"She soon learnt that they were indebted for their present good understanding to the efforts of his aunt, who did call on him in her return through London..." (Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*, Ch 58).

Fitzwilliam Darcy stood before the hearth in the study of his London townhouse, one arm on the mantel as he stared into the roaring flames. They did nothing to dispel the cold that had settled within him.

He thought again of the letter that lay on his desk, the happy scrawl he had received days ago from Bingley, announcing his engagement and asking Darcy to stand up with him at the wedding. Darcy knew he must respond soon; indeed, an answer was past due, and if he delayed any longer, Bingley was well within his rights to take it as an insult.

Darcy's breath caught painfully at the thought of sitting down to write his congratulations and the acceptance he knew he must send, for he could not refuse to stand up with his friend. Was it possible for one's heart to physically twist in one's chest? It certainly felt as though it was.

He was happy for Bingley; truly, he was, but how was he to go and wish the man joy, to be among Bingley's new family, to look upon Elizabeth and act as though he were unaffected? How was he to stand by and smile as Bingley's happiness was secured, while the sole, completely unattainable source of his own smilingly attended her sister, tormenting him with her very presence?

His fists clenched. It was no more than he deserved. The hell he inhabited was of his own making. It would not do to forget that.
There was a commotion in the hall, and he heard several raised but indistinguishable voices. He half-turned to frown at the door when he heard Dawson shout, "You must not, your ladyship! He is not to be disturbed!"

The doorknob rattled, and Darcy had a fleeting moment to be grateful he had locked the door before a very familiar voice sharply replied, "Nonsense! He will see me. Darcy! Darcy, I know you are in there! I must speak with you, this instant!"

He allowed himself to briefly close his eyes and sigh in frustration before he crossed to the door. Opening it, he stood firmly in the doorway. His aunt took a step forward and stopped abruptly when he showed no sign of moving.

"Lady Catherine." He bowed respectfully. "What a pleasant surprise."

"I must speak with you!" she repeated. She took another half a step forward and stopped again, staring up at him in surprise when he still did not move. "This instant."

"Certainly. I would be happy to speak with you in the drawing room." He was not about to allow her into his private sanctuary. He gestured to a waiting footman. "Robert will show you in, and I shall be with you momentarily."

Already at her full height, she drew herself up even higher, and Darcy had to cough to stifle his sudden laughter. She looked like some sort of absurd, affronted bird. With a disdainful sniff, she stalked toward the drawing room, ignoring his footman.

Darcy turned to Dawson. The butler was ashen. "I am terribly sorry, sir. I tried to stop her -- "

"Lady Catherine in high dudgeon is quite unstoppable, Dawson. One can only hope to slow her."

"Nevertheless -- "

"There is no need for apology. There is, however, a great need for tea in the absence of something stronger. Will you please ask Mrs Davis to have it brought to the drawing room?"

"At once, sir." Dawson withdrew to attend to his request, and Darcy drew a deep, fortifying breath and strode after his aunt.

She was, of course, already seated in the most ornate, and therefore the most uncomfortable, chair in the room. Choosing a vastly more comfortable chair, he seated himself near her.

"Lady Catherine, it is most unusual for you to be out of Kent at this time of year. What brings you to London?"

"Where is Georgiana?" she demanded.

He took another deep breath and forced himself to answer calmly. "She is at Pemberley. She much prefers the quiet of Derbyshire to the teeming crush of town, just as her brother does."

"Hmm!" Lady Catherine sniffed. "At least she will not yet have been exposed to this nonsense."

Before Darcy could question his aunt further, Mrs Davis entered with tea. He waited impatiently while it was poured and served, and even more impatiently while his aunt corrected and scolded Mrs Davis on the manner in which it was served and freely gave her opinions on his china, the quality of the tea and of his servants, and the furnishings and fittings of the drawing room. When he was finally able to dismiss the servants with a nod, his housekeeper gave him a very grateful
"Now," he said when they were alone, taking a bracing sip of tea and wishing once again for something stronger. "It is clear that you are upset about something. What is it that troubles you?"

"Reports of a most alarming nature have reached me, nephew. You must act to stop them now, before they can be spread any further. The reputation of Pemberley and your very name depend upon it!"

Darcy blinked, surprised. "Indeed?"

"This could never have happened if you had not been spending so much time with that Bingley. Really, Darcy, he is a tradesman's son, and completely unsuitable as an acquaintance for someone of your station. You will never be taken seriously among the ton if you do not drop him."

Darcy clenched his jaw and pursed his lips to keep his ire from spilling forth. Unfortunately, his aunt took his silence as encouragement to continue.

"You should have dropped him years ago, and now, between him and that scheming, artful family, you will be ruined! To think I offered that deceitful girl the hospitality of my home. A viper in my very bosom! How is this to be borne?"

"I am sorry, Lady Catherine. I am afraid I am not following you. Are you referring to the Bingleys?" he asked in confusion. As far as he knew, Lady Catherine had never met Caroline Bingley.

"Of course I am not referring to them! I am talking about that impertinent, disgraceful, disrespectful, brazen chit of a country nobody, Elizabeth Bennet!"

The words struck him like a blow, and Darcy nearly dropped his teacup. "I beg your pardon?"

"That appalling girl and her shameful family have been spreading vile rumours, Darcy. They have told their entire acquaintance that you have offered for her and been accepted. You! My nephew, descended from an unimpeachable and ancient lineage on one side and from nobility on the other. To lower yourself in such a base and humiliating fashion, and with such a girl as an object! She is nobody!"

Darcy was reeling, and he offered a brief prayer of thanks that he was already seated. He took another small sip of tea to ease his suddenly dry throat. "I assure you, your ladyship, there is no engagement."

"Do you imagine that I believed there was? It is in every way impossible!"

"As that is so, I wonder that you took the trouble to come so far to warn me."

Lady Catherine eyed him over the rim of her teacup. "That is exactly what that horrid girl said."

An overpowering feeling of dread and foreboding began to steal over him. "What do you mean? Who said?"

"Elizabeth Bennet!"

"You have seen her?" he asked sharply. "You have talked to her of this?"

"Of course I have seen her! After Mr Collins dutifully informed me of the spread of these shocking and unfounded reports, I went to Hertfordshire expressly to put this matter to rest. I met
with her on that ridiculously small plot of land her father calls an estate."

"You confronted her in her own home?" His voice was steady again, but icy horror slid down his spine. Elizabeth must certainly wish never to see him again, and he could not blame her, but he would not rest until he had found a way to apologize to her.

"How else was I to discover the truth? I could not allow this rumour to continue unchecked!"

Never, in all of the wanton impropriety her family had displayed, had any of them done anything near to ambushing him in his own home and spewing hatred and vitriol at him, as he was sure his aunt must have done. The only real abuse he had ever received from them had been at Elizabeth's hands, and well-deserved. It was true that her younger sister had eloped, but his had nearly done the same. Georgiana had been but fifteen, and Mrs Wickham sixteen, at the time of their transgressions; Lady Catherine had no such excuse for her behaviour. How in God's name had he ever had the temerity to call Elizabeth's family ill-mannered? He curled his hands around his teacup to keep from wrapping them around his aunt's throat.

Meddlesome, interfering baggage of a woman! How dare you! "And did you receive confirmation of your suspicions?" he asked coolly. "Did Miss Bennet and her family admit to such machinations?"

"Of course she did not, you foolish boy!" she cried. Darcy bristled but held his tongue, and she continued. "She claims never to have even heard them, and she refused to confirm or deny that you have offered for her!"

Elizabeth had not laughed in his aunt's face at such a suggestion, nor had she openly declared him to be the last man in the world she would ever marry. What could it mean?

"...and she refused to admit that she has attempted to draw you in, to infatuate you with all her arts and allurements!"

She had bewitched him, it was true, with her boundless beauty, her sharp wit and her liveliness, her goodness and her playful spirit, and he no longer believed he had any wish to be free of her, but there was nothing artful or cunning about her, and he could only imagine how such an accusation must have angered and mortified her.

*I am so sorry, Elizabeth,* he thought in raw anguish. *I can never make this right.*

"I informed her of your engagement to Anne -- "

"*What?* Lady Catherine!" he cried, horrified and aghast at the enormity of his aunt's presumption. Whatever progress he might have made in changing Elizabeth's opinion of him must be completely blasted now. *She must think me the most dishonourable of rakes! Only a cad would offer for her while his honour is engaged to another!*

"Do not you use that reproachful tone with me, nephew! If you had done your duty and announced your engagement to my daughter, you would not now be in this mess. I spoke of it only to prove to that dreadful girl the futility of all her plotting. But she would not see it! She had no respect for an arrangement that has been in place for more than five and twenty years! She said that though your mother and I designed such a plan, she could not consider you bound by honour or inclination. To so completely disregard the wishes of her betters! Imagine the cheek!"

Darcy fervently hoped that Elizabeth was not indulging in her habit of professing opinions she did not share. Having her think him rude, arrogant, and ungentlemanly was nothing to the pain of imagining that she might think him dishonourable in his intentions.
"I promised her that no matter how determined she is to have you, all her scheming will come to naught, and if she persists and somehow ensnares you, she will be censured, slighted, and despised by all your connections, and she can expect no notice from any of our family or friends."

*If the price of Elizabeth's acceptance of my hand must be the end of all discourse with you, you spiteful, intermeddling harridan, it would be an easy price to pay indeed!* Darcy thought furiously. He did not trust himself to speak calmly.

"Do you know what she said to such a declaration?"

"Pray, enlighten me," he bit out.

"She said that your wife must have such extraordinary sources of happiness attached to her situation that she could have no cause to repine! Have you ever heard anything so boldly mercenary in your life? What awful barefaced *shamelessness*!"

Darcy's simmering rage dissipated into a jumble of confusion as Elizabeth's words echoed through his mind.

"I am quite astonished," he replied truthfully. Elizabeth could in no way be considered mercenary; her humiliating rejection of his offer in Hunsford was the proof. In making such a statement, she would not have meant his wealth. What sources of happiness, therefore, could she mean?

It was likely only her natural liveliness responding to such a wholly unwarranted and unpardonable attack. That was the most obvious explanation, and the one he should believe, but what if it were not so? What, then, could she mean?

Could she mean his presence? His admiration? His love? Would they make her happy? Could he?

"No, she could not mean that," he murmured, shaking his head.

"I assure you, dear boy, she most certainly did! Her every word was shockingly impertinent. Presumptuous girl, to imagine herself mistress of Pemberley! To dare to aim so far above the sphere in which she has been brought up! And when I told her so, she had the audacity to claim that you and she inhabit the same sphere. She called you a gentleman, and herself a gentleman's daughter. As if there is *anything* equal between you!"

Darcy’s admiration for Elizabeth grew with every word. To have defended herself so adroitly against an onslaught such as this, which must have been completely unexpected and utterly mortifying! It was remarkable, and he was proud of her. He knew he had no right to be, but he could not help himself.

"To call herself a gentleman's daughter, as though that is all that matters with such connections on her mother's side!"

That some of Elizabeth's connections were unfortunate was true and could not be denied, but could he honestly bemoan them while sitting down to tea with a woman who persistently showed herself to be more ill-bred than the entire lot of them? He could not, and he had no desire to listen to her harangue Elizabeth and her family any further.

"What was the ultimate outcome of your tête-à-tête, Lady Catherine? Are you satisfied with it?"

"Most certainly not! I asked her once and for all if she had entered into an engagement with you, and she owned that no such engagement exists -- how could she say otherwise? But she would *not* satisfy my desire for a promise never to enter into such! Artful, scheming girl!"
Darcy involuntarily surged forward in his chair, spilling tea on the rug. "I beg your pardon?"

"I am glad to see that you are as appalled as I am by such unmitigated insolence!"

"Do you mean she refused to promise you that she would never accept an offer from me?" he asked, desperate for confirmation. He raised his free hand to rub at his chest. There was a strange lightness within him, a quiver he could not identify. He swallowed harshly.

"Have you hit your head of late, Darcy? You are very slow-witted today. That is exactly what I said! She refused. Every attempt! Obstinate girl!"

Darcy took a sip of stone-cold tea, swallowing it down without any notice at all of its temperature. "I wonder," he said carefully, "That you felt such a step necessary, given that she has denied any engagement exists."

"I meant to have her word that she would not enter into any further attempt to infatuate you, though why I should expect such a crafty, calculating girl to keep her word, I know not. But she would not obey me!"

She continued on and on, and Darcy nodded when necessary, an expression of polite interest and commiseration on his face, but he heard not a word.

It was certainly possible that every word Elizabeth had said to his aunt was simply a response to the unjustified, baseless, and cruel attack upon her person and her character, and that none of it meant anything at all, but that did not fit with what he believed he knew of her. Among the many hard lessons his abomination of a proposal had taught him, he had learned that Elizabeth was honest to a fault, and completely frank in her opinions, particularly so while under fire. He did not believe that she would now be dishonest solely to disoblige his aunt.

If Elizabeth were completely set against him, the way she had been in April, it would have been very easy for her to vehemently deny the engagement, give his aunt the promise she demanded, and be done with the whole matter. Had she received such a promise, Lady Catherine would have immediately ceased her attack, gone away, and troubled Elizabeth no more.

Instead, Elizabeth had steadfastly refused to give her word that she would reject any proposal he might tender, despite his aunt's repeated applications and attempts to extract such a vow. Could he dare to hope that rather than merely being an obstinate response to the worst kind of interference, it was instead an expression of her own hopes and wishes?

Her manner had been so different when they had met by chance in Derbyshire. Before the proof of Wickham's iniquity had come to light, he had begun to hope her opinion of him was changing. Could it have changed so completely in his favour, in spite of his reprehensible neglect in not making Wickham's corrupt character better known?

He thought again of her grave, silent demeanour during his recent visit to Hertfordshre. Was it possible that she had been as unnerved as he, that she had also been preoccupied with quelling strong emotions and tender feelings in order to put forth a pretence of composure? Had she avoided him not because she felt nothing but because she felt too much?

Could she now love him as he loved her?

The mere thought sent such a thrill through him that he felt dazed. His heart began to race, and he pulled in a gasping, greedy breath.

"Darcy!"
He jumped at his aunt's irritated screech, instantly brought back to the unappealing present. "Yes, Lady Catherine?"

"You are acting exceedingly strangely! Are you well?"

"I am. I am very well, thank you."

He was, for he could suddenly see his future stretching out, bright and open and in stark contrast to the bleak loneliness that had enshrouded him just before Lady Catherine's arrival. He could only imagine how horrified she would be to know just how much she had helped him, and he had no intention of informing her.

He would not plan or even begin to conjecture; the folly of certainty was another lesson he had learned well. The only way to discover the path his life would now take was to go to Elizabeth, to put everything he was into her hands once more. The idea of opening his heart to her again filled him with utter terror, but not as much as the dark visions of his life without her in it.

He hoped Bingley would not mind if he returned to Netherfield earlier than expected, because he did not intend to wait another day. He opened his mouth to begin making his excuses when Lady Catherine pointed her fan accusingly at him.

"Darcy, you must see that all this talk has only occurred because you have yet to marry. You have shirked your duty for far too long. You must formalize your engagement to my daughter immediately. You will be married by the end of the month. I insist. You will mind me."

Darcy's temper had finally reached its limit. He had endured his aunt's insults to Elizabeth and her family out of a desperate need to discover exactly what had occurred in Hertfordshire, but he would not be told to mind as though he were still a boy in the nursery. He set down his teacup with a decisive click.

"I think not. This has gone on long enough, your ladyship." His voice was quiet and even and filled with steel. Whether Elizabeth accepted him or not, he was finished with his family's intolerable scheme.

Lady Catherine, who was unused to being defied when an order had been given, stared at him in affronted horror.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have been as polite and obliging as I could be on this matter for as long as I can remember, out of respect for you and Anne, and indeed, for my mother and all her family, and because I have been unwilling to be the cause of family discord, but I can be quiet no longer. Let me make myself perfectly clear: I will never marry Anne."

"What is this nonsense? Of course you shall!"

"I am not engaged to your daughter. I have never been engaged to your daughter. I have no wish to marry your daughter, and Anne has made it very clear to me on more than one occasion that she has no wish to marry me."

"What has that to do with anything? From your cradles, you have been intended for each other. You speak of respect for your mother, but you would so callously ignore her dearest wish? You would ignore your duty to your family? Unfeeling child!"

"You speak of family duty, but you forget, madam, that the Fitzwilliam family is not my only family. I am a Darcy, and I have a duty to my father's family as well. Pemberley requires an heir.
My cousin is not healthy enough to carry and bear me one. I could never marry her, even if she and I were so inclined. To do so would be to completely disregard my responsibilities as Pemberley's master."

"Such astonishing insolence! How is it to be believed? I have travelled all this way at great inconvenience, solely to acquaint you with the treachery and duplicity of that repulsive family, and this is how I am treated? Am I to be spoken to in such a manner? Is this to be borne? Ungrateful boy!"

"I am not a boy, Lady Catherine. I am a man of eight and twenty and have long been my own master. I answer to no one. My loyalties do not lie with Rosings, or with Matlock, or with any estate but my own. My family seat is Pemberley, and I will not ignore my duty there. I will not marry your daughter. Not now, not ever. Now, you must excuse me. You are, of course, welcome to rest here as long as you like, but there is important business I must attend to."

Ignoring her sputtering rage, he stood and gave her a stiff bow before stalking out of the room and firmly shutting the door behind him. He stopped abruptly and leaned against it, his knees suddenly weak as everything that had just passed finally caught up to him.

"She refused to give such a promise," he marvelled, raking a trembling hand through his hair. "Brave, beautiful, glorious girl!"

If the stunned smile he aimed at the footman stationed in the hall did not completely startle the poor man, the exuberant slap on the back certainly did.

"Have the carriage prepared, Robert," Darcy ordered as he hastened toward the stairs. "I am to Hertfordshire, and I have not a moment to lose!"

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