he said, drawing the word out, "I might, maybe, perhaps know a story about a king and a princess - and a very nice farmer too - but they weren't from England. Shall I tell you that one?"

"Are there monsters?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Only human ones. You see, once upon a time, a king lived on the moon. Its seas were filled with water then, and everybody always had enough to eat and drink, and all the jewels they wanted. So, the Moon-people loved their king very much."

"What about the princess?"

"Everybody loved her, too - except the king's second wife. She was cruel and vicious and horrible, and hated the whole world, but her daughter-in-law most of all. So she found a sorcerer as wicked and bad-tempered as she was, and they came up with a plan."

Jane shivered. "I think they count as monsters," she said.

"They were just bad people," said he. "Well, the sorcerer cursed the princess' dancing slippers. Whatever person wore them would never stop dancing." His tone made it clear that he could think of no worse fate.

"Oh - I hope - she didn't wear them."

"Perhaps she did, and perhaps she didn't," he told her. "I do not kno - that is, I shall tell you the rest tomorrow, when you are not so tired."
"I am not - " she swallowed a traitorous yawn - "tired. I want to know what happens!"

Fitzwilliam only laughed, pulling her pale untidy hair, and said cheerfully, "Goodnight, Jane!"

This memory, unlike the others, gave her no peace. She recognised Fitzwilliam as she had not her singing mother and laughing father - oh, she could not picture his face, but she knew him. She knew that he had coddled and protected and fussed over her, that there had been dozens of stories (and dozens of tugs on her plait, too). She knew that once, she had not been responsible for anything more than pets and dolls, let alone an entire family; Fitzwilliam had seen to it that even her cares, small as they were, always fell on other shoulders. "Kitty, why can you not use your own?"

Catherine shot a petulant glare at her sister. "I could, if Lydia had not taken my gown. It does not even fit her."

"It does! Besides, green is much more flattering to my complexion."

"It makes you look consumptive," said Kitty.

For the first time in eighteen years, Jane thought, I miss my brother. She had coiled her hair on the back of her head before she realised that Lydia and Catherine were staring at her.

"I think you ate too much pudding last night," Lydia declared.

Elizabeth's light step in the doorway was a decided relief, as was the briskness with which she managed the youngest Miss Bennets.

"Kitty, your feet are at least an inch shorter than Lydia's. Do you really wish to spend the entire night tripping over her slippers? - and Lydia, how many times have I explained that Kitty's gowns were made to flatter her figure, not yours?"

"Too many," said Lydia sulkily, and flounced out, Kitty stumbling behind.

Jane turned towards her sister. "Are you ready, Lizzy?"

"I do not suppose that is possible," said Elizabeth, with something like her usual insouciance; then her expression softened. "How are you, Jane? You look very pale."

Afraid.

Jane said, "Rather nervous, I confess."

She caught a glimpse of their shared reflection, the similarities between her even features and Elizabeth's harder, bolder ones as pronounced as always. Two pairs of dark eyes met in the mirror; two mouths curved into the same smile. The resemblance was not, perhaps, overpowering - but they had always been alike.

Impossible, she thought, that they could be anything other than sisters. "There must be some connection, however distant," Elizabeth said quietly, and held out her hand. Two topaz crosses dangled from her fingers. "Papa told me that we were already wearing them when - when they found us. He had them mended not long ago."
"How kind of him."

Elizabeth's lips quirked. "Indeed. Will you help me with the clasp?"

"Certainly." She rose - clasped the chain - hesitated. "Lizzy, I know we are sisters."

"Of course we are," said Elizabeth, fastening the other cross about Jane's neck. "Now, I think it is time to leave."

Jane did not speak. She only nodded, and followed her sister downstairs.

They arrived at Netherfield in due time, the entire party full of barely suppressed excitement. Kitty and Lydia had exchanged their respective articles of clothing - and appeared to much greater advantage for having done so - Mrs Bennet fluttered about Jane, and Elizabeth reluctantly accompanied Mr Collins in the first dance.

Afterwards, she fled to Jane's side, just in time to see Bingley and Darcy approaching them.

"Jane," she whispered, "if Mr Darcy asks you, remember to accept. I believe him very much attached to you, in his way - I think he will ask."

Jane shuddered. "Lizzy, it would be too dreadful for words."

"My dearest Jane, I meant a dance, not a proposal of marriage. I know you would never give your hand without your heart."

"I did not think you meant that," said Jane, the ashen pallor of her face visible even in the dim glow of candles and moonlight. "It is only - Lizzy, you must be mistaken. Oh, no, no, no. He could not love me, he does not. It would be too distressing, too disgraceful. He looks so very much like you."

Elizabeth made a strangled sound.

"He reminds me of you every time I look at him." Jane paused, then added with an expression of superhuman fortitude, "I shall dance with him, if I must, but Lizzy, I cannot bear the idea of anything more."

"Of course not," said Elizabeth weakly.

The matter proved academic; Darcy, despite the stately warmth with which he had initially greeted Elizabeth, some twenty minutes before, remained at his most inscrutable until Jane accepted Bingley's request to join him in the next set. Then he smiled with a trace of disquiet that Elizabeth - anxiously searching for herself in his face - entirely missed.

"Miss . . . Bennet," he said, passing over the name with almost palpable distaste, "would you do me the honour of accepting my hand - for the, er, boulanger?"

"Certainly," said Elizabeth, then stared at his retreating back.

By the time the dance began, she could hardly contain herself. Finally, she thought, finally she would know. She was absolutely persuaded that he had been the one to discover the truth, in its entirety, that he had precipitated everything which occurred thereafter. What had he discovered?

Elizabeth lifted her chin and said, "Mr Darcy, I am a very selfish creature, and for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings care not how much I may be wounding yours. A few days ago, my father told Jane and me of how we came to be brought up at Longbourn, but his health has
prevented any further revelations." She felt, rather than saw, the alarm which etched itself across his face. "I realise that Jane must have been on very intimate terms with the Houghton family, that she may not have been orphaned at all."

A separation in the dance gave her a moment to compose herself; then she continued, "I know I was, but we may not be children of the same parents; there is no unequivocal reason to suppose so. Mr Bennet told us that when we first came away, Jane wanted her mother. I asked for a cat. I know nothing more of myself, and precious little of her - but you do. You must; you recognised her after eighteen years."

"Yes," he said, after a pause fraught with agitation - she could feel that his hands trembled as much as hers. "I did recognise her. Once I discovered that you had not died - "

"Died!" cried Elizabeth, so incredulous as to hardly notice the stares they received from the entire room.

Something flashed in his eyes - something, she thought uneasily, very like hatred. "Yes," he said quietly, "we always believed you had died that day. Most of your gown was found floating in the pond. Once I realised that you had not been murdered after all, I recognised you, as well. I knew you both and I remember you both."

She felt her pulse fluttering in her fingertips, thundering in her chest, and managed a thin, thready sort of gasp.

"Who am I?"

He bent his head to look directly at her, his face as pale and drawn as her own, and said, "Your name is Elizabeth Fitzwilliam. You are the only daughter of James Fitzwilliam, younger brother to the present Lord Ancaster and Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mr Collins prattling at Charlotte, and just managed not to burst into wild laughter. "Lady Catherine is my aunt?"

"Yes."

My aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh - she had heard those words before, not long ago - and another revelation pierced her mind.

Great God in heaven.

"Your mother," said Elizabeth, "was Lady Catherine's and Lord Ancaster's sister?"

"Yes," he replied. "If you mean to ask whether she was also your father's sister, the answer is - " he looked at her with an expression of mingled amusement and affection - "yes, she was. I am your father's nephew and you are my mother's niece."

"How . . ." Elizabeth struggled for an appropriate word - "extraordinary."

Darcy smiled. "I certainly found it so myself."

"What of Jane, sir? What is she to you, that . . . who is she?"

"She was not merely on intimate terms with our family, she was a member of it," said he, his eyes grave. "For eighteen years, Elizabeth, she has been your sister, but before that, she was mine."

She stared at him in horrified, astounded, relieved silence. Jane, Darcy's sister? Impossible! It was
in every way unaccountable. Already, though, her mind took account of this new intelligence, rushing hither and yon as it brought the disparate pieces together. Had not she, herself, marvelled at the inescapable fact that they recognised one another after eighteen years? Had she not seen the affection with which Darcy regarded Jane - and had not Jane always liked him, without any reason? Only tonight, Elizabeth's suspicions of some partiality on his side had been received with such an excess of sensibility - of course!

Another thought came immediately upon the heels of the first one: supposing this all to be possible, she and Jane were connected almost as nearly as they had always believed. Cousins! She had not dared hope for so much.

"I am sorry," said Elizabeth, breaking out of her reverie. The musicians laid down their instruments, and Darcy - the set of his mouth grim enough to frighten away thieves, murderers, and small children - led her away, towards Jane.

"You are the last person in the world I, or anyone, could blame for this," he replied.

Elizabeth caught an unfamiliar note in his voice, something more than the ill-humour she usually attributed to him - something of real misery. "Oh, I take no responsibility for the failings of others," she said, her mouth twitching, "but I do regret the pain this affair has caused, to so many."

"You are very sensible," he said, then slowed his steps considerably. "Your - my - Jane must also be told. Shall I relate to her the necessary information, or you?"

"Oh, I will tell her," she said hastily.

Jane listened attentively, asking no questions. Then, clasping Elizabeth's hands, she turned to Darcy and cried, "Why, are you - can it be . . . Fitzwilliam?"

His entire face lit up. "Yes, that is my name. I - I did not know you remembered."

"I have remembered any number of things," Jane said, tears splashing down her cheeks. Then her lips curved into a tremulous smile. "Someday, you must tell me what happened to the Moon-princess."

"The - ? Oh!" Darcy laughed at the memory. "Someday, I shall."
Chapter 5

Impatience formed no great part of Miss Bennet's - or rather, Miss Darcy's - character. Nevertheless, she and Elizabeth spent the evening in a state of such restless anxiety that even Lydia remarked upon it during supper.

Darcy, not far away, sent a sharp glance at them, his acute, unembarrassed gaze gentling at the sight of Jane's flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

"Mr Collins, I hope you left my aunt in good health," he said, as if he had not already heard more than enough on the subject.

"Why, yes, sir, I -"

"Well, Jane, if you cannot enjoy dancing," Lydia went on, ignoring both gentlemen, "you might as well leave the offi -"

"- and my cousin, Miss de Bourgh? how is she?" said Darcy, the obstinate cast to his features indistinguishable from the one Jane habitually wore. The resemblance between them, already striking, was for a moment so pronounced that Elizabeth thought the truth must be discovered then and there.

Instead, Darcy's determined, if minute, enquiries after his relations, Mr Collins' parishioners, the village of Hunsford, and everybody else within five miles of Rosings, so astonished the assorted guests (and their hosts, too) that nobody looked beyond it. Lydia fell into a sulky silence, and Jane's stiff posture relaxed.

Elizabeth, for her part, felt a rush of sensations she could not begin to disentangle, but foremost amongst which was relief. It was impossible to misunderstand his concern when she felt it so often herself: not a disinterested compassion for others, but loyalty to Jane. A loyalty, she thought, which had only manifested when he recognised her for his sister - and therefore she, Elizabeth, had not misjudged him so unfairly as all that.

Oh, he had little of the positive ill-nature she had thought she perceived in his every word and deed. She had refused to see anything amiable in him before his sudden, awkward kindness that day at Longbourn - but it was not a kindness bestowed upon humanity in general, or even upon genteel young ladies, but upon his uncle's daughter. Indeed, she had often heard him speak so affectionately of his sister - his younger sister - as to show him capable of all the benevolence and sensibility in the world, where his own flesh and blood were concerned. She should have seen that - but, still, it was a comfort to her vanity that she had not been entirely mistaken, that he had been kind to Elizabeth Fitzwilliam and not Elizabeth Bennet.

Somehow, in that moment, it became real.

The remainder of the ball passed in a blur. Sir William prattled at her, something about marriage, and later she vaguely remembered Lydia, Kitty, and Mrs Bennet committing a stream of improprieties which should have brought a blush to her cheek, but did not. Only when Mr Collins announced his deference to Lady Catherine and all connected to her did she suffer any kind of clarity. Jane remained oblivious, but Elizabeth and Darcy hid identical smiles in their wine, dark blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

When it was all over and they had returned to Longbourn, Elizabeth could not retire quickly enough. She sent the maid to assist Lydia and Kitty and waited eagerly for Jane.
Her sister - cousin? - Jane entered, several minutes later, with little more than an attempt at her usual serenity.

"Lizzy," she whispered, "I have scarcely thought of anything or anyone else the entire night. Is that very wrong of me?"

"I think it might be excused in the circumstances," said Elizabeth.

"Well - yes, perhaps so. Oh, I am so glad that we are family in every way. It is all strange, and bewildering, but that at least need not change." Jane paused, thoughtful; then her eyes brightened. "Yet my brother is no longer lost to me, either. Fitzwilliam is alive, and well, and -"

" - and Mr Darcy!" Elizabeth exclaimed, laughing.

"I can hardly believe it. Even when I remembered them both, it never entered my head that they might be the same person. Can you imagine Mr Darcy ever pulling anybody's hair?"

Elizabeth, after soberly considering this, confessed that she could not.

"Fitzwilliam did! He told me stories and fussed over me, but when we were well, we got into scrapes, and he teased me, and - and - " the cheerful nostalgia faded from Jane's face - "and until this month, I did not remember any of it. I did not even remember him."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then shut it again. Some situations, she thought, demanded neither wit nor quickness, nor even words. She could only embrace her, pretending not to notice Jane's damp cheeks and red eyes.

"You are too good to me," Jane said into her shoulder, sniffing. "I do not deserve -"

"You deserve everything good the world has to offer," said Elizabeth. "My dearest Jane, you cannot think - " she paused, her voice catching, then continued, "you cannot think your brother blames you. Besides, you may not have thought about all those things that happened, and the people you knew, but neither did you truly forget them. You required only something to remind you."

"It was the dancing-slippers."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Kitty took Lydia's dancing-slippers tonight - do you remember?"

"Why, yes, of course, but -"

Jane straightened, withdrawing just far enough to grasp Elizabeth's hands in hers. "When Lydia mentioned them, I remembered that my brother once told me a story about a princess with cursed dancing-slippers. If not for that, I - I would not have even realised that I had a brother."

"Nonsense," Elizabeth said stoutly. "Your memories may be confused and incoherent, but they have never been gone. Something else would have reminded you; why, we discovered that much within a few hours." She possessed little of tenderness by nature; nevertheless, she still managed to soften her voice to a tone approximating Jane's own. "You may not remember what it was to be Miss Darcy. Perhaps you never shall - but, Jane, you have shown over and over again, that you do remember what it was to be Mr Darcy's sister."

"That is true," said Jane, smiling again, and looked at her admiringly. "You are so sensible, Lizzy."
Elizabeth laughed outright. "If only I had your heart to go with my sense, Jane, I might be half the picture of perfection that you think I am. I only wish -"

"You wish what, Lizzy?"

"I wish I could remember, but I - I know nothing except what facts we have from Papa and Mr Darcy." She still could not bring herself to use any other name for him - certainly not one which belonged to her. "I know my father's name, his brother's title, and nothing of myself." A new thought entered her head and she glanced swiftly at Jane. "Do you recall anything of me, from before? I will understand if you cannot."

Jane shut her eyes, not merely allowing those snippets of before to invade the present, but actively searching for and amongst them.

Voices murmured all around her, making Jane's head hurt even more. Then they went away, and after awhile, Mama came to sit by her side.

"My poor darling," she murmured. The silk of her sleeves was cool and soothing against Jane's hot skin. "Shall I sing you a lullaby?"

"Yes, please," said Jane, and Mama began to sing, her long hair falling down, down, like a shifting, shining black veil.

She shook her head, trying to clear the memory away. She had clung to it through the years, when she forgot - didn't think of - anything else, but it was no help to her now.

"Papa, Papa!" Jane ran through the hall, sliding on the smooth floor until a tall gentleman, his hair as fair as her own, swung her into the air, then around and around.

A brown-eyed boy followed, a little more sedately, his merry laughter ringing out. "Mr Darcy, Mr Darcy! Did you see what I did?"

"Fitzwilliam helped," said Jane, and looked at George with a hint of reproach.

"No," Jane said aloud, frowning.

"Oh! Well, never mind," said Elizabeth. "Before long, I shall undoubtedly know all that I wish and more."

"No, I did not mean - I felt convinced there was something." Jane shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut.

Lady Milton, drowsing on her chair, glanced at her dog and sat upright. "Lizzy! Lizzy, stop teasing Pugsy!"

Lizzy tossed her black curls, giggling. "Pug-see!" she said cheerfully. On a chair beside the viscountess, another girl watched with a conspiratorial grin.

"Stop that this instant! For heavens' sake, Cecily, can you not mind her for five min - Cecily?"

Lady Milton turned her head this way and that, her amiable features perplexed. "Oh! 'tis you, Jenny. Where has Cecily got herself to now? I declare, that child will be the death of me! How could she leave Lizzy with my poor Pugsy - "

"Cecily is five, Mama," interrupted the other girl, snapping her book closed. "I shall manage Lizzy. Come with me, Lizzy, and if you are very good, I will tell Cook to make an entire trifle just
for you."

Jane's eyes flew open. "You teased Lady Milton's pug," she said triumphantly, unable to keep from smiling.

Elizabeth burst out laughing.

She might have asked more, or explained certain implications of the evening's discoveries, or speculated as to their future, but before she could do any or all of these things, they heard a furore from the hallway - pounding footsteps, servants shouting at one another, somebody crying.

Jane and Elizabeth sprang up, the latter flinging the door open.

"Why, Sally," cried Elizabeth, "whatever has happened?"

"Oh, Miss Lizzy, 'tis the master; he's taken a dreadful turn. Mrs Hill sent Jack Anderson for Mr Jones, for all the good it will do - oh, begging your pardon, ma'am!"

Before the end of the second sentence, Elizabeth was half-running, half-stumbling to her father's bedroom, Jane a few steps behind her. She pushed open the door.

"What shall we do now?" Mrs Bennet was demanding of nobody in particular.

Elizabeth felt as if she were watching a play, watching somebody else woodenly, ineptly, perform the role of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She walked forward, towards the man in the bed (not her father, and not Mr Bennet). The servants seemed to melt out of her path.

Blindly, she reached out and felt for a pulse, expecting and finding none.

"He is dead," she said, her voice loud and unnatural. Jane stifled a sob.

Elizabeth glimpsed his face, not contorted in pain, as she had braced herself for, nor smooth and peaceful. He smiled - smirked - in death as he had in life, appearing for all the world as if he were enjoying a grand joke.

This, too, was real.

"Mark my words," Mrs Bennet said, her voice shrill and querulous, "that wretched man will leave us to starve in the hedgerows!"

Elizabeth slowly turned her head to look at her. She didn't see Jane's eyes dart from Mrs Bennet's tear-splotched cheeks to Elizabeth's dry ones, then widen in alarmed comprehension, any more than she felt Jane's fingers pulling urgently at her arm. "Mama, your husband is dead."

"And just like him, too!" said Mrs Bennet indignantly.

Jane gave a great shuddering gasp. "Lizzy, come away. Please."

"Yes, of course." Elizabeth glanced from her father's body to the woman she would never again call her mother, pressing her lips against Mr Bennet's warm hand. "Goodbye, ma'am," she said, and followed Jane out of the room.

The next day, Mr Collins all but ordered his new position proclaimed from the rooftops. Even Mary eyed him with considerable distaste, which only increased upon his request to speak with Elizabeth privately.

Elizabeth herself could not escape a sense that the events of the last twelve hours had happened to
another woman - a woman she knew and admired, yes, but nevertheless somebody else. Only when she saw Jane and the servants catering to the now bedridden Mrs Bennet's fits of hysteria, did she feel any kind of personal involvement. Fury, however, seemed little more appropriate than indifference, so she almost welcomed the opportunity for amusement.

"My dear Miss Elizabeth," began Mr Collins, overflowing with solemn vacuity, "you can hardly doubt the purpose of my discourse - my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken, and recent events render a certain promptitude desirable . . ."

Two minutes later, Elizabeth had decided that of some diversions, a very little would suffice. Certainly the litany of fatuous, condescending insults, thinly cloaked in a proposal of marriage, continued long past the time it ceased to amuse.

"- your wit and vivacity, I think, must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then shut it again. Between Mr Collins' and, surprisingly, Mr Wickham's accounts, she had received a reasonably good idea of her aunt's overbearing, dictatorial temper and general arrogance. She very much doubted that Lady Catherine would tolerate the slightest insubordination in her parson's wife, of all people.

*I, however, am not the parson's wife, but her own niece!* Elizabeth almost laughed aloud, imagining how Mr Collins would look - what he would say - when the truth became generally known.

"On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent: and you may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married."

"You are too hasty, sir; you forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them." She glanced up at him and added, her lips twitching, "I am perfectly persuaded that your friend, Lady Catherine, would find me in every respect ill-qualified for the situation."

Mr Collins dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "I am not now to learn that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long."

Before Elizabeth could respond, the door flew open, revealing a woman of about fifty years. Her face still bore the traces of youthful beauty, but rather more impressive was the tower of dark hair piled atop her head. If not for her extraordinary height and force of personality, it might have overwhelmed her entirely. Instead - aided by a fortune in silks and jewels - she gave the decided impression of an empress surveying an unsatisfactory province.

"Mr Collins," said the lady, her blue eyes snapping, "what is the meaning of this?"

His jaw dropped nearly out of his mouth. "L-Lady C-Cath-Catherine! I - "

"How dare you presume to raise your eyes to my niece - my own niece! Heaven and earth! of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Rosings to be so polluted? Consider me, Mr Collins, most seriously displeased."

"Y-your niece, madam?" he gasped. "Why, I . . . I would never have dreamt of - there must be
She gave him a look which had undoubtedly terrified stronger men into submission.

"F-forgive me. I . . . I did not understand, your ladyship."

"What you do not understand, Mr Collins," said she, witheringly, "would undoubtedly fill all of Rosings. Now, pray remove yourself from my presence, and meditate upon the dignity of rank and what is owed to one's benefactors."

He winced with each word, and after deep, repeated bows to both women, shrank out of the room.

Elizabeth stored the memory away for a time when she could properly appreciate it.

Lady Catherine sniffed. "Young men these days! They think only of themselves. Well, come here, child. Let me see you." Suiting actions to words, she tilted Elizabeth's face up to the light, studying it with a familiar pair of fierce dark eyes.

In fact, the familiarity did not end there - the black hair and pale skin, pointed chin and sharp cheekbones, were all easily recognisable from her own reflection. The dignity of Lady Catherine's features might be unmarred by Elizabeth's turned-up nose and dimpled smile, but the resemblance was unmistakable.

Lady Catherine smiled and nodded. "I knew you would have the Fitzwilliam countenance," she declared. "Well, Elizabeth, come along. Our affairs will not arrange themselves! Is Jenny the tall, fair-haired girl? - the one with a grain of sense?"

"Oh, yes," said Elizabeth.

She followed Lady Catherine into the sitting-room, but before anybody could speak, they all heard Mrs Bennet's voice, rising shrilly as it drew near.

"Lizzy! Lizzy, you selfish girl, how can you think of refusing Mr Collins? We shall all be left to starve! How can you - " She stopped in the doorway, gaping at Lady Catherine. "Who is that?"

A thousand slights and public humiliations, instead of the memories she ought to have had, rushed into Elizabeth's mind. "This, madam," she said, dark eyes cold, "is my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"You are the person who dared lay your hands on my nieces?" Lady Catherine swelled up ominously.

Lydia's and Kitty's jaws dropped in tandem. Mary stared. Mr Collins hunched his shoulders.

The spectre of the hedgerows seemed to have fled entirely. Mrs Bennet turned white, then almost purple, whirling to face Elizabeth. "Why, you ungrateful little piece," she said furiously. "As for you, Jane - "

"You have said quite enough," thundered Lady Catherine. "Do you know who I am? I am not to be trifled with! Jenny, collect your things."

"They are wearing their things," Mrs Bennet said.

Lady Catherine did not hesitate a moment. "Mr Collins, fetch my nieces' belongings." She pointed an imperious finger and he scuttled away.
"I - there must," Jane said, "there must be some dreadful mistake."

Even she did not seem to believe it, and Elizabeth, struck by her expression of acute misery, tried vainly to think of some way to stop the approaching disaster.

Kitty, almost as terrified as Mr Collins, mumbled something barely audible. Then, when Lydia jabbed her in the ribs, she glared and said, "Mama, think of your nerves. You must not make yourself ill."

"Quite so," said Mary, nodding in approval while Lydia sulked; "prudence must govern our thoughts unceasingly. In our unfortunate circumstances - "

"Should you be downstairs, ma'am? You look quite unwell. Perhaps I should fetch your smelling salts."

"It may be too much for her salts," Mary added helpfully. "I think she has a putrid fever!"

Lydia yawned.

"My . . . nerves? Oh! yes, of course - I am really feeling quite faint . . ."

Elizabeth had never thought she would be so grateful to see Mr Collins.

"Your ladyship," he said, preening a little, "my servants have taken Miss Bennet's and Miss Eliz - that is, er, the trunks to your most excellent carriage."

Lady Catherine favoured Mrs Bennet with a stare of something between contempt and hatred.

"Madam, do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. Mr Collins, happy as this occasion must be for you, do not forget your obligations to Hunsford. I will expect a proper curate by Sunday. Jenny, Elizabeth, come along."

"Goodbye," said Jane, helplessly, and after embracing the girls they had called their sisters, they left Longbourn - for, Elizabeth supposed, the rest of their lives. She felt a frisson of anxiety, no more.

Lady Catherine fell asleep almost as soon as they left Meryton.

"What a fine carriage," said Jane, white-faced and wide-eyed; she reached out to clutch Elizabeth's cold hands. "Lizzy, what is this? What has happened?"

"Somebody must have told Lady Catherine about us, probably last night or this morning. I suppose she came to storm the castle and rescue the damsels in distress. I thought she might take us to Netherfield, but perhaps she does not know that her nephew is there; - or perhaps he is not."

"You mean Fitzwilliam?" Jane blinked, colour slowly leeching back into her cheeks. "Of course he is there. We saw him only last night."

"He could have left for London, or even Kent, early today."

Jane only nodded, and drifted away not long afterwards. Elizabeth, though she had never been so exhausted in her life, did not. She sat, silent and grave, in Lady Catherine de Bourgh's splendid barouche-landau, watching the countryside transform into town, until they reached a long line of grand houses.

_Wimpole Street_, Elizabeth thought, and, apparently of their own volition, the muscles in her cheeks pulled upwards.
Lady Catherine awoke as soon as the carriage stopped. "This was your grandfather's house," she said proudly, "and is now my brother's. It is a noble heritage."

"Yes, ma'am," said Jane, blinking in the pale sunlight.

Lady Catherine swept inside, barking out orders to the butler, and they followed in her wake, trying to ignore the surreptitious glances of the servants.

Finally, however, the butler's exasperatingly slow tread came to a halt, and he bowed to someone Elizabeth could not quite see.

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Miss Darcy, and Miss Fitzwilliam to see you, my lord."
Chapter 6

The Earl was a gentleman of perhaps fifty or sixty years with thick, silver-streaked dark hair and fierce blue eyes. His angular features, though lined and weathered with age, were so similar to Mr Darcy's that, had Elizabeth not known better, she would have taken them for father and son.

Two young men stood on either side of Lord Ancaster's chair - a plain-faced stranger, presumably his son, on the left, and Mr Darcy to his right. A third sprawled across a chaise-longue.

All of them turned to stare when the butler announced Lady Catherine and her nieces.

"Jane," said Darcy in some surprise, "what - what an unexpected pleasure."

The Earl struggled to his full, imposing height and limped towards them. "Jane? Is it - are you - Good God, Catherine, what have you done? Why are you not at Rosings?"

"Why should I be?" retorted Lady Catherine. "How could I possibly remain in the comfort of my home, when my own nieces were suffering under the oppression and tyranny of those wretched monsters?"

Elizabeth found herself glancing at Darcy, whose solemn, studied neutrality did not quite conceal a wry twitch of his lips. Mr Bennet had often looked at her just so, and she could not help but imagine how he would have enjoyed the scene.

"After eighteen years, I should think they would have grown accustomed to it," said the man on the chaise-longue, springing up. Dimples appeared in his thin cheeks; untidy curls fell over a smooth white brow. Even Elizabeth found herself smiling in return. "Oh, forgive me - us; we must beg my cousins' pardon for our gross incivility, must we not, sir?"

"What nonsense you speak, Milton," Lady Catherine proclaimed, then smiled with immense self-satisfaction. "Ancaster, I have returned our nieces to the bosom of the family. This - " she thumped Jane's shoulder - "is Anne's girl, and the other is our Elizabeth. Elizabeth, Jenny, the tall gentleman scarcely able to remain upright is your uncle, Lord Ancaster. The young men are his sons and nephew: Lord Milton, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Darcy. They may be distinguished by Milton's lowly stature, Fitzwilliam's unfortunate features, and Darcy's habit of making himself useful." She glanced approvingly at her youngest nephew.

Elizabeth observed, with a stirring of amusement, that Lady Catherine's ill-breeding startled all of her relations into an awkward silence.

Jane said brightly, "What a delight it is to see you all again. Edward, I hope you are not terribly angry with me."

Lord Milton coughed. "I beg your pardon?"

"I did not mean for the acorn to hit your eye," Jane told him earnestly. "I was aiming for Miss Adams' hair, you see - but it was still very wrong of me and I apologise."

Everybody stared at her. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Darcy turned hastily away, their shoulders shaking, and Lord Milton roared with laughter.

"My dear little cousin," he said, still grinning, "you may consider yourself more than forgiven. As you can see, my eye has quite recovered from that . . . unfortunate incident."
"Thank you," said Jane mildly.

Lady Catherine seated herself with an air even more imperious than usual, gesturing for her nephews and nieces to do the same. "Brother, sit down before you swoon," she ordered. "It would be most unbecoming."

Lord Ancaster staggered to his chair. While he scribbled a note and sent a servant to deliver it, Lady Catherine related, with much indignation and some exaggeration, the events of the last few hours.

"Lizzy - " he began.

"Perhaps, sir," Lord Milton said, "my cousins have outgrown the nicknames of eighteen years ago. I should not care to be 'Neddy' still."

Darcy's hand tightened on the Earl's chair. Colonel Fitzwilliam eyed his brother with considerable annoyance.

"Elizabeth - you are, of course, very welcome with us," said Lord Ancaster pleasantly, his acute, unembarrassed gaze settling on her face. Whatever he found there seemed to please him. "Unfortunately," he continued, "I have already arranged to depart in three days' time. I hope you are not too exhausted by your recent ordeal."

"You mean to travel to Yorkshire at this time of the year?" Lady Catherine exclaimed.

"My presence is required at Houghton."

She sniffed. "Eleanor can manage Houghton perfectly well."

"Her authority does not extend to settling several recent disputes," said Lord Ancaster patiently.

Elizabeth supposed that over fifty years as Lady Catherine de Bourgh's brother could turn anyone into a saint.

"My cousins, perhaps, do not wish for one to go to Pemberley, and the other to Houghton," Lord Milton observed; "perhaps, incredible as it may seem, they wish to remain together."

Jane turned pale. Neither of them had so much as imagined that they might be separated, and Elizabeth chastised herself for being so silly as to overlook the possibility. She should have realised that Jane would be sent to her own ancestral home, not her mother's, and that she, Elizabeth, would remain with the Fitzwilliams.

"Oh, we do," cried Jane, then, dropping her eyes, added, "if it is not too much trouble."

The door opened and a slim, black-haired young man hurried into the room.

"Forgive me, sir, but I just received your note and . . . Elizabeth?" He stared at her, his voice breaking into a breathless half-gasp. "My dear little Lizzy."

"James," said Colonel Fitzwilliam, his voice quietly urgent, "consider her situation. She was too young - she does not remember anything, does not know anybody except Jenny and Darcy."

Elizabeth looked about in some confusion, which nobody seemed prepared to alleviate.

Lord Ancaster favoured him with a look of icy displeasure. "Jane, Elizabeth, this gentleman is my nephew, Mr James Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth did not recognise this newest cousin, but she felt, somehow, as if she ought to. Everybody seemed to be staring at her, their eyes expectant, and even Jane's face was filled with a gentle comprehension.

"It is a pleasure to meet you – again," she said uncertainly. "James was my father's name, I understand; you must be his namesake."

Mr Fitzwilliam, with a wry, self-deprecating sort of smile, looked away from her. He appeared to be gazing at a point somewhere above and to the left of her right shoulder.

"Oh, for heavens' sakes, James," said Lady Catherine in some exasperation. "Do you mean to dither about the truth for an half-hour? Elizabeth, this painfully indecisive young man is - "

Colonel Fitzwilliam and Darcy suffered, in tandem, violent coughing fits which would have done credit to a pair of consumptives.

Mr Fitzwilliam smiled and said, "I beg your pardon, ma'am; I wished only to spare my – to spare Elizabeth's feelings. Yes, Elizabeth, I am his namesake. It is something of a family tradition, you understand, that all eldest sons should be given their fathers' Christian names, and I was no exception."

His manner was so gentle and unassuming that she did not understand him for several seconds. Then, her chest inexplicably tightening, she said, "My father was also yours? – you are my brother, not my cousin?"

Mr Fitzwilliam nodded, his face still carefully averted.

"I am sorry – I wish I could remember," said Elizabeth, a realisation of his situation tugging at her own numbing grief. "I do feel that I should."

"There is nothing to forgive, Elizabeth, neither in you nor anybody else in this room." He paused, and with palpable effort turned to smile at Jane. "You must be Jenny. Darcy has told us so much about you, I feel as if I know you again already."

"I am sure my brother has been far too kind," said Jane.

Lord Milton yawned. "Perhaps we should dispense with these affecting reunions, charming as they are. My cousins must be far too tired to properly appreciate them, and there are some trifling matters of where they shall eat and drink and have a roof over their heads, which, if settled, would allow them to swoon in peace."

"Edward –" began Lord Ancaster, for the first time really angry, but his sister forestalled him yet again.

"What is there to settle? Jane shall accompany her brother to Darcy House and thence to Pemberley, while Elizabeth, of course, must come to Rosings."

"Rosings!" cried Lord Ancaster, clearly giving voice to the astonishment felt by the entire room. "Elizabeth – at Rosings? Whatever are you thinking of?"

"You know perfectly well that Elizabeth was given over to my care, brother. Everybody agreed that I should have the rearing of her."
"When she was an infant, and our sister alive! – seclusion at Rosings is no life for a young girl, Catherine."

"Nonsense!" scoffed Lady Catherine. "Rosings, at least, is not in the icy wastes of the North like Houghton. Why, it is quite an easy distance from London itself."

Darcy, who had been quietly consulting with Mr Fitzwilliam, cleared his throat. "I beg your pardon, sir, madam, but our sisters must be exhausted after such a day as this. They hardly need to finish it with a quarrel. Jane, Elizabeth, would you like to retire for a time?"

It was less a question than a command, but Jane nevertheless responded, "Yes, thank you. That is – " She looked at Elizabeth uncertainly.

"Afterwards, perhaps you might care for a walk in the gardens," added Mr Fitzwilliam, his voice and manner as gentle as ever. "Darcy and I can accompany you."

Elizabeth liked him already. "Yes, I would," she said, half-miserable, half-curious, and wholly weary. Lord Ancaster sent for a maid, whispering orders, and she led them to an opulent pair of bedchambers, fortunately just opposite one another.

Elizabeth had intended to open her heart to Jane, but her eyelids seemed to droop almost as soon as she caught sight of the bed. When Jane crept across the hall to speak tearfully of Mr Bennet, and even "Mama, and our sisters, and poor Mr Collins," Elizabeth could only fall back on a repeated insistence that nothing was Jane's fault.

Jane, apparently much comforted, slipped away a short time later, and Elizabeth closed her eyes, falling deeply and peacefully asleep.

About an hour later, she awoke to a single thought: my father is dead. All the comforting detachment of the morning seemed gone. Elizabeth curled up on the bed, her dry, burning eyes fixed blindly on the cherubs painted on the ceiling, and felt almost consumed by loss. Whatever he may have been or done, he had loved her, above and beyond the children of his own blood. She remembered countless conversations over books and chess and the dinner-table. There had been an understanding between them, an affinity of expression and thought completely unlike any other attachment. How often had they laughed together over a pretentious treatise or a joke only they could understand?

Unwillingly, she also remembered the flashes of callous indifference – never towards her, which made them so easy to overlook, but part of his character all the same. He would not, she thought, have wanted her to grieve him as a dearly departed saint, but as the odd mixture he had been.

Or, perhaps, he would not have wanted her to grieve very much at all; had he not always expected her to derive the most amusement possible out of any situation? He, with his weakening body and fading mind, and only terrible loss to live for, had met death with a smile.

I am trying, Papa, but there is precious little to enjoy here.

She considered the cherubs frolicking above her head. They were really quite dreadful.

"Oh, very well," she said, and laughed.

The girls were only too glad to walk out with Mr Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy, even if it meant enduring the impertinent curiosity of fashionable London. Jane, in particular, seemed to attract a number of superior glances.
As soon as civility allowed, Elizabeth asked anxiously, "Has anything been decided?"

"Not pre – "

"No," said Darcy. "The situation is rather complex, at least as far as you are concerned, Elizabeth."

"I? Why should I – " She broke off.

Darcy hesitated. "Jane came of age several years ago now," he said, "and her guardianship was a simple matter even before that. Your birthday, however, is not until February – "

"May," said Elizabeth, "my birthday is in May, not February." She looked at their stiff faces and paused, holding a hand to her suddenly spinning head. "Oh. I was born in February, then? February of 1773?"

This, somehow, was almost as hard as discovering that she had been kidnapped by those she called "Mama" and "Papa."

James Fitzwilliam lifted his hand, then dropped it again, as if he did not quite know what to do with it. He cast Mr Darcy a troubled look.

"Yes," Darcy replied, "and you will not be of age until then. My uncles, your father and his twin brother, spent most of their lives abroad and habitually sent their children to be raised at Houghton. At the time of your birth, however, my grandfather's health was failing, so all of you were effectively left to the care of the present Lord Ancaster. Unfortunately, he was then newly widowed and struggling with a number of . . . difficulties. The addition of four young children rather overwhelmed him."

"Milton was then about fifteen," said Mr Fitzwilliam mildly. Elizabeth imagined her eldest cousin at Lydia's age and grinned.

"Ultimately, the boys were sent to school, the elder of the two girls remained with my grandmother, and Lady Catherine took on your care."

"Lady Catherine!" cried Elizabeth. "Why, is that what she meant, earlier?"

"Indeed."

She considered this for a few moments. "How remarkable. Do you know why she wanted me? was I foisted upon her in some way?"

Mr Fitzwilliam coughed. "Quite the contrary; she insisted upon taking you with her when she returned to Rosings. You, er, had a habit of stamping your hair-ribbons into the mud – a habit shared by Lady Catherine, in her own childhood. I understand it, er, endeared you to her."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, smiling; then she caught her breath and repeated, "Oh!"

Jane caught her hand. "What is it, Lizzy? Is something wrong?"

"I wanted a cat."

"I do not understand."

Elizabeth pushed her hair out of her eyes. "Do not you remember what Pa – what Mr Bennet said? When they first took us away, you kept crying for your mother, but I . . . I just asked for a
"You were scarcely two years old," said Darcy harshly. "You could hardly be expected to say *Lady Catherine* properly."

"You could not pronounce *any* of our names properly," Mr Fitzwilliam added. "We were all *Cat* and *Jem* and *Puthy*."

"Oh! You must have been very fond of her, Lizzy – and she of you." Jane squeezed her hand, tears freely falling down her cheeks. "Poor Lady Catherine!"

Mr Darcy and Mr Fitzwilliam exchanged slightly puzzled glances.

"Jane is very sensitive," said Elizabeth.
Chapter 7

Lord Ancaster and Lady Catherine had declared a truce by the time Elizabeth and her relations returned to the house. Nobody mentioned any future plans for the rest of the evening.

Surprisingly, it was not an unpleasant one. Colonel and Mr Fitzwilliam did much to ease the inevitable discomfort, more through consideration of the young ladies' feelings, and general eagerness to please, than personal charm – particularly the latter, who lacked his cousin's air of amiable unconcern. Darcy, despite his cooler manners, was almost as agreeable, and Lord Milton restrained himself to something like civility.

Over dinner, while everybody made determined conversation, Elizabeth glanced from Mr Fitzwilliam, to Lord Milton, to Darcy, to Lord Ancaster, and back again. Nobody would mistake any of them for each other, of course, but still, the resemblance was unmistakable. With the same tall figures and pale, angular faces, the same black hair and dark blue eyes, they all –

They all looked like her! – much more than Jane did, though a year ago she had been the only person Elizabeth bore the slightest resemblance to. Jane herself had said that Darcy, of all people, reminded her so much of Elizabeth that she could hardly bear to dance with him. That was mainly colouring – shared, it seemed, with almost every Fitzwilliam in existence – and perhaps some confusion of her sororal feelings for both, but still, it was there. She could see that now.

Her eyes returned to Mr Fitzwilliam, who had her nose along with the eyes and hair. My brother, she thought, and felt nothing.

He glanced up, meeting her embarrassed gaze across the table, and offered a gentle, hesitant smile. His entire bearing spoke of good will towards humanity in general and Elizabeth in particular.

The nothing mingled uncomfortably with pity and admiration. Thankfully, he returned almost immediately to his conversation with their uncle.

She decided that she would at least try to use his Christian name henceforth.

The young ladies retired well before the others – "it is the least we can do," said Elizabeth wryly. Her sister-cousin slept well; she did not, tossing and turning for most of the night and rising early.

Nevertheless, everybody except Jane and, predictably, Lord Milton, were already awake. It was a small comfort to see that Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy, with heavy lids and dark shadows under their eyes, looked as tired as she felt.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," said Mr Fitzw – James, springing up to offer her a chair. "I hope you fell well?"

"Tolerably, thank you."

"I have written to Eleanor," Lord Ancaster informed his plate. "She and Cecily will be expecting us."

This evidently made sense to the others, who gave absent nods and murmurs of acknowledgement.

"Elizabeth," Darcy said abruptly, "we have been speaking of your – er – future domicile. Lady Catherine has agreed that it may be beneficial for you to acquaint yourself with Houghton before
returning to Rosings. I – we – hope that is agreeable to you."

Elizabeth was left with the decided impression that he hoped so for her sake, since she would go where she was sent whether she found it agreeable or not.

"Thank you," she said. "Forgive me, but is Pemberley very far from Houghton? I – I should like to see Jane occasionally, if it is possible."

"No."

Hastily, Colonel Fitzwilliam interjected, "He means that Pemberley and Houghton are quite near together, not that you and Jane cannot meet."

"Naturally," said Darcy, his expression faintly incredulous, as if any other interpretation of his words – word – were quite impossible. "I imagine that you shall meet quite frequently, since I intend to take Jane home as soon as possible."

Lady Catherine sniffed. "As well you should. My poor sister would have wanted – well! It is only right that Jenny should return to her proper home." She cast a gimlet eye in her brother's direction.

"You are very gracious, aunt," said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

"Of course I am," she said crossly.

Elizabeth had no idea how the gentlemen had persuaded their aunt to relinquish her claim to her, even for a short time, but was suddenly grateful that they had. Lady Catherine's foibles and inconsistencies, however diverting at present, would undoubtedly cease to amuse after a few days in her company – let alone years cooped up at Rosings. For a moment, just the idea seemed to stretch intolerably before her.

Her father, she thought, must have felt something similar when he realised what sort of creature he had married. She would find a better solution, when it came to that.

Elizabeth put the prospect out of her mind and smiled her thanks at Mr Fitzwilliam.

Within twenty-four hours, she was standing at the foot of the stairs, dressed for another journey. Lady Catherine had already departed for Rosings some time earlier, sniffing all the while.

"Goodbye, Elizabeth," said Darcy coolly. "Jane, you will undoubtedly wish to bid our cousin farewell – oh, it seems my uncle requires our assistance, James. Come along." He strode towards the earl (who did appear unsteady on his feet), dragging several cousins in his wake.

Elizabeth looked at Jane in some bemusement. They had never been inseparable, exactly; at least not as far as physical proximity was concerned. Sometimes they were near to each other, and sometimes they were not; sometimes they went to Gracechurch Street together, and sometimes Jane stayed at Longbourn. However, they had always known that they would inevitably return to the same house and the same room, where they had lived out their lives together.

Most of their lives, she knew now – the bits and pieces of Jenny Darcy, floating about the present Jane's memory, were real to her, if not Elizabeth, and had nothing to do with their years of sisterhood at Longbourn.

"Lizzy," said Jane, her voice shaking, "you – you must take care. I understand that Yorkshire has very uncivilised winters, and you are so fragile. Do not walk out during rain or snow, and always remember your handkerchief, and – and write to me sometimes. You will write to me?"
"Of course I will," Elizabeth assured her. "I will send letters every day, if you wish, and I am sure Lord Ancaster will frank them. You see? It is settled already."

Jane nodded, then reached out to embrace her tightly. "I shall miss you, Lizzy," she said, her voice muffled against Elizabeth's shoulder.

"Of course you shall – and I, you," said Elizabeth, determinedly ignoring the lump in the throat. "You shall keep house for your brother at Pemberley. Remember to tell me all about it, and your neighbours, and – and everything, before we see each other again. It shan't be long, so you must write to me very faithfully."

"I will."

Jane stepped away, scrubbing at her cheeks, just as Darcy returned to her side. Silently, he offered a handkerchief.

"Elizabeth?" called Lord Ancaster. "Elizabeth, are you ready?"

"Goodbye, Jane," Elizabeth said, her voice hoarse, and hurried blindly away.

The journey from Ancaster House to Houghton took several days even at the height of summertime; on this occasion, they did not reach Bakewell until late on the fourth of December. By then, Elizabeth almost hated the earl's fine coach.

"One would think," said Lord Milton wearily, "that we might have planned a slightly more comfortable itinerary after last year."

Lord Ancaster, already half-asleep, restrained himself to an annoyed yawn.

"Save your remonstrations for Eleanor," Colonel Fitzwilliam said, laughing. "If she does not orchestrate my father's every step, she certainly tries, and you know she overlooks such trifling impediments as mountains and winter."

"Who is she?" Elizabeth's teeth chattered. "I seem to remember – Lord Ancaster said something about writing to – yes, Eleanor and – and Sally?"

"Ella and Cecily," said Mr Fitzwilliam. "Eleanor is Lord Ancaster's daughter."

Eleanor was clearly made in the same mould as Lady Catherine; nevertheless, Elizabeth asked, "What is she like?"

Lord Milton grinned. "Difficult," he said, almost fondly; which, after a moment's consideration of the vagaries of his own character, made a certain amount of sense.

"And – Cecily? – who is she?"

"My uncles' other daughter," Colonel Fitzwilliam answered.

Elizabeth, who (quite reasonably) had not for one moment considered that another brother or sister might be lurking in the wings, stared. "I have a sister?" she cried. Then – "I do not understand."

"Cecily is not our sister," said Mr Fitzwilliam.

The colonel addressed himself to Elizabeth. "Very nearly; your fathers were twins, you know – identical – and your mothers were first cousins. The resemblance is extraordinary."

"I should think you would all be accustomed to that," Elizabeth said without thinking. Then she
"I should think you would all be accustomed to that," Elizabeth said without thinking. Then she blushed. "That is, I look forward to seeing her."

"As does she, I am sure," Mr Fitzwilliam replied. "She loves you already."

"Before we have even met?" Elizabeth laughed. "My uncle's letter must have been very complimentary."

This, inexplicably, seemed to silence all three gentlemen. Finally, the colonel said in a constrained voice, "You cannot remember it, of course, but you have met, and many times; she is several years your senior, so whenever Lady Catherine brought you to Houghton, Cecily was expected to look after you. She – er – took your 'death' very hard."

Darcy, she remembered, had said something about that; for all these years, her family had believed her dead – murdered. No wonder they had no idea what to do with her.

Lord Milton glanced at his brother and smiled, his eyes alight with sardonic merriment. "Of course, it is perfectly impossible that Elizabeth, at twenty, could be fundamentally different from Lizzy at two – but perhaps Cecily might find some slight, insignificant changes. You do seem a little taller than I remember."

"Cecily," said Colonel Fitzwilliam, "will undoubtedly find any changes very slight indeed."

Lord Milton laughed. "Touché."

On the following morning, they finally arrived at Houghton. Elizabeth would have been delighted to see the place had it been a desolate ruin. To her mixed relief and pleasure, the house itself was a handsome, modern place, overlooking a large lake and a wide sprawling lawn dotted with trees. Even had she wished to, she could not have failed to admire it.

Elizabeth gave a little sigh as Mr Fitzwilliam helped her out of the carriage, and gratefully accepted his arm as they walked behind Lord Ancaster and his sons.

"Are you glad to be home, M – brother?" she whispered. The earl's letter had clearly arrived ahead of them; even the servants, eying her with considerable curiosity, seemed to know who she was.

"Yes," he said simply. "I fear I am a rustic sort, Elizabeth; I would never leave this house, and my parsonage, and the parish, if I could at all avoid it."

"Like Papa," she thought, but remained silent. She felt certain that he would not appreciate the comparison.

In the saloon, they were greeted by a proud, beautiful woman, whose striking resemblance to Lord Ancaster and cold reserve left Elizabeth with no doubts as to her identity.

"My daughter, Lady Eleanor Fitzwilliam," said the earl. "Eleanor, this is Elizabeth."

Lady Eleanor considered her with about as much warmth as Elizabeth felt, curtseyed, then greeted her brothers with the same icy civility.

"My grandmother," she announced, once they had dispensed with the requisite introductions, "will be eager to see you, cousin. I am afraid she is quite exhausted at present."

"Nerves," said Lord Milton sagely.

Eleanor gave her brother a sharp look, but before she could reply, the door flung open and a
young lady stumbled in. She was less handsome than Eleanor, the familiar dark hair and blue eyes accompanied by a still more familiar pointed chin, small, turned-up nose and wide smile, but her expression was open and pleasant.

"Lord Ancaster-Edward-Richard-James-Ella," the lady gasped, then promptly rushed to embrace Elizabeth, all but flinging herself into her arms.

"Elizabeth! I can scarcely believe it," she cried, her eyes shining. "I am so glad you are home, cousin, you cannot imagine. Look at you! You are taller than I am – isn't she? Oh! I am so silly!"

Lord Milton mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like agreement.

"You must be so bewildered – we have not even been introduced." Then she laughed. "Not for eighteen years, at any rate. I am your cousin, Cecilia Fitzwilliam, but you must call me Cecily – everybody in the family does."

"Except Lady Catherine," observed the colonel.

"Oh, hang Lady Catherine," Cecily cried, turning back to Elizabeth and clasping her hands. "You look just like I imagined you would. – I do hope you will be happy, Elizabeth, and – why, you must be exhausted after such a long journey. How could you let me carry on so, Edward?"

"It may surprise you, Cecilia," said Lord Milton – Edward? – "but Elizabeth is actually capable of speech."

Cecily looked penitent. "I did not mean to overwhelm you, Elizabeth. Will you forgive me?"

"Such a kind welcome hardly requires forgiveness," said Elizabeth, smiling warmly at her.

"Thank you for it, Cecily; I am very glad to meet you again."
Chapter 8

Fitzwilliam and Jane Darcy left their uncle's house almost as soon as his carriage rolled out of sight.

He shook out the reins, awkward and uncomfortable and unsure of how to speak to a grown sister, while she looked about the street interestedly.

"We must go to the house in town to-day," he said, breaking what seemed to him an intolerably constrained silence. He would have been very surprised to hear that Jane did not find it so.

"Oh?" said Jane, patting a wayward golden curl into place. "Have I seen it before?"

"Four or five times, perhaps. You will not remember it."

This judgment proved correct, though the house was so handsome and elegant and tall that Jane almost felt she had not seen it, ever, for she could hardly have forgotten it if she had. Of course, if her brother said so, she must have.

A tall, spare woman, with an air of much greater authority than the other servants, hurried forward to greet them.

"Jane," said Darcy, "this is our housekeeper in town, Mrs Godber. She has served our family for many years. Mrs Godber, you remember Miss Darcy, who will preside over my household."

Jane, taken aback by this announcement, almost trembled. The housekeeper scrutinised her, then allowed herself a wintry smile. "We will be honoured to serve you again, Miss Darcy," she said briefly.

Darcy dismissed her, and with a peculiar smile pulling at his mouth – the sort of smile that usually brought a friend or relative to his rescue – said, "You must be hungry. Would you prefer to eat, or to see your rooms?"

Jane chose food, which arrived with such rapidity that she supposed it must have been prepared already. Perhaps the Darcys always ate at this hour.

"We are the only family here," Darcy told her, scarcely touching his meal. "Georgiana, our younger sister, has been staying at my great-uncle Darcy's house, just outside of town. She should be here tomorrow, with Sir James and his wife."

"I shall be glad to see her," said she, trying to remember a sister. "Do they – do they know that I . . . ."

"They have been informed of your discovery."

Their relatives arrived punctually the following day. Jane, who had unsuccessfully racked her brain for any memory of a sister, sat in considerable anxiety while Darcy orchestrated one plan for the journey to Pemberley, another for a duplicitous banker, and a third for a crippled young tenant.

"Sir James and Lady Darcy; Miss D – Miss Georgiana Darcy," squeaked a young servant, fleeing at one amused glance from Lady Darcy.
Jane's eyes instantly went to her sister, a rather tall, well-grown girl with green-hazel eyes, masses of familiar black hair, and a terrified expression. Despite her colouring, she resembled Jane even more closely than Darcy did – this much she saw, and yet she did not know her.

"Jane!" cried Georgiana, eyes wide, and astonished everyone by taking several quick, impulsive steps forward before faltering.

Jane's heart immediately went out to her. "You must be Georgiana," she said, holding out her hands with a gentle smile. "I am so delighted to meet you at last; here, you must sit with me. I want to hear all about you; we are sisters, you know."

"I – I know," said Georgiana, astonished and grateful. She detached herself from Jane long enough to greet Darcy with her usual mixture of awe and adoration, then returned to their sister's side.

It was left to Darcy himself to perform the introductions, which he immediately did. Sir James Darcy, their great-uncle, was a judge not sixty years old – scarcely older than the nephew who had predeceased him, and over twenty years the junior of his own brother, Jane's grandfather. His wife was about a decade younger.

Both greeted her with a good deal more affection than she expected. Sir James remarked that she had something of the Darcy countenance, and her father's hair, and hoped that she had not suffered very much. Jane, her sympathies firmly with everybody but herself, hardly knew where to look until Darcy – who had a very good idea of her feelings – smiled and said she had not been kept in a dungeon.

Lady Darcy, for her part, insisted upon taking Jane to the best shops, ordering impossibly fine gowns, and hats, and slippers, and any number of other things, all to be sent to Pemberley as soon as possible.

After they were gone, Darcy sent his sisters upstairs to examine the establishment they would share, and do whatever it was that ladies did to prefer for dinner. He himself went to his study to think of topics of conversations that involved neither commands nor sarcasm.

Jane, thankfully, shared Bingley's genius for making light, undemanding conversation. They talked and shared stories over dinner; not easily – that was impossible – but pleasantly. Even Georgiana laughed once or twice at her brother and sister's youthful misadventures.

They left for Pemberley shortly thereafter. The journey was a long one and Jane slept through most of it, her golden head nodding against Darcy's arm.

"I am glad you found her," whispered Georgiana.

"You may speak normally. She will not wake up, unless her habits have changed more than, at present, seems probable," Darcy paused. "I, too, am – happy to have her returned to us."

Georgiana smiled. Then her brow furrowed, and she said, "It must be difficult for her. I know she remembers a great many bits and pieces, but – but would it not be a terrible shock, to find out such a thing?"

"Quite startling, I imagine."

"I suppose it is a great change, as well – from what she is used to, I mean."

He looked directly at her. "Yes, it is. We must do our best to help her. I have perfect faith in Reynolds' loyalty, of course – " their eyes met and both stifled laughter – "but I shall do my
utmost to assist Jane in her new duties, while you should acquaint her with the knowledge of Pemberley, and our neighbourhood, that you possess and she has either forgotten, or was never in a position to learn."

"I?" Georgiana stared at her hands, thin and limp in her lap. "What could I . . . oh, I suppose she does not know where the chapel is, or what the servants are called, or the Miss Blythes' Christian names."

"Precisely."

Jane stirred awake on their last day of travel, as the carriage clattered from Lambton to Pemberley. She glanced around the carriage, realised that her peculiarly dark pillow was in fact Darcy's sleeve, and sat bolt upright.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!" she cried. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About thirty hours, I think," Georgiana told her.

"Not including the occasions when we stopped at an inn," added Darcy.

"That is true."

They looked at her expectantly.

Jane pushed several curls out of her eyes and glanced out the window.

"Oh!"

She saw the great Pemberley woods, the river and the arching bridge and the wooded hills soaring behind it all like a painting, and felt as if someone had struck her. Her chest ached, and all breath seemed to rush out of her body. Afterward, she could never say how she found herself standing before the elegant mansion that was Pemberley House, her brother and sister on either side of her.

"This is – I have dreamt of this place for my entire life," she said, gazing around in disbelief. "I – it does not look the same, exactly, but – but – " Thoughts and memories flashed through her mind, too quick and ethereal to grasp. "I lived here! I remember – "

"Of course you do," said Darcy.

"I remember all sorts of things from when I was that age," Georgiana added shyly.

Jane, tears springing to her eyes, reached for their hands. She thought not of a particular memory, but of the vague sense of calm and quiet she had clung to through the years. This was the place where, as a little girl, she had lived in elegant tranquility with her brother and their parents, frail and doted-upon and protected from even a hint of discord.

"This was my home," she whispered.

"It still is," Darcy told her, his voice as cool and practical as Elizabeth's.

Inside, the house looked a little less splendid than she had imagined – remembered – and more elegant. Jane glanced at the polished floor, the high arching ceilings, the richly upholstered furniture, all so familiar now, and felt as if she were walking through a dream.

The housekeeper immediately dispelled the impression. She was a tiny, wrinkled person of strong opinions and great loquacity who had disapproved of 'fancies' even as a nervous young
parlourmaid. Bustling forward – she never walked when she could bustle – she greeted her master and his sisters with her usual air of resolute solicitude.

"Well, Miss Darcy," she said, as if Jane had just returned from an extended holiday, "I must say we're all very happy to see you back home again. If you'll follow me, I can show you your rooms."

As Jane followed her up the stairs, she felt that nagging sense of familiarity again. "I beg your pardon," said Jane, "but – have you been at Pemberley very long?"

"Twenty-four years in January," Mrs Reynolds told her proudly. "Lady Catherine sent me to Lady Anne just before you were born, and I never went back, though I had been at Rosings ten years. I was not housekeeper then, of course."

"You were – " Jane hesitated – "Martha?"

"I declare! Fancy your remembering that! – but then, you were always like the master – the late master. He never forgot a thing either."

She opened a door and sniffed the air suspiciously. "Adequate," she decreed. "Your chambers have been shut up for nigh on eighteen years, Miss Darcy. Her ladyship wouldn't hear of anything else, and after she died, the late master couldn't bear to change them. Mr Darcy – well – he never did either. You see, she always meant them for you, first, when you grew old enough, and later, for when you returned home. She always said you would, someday."

Home.

Jane walked past her, into the pale, pretty rooms that her mother had kept waiting for her, confident of her return, but dead before she could witness it. Even Mrs Reynolds could not drive away the ghosts here.

"Thank you, Reynolds," she said in a voice hardly recognisable as her own, and turned to look out the window. It was the loveliest view she had yet seen – indeed, Lady Anne had chosen these rooms for exactly that reason.

For a long while, Jane sat motionless near the window, feeling very much loved as the silent serenity of the chamber seemed to wrap around her. She wished Elizabeth were here, to explain what it all meant, and she wished her mother and father were not dead.

This was my home, she thought, and Jenny Darcy, that small, cherished child of five, seemed to cry out - and they took me away!

Fitzwilliam and Georgiana Darcy, at least, ought to have been exhausted from the days of travel; Jane's ability to fall deeply and instantly asleep while rocked and jostled by the movements of a carriage was not one shared by her brother and sister. They were both too highly-strung and too fastidious to rest easily outside the spotless safety of their own beds in their own homes. Every night, they had stopped at an inn; and every night, Georgiana tossed and turned while Darcy laid motionless, arranging plans in between furtive glances at the corners of the room.

As a matter of fact, they were tired; but their minds were far too full for immediate sleep.

Georgiana spent several hours thinking that she had a perfect, lovely sister to go with her perfect, handsome brother. At first it all seemed like a gift from God; then she thought that Jane would always have been with them if she had not been stolen. Perhaps their mother would not have died, either; everybody said she didn't care to live after they stopped trying to find Jane.
Georgiana decided that she disliked the Bennets very much.

Darcy, whose own dislike took the form of an indifference so absolute that it surprised even him, did not waste any decisions on them. He thought of the coming Sunday, when Jane with all her candour and delicacy would become the object of the most impertinent curiosity – in their own chapel! She could ride, he knew; perhaps he should take her around the estate before then. She would need her own horse – had not Carrington mentioned something about a fine palfrey? – and while he was speaking to Carrington, he might as well disabuse him of his notions about his third cousin's uncle's act – a vile, pernicious piece of work –

After several hours, he was finally on the point of falling asleep, when he sat bolt upright.

"Oh, Lord," he said aloud. "Bingley."

Two letters were sent the next day, at no expense to the recipients.

The first began:

My dearest Lizzy,

Fitzwilliam and Georgiana and I arrived safely at Pemberley to-day. Everything is very beautiful and everybody is so kind to me . . .

The other was exceedingly brief by all usual standards.

Bingley:

Forgive me for my delay in returning to enjoy your hospitality at Netherfield. As you can see, I am now at Pemberley and plan to remain so for an indefinite period of time. I do not expect to return south at any point in the immediate future.

I have never had cause to mention to you the peculiar tragedy which befell my family and I eighteen years ago, but I expect you have heard of it. The elder of my sisters, four years and a half my junior, was stolen when we were both children. While in Hertfordshire, I discovered her living in near-ignorance of her condition – this will, I hope, account for certain oddities of behaviour while there. We have both altered in appearance somewhat and did not recognise each other for several weeks.

I have since remedied the situation but feel it best to remain in Derbyshire at present. However, I am sure that she and Georgiana would be pleased if you – and, of course, your sisters, who were such great friends to her while in Hertfordshire – were to join us here.

I am yours &tc,

F Darcy
Chapter 9

"Elizabeth? Elizabeth, are you awake?"

Elizabeth opened her eyes. Chilly sunlight poured through the windows; she made a few swift calculations and scrambled out of bed, just as another tentative knock came at the door.

"Lizzy?"

She rushed to open it. "Cecili - Cecily," she said, blinking in sleepy bewilderment at the dresses draped over her cousin's arm.

"Good morning!" Cecily said brightly. "Oh! Did I wake you? It is nearly - that is, I did not . . . I thought you might not have - might not have been able to bring proper clothes, when you left That Place. The men won't have thought of it; they never do consider that kind of thing, do they?"

"I -" Elizabeth had a sudden vivid image of herself in her most unfashionable Longbourn gown, plain and provincial beside her elegant cousins. Amidst all the grief and bewilderment and apprehension of the moment, she suppressed a wince of pure vanity and glanced from the gowns to Cecily's anxious face. "I hardly know what to say. Thank you - please, come in."

Cecily cheerfully dropped the dresses on one chair and flung herself into another. It was evident that she, at least, had little of the dignity so dear to their other relations. "You are a little taller than I am, so I brought all of my longest gowns. The yellow silk flatters our colouring the most, I think, though the blue is also pretty. I do hope you like them." She beamed at her, unable to restrain a warm, friendly smile that did more to put Elizabeth at ease than all of the others' charm and solicitude.

"Of course I do." Elizabeth smiled back at her. "They are lovely and - and, to be perfectly truthful, I should not at all like to look like a poor relation from a country village."

Cecily laughed delightedly. "You are just like I imagined you would be," she said. "Oh, Elizabeth, I am so glad you are back home!"

Elizabeth, determined to unite truth and civility but unable to quite reciprocate the sentiment, replied, "And I - I am glad that you are here, Cecily."

After a little more desultory conversation, Cecily left her to get dressed, and then returned to accompany her downstairs.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," said Eleanor without enthusiasm. "Lady Ancaster has decided upon today's rôle, so I expect she will wish to see you soon. Good morning, Cecily."

Cecily, surprisingly, accepted this without comment; Elizabeth imagined the loss of husband, daughter, sons, granddaughters, and eyed her cousin with considerable distaste. Eleanor, so exactly what Elizabeth had first imagined Darcy to be - arrogant, disagreeable and ill-tempered - had restored her to all the enjoyment of that original dislike.

For a moment, she felt herself again, the Elizabeth Bennet who had never felt the slightest discomfort in her own skin, nor the slightest doubt of her own judgment, and could almost have thanked her. She laughed inwardly at the idea of it.

Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Milton greeted her in their usual manner - pleasant and insolent,
respectively - and Lord Ancaster nodded in the general direction of her shoulder. Mr Fitzwilliam - James, she reminded herself - smiled gently, asking after her health with real concern.

"I am very well, thank you," she said, and tried not to treat him with particular stiffness. It was difficult; he was her brother, her nearest kin alive in the world. She felt obliged to love him - all the more because he was a kind, sweet-tempered man who ought to be loved by everybody who knew him. Elizabeth did not, and felt cruel and awkward and wished he would demand something of her, show some trace of ordinary selfishness.

He did not, of course.

Despite Cecily's affectionate camaraderie and her own apprehension, Elizabeth could scarcely contain her relief at the dowager's summons, which she obeyed with alacrity. Anything, she thought, was better than the discomfort of the family gathering - Lord Milton's sly digs and Lady Eleanor's silent disapproval almost as painful as James' unassailable worthiness.

Moreover, their grandmother had also demanded Cecily's presence; Elizabeth was only too glad to listen to her cousin's nervous, incoherent prattle as they trailed after the (suitably ancient) servant like the heroines of a novel.

"Miss Fitzwilliam and - er - Miss Fitzwilliam," he declaimed, and left the girls to face the dowager.

Anne, Countess of Ancaster, had been a very fine woman in her day - a leader of fashion, a patroness of artists and musicians whose fame would one day far outstrip her own, and a hostess who had made and destroyed several great statesmen. Now, she was nearly eighty, her body small and thin and wrinkled, her mind all but unchanged from what it had been at sixty-five.

"I - I hope you are well, Grandmama?" said Cecily, uncertainty flickering over her features, and added unnecessarily, "This is Elizabeth - Uncle James' daughter Elizabeth."

"I know quite well who she is," Lady Ancaster said finally, staring at them. She was clearly the source of the steely dark eyes so prevalent throughout the family, and just as clearly had bequeathed little else. Elizabeth felt something almost like relief at the sight of a relation with so little resemblance to herself. "Sit down, girls. I have not seen you in some time; it feels quite like years."

"Well," Cecily said, "as a matter of fact -"

"I hope you have not married yet. I do not understand young ladies these days, marrying straight out of the schoolroom without a thought of the future."

"We have not," said Elizabeth, mouth twitching. Ordinary civilities had exhausted her; eccentricity brought back all her old pleasure in whims and folly.

"I am four-and-twenty, Grandmama," Cecily added; "that is rather more than straight out of the schoolroom."

"Pshaw." Lady Ancaster waved one claw-like hand dismissively. "Four-and-twenty, forsooth! - and Elizabeth younger still! Babes in arms, the both of you. Did Edward steal you?"

"No," said Elizabeth. Glancing around the room, she could not help but notice an abundance of grotesque cherubs, and wondered if her ladyship were responsible for those at Ancaster House. "No, that was somebody else."

"Catherine thinks it was him, but then, one never knows with Catherine. She is such a difficult
child, you know. I am terribly worried about what will become of her. Perhaps it is wrong to say so, but I really do think she would have been much happier as a man. She is always running to me with her gown torn and her knees scraped, crying 'Mama, Edward stole my doll!' "

Cecily and Elizabeth looked at one another, the former resigned, the latter taken aback and - not frightened, but shocked and disturbed. This - Elizabeth could not quite say the word, even to herself - was plainly more than an old woman's caprice. the

"I must do something. It isn't fair, not when she was the old man's darling for his sake."

Elizabeth, despite the much greater concerns of the moment, found herself abruptly preoccupied in trying not to think of Lady Catherine as any man's darling. "It should not be necessary, ma'am," she said after a moment, her voice steady; "my uncle has already agreed to give me back after my birthday."

"Well, that is very good of him. Her body is resilient enough, but the head is porcelain." She continued without a pause, "I hope you have been practising, Cecily. We are quite fortunate in this family, to be handsome and so very talented, but you must not neglect your gifts. The Lord will smite the wasteful."

Cecily winced.

"Then I should have been smitten ten times over," Elizabeth said cheerfully. She could not quite bring herself to look either in the eye. "I am sure I could be very proficient, if only I would take the trouble of practising - but I will not! To think of devoting so much of one's attention to a single thing!"

"Yes, exactly - and Grandmama, I do draw, quite often."

"Scribbles," scoffed Lady Ancaster.

"No, indeed. I could draw Elizabeth and Eleanor for you. Would you not like that?"

The countess hesitated. "Anne's miniature is too old."

"Yes, quite so." Cecily met Elizabeth's alarmed gaze with a slight shake of her head. "She shan't remember, she mouthed.

Words froze in Elizabeth's throat. She looked into the countess' fierce blue eyes, and felt a sudden rush of sympathy with her - with her grandmother, who somehow felt nearer than all the others. It was more than a simple tie of blood, or even of affection; Lady Ancaster was her father's mother. She was the woman whose long-ago choices had made Elizabeth's life possible, who now had no choice but to rely upon the memories and assertions of others.

"Nobody has ever drawn me before," she said lightly. "I am sure it will be a pleasure to sit for you, Cecily." If I am lucky, she thought. Perhaps Eleanor will be busy scolding the poor into peace and harmony, or whatever it is that she does to amuse herself.

Lady Ancaster drifted into even more incoherence, and finally sleep; the servant, who Elizabeth had mentally dubbed Theodore, appeared almost instantly to usher them out. In truth, Cecily and Elizabeth needed no such encouragement.

"Is she truly -" Elizabeth hesitated.

"I do not know; she has been like - this - for as long as I can remember. Edward and Eleanor say she was always eccentric, but something changed after you and Jane were stolen, and then when
Lady Anne died. I know it must not seem like it, but her life has been very hard."

"It does seem like it," said Elizabeth. "I have only lost - well, I cannot imagine what it must be to lose so many people, to outlive one's own children."

"Yes, exactly - you do understand. I should have known that you would." Cecily shook her head. "Perhaps - perhaps you would like to take a walk, outside? It looks clearer now, but we could bring umbrellas in case it rains again. I could show you all the circuits; they are very pretty, even now."

Elizabeth caught Eleanor's distinctive contralto as they approached the parlour. "Oh! I am an inveterate walker, I should like that very much."

She glanced at her watch; it had just struck twelve.

"And the evening and the morning were the first day," she murmured to herself, almost laughing, and ran upstairs to change.

#

The next day, at Pemberley, breakfast was calm and pleasant.

Jane and Darcy, surrounded as they were by fragments of the past, could scarcely keep from asking "do you remember - ?" and telling the stories of their childhood all over again, while Georgiana glanced from one to the other in bemused happiness and tried to catch every word. Darcy found himself cheerfully relating the tale of the first animal they had brought home - a starling - to a captive audience.

"Did you ever see him again?" Georgiana asked wistfully.

"Her, and yes," said Darcy. "You shall not remember when we found her, Jane - you were little more than two years old - but perhaps later? Her nest was in one of the Spanish chestnuts, and sometimes she would come and peck on the window to our nursery."

"Oh! yes. We fed her pieces of our nectarines when Nurse wasn't looking." Jane suddenly sobered. "I wonder what happened to Nurse. She was not a young woman then."

"She lives on the estate," said Darcy, his brows knitting together. "I must ride in that direction to-day, and the day will be clear; perhaps you and Georgiana would care to join me? She would be delighted to see you, I am certain, and I know you ride."

Jane's eyes lit up. "Yes, I do - that would be delightful!"

"Oh," Georgiana said instantly, "I cannot, I - I must practise the harp, but Jane can ride Euterpe. She is my palfrey, very sweet-tempered and obedient."

To Jane, it seemed a very long time since she had been able to ride - to ride properly, for the joy of it, and not simply to travel from one point to another. It was longer still since she had done so with any kind of companionship, as Elizabeth disliked horses on general principle. She thought back, and realised it had not happened since before, when she and Fitzwilliam used to ride about the park on their ponies ("for our health," said he solemnly, his eyes laughing), almost exactly as they were doing now.

Everybody they saw seemed to recognise her immediately, and meet them with pleasure; the tenants they passed called her "Miss Darcy" on sight and bowed as if she were a princess. They brought food to a young crippled girl, who declared that Darcy was a saint and Jane an angel.
Their nurse lived nearby, in a small, comfortable cottage. Her name was actually Mrs Sharpe and she was over eighty years old.

"I have brought my sister to see you, Mrs Sharpe," Darcy said, speaking rather more softly than was his habit, and enunciating even more carefully.

She squinted at Jane's hair.

"I may be old, but that don't mean I've lost my wits altogether," she said reproachfully. "I wasn't born yesterday, sir. You can't mean to be trying to convince me that Miss Darcy isn't as dark a creature as her ladyship."

Jane stepped forward before Darcy could speak, her eyes wide and eager. " 'Tis Jenny, Nurse," she said, then added in her gentle voice; "Miss Darcy, that is, not Miss Georgiana. You cared for me when I was small; it was a very long time ago, but perhaps you still remember?"

"Miss Darcy? Miss Darcy that was?" She fumbled for her spectacles. "Gracious, child, as if I could forget. Sit down, let me look at you."

Jane promptly obeyed, and Mrs Sharpe, after peering into her face, dashed a suspicious dampness out of her dim eyes. "Well, that's not a face I ever thought to see again - or anybody but your poor mama, I wager. You're not sickly now?"

"I do not believe so," said Jane.

"She had a very bad cold not a month ago," Darcy said sternly.

Mrs Sharpe cackled. "Fifteen years if it's been a day, isn't it, sir?"

"Eighteen," said Darcy, looking at his sister in some bemusement. She had grown into a woman, of course, and developed an air of vaguely maternal concern, but otherwise she seemed very much the same Jane she had always been. Her expressions and mannerisms were so similar to those in his memories, even the sweet, mild intonation of her voice. It had been almost two decades and already they were instinctively slipping back into the habits of childhood, as if nothing had changed.

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps - in essentials - nothing had.

They sat with Mrs Sharpe for almost an hour while she reminisced. Despite her age, her memory had not faded in the slightest; in fact, she remembered the young Master and Miss Darcy rather better than they did themselves.

"You were the best-natured children in the world," she said firmly.

Jane and Darcy flushed.

"And you, miss, the easiest to care for. I never saw a more obedient child."

"Oh, no," said Jane, turning a still brighter scarlet. "I am sure my brother -"

Darcy laughed. "I cannot take that honour from you, Jane; I only truly obeyed rules insofar as I agreed with the reasons for them. The rest I bent into some very peculiar shapes. You remember, ma'am."

"Sharp enough to cut yourself one day - I'm sure I told you so a dozen times if I told you once. You were a good boy all the same - very well-mannered and a nice even temper most of the time,
and generous-hearted. If there's anything I can't abide, it's meanness in a child. Nine times out of ten, they grow into the worst sort of men and women. Why, sir, I don't think I heard you raise your voice more than twice in all those years - and you, Miss Darcy, you were as sweet as any girl could be, no matter how feverish you got."

The old nurse finally grew sleepy, and sent them off with something of her old brusque manner. Darcy and Jane tactfully ignored the tears rolling down her weathered cheeks.

Darcy suggested that they return to Pemberley, and Jane, realising that the morning had all but passed away, gladly assented.

She missed Elizabeth terribly, and in a different way Mr Bennet, and yet, as they rode home, she felt almost happy.
Chapter 10

After that first day, Elizabeth walked out whenever the weather permitted. Cecily sometimes joined her, cheerfully pointing out the best paths during this time of year, but she was not a great walker and, though she never said so, much preferred to remain in the gardens or even in the house itself. Elizabeth did not mind; she almost loved Cecily already, but her meanderings about the countryside had always been an opportunity to recover herself in quiet peace. Little of either could be found in Cecily's company.

It was on one of these occasions, as she returned to the house, that Elizabeth overheard her cousin Edward say:

"Dear God, what a tragedy!" After a moment, he added, "Was it necessary to interrupt a really enjoyable quarrel for that? Eleanor and I were just beginning to sink our teeth into it."

"Is it necessary for you to conceal the slightest trace of consideration for anybody beyond yourself?" cried Cecily.

Lord Milton, for once, fell silent - Elizabeth suspected out of sheer surprise.

"Of course Elizabeth has clothes," Lady Eleanor said. "She brought a trunk -"

"She has nothing new - just what she had from those people. You must see that Elizabeth cannot wear those! She would look more like Lady Ancaster's maid than her granddaughter!"

Elizabeth flushed, expecting her ladyship's usual sneering disdain, and quickened her pace. Instead, Eleanor said sharply and disapprovingly, "My father did not order any clothes for her? Edward did not think of it? Did they find a proper maid?"

"I am sure they meant well, Ella," said Cecily, faltering a little, "it is only that they - they are -"

"Men!"

Edward's yawn, and his drawling reply, were blessedly faint: "I was the smallest bit preoccupied, Eleanor."

Eleanor said something, but Elizabeth could not easily make it out and did not try. She instead hurried away, her mind whirling. - In the last several days, it had become evident that Cecily lived in awe of the other Fitzwilliams; despite the evidence of her own ears, Elizabeth found it difficult to credit that Cecily had actually confronted Edward and Eleanor, of all the cousins, over such a trivial matter.

Cecily, she thought, was very easy to love; not like James, exuding worthiness from every pore, but constantly demonstrating the same sweet, affectionate nature Elizabeth had always so prized in Jane, yet unlike her in every other possible respect.

Much to Elizabeth's astonishment, the matter did not end there. Lord Ancaster - who thus far had scarcely spoken to her, or anybody but Edward - summoned her to his study the following afternoon. Elizabeth, a little apprehensive and very curious, entered the room to find herself facing another young woman - by her voice and apparel, a girl from the village.

"Ah, Elizabeth," said the earl, addressing her left arm in his usual, vaguely amiable, fashion. "This
is Ellen Brown, from the village. I hope she is suitable to you?"

Elizabeth hesitated. "I, well - er - I beg your pardon?"

"We have found her references exemplary," Lord Ancaster continued, "and your cousin Cecilia is very satisfied with her sister's service."

"I see. No, I have no objections."

With a nod at the fender, Lord Ancaster dismissed Brown and coughed. "Er. I also understand that, er, there is some question about your, er, gowns and - er - such things."

Elizabeth flushed scarlet. "Oh! I do not - that is - Cecily has kindly offered me enough for the duration of my . . . residence here."

This, to her surprise, roused his lordship to something like animation. "Nonsense!" cried he indignantly. "My niece shall certainly not go about in others' cast-offs. No, there is a dressmaker in Allingham. It may not quite be London, but will do for the present. My mother is very fond of that sort of thing; I am sure she will be only too pleased to accompany you. Expense is not an object - you must be seen to be a Miss Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then shut it again. Once she had regained her voice, she said, "You are very generous, sir," and made her escape.

Cecily, to whom she related the conversation in full, declaimed any praise for the latest changes in Elizabeth's circumstances. "I did hardly anything," she insisted. "I knew about your Brown, and since you needed someone pretty well immediately - well, I thought of her, and I told my uncle. Really, though, that is all, and I am sure somebody else would have thought of it." She paused, then added with a mischievous smile, "Does my uncle really expect Grandmama to take you to Mrs Martin's shop?"

"Yes, I think so." Elizabeth somehow felt that she could love Lady Ancaster more easily than anybody else, except perhaps Cecily, but that did not brighten the prospect of an outing with her. Impulsively, she turned to her cousin and said, "Oh, Cecily, you will come with us, will you not? I shan't be able to keep a straight face by myself."

"I am not sure how much help I can be with that," said Cecily, "but of course I shall come."

They called it the expedition and by the time their grandmother summoned Elizabeth downstairs, had laughed themselves into a degree of complaisance. Elizabeth was almost looking forward to the mixture of anxiety and hilarity which seemed sure to follow.

Lady Ancaster, standing beside Edward and looking disconcertingly sane, said with perfect serenity, "Good morning, Elizabeth. Why, you already seem taller. Have you grown?"

"A little, ma'am, in a manner of speaking," said Elizabeth, "though I think it is mainly the effect of my gown. Do you agree, cousin?"

"Oh, quite so," Lord Milton replied, running his fingers over the seal of a letter. "I do not imagine you have grown an inch since yesterday."

"Are you to accompany us, girl?" Lady Ancaster asked Cecily. "Your mother will be pleased."

"Her mother is dead," said Lord Milton.

The countess blinked, then shook her head, as if tossing aside a stray thought. "Of course she is.
They died in Portugal, all of them together; James and Henry, and Laura and Cecilia. Laura was your mother, Elizabeth. Do you remember her?"

"Of course she does not," he said.

"I thought you mightn't, after all these years." Her brow furrowed. "It has been many years, has it not? Since Catherine took Laura's doll?"

"Yes," Elizabeth replied, almost gently; "that was a very long time ago, now."

"Ah. Well, that does explain a great deal. Cecily, child, you cannot stand there shilly-shallying the entire day. Are you to come with us, or not?"

"Yes, Elizabeth wants me," Cecily declared. Then a flicker of uncertainty crossed her face. "At least . . ."

"I do," Elizabeth said firmly.

As they rode through the village, she looked about interestedly. It was not like Longbourn or even Meryton, but larger and more prosperous. There was none of the comfortable familiarity she recalled; the villagers' manner towards them was a mixture of respect, deference and avid curiosity.

Mrs Martin, a large, cheerful woman with a loud voice, took one glance at Lady Ancaster and fell silent, almost immovable from astonishment. Then she smiled even more broadly and bustled over to greet them.

"These are my granddaughters, who have been returned to us," Lady Ancaster said.

Mrs Martin's eyes widened, but she confined herself to a polite: "Oh, isn't that nice?"

Elizabeth was certain the news would be all over the village within an hour after their departure.

"Very," replied the countess, in a tone which could only be called dry. Then she detailed Elizabeth's requirements with only the occasional segue into the past, Mrs Martin hastening to agree with every word and her granddaughters trailing after her in some bemusement.

"My grandmother seems in - better health today," Elizabeth whispered.

"Some days are better than others, but . . ." Cecily shrugged, looking every bit as taken aback as Elizabeth felt. "I do not know. Perhaps it helps her to think about something that isn't tragic."

Lady Ancaster gave a cry of delight. "Girls, come and look at this. Is not it lovely?" She smiled at Mrs Martin. "My daughter Anne has a gown in something quite similar, and she is always very admired."

Mrs Martin swallowed. "Ah," she said. "Yes. I have heard that."

Elizabeth and Cecily gave her commiserating smiles and examined the fabric.

"I really would prefer yellow, ma'am," Elizabeth said.

Lady Ancaster's brows lifted. "Elizabeth, dear, white would suit your colouring much better. Catherine and Anne -"

"White is ever so much smarter than yellow," added Mrs Martin.
Elizabeth's fondness for the luxuries of life had never overwhelmed her good taste. She imagined the sumptuous fabric cut into a day gown, and set her teeth.

Cecily, after one glance at the obstinate expressions on her relations' faces, hastily intervened. "Oh, you cannot really think that you will need only the one dress, Elizabeth. White is always elegant, it would be perfect for a more formal gown, with the yellow more suitable for ordinary wear. You do remember that lovely yellow muslin you made for me last month, Mrs Martin? Elizabeth was just admiring it yesterday."

Elizabeth's mouth quirked.

Fortunately, the young ladies' tastes were in nearly perfect accord, which made Cecily an even more desirable companion, for this sort of expedition, than Jane had ever been. She took a childish pleasure in pretty things, while her whimsical, unaffected ways kept her from giving offence. As they made their choices, Elizabeth was astonished to find herself giggling like a girl just out, attracting the attention of Lady Ancaster and several other patrons. Their grandmother smiled serenely before continuing to outfit her in a manner befitting Miss Fitzwilliam of . . . Elizabeth did not even know where to finish the thought.

By the time they made their leave, Elizabeth's head was full of muslin and silk, but not so much that she failed to see her cousin lingering at Mrs Martin's table. They seemed to be talking lightly, Cecily's hand resting on a folded letter. The dressmaker snatched it up as soon as Cecily's back was turned, and Elizabeth caught a glimpse of the seal.

As they followed their grandmother to the carriage, Cecily's face looked pinched and unhappy for a moment. The expression was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

"Cecily," Elizabeth whispered, "did you just give Mrs Martin Lord Milton's letter?"

"Lord Milton? Oh, Edward. Yes, he told me -" Her eyes widened. "Oh! I was not to mention it to anybody. I don't know why, but - oh, I am sorry." She looked plaintively at Elizabeth, clearly longing to divulge the secret as much as Elizabeth wanted to hear it; but both had too much natural delicacy to press the matter any further, and after a brief, awkward silence, Cecily began chattering about the beautiful set of pearls Elizabeth had, apparently, inherited from her mother.

"They say Lord Cardwell spent five hundred pounds on our mothers' trousseaux, even though the wedding was so dreadfully quick and he hardly saw them afterwards. Sometimes I wonder why Papa and Uncle James married well at all - it's not as if they cared sixpence about such things."

Elizabeth felt, for the first time, a small thread connecting her to those long-dead Fitzwilliams who had given her life. She slowed her stride to match Cecily's shorter one, and said impulsively, "Tell me about my father, please, and yours, and our mothers. I am not like Jane, I cannot remember anything."

The Fitzwilliam name, or the Fitzwilliam money, ensured that Elizabeth had a new gown by Sunday, when they all sallied forth to hear James preach.

The church was filled almost to overflowing, and Miss Butler, Mr Talbot, and Miss Ponsonby - who had, for twenty years, excused themselves from rising or kneeling on account of feeble knees and general decrepitude - sprang up as soon as the psalm was given out. The rest of the congregation followed suit, turning as one to gawk at Elizabeth.

Lord Milton loudly observed that the entire parish had evidently been struck by a fit of piety.
Colonel Fitzwilliam glared at him, and Cecily, who was seated on his other side, jabbed him in the ribs. Elizabeth, ignoring both the squabbling of her cousins and the stares of the impertinent, kept her eyes fixed on James. - It had been a good sermon, insofar as she could tell - she knew herself not to have been as attentive as she ought, but as she had been much more so than nearly everyone else, she felt somewhat vindicated.

She had only a moment's notice before the others swarmed about, offering congratulations and trying to get a good look at Elizabeth, while Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Milton did their best to frustrate the latter object. Elizabeth's mouth soon ached from smiling so long, answering queries, and struggling to keep track of names and faces. The only ones she could clearly recall were their closest neighbours, the Brookes, and Mr Lynch, a bold queer-looking Irish gentleman who gripped her hand and stared into her face until James and Edward gave him a sharp look.

"Never mind," whispered Cecily. "This will be old news as soon as another scandal comes along."

Eleanor, in a tone that was evidently meant to be reassuring, said, "Never mind him, Elizabeth - he is only the son of an Irish viscount. You can do much better."

She looked between them, Eleanor and Cecily and James on one side, Lord Milton and Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Ancaster on the other, and wondered if this was what her life would be now - pulled between the eccentricites of her relatives in an endless succession of busy nothings.
For Darcy, those first few weeks passed in a blur of activity. There were all the usual duties of the estate and of his position; the friendly curiosity of the neighbourhood to be contended with, at church and at Pemberley; and, of course, arrangements to be made for Jane's comfort.

While it never occurred to him to ask what she required, he and Georgiana offered everything they could think of. The latter, at first, was more successful; Jane cheerfully accompanied her to shops, sat for drawings and seemed happy to remain still for hours, listening to Georgiana play and sing.

"I have no ability myself," she confided to Darcy, with a rueful smile, "but I do love music."

He looked at her and tried to think of something to say. "You are not completely without talent," he said finally. "I have heard you sing at church."

Jane, sufficiently acquainted with his manner of speaking to take this as intended, smiled even more brightly. "Thank you."

For himself, Darcy found that this sister had a rare facility for contentment, neither demanding nor wishing anything to improve it. He could offer her little but a few childish memories, protection from ambitious young men and their equally ambitious mothers, and Pemberley. Even the last of these had, at present, little to recommend itself; the woods were bare and desolate at this time of year, the grounds covered in snow, even the stream frozen as often as not.

Jane might have disagreed, but he had not yet been driven to discussing the weather with her - and as she was not a great walker and his stables had few mounts appropriate to a lady, she only left the house when Georgiana's palfrey could be spared.

This, at least, he could remedy. A cousin of his mother's, Lord Carrington, took justifiable pride in the horses he bred, and lived scarcely a stone's-throw away. Darcy sent a letter to him, detailing his requirements and pointedly inviting him to call at Pemberley.

Carrington accordingly came, and in common with almost the entirety of their sex, fell into incoherent babble after one glance at Jane. Darcy took him off to the study as soon as civility allowed.

After a few moments of marked inattention, Carrington said, "That was our little Jenny?"

"That was Jane, my sister," said Darcy, enunciating slowly and carefully for the benefit of Carrington's diminished faculties. "She is fond of riding, and I wish to provide a horse for her. The price is of no object."

This seemed to penetrate Carrington's daze. "Price? I should think not! It will be an honour to provide some small convenience for my cousin."

Darcy stared. Then he smiled very pleasantly. "It would indeed; sadly, I did not offer it to you."

"I should very much like to - welcome her to the family. It would hardly be inappropriate to offer her a gift."

Darcy brought him to see reason, of course - it took about ten minutes, and in the end he bought his sister a fine mare for a quarter of its worth. His scheme had not extended that far - or indeed,
any farther than introducing Jane to the relation least likely to oppress her spirits. Nevertheless he was pleased, and reflected with some complaisance that his plans always seemed to accomplish more than he intended.

He presented the mare to Jane as soon as possible, with no particular pomp or ceremony, and started at her reaction. He had expected - hoped - she would be pleased, but it was nothing extraordinary. She would have likely had two or three by now, if those detestable Bennets had not forced her into a life far inferior to that which she deserved; instead she wept with gratitude because he, her own brother, had provided her with a horse.

Sometimes, he thought it fortunate Mrs Bennet was already widowed.

Elizabeth wanted to love her family.

She could not say exactly what she did feel. It was odd and thrilling to pass a portrait and see her own eyes set in another's face. Cecily, more like a younger sister than a cousin four years her senior, was already dear to her. Elizabeth had never before felt herself a steadying influence on anyone. She had tried with Kitty and Lydia, to no avail, but Cecily was older, and felt the weight of who and what she was far more keenly than they ever had - more keenly than Elizabeth did, for that matter.

Yet she could not feel she knew the others half so well. James' self-command never wavered, and for all his kindness and consideration, he seemed almost unreal - somebody's idea of the perfect brother or the perfect vicar, rather than an actual person. Eleanor - well, too little could not be said on that subject. She scarcely saw the earl or his sons.

Oh, they were all her blood, and the ties of kinship could not be ignored; yet, without the habits of dependence, the connections that were built through years and years of shared experiences, it was impossible to feel quite what she ought. She missed her camaraderie with her father - with Mr Bennet - laughing over silly books, or games of chess, or some sly, witty joke that only they would understand. At the same time, even her grief, even her memories, were tainted by the knowledge of what he had been and what he had done.

She missed Jane, too, even more than she had expected. Elizabeth had always recognised and praised her sister's serenity, candour and generosity of spirit, but she had not realised how much she also relied upon them. Jane's frequent letters could hardly fill the breach. Indeed, in some respects, they made matters worse, for Jane was so cheerful and encouraging, so obviously content in her life, that Elizabeth felt her own ingratitude all the more keenly.

I am trying to be happy, she wrote to Jane, but I do not quite know how. I have never needed to try before.

Elizabeth looked at the letter, longing to pour out her heart - but not like this, and not when it could only spoil her happiness. Thankfully, Lord Ancaster was generous with his paper; she crumpled it up and threw it in the fire.

Besides, her life was not all grief and apathy and discomfort. She could easily think of other things - absurdities which had delighted her, hours of gaiety and laughter with Cecily, even Lord Milton's witty incivility. Of course, now there was nobody to share the absurdities with, while Cecily's exuberance and the general discord forced her into weary solitude.

Then the weather took a sharp turn for the worse. Nobody was permitted to venture outside, not even the gentlemen - and certainly not Elizabeth. Her usual refuges within the house always seemed to be occupied, the cousins unable to go anywhere without stumbling upon one another.
Elizabeth's spirits were then so low, her patience so exhausted, that she really felt she could not endure a day more of it. Yet the next day came, and she hurried to the library only to overhear Edward and Eleanor's voices raised in another quarrel.

Elizabeth ran away. Her legs seemed to move of their own volition; she had no idea of a destination, no thought of anything but getting away, and could never remember how she reached a part of the house she had not seen since her first week at Houghton.

She paused for breath, came to her senses, and was promptly furious with herself for having been so silly.

"Good morning, Miss Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth's head snapped up. Lady Ancaster's wizened old servant stood before her, his expression grimly pleased. "Theodore," she said blankly, and realised that she had never been told his proper name. He looked slightly bewildered, but continued,

"Her ladyship will be very pleased to see you."

"Oh! I did not - " Even then, Elizabeth could not bring herself to selfishly disregard the feelings of anyone. "I did not know if she could receive visitors today."

"She is in excellent health today."

Elizabeth swallowed. "Well, I - please take me to her, then."

She followed him reluctantly, her imagination conjuring up scenes more bewildering and wearying than any she had lately endured. She really felt that she would like to sleep for a fortnight.

"Miss Fitzwilliam, madam," said Theodore, ushering Elizabeth into the countess's parlour.

"Oh! How delightful!" she cried, her face alighting with pleasure.

"Good morning, Grandmama," said Elizabeth.

She forced herself to smile, almost overcome with pity. Provoking as the last week had been, to spend all her days in solitude, never setting eyes on anyone but the servants - how much worse must that be?

Elizabeth's gaze had been fixed firmly on the floor, but she steeled herself to meet Lady Ancaster's clouded one.

She almost stared. Her grandmother's grey eyes were clear and lucid.

"My dear, you are very flushed. Are you feeling quite well?"

"Oh - yes," she stammered. "I - I must have been too long by the fire. My health is excellent, ma'am."

"That is a great comfort to me." Lady Ancaster dismissed Theodore, then smiled at Elizabeth. "Now you must make yourself very comfortable, and tell me how you are settling in at Houghton. This all must have been a great shock to you."

Elizabeth perched on the edge of a chair. "I - well - yes, of course, but everybody has been so kind . . ."
"Oh?" said Lady Ancaster serenely. Well, that is a very pleasant surprise."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Love is not always blind, my dear." The countess' eyes twinkled. "Of course, our family has many fine qualities. Undoubtedly, they all mean well - but I would not expect that to often translate into real, active benevolence. It so rarely does, you know."

Elizabeth dropped her eyes. "Yes, I know."

"There is James, of course. He does have a kind nature - but then, it is often crippled by his shyness. No, he would not dare much towards you - afraid of appearing to presume, I expect."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "I never thought - he is reserved, of course, but I did not believe him shy."

Lady Ancaster considered. "Reserved? Oh, no, I should not say that. He is very much drawn to people, very friendly when his timidity is forgotten. Perhaps you are thinking of Fitzwilliam; I often confuse them for one another."

Elizabeth felt more bewildered than ever. "James and - Richard?"

"Oh, no!" Her grandmother laughed. "Fitzwilliam - I know you have met him, he said so in his letters. Why, he was the one to discover you - ah! now I understand. I meant your cousin Darcy; Fitzwilliam is his Christian name."

"I see." Darcy certainly seemed more akin to her brother than careless, ebullient Richard, but anybody would be. She could not imagine mistaking him for James, of all people. Finally, she said, "I was thinking more of Cecily, ma'am. She all but worships the ground Edward and Eleanor walk on, but I - I accidentally overheard her censure them over my clothes, and she procured an excellent maid within days."

"Ah! Yes, I can see it of her. Cecily is - " Lady Ancaster paused, and seemed to change her mind - "very fond of you, is she not?"

Elizabeth smiled. "I believe she is."

"That would make all the difference. Well, for your sake, I am glad that somebody is thinking of these things, that you are not greatly distressed by all that has happened."

"I - " Elizabeth flushed, her eyes dropping to the floor. She lifted them with a sudden rush of anxiety. "I am trying not to be, madam. Sometimes it is more difficult than at others."

Lady Ancaster's customary serenity shifted into a sort of sorrowful compassion. She reached out and took Elizabeth's hand between her own. "Oh, my dear girl. I am so sorry."

Elizabeth smiled shakily. "You need not be; nobody could be less at fault for this entire affair than you, ma'am."

"That would not prevent my feeling it," Lady Ancaster said, "even if it were true; but it is not. This particular honour, I am afraid, belongs to my grandchildren - all of them." Her grip tightened about Elizabeth's hand. "I insist that you listen to me, while I can still make myself understood. You have obligations of obedience and gratitude, and I would not have you forget them, but happiness is not a debt you owe to anybody. In the course of a month, you have lost your home, two sets of parents and a sister. You have as much right to grieve as any of us - and we have never stopped."
"I am not like that. I have always been happy," said Elizabeth in a low voice. "It has always been my nature to be happy. I can laugh myself out of anything."

She saw tears fall on to her grandmother's frail, wrinkled hand and realised she was crying. "I am sorry. I do not mean to - it is just that I want to go home." She paused. "That is terribly silly. I have only ever lived in other people's houses."

"Not at all," said Lady Ancaster, discreetly offering a handkerchief.

Elizabeth scrubbed at her eyes. "I could laugh it off, if it were just one thing. Instead, I am so tired, all the time. Everybody I know is gone. I cannot remember anything, and I cannot escape any of it for a single moment. It is like the starling said: I can't get out - I can't get out."

The words seem to hang in the air, echoing in Elizabeth's ears. She raised horrified eyes to her grandmother.

"Yes," Lady Ancaster said softly, "It is hard, is not it?"

In Derbyshire, too, the weather grew cold and bitter. Darcy and his sisters had become accustomed to riding out together, and they were reluctant to give it up.

Still, they accepted the change with good enough grace; it was nothing very terrible, after all, to be spared the prying calls of their neighbours for a fortnight. Jane, who had never in her life so much as entered a kitchen, let alone managed one, found that her new responsibilities came easily when learnt in peaceful isolation, while Georgiana was always happiest amongst her family alone.

Darcy, for his part, had so much to do - and found other people so trying, in general - that he felt almost as glad of the respite as Georgiana. He had a sister to instruct, to plan for, and to become acquainted with; he wished to make her at ease while also making her understand her responsibilities.

Half the time, they seemed to fall naturally into their old childish relationship and habits; he led, and she followed; she fussed, and he scolded; he smiled, and so did she. During the other half, however, they were almost strangers - a grown man and woman, too quiet and reserved to know how to fill the long silences, trying to do the work of eighteen years in a matter of weeks.

Familiarity would come with time, he decided; and indeed, they grew more comfortable, and had more to say, with each day that passed. And finally, the odd constraint between them disappeared, after the storm passed and - of all things! - a letter from Bingley arrived.

It had, apparently, been misdirected to Pendleton and then Pembury - which, in retrospect, Darcy thought he ought to have expected. Bingley's delight at the good news, his compliments to Miss Darcy and Miss Georgiana, and his cheerful acceptance of Darcy's invitation, took over an hour to decipher. Darcy smiled, shook his head, and decided to inform his sisters of their expected guests.

Georgiana, somewhat to his surprise, was practising alone in her favourite parlour.

He glanced around. "Georgiana? Where is Jane? - I expected to find her with you."

"Upstairs, I think - she said she needed to write some letters." She studied her music. "Oh, 'tis the left hand! Now I understand!"

Jane was, indeed, upstairs, sitting in the pale, delicate room their mother had prepared for her, opening and closing drawers. "Fitzwilliam!" she cried, her eyes shining as she caught sight of him.
It struck him, for the first time, that she liked him. Darcy, who from quite early in his life had neither known nor cared what anybody thought of him, felt awkward, embarrassed, and immoderately pleased.

"Good afternoon, Jane," he said, still flushed. "I - er - wished to inform you that - that I have invited Mr Bingley and his sisters to come to Pemberley, not long after Christmas. I hope that is satisfactory to you?"

Inexplicably, she, too, coloured. "Oh! yes. Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley were so kind and agreeable - and Mr Bingley too."

A dozen sharp replies sprang to his mind; Darcy firmly suppressed them all. "Yes, he is. Er - forgive me, but are you looking for something? I should know where it is; my mother used to spend hours here, and I often stayed with her. Nothing significant has been changed since she died."

"Oh! It is nothing, really; the maid said there should be fresh paper here, but I could not find any."

"It used to be kept in the right drawer." He walked over to the writing table, and reached inside. "Ah, yes, it had slid back."

"Thank you! I worry so much about Lizzy, you see, that I -"

As he lifted several pages out, something else fell to the floor.

"What is that?"

"Letters," said Darcy, bending down to pick them up. They were old, but still sealed, and bound together with a faded, fraying ribbon. All were addressed simply to Jane.

After one long moment, he placed them in her hands.

"Did - did my mother . . .?" Jane's eyes widened, her fingers curling about the letters."

"I presume so. That is, at any rate, her handwriting; I should know it anywhere." He coughed. "Er - I shall leave you to read in peace, then."

"No!" She clutched his arm. "Fitzwilliam, you cannot - please stay with me. I cannot face them by myself."

"Very well." He paused, examining her strained, white face. "Would you like me to read them to you?"

She relaxed her grip on him, scrubbing at her cheeks like a child. "Yes. Yes, I would. Thank you!"

Darcy could not quite look at her. He gazed steadily at his mother's letter, then cleared his throat. "My dearest Jane . . ."

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