Family

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Summary

When Mr. Darcy returns from Hertfordshire, his sister Georgiana can tell something has changed in him, and she sets out to discover what it is.
Quashed Dreams

The music was soothing, almost like the tinkle of a brook as it flowed from her fingertips. There was little Georgiana Darcy loved more than spending hours at the pianoforte, coaxing sweet melodies from its keys. Sometimes she thought the sensation she felt as she played must be what it would be like to be able to fly, so weightless and happy. She vastly preferred playing the music to those rare occasions when her governess played and asked Georgiana to dance—dancing left Georgiana feeling exposed and confused, and she longed to sink back into the background. No one noticed the player seated on the bench of the pianoforte. Or so she fondly imagined; she was not officially “out” yet, and her experience with society had of necessity been limited.

Resolutely, she drew her thoughts away from the small amount of society she had tasted. Thrilled as she had been by Mr. Wickham’s attentions the previous summer, she’d found the fluttery feelings he awoke in her unsettling. She had wept from the loss and betrayal, but over time, and with the help of her brother, she had come to feel that she was far better off as Georgiana Darcy than she could have been as the Georgiana Wickham she had dreamed of becoming.

The music had slowed and darkened with the course of her thoughts, and Georgiana’s fingers stilled on the keys. As she was trying to decide what to play next, the door opened before her.

“Miss Georgiana, your brother’s carriage is arriving!”

Fitzwilliam! She jumped immediately up from the bench, hurrying at what was no doubt a most unladylike speed to meet her beloved brother. The carriage pulled up at the front of the house while Georgiana fairly flew down the steps. The carriage door popped open and Fitzwilliam climbed out. There was a gloom in his expression and a reserve in answer to her smile that puzzled her, until he turned to offer his hand to a lady inside the carriage. Georgiana recognized Miss Caroline Bingley with a sinking heart. There went any chance of free and easy conversation with her brother—Miss Bingley was an eavesdropper of great skill—and it meant that no doubt Georgiana would be plagued by the twin irritants of Miss Bingley attempting to convince her of the stellar qualities owned by her brother Charles and of Miss Bingley dangling her lures for Fitzwilliam.

Mr. Charles Bingley exited the carriage behind the other two, his usually bright and genuine smile seeming forced. Only Miss Bingley seemed pleased, Georgiana noticed. What had gone wrong that had Fitzwilliam and Mr. Bingley so down and Miss Bingley so … satisfied?

Her curiosity would have to wait, however. After she had made her curtsey to the others, Miss Bingley caught her by the arm. “Miss Darcy, it has been such a long time. Do take a turn with me in the gardens and tell me everything that has happened here. Oh, how I envy you this simple, bucolic lifestyle!”

Georgiana pressed her lips together. Did Miss Bingley truly imagine that Georgiana couldn’t see through her thinly veiled insult? She submitted to being drawn toward the side gardens, but not without casting a glance over her shoulder at Fitzwilliam, who seemed—altered, somehow. Distracted, certainly. How dearly Georgiana would have loved to have asked Miss Bingley, but any questions submitted to that lady were likely to garner only arch witticisms and obscure hints meant to confuse more than to edify. Georgiana set herself to endure Miss Bingley’s company, and to simultaneously devise a scheme that would give her time alone with her brother. She hadn’t liked that pinched look on his face or the faraway expression in his eyes.

The dinner conversation was stilted. Mr. Bingley exerted himself to be amusing, but his attempts at humor fell flat until eventually he subsided into his soup. Fitzwilliam spoke in monosyllables,
and Miss Bingley, after comments about Hertfordshire that were clearly intended to needle one—or possibly both—of the men, allowed the talk to die out. Georgiana felt keenly the necessity of being a good hostess, but with three people so determined to be lost in their own thoughts, what was there in her quiet life to bring them out?

By the time the dessert dishes were cleared away and she could rise from the table, she was suffering from a mild headache and heartily tired of the set of them. Pleading the headache and ignoring the mulish look on Miss Bingley’s face, Georgiana went to bed early. Her fingers itched for the smooth keys of her pianoforte, but she could not play as she would want to with this houseful of people. Perhaps they wouldn’t stay long, she thought as she drifted at last into a troubled sleep.

The next morning gave no indication of a short stay, however, as Miss Bingley lay abed late and Mr. Bingley went out shooting on his own. But Georgiana was just as happy, because that meant she had Fitzwilliam to herself, and she prevailed upon him to walk with her, far into the grounds where their whereabouts could not be discovered from the house. They spoke of light things, mostly—of how much she liked her pianoforte, of plans to improve the house, of the sights he had seen in his travels.

At last he fell silent, staring ahead of them, lost in his own thoughts. Georgiana was used to her brother’s silences, but there was something different about this one. He seemed troubled.

“Fitzwilliam, what is it?”

“What?”

“I am convinced something happened in Hertfordshire to upset you—and poor Mr. Bingley, as well.”

“Ah.” His mouth twisted a little, as if he was recalling something unpleasant. “It is nothing you need concern yourself with.”

“Well, yes, so I assumed—had it been something of import to myself, I know you would have told me at once.” She tucked her hand in the crook of his arm.

“Your faith in my good sense is gratifying.”

“Fitzwilliam! Have you gone and done something impulsive and rash?” There was no response to Georgiana’s teasing question, and she shook his arm. “Silence is to be understood as consent, you know.”

“‘He who is silent is understood to consent,’” he corrected her. “Qui tacet consentire videtur.”

“Yes, yes, we all know you were a formidable student.” But she smiled at him for all that; she was immensely proud of his intelligence. “Changing the subject will not keep me from asking questions. Must I inquire of Miss Bingley what occurred?”

Fitzwilliam looked alarmed. “No, I beg you, do not do such a thing. I believe her comments would cause … Mr. Bingley great pain.”

“In that case, you must tell me, so that I do not inadvertently bring up a related topic.”

“Very well. I should have known you would see the general agitation of the party. I had hoped not to have to discuss this with you, for reasons which will become clear.” He led her to a small stone bench under a large tree. “There was a public ball the night after we arrived in Meryton.”
“And were there many young ladies there?” She watched him with unconcealed interest. Georgiana could never decide whether she hoped her brother would find happiness or feared that the woman he eventually married would come between them.

“Yes. Most of them from the same family.” He said it in a tone of disapproval. “Five daughters, all—most—of them quite disgraceful. As was the mother, indeed.”

“And the father?”

“He was tolerable, but clearly had no influence over the behavior of the women of his family.”

“Did you dance with any of these young ladies?”

“No,” he replied curtly.

“Did Mr. Bingley?” Georgiana was beginning to see which way the wind was blowing. “He danced with several, I am sure.”

“Only with the one. The eldest, Miss Bennet, who largely escapes the impropriety of the rest of her family. He danced with her, and then his sister unluckily asked her to dine.”

“Did she do something shocking at the dinner table?”

“She did not.” Fitzwilliam spared her a brief smile. “Your taste for inappropriateness is a bit unseemly, you know.”

Georgiana shrugged. “I see so little of it here, you must forgive me for wanting to hear some tales of rather more interest than merely spilling the soup.” Her brother’s smile widened, and she was glad to see the genuine humor that was such a part of him returning. “Now, tell me what this unfortunate Miss Bennet did at dinner that was so offensive.”

“In truth,” he said, the smile fading, “it was not her doing. It was her mother’s. You see, the two establishments were set far apart, and rather than send Miss Bennet in the family carriage to dine, the mother sent her on horseback. In the rain. Naturally, and no doubt according to plan, Miss Bennet took ill.”

“Oh, the poor thing! I hope she recovered.”

“She did. Although she was quite ill for some time.”

“So she stayed at Mr. Bingley’s home? She was too sick to remove?”

“Yes. Her sister, Miss … Elizabeth Bennet, came to stay as well, to care for Miss Bennet.”

“And what was Miss Elizabeth like? As disgraceful as the rest of her family?”

Fitzwilliam stood up, walking away from Georgiana. With his back still presented to her, he said, shortly, “No.”

Ah. Did the wind sit in that corner, then? Perhaps that would explain Fitzwilliam’s dour mood. Georgiana watched him a moment, deciding which conversational path to take to get the most information from her stubborn brother.

“So am I to deduce that Mr. Bingley found Miss Bennet to his taste, then?”

“He did. Most unfortunately. For she appeared to feel no such regard in return. She is a quiet creature, most reserved unless in the presence of … her sister.”
“Could it be perhaps that she is shy?” Georgiana spoke from experience. Although she knew her brother didn’t see her—or himself, if it came to that—as cold, or proud, or reserved, she was a keen enough observer to know that others mistook their innate shyness in just that way.

He shook his head. “I am convinced that no young lady brought up in such a family could have retained shyness of that severity.”

“And so you persuaded Mr. Bingley to give up the attachment?”

“The house and the country, yes. The lady herself, yes. As you have no doubt seen, the attachment lingers. I fear he will be a long time recovering from it.” Fitzwilliam was staring off into the distance, across the fields, his voice so low she could hardly hear him.

“Why should he recover from it, if the lady made him happy?” Georgiana had a feeling they were no longer speaking of Mr. Bingley; she had never heard quite this depth of feeling from her brother when speaking of women. Most typically they laughed together over the women their relations threw at his head, or pitied the ladies for being subject to the matrimonial market. But there was no laughter in his voice today, and no pity. “Perhaps it would have been as well to allow the attachment, even if it is one-sided?”

“Allow the attachment? When she has no fortune, no family connections to boast of, and her own family is shamefully ill-behaved? No.”

“Tell me about her, then.”

Fitzwilliam turned to look at her. “About Miss Bennet?”

“About Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” At his frown, Georgiana smiled. “Did you think I could not tell? Mr. Bingley is plainly not the only one who formed an attachment in Hertfordshire.”

“I had not realized it was so obvious. Georgiana … Georgiana.” He sighed heavily, sitting down next to her. “I feel I should apologize to you. This is not—not what I owe to you.”

“Your happiness is what you owe to me. Can this Elizabeth Bennet make you happy?” She poked him in the arm.

“I … How do I know? She has a mischievous face, not unlike that of someone else I know,” he said, returning the poke, “and a quick wit. She said she loves to laugh, although I never was fortunate enough to hear her do so. And when I—“ He broke off, swallowing visibly, and his right hand spread out and then relaxed on his leg. “But her family is insufferable, her fortune nonexistent, she thinks me cold and unpleasant, and—” Fitzwilliam glanced at Georgiana and then shook his head. “There may be another man who holds her interest.” He held up a hand before Georgiana could ask for further details. “No. There is no more future for me with Miss Elizabeth Bennet than there is for my friend Charles Bingley with her sister.”

Georgiana hated to see her beloved brother so unhappy. She looped her arm through his, shifting closer on the bench to offer her wordless support, knowing well that no words of hers would sway him when his mind was so thoroughly made up.

“You would have liked her,” he said softly. “Yes, you would have liked her very much.”

She was filled with curiosity about this woman who had Fitzwilliam so conflicted. Imagine, having four sisters! Such richness of family. But none of them were worth as much as such a brother as Fitzwilliam, she thought, thinking of the pianoforte he had surprised her with and all the hours he had spent patiently listening to her as she wept over Mr. Wickham and the laughs he had
teased out of her when she had thought herself emptied of laughter. She wished nothing so much for Fitzwilliam as a woman who would do all those things for him in return.
“Must you leave for London so soon? I had hoped you would stay longer than a week.”
Georgiana reached for her brother’s hand. “Fitzwilliam, don’t go so soon.”

“I must. Charles—Mr. Bingley—is restless here, and I want to take him to town to give him some employment.” Unspoken was their mutual agreement that Miss Caroline Bingley couldn’t possibly leave Pemberley soon enough, and she wouldn’t go without her brother.

Georgiana knew better than to ask if she might accompany them. Before the disastrous affair with Mr. Wickham the previous summer, she had been supposed to make her debut this year. But she had lost her taste for it, and Fitzwilliam would not hear of it now. Perhaps next year they would both be ready. And she did love to be home, here in the big spacious light-filled rooms and the fields to ramble in and the peaceful quiet. If only he would stay, too, she could be perfectly happy.

Something had changed in her brother. Always reserved in company, he was usually his lightest and most at ease in her presence. Now he gazed off into the empty air, his face pensive and worried, and had difficulty holding onto the thread of a conversation. He had not forgotten Miss Elizabeth Bennet, that much was plain to Georgiana.

She left him to his accounts; he had a stack of bills and papers on the desk in front of him to deal with before he could leave for London. Georgiana wished it was twice as high. Walking out onto the broad terrace, she looked across the fields and sighed. Oh, if she were only a man. If she were a man, she could saddle a horse and ride away—to London with Fitzwilliam, perhaps, or, better, to Hertfordshire, to the home of the Bennets. She would ride into the courtyard and swing down from the horse and demand to see this woman who had altered her beloved brother so.

Or perhaps, if she were older and out in society, she could take a carriage and drive across the country and take tea with Miss Elizabeth. They would talk, and Miss Elizabeth would avow her own love for Fitzwilliam and Georgiana could smooth away the obstacles that were causing Fitzwilliam such distress. Then she and Miss Elizabeth could be friends and call each other by nicknames. She would refer to Miss Elizabeth as Beth. Or Betsy. No, definitely Lizzie. And Miss Elizabeth would call her Georgy. No one ever had before, and Georgiana thought it would be lovely to have a friend who did.

What would Lizzie have to say that could convince Fitzwilliam how wrong he was? Because surely Lizzie loved him; who wouldn’t? Georgiana thought if she could only decide how Miss Elizabeth Bennet would convince him, then she could use the same tactics. She hated to see him so unlike himself, so severe and unsmiling, her beloved brother whose smile lit his face just as the stars lit the night sky.

Thinking hard, she paid too little attention to where she was going and ran into Charles Bingley as he was coming out of the house, her nose smashing against one of his buttons.

“Oh, Miss Darcy, I am sorry,” he said, horror-stricken, as she stepped back, rubbing her nose.

“My fault entirely, Mr. Bingley. I should have been watching where I was going.”

“As should I, it seems.”

“What is it that has you too lost in thought to see someone in front of you?” she asked, looking up at his guileless countenance. Maybe he would tell her what Fitzwilliam would not.
Mr. Bingley’s smile faded. “Nothing of consequence, I’m afraid.”

Tucking her arm into the crook of his elbow, she walked with him. “I am sorry you are all going to be leaving so soon. We have barely had a chance to catch up.” His sister’s constant match-making attempts aside, she quite liked this big friendly open-hearted man; her regret at his hasty departure was genuine. And knowing that his affections were turned elsewhere, she need not worry about giving the wrong impression.

“I am sorry as well. London is not so much to my taste. I prefer the country, the quiet life.”

“I thought that was what you sought in Hertfordshire.”

“It was. And I thought … but it is of no consequence.”

“Will you give up the house there, then? I understood Fitzwilliam to say that the shooting would be very fine there in the fall.”

“Perhaps it would have been. I mean, would be.” Mr. Bingley sighed heavily. “I may retain the house for some little time. It would be … hard … to give it up so quickly.”

Georgiana was perceptive enough to see that he was speaking of more than the house. “The people in the neighborhood surrounding it sound quite lively. There was a family of five girls? Imagine so many in one house.” Her own house was more than large enough to contain as many girls and more, but she doubted Mr. Bingley would quibble with the sentiment.

He flushed deep red, glancing at her from the corner of his eye. “Yes. It would seem rather a lot, wouldn’t it? I did have the pleasure of making their acquaintance. Quite a boisterous family, such energy. Being more the quiet sort myself, I was a bit overwhelmed by them. The mother, particularly, spoke very fast. It was hard to know what to say in return.”

“Did they all speak so fast?”

“No. The eldest sister was—“ He broke off, swallowing visibly. “She was much the quietest.”

“She was the one who was ill at your home, was she not? And the sister who came to stay, Miss …?"

“Miss Elizabeth.” He smiled now, as if at a memory. “Miss Elizabeth was not so loud as her mother, nor quite as overwhelming in her speech, but she had a quick wit. Fortunately she turned that wit more on your brother than on myself—he has much more felicity than I when the conversation turns so rapidly.”

“So he engaged in conversation with Miss Elizabeth?”

“Only when required to do so.” Mr. Bingley gave her a conspiratorial smile. “You are aware, I’m sure, of how quiet he can be when in company, although I daresay he does not see it so readily in himself as we do.”

The conversation was interrupted by the footman appearing on the terrace; he bowed, informing Mr. Bingley that the carriage had been called for and would be brought around in an hour’s time.

Disentangling his arm from Georgiana’s, Mr. Bingley bowed to her. “That means I must go make certain all is in readiness. Miss Darcy, as always, it has been a pleasure.”

“The pleasure was mine, Mr. Bingley. Do come again. And … in the meantime, I do wish you happiness.”
He frowned, not quite understanding her. To forestall any questions and avoid embarrassing him with her knowledge of his plight, she bobbed a curtsey.

“Safe travels, Mr. Bingley.”

“Thank you.” He left her to go determine whether his sister was quite ready to depart; as she was. Miss Caroline Bingley, finding the lures cast Mr. Darcy’s way thrown in vain, and finding her brother as willfully blind to the charms of Miss Darcy’s fortune as ever, was more than desirous of their swift departure for London and the society she so enjoyed.

Georgiana found herself alone with her brother as the carriage was being brought around and Miss Bingley was raising a fuss looking for a lost feather from a headdress she had worn two days previously. Under cover of the flurry, they would have a few moments to say good-bye privately. For once, Georgiana appreciated Miss Bingley and her obsession with meaningless trifles. A feather, of all things!

“Fitzwilliam, I do wish next time you come you would stay longer. It seems I barely saw you and now here you are off again.”

“I promise, next time I come, we will have a good long time together,” he said, putting his arms around her. Georgiana pressed her face against his chest. She didn’t like to admit, even to herself, how much she depended on him. Knowing that all the love at her disposal was contained in one person sometimes overwhelmed her; much as she treasured her beloved brother, she longed for a larger family connection to be surrounded by. Her mind kept going back to the five sisters … imagine such richness of familial devotion! She feared she was at risk of developing her own obsession with the Bennets of Hertfordshire. How could she convince her brother to further the relationship with Miss Elizabeth that he so clearly longed for, against his better judgement and the restrictions of class that they lived under?

“Well you make me another promise?”

“What is that?” He looked at her indulgently, no doubt imagining she was about to ask for a frippery to be sent to her from London.

“I do not like to see you so downcast, and I fear you will remain so until you resolve what’s troubling you.”

The smile on his face faded, and he appeared to be about to speak, but Georgiana gripped the front of his coat, looking up at him earnestly.

“You know what I speak of. The promise I ask is that, if the chance should arise of your seeing … that person again—“ She cast a quick glance over her shoulder to be sure Miss Bingley was still occupied with her belongings and not listening to them. “If that opportunity does present itself, promise me you will take it to improve your acquaintance and determine once and for all if it is as impossible as you say, or if, perhaps, the inclination has passed.”

It hadn’t; she could tell as much from his face. A twisting mix of emotions showed in his eyes as he looked down at her. “You cannot know what you are asking.”

“You cannot know what you are giving up until you have taken the time to consider the matter thoroughly.” Perhaps, as the younger and less experienced sibling, she should not have been giving him advice. But Georgiana had been most strongly attached to Mr. Wickham the previous year. She remembered what that felt like all too vividly, it seemed at times. To her knowledge, Fitzwilliam had never found himself in the grip of such emotions. “Promise me, Fitzwilliam.”

Miss Bingley was sweeping toward them, if that studiedly languorous walk of hers could be
considered ‘sweeping’. Fitzwilliam clearly would very much have liked to argue, but in the end, he proved what he had often said—that he could deny his sister nothing. “Very well. I promise. Not that I expect such an opportunity to arise.”

“Stranger things have been known to occur.”

“You have been reading too many novels. I shall speak with your governess about guiding your inclination toward more weighty books.” He smiled at her, his old teasing smile, and she couldn’t help but smile back.

“Where do you think I find those novels? In her sewing basket when she falls asleep after tea.”

They both laughed. With a final affectionate embrace, he joined Mr. Bingley and Miss Bingley, whose complaints could be heard from inside the carriage, and they were gone.

Georgiana turned slowly and went back inside the house, to while away the time with her pianoforte until he should come back again.
Rejected

Georgiana was just sitting down to breakfast when one of the maids rushed in. “Oh, Miss Darcy! Your brother—“

She didn’t finish because Fitzwilliam was behind her. He put a hand on the maid’s arm, nudging her out of the way.

“I have kept my promise.” Georgiana got no farther; shock at his appearance stopped her tongue. He was haggard and hollow-eyed, his hair tumbled around his face, his cheeks unshaven, his clothing travel-stained and wrinkled. A picture more unlike her well-turned-out brother she couldn’t have imagined. “What has happened? Is—“ She stopped herself. Clearly, everything was not well. Not well at all. She got up from the table, hurrying to his side.

Her brother took her by the arms, and for a moment Georgiana thought he might shake her, so dark did his face look. And then he drew her close against him, leaning down to rest his forehead against her shoulder. She could feel fine tremors shaking him.

“She refused me. In words that—“ He groaned, pulling away from Georgiana and rubbing his hands over his eyes. “Words that she thought I deserved. None of what she said to me was unfair; much of what I said to her was—not unfair, precisely, but unkind. A man could not have offered for a woman’s hand less graciously than I did.”

“But why? Why did you approach her so, if you wanted her to accept?”

“Did I?” Fitzwilliam said, taking a seat at the table and leaning his head on his hands. “Perhaps I didn’t. It is, after all, often easier to be refused and have done with it than to cling to an unsuitable attachment.”

“No. Nor have I. I would never have considered such a thing. But Li—Miss Elizabeth … I can’t get her out of my mind. And then I saw her again, and she—I could not bear not to have spoken.”

“When was this?”

“When?” He looked up at her, his eyes bloodshot. “Yesterday, I think. After church, I found her outside, and made bold to speak to her then.”

“And she refused you?”
“Vehemently.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“When was the last time you slept, Fitzwilliam?”

“Night before last, I think. I saw her, two nights ago, at Lady Catherine’s home, and we spoke, and it was—I felt—What does it matter now?” He got up, his blazing eyes looking into Georgiana’s. “It’s over now, or it should be, if I could just forget—“

“We should get you to bed.” Georgiana took his hand in hers, leading him from the room. “Your horse?”

“In the stables.”

The footmen would no doubt have seen to his bags. Georgiana hoped they were finished unpacking, because Fitzwilliam needed to sleep. He was so drowsy he stumbled several times.

“You would like her,” he mumbled, half-asleep, as they climbed the stairs. “My Lizzie.”

‘Lizzie’, then? Oh, he was far gone, and over a woman who did not have the wit to see his worth. Georgiana would have given much to be able to see ‘Lizzie’ just now, to have given the other woman a piece of her mind.

“Will you be able to sleep?” she asked her brother at the door of his bedroom, knowing as soon as the words left her lips that it was a foolish question. She watched him shuffle to his bed and fall onto it, and quietly shut the door behind him.

Georgiana, on the other hand, had trouble finding her rest that night. She felt tremendously guilty for having forced Fitzwilliam to make her that promise. If she hadn’t done so, would he still have placed himself in Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s way and been unable to stop himself from asking for her hand? She tossed and turned, trying to picture how such a scene could have gone so wrong. Fitzwilliam was strongly opinioned, that was certain, and he could express himself forcefully and with passion, and no doubt he had done so to Miss Elizabeth—‘Lizzie’. But to have offered for her in such a way as to force her to turn him down, and insult her in the process? That did not at all sound to Georgiana like her kind, gentlemanly, generous brother.

She resolved to catch him in the morning and ask for more details. But due to her sleepless night, she arose late, and found him just leaving the breakfast table with an expression that did not invite entreaty. She tried to speak to him anyway, but he brushed her off. Kindly, to be sure, but firmly.

“I will be leaving later this afternoon for London. Pressing affairs require my attention there,” he said.

“So soon? Fitzwilliam!”

“I’m sorry.” He hurried from the room, leaving her to breakfast alone.

She dared, later, to venture into the study with a hot cup of tea, which he accepted gratefully.

“You can’t have slept well,” she remarked, putting one hand on his shoulder as she stood behind him.

“Tolerably enough. You needn’t worry about me, Georgiana.” He pressed his hand over hers, looking up at her with a smile.

“I always worry about you, dear brother. I have little else to do.” She added the last almost under her breath, but his eyes softened.

“We shall see about finding you more congenial company. Would you like to come to London
with me?"

“Yours is the most congenial company I can think of. Will you not stay here?”

The shadow of his unhappiness crossed his face again. “I am not particularly congenial at the moment.”

“Fitzwilliam, I don’t understand.”

“Don’t speak of it!”

“No, I must. Because I know you, and I know you to be a man who thinks of the feelings of others—often so much so that you are unable to speak when in company, for fear of offending someone.”

That got her a smile, and Fitzwilliam shook his head. “You give me too much credit. Rather than fear of offense, it is inability to think of light, diverting conversation that stills my tongue.”

“You may think of yourself that way if you choose, but I know better.” She gave him a quick, affectionate hug. “You must have gone out of your way to be rude to Miss Elizabeth.”

“I … stated rather clearly all the reasons why I should not have thought of marrying her,” he admitted. “I thought she should hear both sides of the question.”

“And she did not agree?”

“Would you have, if a gentleman protested to love you against all logic and against his own inclinations?”

Georgiana tried to imagine it … but for such a man as her brother to admit that his love was stronger than his caution? Surely Miss Elizabeth must have seen the force of his emotions. She said as much, and Fitzwilliam chuckled.

“She did. And she returned them with force of her own. She accused me of—some things which I had done, and some things which I had not.”

“What did you do?”

“I accepted her refusal. It was my due. But I could not leave without having—I could not bear to have her continue thinking of me as she did. I wrote a letter to explain to her why I had done some of the things I had done.”

“And you gave it to her, and she read it, and she still did not accept your suit?” He flushed, looking away, and Georgiana clucked her tongue. “Fitzwilliam, did you not even wait until she had read your letter and could respond?”

“Waiting was more than I could bear.” He closed his eyes, bending his head toward the desk. “What could she say? I had, indeed, convinced Charles to withdraw from her sister, for many of the same reasons I was so unwilling to yield to my own affections. And I had been just as proud and just as cold in bearing as she thought I had been.”

“So Miss Bennet did love Mr. Bingley? I am so glad!”

“Glad? Yes. Yes, I suppose so.” He sighed heavily. “It changes nothing. Her family is still … untenable.”
“You offered for her despite them. Might not Charles feel the same?”

“Charles’s family would not feel the same, and he would suffer for it. Besides, I told myself many times that I could not bear to attach myself to such a family. I believed it then. I believe it now, for that matter. But when I was near her I—I should not be speaking to you of this.”

“To whom else would you speak? Did you not listen patiently to me last summer, to every besotted word?”

“It was my pleasure to do so,” he said, taking her hand in his and squeezing it. “Miss Elizabeth had been listening to Mr. Wickham’s account of his woes. She cast my treatment of him into my face.”

Georgiana drew in a shocked breath. “I hope you set her straight.”

“I did. In the letter I wrote her, I explained the situation from my—our—perspective.”

“Do you think she will believe you?”

“She is a woman of character and intelligence. She will not dismiss my words out of hand. But Mr. Wickham has a golden tongue. It may be that he will feel a genuine—”

Georgiana made a rude noise that she had learned from one of the footmen, to cover the pain she still felt. She no longer loved Wickham, to be sure, but it hurt to consider that she had been so thoroughly taken in by his smooth manners and easy charm. She would not allow that to happen to her again.

“I am sorry,” Fitzwilliam said. “I would not bring up painful memories for all the world.”

“I cannot go around pretending it never happened forever. I am not the same girl I was before it all happened, and I need to be aware of that.”

“You could be again. You needn’t let him alter you,” Fitzwilliam said, pressing her hand.

“I don’t think I have much choice.” Georgiana straightened, removing her hand from her brother’s grasp. “But enough about me. My troubles are in the past. Yours are present, and we must resolve them.”

Fitzwilliam smiled, albeit sadly. “I do not think there is a resolution to be attempted. She has refused me.”

“But she was not in possession of all the facts. Perhaps now that you have explained yourself, she may be persuaded to think differently.”

“What an optimist you are, Georgiana. Or are you a romantic?” Fitzwilliam removed his pocket watch, consulting it for a moment. “She will not change her mind, I think.”

“Nor will you, no matter how you may pretend to be too busy for your feelings to keep up with you.”

“Perhaps you are right. But I will not put myself in that position again, to be that … vulnerable.” The last word was almost lost as he stood up. He gathered the papers on his desk, placing them in a neat stack. “I am sorry to be leaving you so soon.”

“When will you come back?”
“Soon, I promise.”

She considered teasing for a surprise, as she used to do, but in the current circumstances she thought he might take it the wrong way. “Do take care of yourself, Fitzwilliam.”

“I shall attempt to do so.” His small smile made it a joke, but the sadness still lurked beneath it.

Georgiana stood in the doorway, watching as Fitzwilliam rode down the lane. His shoulders still slumped, his posture not what she was used to seeing. Fitzwilliam had dared to dream of something fragile and precious, and he had lost that dream. With it, he had lost Georgiana’s, as well. Her own shoulders slumped as she turned to go inside.
Georgiana bent her head over the pianoforte keys, concentrating on the music. It was a sad, slow piece, suitable to the quiet day. She had heard the housekeeper let a party in to the house; they were in the sculpture room now, she thought. She tried to play softly, hoping no one would hear the music and be tempted to come find her.

A particularly tricky part of the piece came up, and she smiled, enjoying the challenge and the practiced movements of her fingers, knowing just what to do. There was really no feeling quite like it.

And then a hand rested on her shoulder. She practically leaped off the stool, and then did leap into the arms of her brother. “Fitzwilliam, you should have sent me word you were coming!”

He laughed, spinning her around the way she loved. “I didn’t know myself. I—“ His words stopped; he stared into the mirror over the piano as though he had seen a ghost.

“Fitzwilliam?”

“Wait here.” The words were an afterthought; he was halfway to the door, practically running.

As soon as he was out of the room, Georgiana hurried to the window. Peering out, she could see Fitzwilliam running across the veranda after a young woman with dark hair. Georgiana’s breath caught. Could this be the famous ‘Lizzie’? It must be; for no other woman on earth would Fitzwilliam look so strange and awkward and eager. Why on earth would Miss Elizabeth Bennet be at Pemberley?

Fitzwilliam and his Lizzie were staring at one another, both of them standing stiffly, clearly uncomfortable. So it appeared that she was not there to apologize and profess her love for him. Georgiana’s heart sank. If she didn’t want Fitzwilliam, why couldn’t she leave him alone? What was the purpose of observing a man’s house when you had already made it clear you had no interest in being mistress there?

Or, yet worse … perhaps this Miss Elizabeth was there to see for herself what she had turned down. Perhaps she had changed her mind under consideration of Fitzwilliam’s ten thousand a year. That would be dreadful, to have her brother wedded to a woman who cared for his money alone. For a moment, fear gripped Georgiana’s heart. Would such a woman turn her out of her beautiful home? Change Pemberley into a place of excess and fill it with people of Caroline Bingley’s stamp?

But even as the thoughts crossed her mind, Georgiana reconsidered. She could see over Fitzwilliam’s shoulder into the face of this woman she supposed to be Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and there was none of the proudness or greed of a woman on the hunt for a fortune in it. This woman looked discomfited; she fidgeted as she spoke. And there was a softness in her look as she turned her face up to Fitzwilliam that made Georgiana wonder if her brother had been entirely wrong about this woman’s feelings toward him.

The woman turned and ran down the steps in a flurry of skirts. Georgiana was surprised Fitzwilliam did not go after her. He stood there for a long moment, stockstill, before turning and hurrying just as fast in the opposite direction. Georgiana could hear him calling out to a waiting groom for his horse, and then, very shortly, she saw him racing down the lane. Where could he be going so fast? Fitzwilliam was usually very careful with his horses. She hoped he wasn’t going after Miss Elizabeth. Or did she? Perhaps he would catch up to her, as Miss Elizabeth appeared to
be walking, judging from the absence of a carriage, and convince her to accept his proposal this
time.

Georgiana’s brief surge of optimism was short-lived; Fitzwilliam was too proud a man to press his
suit on a woman who was so clearly not receptive to it. He would only be hurt, once again, and
Georgiana could hardly bear to see that happen. She sat down to her pianoforte, but the music that
flowed from her fingers was discordant, and she soon stopped playing, unable to concentrate.

Fortunately for her, Fitzwilliam’s step was heard in the hall shortly afterward, and he came into the
room exuberantly, sweeping Georgiana into his arms and swinging her around for the second time
that day.

“My dear sister, you will never guess who has been here.”

“Possibly I could, but I see you are bursting to tell me yourself. Who was it?”

“Elizabeth Bennet!”

“Here? Whatever could she have been thinking?”

“She had been informed I was not in residence, and it was the particular wish of her aunt and
uncle to view Pemberley.” Whether it had been Miss Elizabeth’s own particular wish, Fitzwilliam
did not say. Georgiana wondered—surely she must have had some curiosity, else why not protest
against the plan?

“And you spoke with her?” Not for anything would Georgiana have admitted to having spied
upon her brother’s conversation. Sixteen was entirely too old for such goings-on … or so she was
certain he would say.

“I did.” He was trying to repress a smile, but having little success. Anything she had wanted to
know about her brother’s continued feelings was clear in the light in his eyes.

She wanted to ask if Miss Elizabeth had altered her opinion, but that seemed a presumptuous
question. Instead, she asked, “Will we be seeing her again, or has she left the neighborhood?”

Fitzwilliam’s smile burst through his attempts to suppress it, and lit the room. “I invited her aunt
and uncle to dine here tomorrow, and they are coming. She will be here tomorrow afternoon.
Georgiana, I cannot wait for you to meet her.”

“My sentiments exactly, dear brother.” She squeezed his arm. “Now, what shall we do to entertain
her?”

He stared down at her, the smile frozen on his face. “Entertain her? I … thought we would dine,
and …”

“In short, you did not think. At least, not to any purpose.” She had to laugh at the flummoxed
expression on his face. “Does she play?” It was a question she had been longing to ask.

“She does. She plays … quite well.”

“Well, then. We can play duets!” Oh, how Georgiana looked forward to playing a duet with Miss
Elizabeth—Lizzy. “And then, perhaps, a hand at cards? Although no doubt her uncle will want to
fish, or hunt, or some other such manly sport, in which case Miss Elizabeth and her aunt and I can
have a nice visit.” She patted Fitzwilliam on the arm. “Leave it to me; I shall play hostess of
Pemberley and hope I can do it credit.”
“Are you certain?” He looked doubtful.

Sobering, Georgiana looked up into her brother’s eyes. “Trust me. I will not let you down.”
As the time set for Miss Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle to arrive came closer, Fitzwilliam paced back and forth, first standing and staring out the window, then retreating across the room in an attempt to make time pass faster by not watching for the arrival of the carriage, and then returning to the window in an agony of impatience. Georgiana resolutely took her seat at the pianoforte, beginning to play a detailed, intricate piece that would require her concentration. The diversion worked—she was soon engrossed in the music, and even Fitzwilliam had been drawn to the instrument to watch her fingers dance over the keys.

They were both startled when the door opened and their visitors were announced. Fitzwilliam stood as if frozen; Georgiana was off her piano bench and hurrying toward the dark-haired girl with the fine eyes before her brother had stirred a step.

“Miss Elizabeth!”

Fitzwilliam was catching up; he came to her side, his eyes fixed on Miss Elizabeth’s face as though he could not have looked away if he’d wanted to. “My sister, Miss Georgiana,” he said, and it was clear Miss Elizabeth hadn’t missed the informality of the introduction. He ought to have introduced her as “Miss Darcy.” Indeed, Miss Elizabeth ought to have introduced the man and woman behind her, quite obviously her aunt and uncle. But Georgiana was too excited by finally meeting this fabled creature to stand upon ceremony.

“My brother has told me so much about you; I feel as if we are friends already.” She did. There was something winning in Miss Elizabeth’s shy smile and in the way she stood in the midst of the room, neither overawed nor overly impressed by the fine things that surrounded her. There was humor in her face, too, and Georgiana was ready to talk to her about anything and everything.

“Thank you.” Miss Elizabeth clearly seemed a bit overwhelmed by the effusive greeting. She smiled politely, but appeared unsure of how to respond. Her eyes roamed, not quite meeting either Fitzwilliam’s or Georgiana’s eager gazes. “What a beatiful pianoforte!” she exclaimed at last.

It was, indeed. Georgiana glowed with pleasure, not least because it gave her the opportunity to praise Fitzwilliam. “My brother gave it to me. Of course, he shouldn’t have.” She glanced at him proudly.

He tore his gaze from Miss Elizabeth long enough to glance Georgiana’s way. “Yes, I should.”

“Oh, very well, then.”

Fitzwilliam looked back at Miss Elizabeth, smiling at her. “Very easily persuaded, is she not?”

“Your unfortunate brother once had to put up with my playing for an entire evening,” Miss Elizabeth said. Her smile in response was a natural one, not studied, and Georgiana liked her the more for it.

“But he says you play so well.” She cast her brother a sidelong glance of amusement.

“Then he has perjured himself most appallingly.”

Fitzwilliam laughed, his real laugh, the one Georgiana so rarely saw amongst other people. In that moment, she fell a little in love with Miss Elizabeth herself. Anyone who could make her brother that happy was well worth having, in her opinion.
“No, I said you play quite well,” he said.

“No, ‘Quite well’ is not ‘very well’, I’m satisfied.” They gazed at each other, both caught in the single still moment of happiness.

At last Fitzwilliam, seeming to remember that he and Miss Elizabeth were not alone in the room, glanced in Georgiana’s direction. She couldn’t help the smile that came to her own face, watching them together, and he flushed under her gaze. Abruptly, he said, “Mr. Gardiner, are you fond of fishing?”

The change of subject took the whole room by surprise.

“Yes? Oh! Yes, in a few hours. Mr. Gardiner, this way, if you please.”

Mrs. Gardiner seated herself on the sofa while Miss Elizabeth and Georgiana took their place at the pianoforte. As their fingers poised themselves over the keys, Georgiana began to think of what she could say to plead her brother’s case without seeming to do so.

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“Yes, sir,” Mr. Gardiner replied.

“Then can I persuade you to accompany me to the lake this afternoon?” Fitzwilliam was speaking very fast, and looking over Miss Elizabeth’s shoulder as if the effort to be in the same room with her was suddenly too much. “It’s very well stocked,” he went on, “and its occupants have been left in peace for far too long.”

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner exchanged a glance, and Mr. Gardiner said, “I would be delighted!” His wife seemed less so, and Georgiana was initially of the same mind—any plan that kept Fitzwilliam and Miss Elizabeth apart seemed to her to be poorly thought out. But then she considered that she would have several hours alone with the two ladies, and surely in those several hours she could determine what Miss Elizabeth’s feelings were toward Fitzwilliam. Judging from the look of dismay on Miss Elizabeth’s face, she had counted on spending more time with Fitzwilliam, and Georgiana viewed that as a very positive sign.

“Do you play duets, Miss Elizabeth?” she asked. One could discover a great many things about someone when sitting side by side with them at the pianoforte. She resolutely refused to think about sitting thus with Mr. Wickham, teaching him to play. That part of her life had been a dream, a nightmare, and it was over now.

“Only when forced,” Miss Elizabeth said.

“Brother, you must force her,” Georgiana said decidedly, and Fitzwilliam laughed.

“My sister can be most demanding.”

“In that case, it appears I must accept,” said Miss Elizabeth, “but I beg of you to be easy with me; I am assuredly not a player of your quality, Miss Georgiana.”

“I find that hard to believe.” She didn’t, actually. Miss Elizabeth hardly struck her as someone who would fall victim to false modesty. Georgiana was already sorting through her music to find something that would be simple enough to allow them both to play well while still being interesting enough that Miss Elizabeth wouldn’t feel that she was being condescended to. “I believe I know just the thing. Fitzwilliam, we will see you at dinner in a few hours?”

He was staring at Miss Elizabeth, and Georgiana cleared her throat to catch his attention.

“Now, Miss Elizabeth. Let us begin.”
Georgiana and Miss Elizabeth played harmoniously for some time. The gap between their skills was smaller than Georgiana had feared it might be; Miss Elizabeth would play better if she enjoyed it more. Her natural talent was limited, it seemed, but she also paid little attention to the flow of the music. Clearly her inclinations lay elsewhere.

“Do you paint, Miss Elizabeth?” she asked during a pause.

“No, not at all. Our education was not focused in the directions of those skills and talents.” With a twinkling glance from her brown eyes, Miss Elizabeth smiled. “In truth, our education was quite unfocused. We learned what we chose to take an interest in, with the end result that we are all sadly unbalanced.”

“Ah.” Somewhat sadly, Georgiana said, “I received a rather more traditional education. I wonder what I might have chosen to take an interest in, if the opportunity had offered.”

“Music seems to interest you well enough.”

“Oh, yes, I love it! But no doubt there are more useful abilities to cultivate.”

“I suppose that depends on what you intend to accomplish with your life. One might say you already delight the ear with your playing, which is of itself an accomplishment. My preferred hobby, reading, accomplishes much within myself, but does little for others.”

Georgiana looked at her companion in surprise, not having expected such a candid or thoughtful response. “I’m certain your friends and family would disagree with you.” She hesitated, then added, “My brother certainly seems to see your value.”

Miss Elizabeth’s eyes widened, her mouth parting in surprise. She looked away, getting up from the piano bench. “Your brother is generous to say so,” she said, her back to Georgiana.

Her aunt was sitting on a chair, hands folded in her lap. She watched Miss Elizabeth walk to the window, looking out over the lawns, but didn’t add to the conversation.

So many questions hovered on the tip of Georgiana’s tongue. ‘Do you have intentions toward my brother?’ ‘Is his regard misplaced?’ And, most importantly, ‘do you love him?’ But it was not her place to ask those questions, and the answers should be for Fitzwilliam’s ears, not for Georgiana’s or Mrs. Gardiner’s, however much they both would have liked to hear them. Instead, rising from the bench, she asked, “Miss Elizabeth, would you like to take a turn in the gardens? I understand you enjoy walking.”

“I do indeed.” There was a soft smile on Miss Elizabeth’s face as she turned from the window. As she couldn’t possibly see all the way to the lake where the gentlemen were fishing, Georgiana wondered what thought had brought that look to her face. She quite liked it—the other lady looked far less daunting and more approachable with that quiet smile. “I should quite like to see the gardens at Pemberley.”

Mrs. Gardiner had opted to remain within doors, reading a book she had found on the library shelves (not, to Georgiana’s great relief, one from the governess’s collection). As Georgiana and Miss Elizabeth strolled through the gardens, they linked arms. The conversation mostly kept to the gardens themselves, the plants and the difficulties with bugs. Both girls enjoyed the flowers without having any particular desire to learn over much about the details of their cultivation, and
they laughed a little together over the shared shame.

“We are sad horticulturists, Miss Georgiana.”

“We are indeed. Our families should be ashamed of us.”

The smile passed from Miss Elizabeth’s face, and she looked away.

Georgiana glanced up at the sun. It appeared to have been a good hour since they came outside—surely it was nearing time for the gentlemen to return from their fishing. “Shall we go in? Perhaps we might find a nice refreshing glass of lemonade awaiting us.”

“Yes, thank you.” The animation returned to Miss Elizabeth’s eyes like the sun peeking through a cloud, and Georgiana was glad to see it.

Mrs. Gardiner looked up from her book as they came in. “How were the gardens, my dears?”

“Quite nice, thank you, aunt,” Miss Elizabeth responded, taking a seat next to the older woman. “Next time, you should join us.”

“No doubt I’d have been in the way. I’m sure you two had much to talk about.”

Miss Elizabeth looked confused, and Georgiana narrowed her eyes speculatively. Did Mrs. Gardiner suspect a tenderness between her niece and Fitzwilliam? Or was she trying to create one? Perhaps Mrs. Gardiner’s matchmaking had been the impetus behind their original visit to Pemberley.

Just then, the doors opened and the gentlemen burst in. Fitzwilliam was talking animatedly about his plans for the grounds, as Mr. Gardiner listened thoughtfully. Any concerns Georgiana might have felt about the wisdom of the visit were erased when she saw her brother’s face light up the moment he saw Miss Elizabeth. He attempted to cover his happiness with the mask of civility he usually wore when in company, and as far as the others could tell, perhaps he succeeded, but Georgiana knew him too well to be fooled. She only wished she could read Miss Elizabeth’s face as well. She was an open person, as society went, but not so open as to reveal herself easily.

Dinner was announced shortly, before the gentlemen tired of telling fish stories. Of course, Fitzwilliam, who was an avid fisherman, never quite tired of telling fish stories, and it seemed he had found a kindred spirit in Mr. Gardiner, so perhaps the supply of tales would have filled whatever time they’d had. In either case, they went into dinner rather casually, paying little attention to the usually strict rules of precedence, and took their seats.

There was silence for the first time as they sat, waiting for the servants to finish ladling out the soup. The formality of the setting had Georgiana tongue-tied, feeling more like she usually did in company, instead of the ease and enjoyment she had felt all afternoon with Miss Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner. Looking around the table, it was obvious that everyone else felt as she did. As hostess, wasn’t it her duty to break the ice, to come up with a suitable topic of conversation that would entertain them all? But her mind was a blank. She looked wide-eyed at Mrs. Gardiner, hoping the older woman could help her out of her predicament.

Mrs. Gardiner genteelly slurped her soup from the spoon, appearing completely oblivious to Georgiana’s silent plea. Instead, Mr. Gardiner jumped in, with a question about frogs, of all things. Fitzwilliam, though seeming rather startled, was willing to discuss the types of frogs who lived around the edges of the Pemberley lake, and from there the talk moved to frog’s legs and ways of preparing them. Soon conversation was flowing freely. Fitzwilliam even laughed a time or two, although he and Miss Elizabeth exchanged almost no comments directed at one another. For her
part, Miss Elizabeth seemed quite focused on her food and her plate, shy in a way Georgiana would not have imagined her.

All too soon the dinner, which had begun so stiffly and ended in such lively conversation, was over. Georgiana rose with reluctance, leading the ladies to the drawing room, wondering what her brother and Mr. Gardiner would talk about over their port. She hoped they wouldn’t stay at it long; she very much wanted her brother and Miss Elizabeth to have more time together.

Having spent the day together might have had them all bored with one another, but as they settled on the seats in the drawing room, Miss Elizabeth made a joke about frogs that set all three ladies laughing. The conversation was spirited enough to draw the men in from their port, Mr. Gardiner sinking gratefully onto the sofa next to his wife, while Fitzwilliam stood between Georgiana’s chair and Miss Elizabeth’s.

“Do sit down, brother. You’re much too tall to loom over us in grandeur.”

“Was I looming?” he asked in surprise. “That was not my intention.”

“You never do seem to intend to loom, Mr. Darcy, but somehow you manage to do it all the same.” Miss Elizabeth’s upward glance was an arch one, but there was meaning behind it, of that Georgiana was certain.

“Do I? My apologies.” He looked around for someplace to sit, but appeared to find all the other chairs—notably, all placed across the room from where Miss Elizabeth sat—not to his taste.

“Please, brother, have my seat.” Georgiana knew a cue when she saw one. She stood up. “I shall play, shall I? I would enjoy it very much.”

“In that case, I would like nothing better.” He smiled at her in gratitude, and she smothered her own grin as she took her seat at the pianoforte. Of course, the problem with this arrangement was that she could no longer hear what her brother and Miss Elizabeth were saying to one another, and she would very much have liked to do so. Watching them carefully, she tried to read their lips, but their body language was more easily discerned, and it said they were both feeling quite awkward, the conversation stilted and uncomfortable. Georgiana sighed. Well, she hadn’t expected one evening to turn everything around, had she?

She hammered down on the keys, reaching a particularly lively point in the song. Truth be told, she had actually hoped one evening would turn everything around. Foolish of her, no doubt. Finishing the song, she closed the cover on the pianoforte just as Mr. Gardiner stood up to make their excuses. Fitzwilliam rose, too, and immediately offered to ride with them back to the village, as the roads were dark and the hired coachman might not know them as well as he did. His offer was gratefully accepted.

Miss Elizabeth came forward with her hands outstretched. “Miss Georgiana, thank you for opening your home to us.”

“It was my pleasure. Come again anytime.”

The other woman’s eyes darted away from Georgiana’s. She wouldn’t, then. Nothing had changed. Fitzwilliam had, it was clear, fallen even more under the spell of this woman, and it was to no avail. Georgiana felt sick, and suddenly she couldn’t wait for the visitors to leave. She longed simply to sit down and close her eyes and wish with everything she had that Miss Elizabeth would undergo a change of heart.
Fitzwilliam was gone a very long time, taking Miss Elizabeth back to the inn. So long that Georgiana wondered if he had prevailed, and won the other woman’s hand and heart … and then wondered if he had been in an accident on the road. Neither seemed believable: Miss Elizabeth appeared unmoving, and Fitzwilliam was an excellent horseman. But Georgiana was at a loss to explain his lengthy absence otherwise.

At last she determined to retire and began getting ready for bed. She was brushing her hair before the mirror when she heard swift footsteps in the hall and a light tap on her door. “Georgiana.”

“Come in!”

He opened the door and stepped in, looking pale and distressed. “There has been a … a change in my plans. I must go to London immediately.”

“What happened?” It wasn’t good; that much she could see from his face. “Has someone been injured?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” He started to speak, then caught himself. “I do not know when I will be able to return.”

“Fitzwilliam, you must tell me more than that. What happened to you this evening?”

“I have no wish to hurt you.”

“Me? What do I have to do with it?” A dreadful thought struck her. “Did I do, or say, something to offend Miss Elizabeth? Has she done something rash?”

“No, not in the least. She found you delightful.”

“Did she? I’m glad to hear it. But if that’s not the trouble, what is?”

“When we arrived at their lodging, a letter was awaiting Miss Elizabeth. It appears …” He took Georgiana’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “It appears her youngest sister has run off, with someone I am afraid we know all too well.”

Weakness flooded Georgiana, and she groped for her chair, sinking into it. Oh, yes, she remembered him, his soft words and charming smile, his exciting promises and his gentle fingers stroking her arm. She swallowed against her sudden nausea. “Mr. Wickham,” she whispered. “Miss Elizabeth’s sister has eloped with Mr. Wickham?”

Fitzwilliam’s lips tightened. “My understanding of the situation is that elopement is the best one could hope for.”

Georgiana closed her eyes, trying to ward off memories of the enticing whispers that had almost convinced her that elopement was the best course for herself, as well.

“How could she do such a thing?” Fitzwilliam said, more to himself than to his sister.

“Because she could not imagine a day without him,” Georgiana said.

Fitzwilliam reached for her hand, squeezing tightly. “And because she had no loving family to stop her.”
They both remembered the day he had found her hand-in-hand with Mr. Wickham. Once her suitor had left, in her innocent eagerness to share her excitement with her brother and gain his approval, she had told Fitzwilliam everything about Wickham’s plans. He had listened with patience, asking detailed questions about the courtship. Only then had he left her to seek out Wickham, making it clear to that gentleman that if he ran off with Georgiana without her family’s consent and approval, which he would never gain, her fortune would never come into his hands.

Georgiana had not seen Wickham again, and for a long time she had blamed her brother for her lover’s defection. Later, with time and distance between them, she had thought more clearly about the things Wickham had said. All the wonderful things he’d wanted to do had been so expensive, and he had spoken so sharply about Fitzwilliam that for a brief while even she had begun to see her brother as Wickham saw him. Wickham had never wanted to listen to her play the pianoforte, and he had never asked her about her interests or her dreams for the future. He had taken for granted that she wanted what he wanted. Or, probably more accurate, he had never cared what she wanted at all.

She had gradually come to understand Fitzwilliam’s actions and to forgive him for having stepped in on her behalf, but the topic remained undiscussed, both of them preferring to pretend that Mr. Wickham had never come between them. Georgiana knew what it cost Fitzwilliam to talk about him even now. What she could not guess was how this turn of events affected her brother’s feelings for Miss Elizabeth Bennet. The runaway sister appeared destined to be tied to Mr. Wickham permanently; could Fitzwilliam still consider allying himself with the family under those circumstances? Assuming Miss Elizabeth would have eventually accepted his suit in the first place, of course.

“So you remained with Miss Elizabeth and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner for some time as they discussed what to do?”

Fitzwilliam looked discomfited. “It took Miss Elizabeth a long while to calm down from her initial distress. Naturally I waited to be certain she was in full command of herself. It was not my place to assist them in their decision-making.” He glanced down at his boots. “Nor do I imagine there is much to decide. The girl is hopelessly compromised; they will have to see to it that Wickham marries her or she ruins the entire family.”

“Will he marry her? If—if he wouldn’t marry me without my fortune, and Miss Elizabeth’s sister has no fortune …” Georgiana let the words trail off, feeling very tired and saddened. “How old is she, Fitzwilliam?”

“Fifteen, I believe. Just the age—“

“That I was.” She sighed heavily. “Poor girl.”

“Yes. Yes, poor girl indeed,” Fitzwilliam said. His tone was stronger now, and he stood up straighter.

Georgiana remembered what he had said when he had first come into her room. “And you are going to go to London?”

Fitzwilliam shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “You may tell me it isn’t my place, and you would be right to do so. But I know Wickham as Mr. Gardiner does not; I think I will have greater success not only in finding the fugitives, but in convincing Wickham to do the right thing by the young lady.”

“Will you tell Miss Elizabeth what you did?”
“No!” His eyes flashed. “Assuming I can do anything at all, I will leave it as a secret, not to be told to her. I won’t have her accepting my suit out of gratitude when she would not do so for love.”

Georgiana nodded. It might not have been the course she would have chosen in her brother’s shoes, but it was his way, and there was little point in arguing.

“How will you find them?”

“I unfortunately know a little of Mr. Wickham’s habits. I will stay with Mr. Bingley, and will make my enquiries. I pray it will not be too late once I find them.” His eyes fell on Georgiana. “I am sorry to have to bring up these memories.”

“I can’t go my whole life hiding from what I almost did.” She stood up, reaching for his hand, and squeezed it reassuringly. “And I thank God you were there to keep me from it.”

“As do I.” He reached for her, pulling her close in a tight embrace. “I only hope I can do as much in this case.”

Georgiana let him go, listening to the sound of his footsteps hurrying toward his own room to pack. She hoped so, too, feeling a kinship with this young girl, and a tremendous sympathy for her family.
It seemed a long while before any news arrived. Georgiana attempted to fill her days as best she could, practicing the pianoforte with furious concentration and reading as many books as she could manage in order to improve her mind for her next meeting with Miss Elizabeth. She felt confident that there must be one—surely such determination as Fitzwilliam’s would win through eventually. Resolutely she refused to contemplate the possibility that he would fail to find Mr. Wickham and the runaway sister. That would put the rest of the sisters utterly beyond reach—at least, for a gentleman. He could not allow that to happen. Or, rather, she thought more practically, she hoped he wouldn’t.

She imagined poor Miss Elizabeth’s feelings as she worried over her sister, unable to do anything about the situation. How would she react, Georgiana wondered, if Fitzwilliam was in danger and she had no way of finding him or going to him for help? It would be miserable. She wasn’t certain she would be able to endure such torment without acting … but then again, as women, they had no right to act, and no way to discover the truth of such escapades as this of the youngest Miss Bennet’s. It was enough to make Georgiana wish she had been born a man, and could be allowed to be out in the world making decisions.

These speculations were fruitless, she told herself, restlessly leaving the pianoforte for the sunny gardens. What a pretty life, filled with fine things and the beauty of nature and everything nice she liked to eat … but useless. Lightly cupping the blossom of a rose, she looked into it, searching for her answers there.

A voice calling her name startled her, and she jerked the blossom off the bush involuntarily as she turned. One of the maids was coming toward her, holding a letter aloft. It must be from Fitzwilliam, Georgiana thought. She had left instructions that his letters be brought to her as soon as possible. Georgiana tucked the rose into her hair and took the envelope, thanking the maid. She slit it open carefully, removing the closely written letter, and hurried to the nearest bench to read it.

Dearest Georgiana,

The fugitives are found, and more easily than I had suspected they would be. The gentleman of our acquaintance is sadly lacking in imagination. Unfortunate for him, but very fortunate for the family of the young girl. I wish I had found her in a more sober frame of mind; she seems to understand very little of the position she had placed her family in and to care even less. I am grateful to you, sister, for the good sense and delicacy you displayed at a similar time in your life, and if I have not said so adequately before, I am proud of the way you handled yourself then and afterward.

She smiled at that. His approval and respect meant so much to her—he stood in the place their parents would have held had they lived. It was gratifying to know that even though she had disappointed him by falling for Mr. Wickham’s lures in the first place, she had met his expectations in overcoming the situation.

I have, I hope, helped to manage the situation in such a way that Mr. Wickham should not be able to bring further disgrace to the Bennet family, and with the commission I have enabled him to purchase he should be placed where he can do no further damage to our family’s harmony. These arrangements were made in the strictest confidence, which I believe he will honour. I have asked Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner to keep my confidence, as well, although I do not believe they fully understand the situation or the reason for my reticence. It is to Miss Elizabeth’s credit that it appears none of her family is aware of what has occurred between us—she is very generous in her discretion.
‘Generous in her discretion’? Georgiana mused. Possibly. Or perhaps she was embarrassed at the way she had treated Fitzwilliam. Georgiana wished she could get the two of them alone in a room and force them to talk with one another. But as polite and stubborn as they both were, doubtless they would dance around the most important topics and nothing would be discussed and no progress would be made. She sighed, turning her attention back to the letter.

*Before I may leave London, there is just one small task remaining that I wish to discharge. Also, I do want to make certain that Mr. Wickham’s situation is properly taken care of, down to the dotting of the final ‘i’. At the very least, this occurrence has removed the danger of his leading any more young women astray. We can be thankful for that much, even if I grieve for Miss Elizabeth in having her sister, and the rest of her family, permanently tied to such a man.*

*I hope that reading this has not brought you further pain. At least there is some relief in knowing that the man who caused much of our problems has been removed from our lives, hopefully for good. The only chance of further entanglement with Mr. Wickham is if that wish of mine that you know of should come to fruition … but the lady in question has left little room for hope in my heart, and so I must search for another bright side in all of this.*

*The final task remaining to me will, if it succeeds, no doubt take me elsewhere than London for a brief time, but once that is done, I hope to return to Pemberley and to you, dearest sister, for a good long while. I need the healing consolation of home and family after all that has occurred. I vow henceforth to be a more devoted brother and to take a greater interest in your time and welfare. You are very dear to me, Georgiana, and I hope that you know that.*

*Your loving brother,*

*Fitzwilliam*

Tears sprang to her eyes as she folded the letter up. All her life, she had looked up to her intelligent, well-spoken, generous, good-hearted brother and had worked to be worthy of his regard. She was immeasurably gratified that she had achieved that goal, and had become someone he wanted to spend more time with. Now if only his Miss Elizabeth could be persuaded to overcome her objections to him and look on him with favor—what a happy family they could be.
Familial Disharmony

The next letter Georgiana received wasn’t nearly as sweet or thoughtful. It was from her aunt, Lady Catherine deBourgh.

After some initial pleasantries and inquiries after her health and the state of her practice on the pianoforte, Lady Catherine launched into the point of her letter.

My poor Georgiana, it has come to my attention that your dear brother Fitzwilliam has become entangled with a scheming social climber of very poor family, a Miss Elizabeth Bennet. It is not to be borne that such a woman should take her place amongst the long line of illustrious mistresses of Pemberley. A place, I am sure I need not remind you, that currently belongs to yourself. This young person—I cannot in good conscience abuse the term ‘lady’ by applying it to her—is the second in a set of five undisciplined sisters. Five! Can you imagine such a lot?

Georgiana certainly couldn’t, although she had tried a number of times. Imagine being one of five sisters. One could never be bored, or lonely, or at a loss for someone to talk to who understood. For that matter, just having a mother and father sounded heavenly to Georgiana. No matter how hard Fitzwilliam had tried to see to it that her life wasn’t altered by her parents’ deaths, it had been. A young, single man such as her brother simply wasn’t capable of taking the place of both father and mother. Their aunt, Lady Catherine, had loudly attempted to insist that Georgiana should come to Rosings and be raised alongside their cousin Anne, but Georgiana had shrunk from the dark, depressing rooms and the shy cousin who barely spoke and the aunt who spoke too much and too decisively and was too critical of everything—and everyone—Georgiana cared about. She had begged Fitzwilliam to be allowed to stay with her governess in the light, sunny rooms of Pemberley, rambling through the gardens and the woods, with her pianoforte as companion. He had agreed, although with some misgivings. After the dreadful experience with Mr. Wickham, Lady Catherine’s shrill imprecations against Fitzwilliam’s inability to care for his sister might have induced him to listen to his aunt and send Georgiana to Rosings after all, but Georgiana had been in no condition to travel, and at last Fitzwilliam had seen for himself that she would not have been able to stand up against the stream of criticism that would have been poured forth in response to her near-disastrous mistake.

Steeling herself, Georgiana turned back to Lady Catherine’s letter.

You must join with me, Georgiana, in standing firm against this girl’s attempts to ensnare Fitzwilliam. I shall use all my considerable influence with him to remind him of his prior commitment to Anne, and you must use whatever influence you can muster in that cause, as well. It would be best if you were to come to Rosings, that we might present a united front to him, making it clear what the respectable women in his life think of this Miss Bennet. I have never understood why he would not accede to my many requests to install you here. You would find Anne’s company most improving, and I would be far better able to manage your debut and secure you a suitable prospect were you to be a resident of my estate. Do speak to Fitzwilliam the next time he visits Pemberley and see to it that he sees reason, on both topics.

It is my desire that between us we can bring your brother back to a full understanding of his obligations and responsibilities. I had not hoped for Anne to marry so soon, as her health is still so delicate, but in view of the current disagreeable situation, perhaps it would be best if we began to arrange a wedding within the year. I am certain you will enjoy helping Anne select her bridal costume.

Georgiana sighed. Fitzwilliam had never wanted to marry poor Anne deBourgh. She was a mousy little thing who never had two words to say, in company or out. Georgiana had been thrown
together with her quite a bit over the course of their childhoods, and still had little idea what Anne thought about anything. She suspected Anne herself didn’t know; she’d been constrained to like what her mother liked and go where her mother went her entire life. Any man who married Anne would be marrying naught but Lady Catherine’s shadow. Georgiana felt sorry for her cousin to a degree, but Anne made even that difficult, since she seemed so little concerned about her own life and prospects, content to read the books she was allowed and let her mother make all her arrangements and decisions.

She would refuse Lady Catherine’s imperious summons, of course. As for Lady Catherine’s stream of invective, which went on for another three closely written pages, Georgiana took only one thing from it—if Lady Catherine had heard of an entanglement between Fitzwilliam and Miss Elizabeth, something must have occurred between them to alter their relations, and that was quite good news.

Georgiana folded up her aunt’s letter with a smile that would have severely discomposed the mistress of Rosings, had she been there to see it.
Two days later, Georgiana received another letter, this one accompanied by a footman. It was brief and to the point:

*Georgiana: The bearer will conduct you to Mr. Bingley’s home in Hertfordshire. Make all haste, as I have much to tell you!*  
*Your loving brother, Fitzwilliam*

She could barely breathe for excitement, much less prepare for a journey. Surely his exclamation point, taken in conjunction with Lady Catherine’s letter, could only mean one thing. But all the other possibilities crowding her head made it hard for Georgiana to concentrate on the mundane details that needed to be taken care of before she was finally ready to get in the carriage and be on her way in response to Fitzwilliam’s summons.

At last she was on her way, bouncing in her seat in a manner most unseemly for a young lady of her advanced years and breeding. Eagerly she peered out the window, watching as the familiar countryside altered. Questions raced incessantly through her mind. What would Mr. Bingley’s house look like? Would Fitzwilliam meet her there? Would she see Miss Elizabeth? Most importantly, did Fitzwilliam’s words portend a change in his relations with Miss Elizabeth, or did they not? If Lady Catherine had heard of an entanglement and had written to Georgiana, she must have written to Fitzwilliam likewise. Or, worse, gone to see him. Perhaps she had even gone to see Miss Elizabeth, if she were in a true extremity. Could Lady Catherine have convinced Fitzwilliam to marry their cousin Anne? Georgiana could scarcely credit such an idea, but if Miss Elizabeth had refused him again, perhaps her brother might have been convinced to join himself in marriage with the lady his aunt so strongly wished him to wed, just to gain a measure of peace and distance from the object of his affections.

Georgiana certainly hoped that wasn’t what had come to pass. Oh, if she could only force the horses to move faster! The curiosity was building inside her with every clopping footfall.

The maidservant she had brought with her, one of the most dependable, was little help, as she could not tell Georgiana with anywhere near enough accuracy how much farther they had to go.

At last the carriage came to its final stop. Georgiana was stiff and tired from so much unaccustomed travel, and her stomach was filled with butterflies. What would she find once she alighted?

To her disappointment, Fitzwilliam wasn’t there waiting for her. Several footmen clustered about the carriage, unloading baggage and helping her and the maid down. And there, coming toward her with a broad smile and his hands outstretched, was Mr. Bingley.

“Miss Darcy, what a pleasure it is to have you here! Welcome.”

“It’s good to be here, Mr. Bingley.” She couldn’t help looking past him, straining futilely for a glance at her brother. “Where is Fitzwilliam?”

“He had hoped to be here when you arrived, but you made better time than we had imagined. I know he has much he wants to tell you.” Mr. Bingley’s eyes were sparkling, and his smile as wide as she had ever seen it. “But come, you must be tired from your journey. Come inside, I’ll have one of the maids show you to your room so you can restore yourself.”

Georgiana followed him, still burning with curiosity. Tired she certainly was, but even so she
would have preferred to see Fitzwilliam as soon as she arrived.

Two hours later, bathed and dressed in fresh clothing, she did have to admit she felt much better. She went down to the salon, where she found Mr. Bingley standing at the window, that smile still lingering on his face.

“If you'll pardon my mentioning it, Mr. Bingley, you appear quite pleased about something. May I ask what has you so aglow?”

“You may.” He turned toward her, motioning her to a seat. “I am to be married. Very shortly. In fact, as soon as can be arranged.”

“Indeed? And who is the lucky lady?”

“Miss Jane Bennet.” Lost in his own happiness, Mr. Bingley didn’t notice Georgiana’s start of surprise. “She lives right near here, and I met her when I first took this house. Your—there were objections made by some to her situation and her connections.”

“But you have overcome those objections in the face of your … ah … attachment to the young lady?” Georgiana had been going to say “ardor”, but neither she nor Mr. Bingley would ever have recovered from their blushes had she used that word.

“Yes, indeed!” He beamed at her. “And the objections were withdrawn, at any rate. The young lady’s modesty and amiability were remarked upon as being so superior that she couldn’t fail to rise above any deficiencies in her family. Happily, that was my own opinion, as well, and Miss Bennet—Jane—was prevailed upon to agree to become my wife. I am a fortunate man.”

“You certainly are. When am I to meet this paragon?”

“Soon, I imagine. Quite soon. There’s a dinner party arranged in three days’ time—we had hoped that would give you some time to adjust to certain changes …” His voice trailed off, his cheeks reddening. Georgiana had known Mr. Bingley too long to be surprised by his descent into stammering and confusion. On the contrary, his awkwardness delighted her, because it tended to confirm what she suspected about the alteration in Fitzwilliam’s prospects. Now, if her brother would only arrive to end the suspense and receive her congratulations, she would be quite content.

Mr. Bingley moved to the window, staring out of it determinedly. Clearly he hoped to avoid further speech, so that he might not spoil his friend’s surprise. “Ah, here he is now,” he exclaimed at last.

Georgiana shifted in her seat, rearranging her skirts, her heart beating fast. Anyone would have thought it was her own engagement she was anticipating, she thought to herself. Still, Fitzwilliam’s happiness was the more immediate goal. Her own would come someday—her brother would see to that. She only hoped she could help see to his.
Footsteps sounded in the hall outside the salon; Fitzwilliam was practically running. He burst into the room with a smile on his face Georgiana had rarely seen outside the safe confines of Pemberley, and she stood to greet him, unable to remain sitting properly. For that matter, with only Mr. Bingley to see them, what did it matter if they practiced society’s proper behavior? She had been terribly concerned about Fitzwilliam’s well-being, and was so glad to see him she could not have refrained from embracing him had even the imposing person of Lady Catherine stood between them.

As it happened, she did not, however, and Georgiana could feel her brother’s exuberance as he swept her up and twirled her around. An undignified greeting for a girl of her years, to be certain, but it didn’t matter at all to Georgiana—or to Fitzwilliam or Mr. Bingley, clearly, because they were all laughing and happy.

“Fitzwilliam!” she cried breathlessly as soon as he had put her down. “Your letter was shamefully short and incomplete. Tell me at once—what news do you have for me?”

“Can you not guess?”

“I can, and have, many times in the course of the journey. But I would far rather hear it from you—and quickly, before I burst with the wondering!”

“Very well.” He held her by the shoulders, looking down into her face, his smile wide. “I am engaged to be married.”

“Yes, but to whom?”

Her impatience made him laugh. “To whom do you think?”

Georgiana glared at her brother. “Lady Anne deBourgh?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I had a letter from Lady Catherine.”

“You did? What did she say?”

“She asked me to join with her to point you back in the direction she desired you to follow—straight back to Rosings and far away from the temptations of Hertfordshire.” Georgiana watched her brother closely. He groaned, but the twinkle in his eyes didn’t dissipate. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“You have managed at last to prevail upon Miss Elizabeth to change her mind.”

“In point of fact, I have not.”

Georgiana’s face fell, and Fitzwilliam chuckled. “You haven’t?”

“No. It was Lady Catherine who did the prevailing, if you can imagine such a thing.”

“How so, when she was so set against Miss Elizabeth anywhere near you?”
Mr. Bingley laughed. “You have the right of it, Miss Darcy. The lady came in one night, so late she roused the whole household, and gave my friend here such a dressing down as I never thought I would live to see him endure. He took it like a gentleman, politely told her that he intended to suit himself, and sent her on her way.” With wide eyes, he added, “He didn’t even offer her a cup of tea.”

“You said that to Lady Catherine?”

Fitzwilliam looked abashed, but only for a moment before his smile returned. “I did, indeed. She was not pleased.”

“To say the least,” Mr. Bingley said.

Georgiana looked between the two of them in confusion. “But how did her appearance here convince Miss Elizabeth?”

“Oh, it didn’t,” Fitzwilliam assured her. “However, her appearance at the Bennets’ home certainly did.”

“Lady Catherine went to visit Miss Elizabeth?” Oh, how Georgiana would have loved to have witnessed that meeting! “To convince her not to marry you?”

“Yes. Apparently Lady Catherine’s vicar is married to a friend of Lizzie’s.” Fitzwilliam started to catch himself at the use of the less formal name, and then appeared, from the light that brightened his countenance, to decide that as an affianced man, he had the right to be informal. “Through that connection, Lady Catherine was made aware of my relations toward Lizzie, and she came to Hertfordshire to demand that any agreement between us be brought to an end. Lizzie refused to promise such a thing, and that allowed me to hope as I had never dared to do before. I went the next morning to renew my advances toward her, and found them favorably received. And … here we are.” The rush of words stopped, and he beamed at Georgiana.

Her eyes filled with tears. “It’s just what I hoped for.” Georgiana reached up on tiptoes to give her brother a hug. “When is the happy day?”

“We are still working on that. Soon, we hope.” He glanced at Mr. Bingley. “We have hoped we could coordinate with Charles and Jane—Miss Bennet … did he tell you his own news?”

Georgiana nodded, too happy to speak.

“Lizzie and Jane will be having luncheon with us tomorrow, and then you will meet the entire Bennet family at dinner the night after.”

“All of them?” she asked, thinking of one member of the extended Bennet family she had no desire to come into contact with.

“All but the youngest. She has recently been married and is living with her husband in the north.” Mr. Bingley was unaware of the former relationship between Georgiana and Mr. Wickham, and appeared truly downcast that she would not be able to meet the entire family assembled at once.

“Oh, that is a shame,” Georgiana said, but she and Fitzwilliam exchanged a glance that said it was anything but.

Mr. Bingley smiled, the momentary seriousness gone from his face. “But not such a shame that we should allow ourselves to become downhearted.”

“No, I should say not. These are happy days. And all the happier because of your arrival, my
dearest sister.” Fitzwilliam put an arm around her shoulders, giving her a little squeeze.

Georgiana couldn’t help but sigh. Her brother’s happiness all but secured, a congenial family relationship in at least one of his prospective brothers-in-law, and soon she would be in the midst of the Bennet sisters, where she had hoped to be for such a long time. Happy days, indeed.
The following day, after a long rest in a most comfortable bed—whoever had furnished Mr. Bingley’s house had good taste—Georgiana awoke refreshed and excited, more than ready for her luncheon with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. She could barely sit still as the maid assisted with her hair. Georgiana was capable of tying up her own hair if need be, but the results were rarely fit for other eyes to see. And today she wanted to look … well, perhaps not perfect, but her best, at any rate. Perfection had a tendency to be daunting, and she had no desire to be daunting in the presence of the Misses Bennet.

Fitzwilliam’s quiet smile of approval at her appearance was all the assurance she needed that in that area, at least, she would not be a disappointment to him. Gracefully, she took her seat, twisting her handkerchief in her fingers.

Mr. Bingley was watching anxiously from the window. He turned at last, beaming. “They’re here!” He had barely finished speaking before his long steps had taken him from the room to greet his intended, and Fitzwilliam wasn’t far behind. Left alone, Georgiana stood up, wondering if she should remain where she was or follow the two men. Remaining still made her feel uncomfortably as though she was putting on airs, receiving visitors in another person’s parlor, but she felt equally uncomfortable hurrying to meet the other two ladies, feeling that they should have a moment with their betrotheds without the inhibiting presence of a near-stranger. She settled on walking slowly toward the hall. The laughter she could hear ahead of her made her smile, but as she drew closer she felt shyness stealing over her.

Georgiana poked her head around the door, unsure of herself and her welcome, although what there was to be so nervous about, she couldn’t have said.

It was hard to tell which of the four people in the hall looked the happiest, although Mr. Bingley wore his emotions most vividly on his face. The blonde lady greeting him was flushed rosy red, no doubt at a compliment, and had ducked her head shyly. Miss Elizabeth was not one to hide her face, and she was looking up into Fitzwilliam’s eyes, her own shining brightly.

Fitzwilliam was the first to notice Georgiana standing there, and he spoke a quiet word to his intended, who glanced in Georgiana’s direction before moving toward her with her hands held out. “Such a pleasure to see you again!”

“Miss Elizabeth.”

“Please, if we’re to be sisters, I do hope you’ll call me Lizzie.”

Lizzie! Just as Georgiana had imagined! She squeezed Lizzie’s hands. “Only if you will call me Georgie.”

“With pleasure.”

Fitzwilliam frowned. She had never asked him to shorten her name, but then, anything short of Georgiana would have sounded odd coming from him. She hoped he didn’t feel slighted by it, but there wasn’t time to consider such a thing, because Lizzie was calling over her shoulder, “Jane! Come meet Georgie Darcy, our new sister-to-be! Georgie, this is Jane, and you know that she and Mr. Bingley—“

“Charles.”
“Charles, then.” Lizzie cast him a smile. “So, Jane and Charles are getting married, too, so we will all be one family. I hope … I hope that makes you as happy as it makes us.”

“Oh, it does,” Georgiana assured her. “It truly does.”

She felt Fitzwilliam’s hand on her shoulder. “I’m afraid I have not been able to be as present in Georgiana’s daily life as I might have hoped. The loss of our parents should have brought us closer together, and instead, I fear, with the cares and responsibilities of becoming the head of our family, I have not done all that I ought.”

“No, no! Dear brother,” Georgiana said affectionately, covering his hand with her own. “You have done admirably well.”

“Surely you are not to blame for not being able to take on the roles of mother and father both,” Lizzie said quietly, giving him a look filled with approval. “You are, after all, only one person.”

“Sometimes even an abundance of relations cannot make up for the sincere affection of a single sibling.” Jane spoke up at last, looking at Lizzie with a gentle warmth and trust that made Georgiana like her instantly.

“Fitzwilliam sells himself short,” she said earnestly to the other two ladies, not wanting them to have the wrong idea of him. Not that they could, judging from the friendliness that seemed to exist among the two couples, but she had always felt that he was too hard on himself when it came to his raising of her. “Our parents could not have cared for me more tenderly than he has.”

There was a silence in the room as they all stood about smiling at one another, before Fitzwilliam withdrew himself, clearing his throat. “Charles, do I hear the luncheon bell?”

He hadn’t, but the suggestion was enough to remind Georgiana of how hungry she was, and she was relieved when Mr. Bingley stirred himself from Jane’s side to go find out when the luncheon would be prepared.

“That will be your duty soon,” Lizzie said to her sister, who smiled.

“I look forward to it.” She gazed around at the high-ceilinged hall. “I cannot wait to be mistress here and … change those drapes, for one thing.”

“Redecorating already?” Fitzwilliam chuckled. “And you, Lizzie? Which parts of Pemberley do you intend to alter first?”

She looked up at him with an impish smile on her face. “Whichever parts you like least, of course.”

Georgiana looked away, feeling suddenly uncomfortable in their presence. The looks on their faces … no one had ever looked at her like that. Certainly not Mr. Wickham.

Jane must have sensed some of what Georgiana was feeling, because she linked their arms, leading her a few steps away. “Have you spent much time away from Pemberley, Miss D—Georgie?”

“Not recently. It is so quiet there—I like it better than the noise and the smell of London. I mean,” Georgiana stammered, not wanting to give offense in case Jane was fond of the city.

“No, I understand, and in many ways I quite agree. London is fine in its place, but for everyday I prefer the country. You are not out yet, is that what I understand from Fitzwilliam?”
Georgiana nodded. “We had thought about it this year, but …” She caught herself, not certain how much Jane knew of her history. “We decided next year would be better.”

“As it will.” Jane squeezed her arm. “You shall have the benefit of whatever advice we can give you. And our younger sisters, Kitty and Mary, are both out, as well.”

“Oh, Jane, you aren’t trying to suggest that Georgie should follow their lead, are you?” Lizzie called.

“On the contrary.” Jane laughed. “I am hoping that Georgie can be a good example for them.”

“That’s more the thing, indeed,” agreed Lizzie.

“I look forward to meeting them,” Georgiana ventured.

“They are quite the experience. Unfortunately, it may be some time before you have the chance to meet our youngest sister, Lydia. She is recently married and gone with her husband to the north.” Jane sighed. “No doubt they will be happy—Lydia always does seem to land on her feet. But to be so far away from her family cannot be a good thing.”

Lizzie linked arms with Georgiana on the other side, giving Jane a warning glance. “Sometimes people have to leave their families to be allowed to grow up, which you know very well is true in Lydia’s case, Jane.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Jane sighed again, then glanced guiltily at Georgiana. “Here I am, going on about people you don’t know.”

“No, no, I like to hear it,” Georgiana assured her. In truth, she didn’t quite like to hear about Mr. Wickham’s new wife, but since he was now such a near relation of Miss Eliz—of Lizzie’s, she supposed she would have to get used to hearing about him without immediately thinking of him in relationship to herself. And after all, what had he really done? Thanks to Fitzwilliam, nothing. Her brother had stopped her from making a dreadful mistake, and they two were the closer for it. There was, Georgiana told herself firmly, no further reason to look back on Mr. Wickham with any emotion at all. She was well free of him, his future was decided in another quarter, and she could see now, watching her brother’s face as he looked at Lizzie, that what Mr. Wickham had pretended to feel for her, and what she had persuaded herself she felt for him, was but a shadow of what real love could be. It was time to let go of those lingering feelings and step forward into her new life.

“You appear to be thinking long thoughts,” Lizzie whispered.

“No, not any more.” She smiled at her soon-to-be sister, knowing that Lizzie knew as much of what was going on in her mind as anyone other than Fitzwilliam could.

As Jane left them to consult with Charles about some detail of the luncheon, Lizzie led Georgiana toward the windows, saying very softly, “I think I can venture to guess what was in your mind. I had a narrow escape in that quarter myself, during my extended period of foolishness before I came awake to an understanding of your brother’s many fine qualities. Did you know about … any of that?”

Georgiana glanced over her shoulder, catching her brother watching them with some concern. He was shortly drawn into Charles and Jane’s discussion, and she ventured to respond to Lizzie’s question. “He told me some few things, yes.”

“Then you will be able to imagine how I felt when I learnt of Lydia’s impetuosity and the nearly disastrous choice she had made. A pale shadow compared to your own emotions, I have to think.”
“No.” Georgiana spoke decisively. Best to nip all this in the bud now and have it no longer spoken of. “That’s past. The fault was mine for believing … things I should not have, and I will be wiser next time. I wish your sister happy, but I do not envy her choice. Not in the least.”

“Nor I. We have that in common.” Lizzie squeezed her arm. “Georgie, I do hope we’re going to be friends. I want you to live with us at Pemberley, lest you had any concern about that, and I have no intention of coming between you and your brother. He positively sparkles in your presence, and we need to encourage him to sparkle more often, don’t you think?”

“I do, indeed. And I could say the same.” Fitzwilliam didn’t quite sparkle when with Lizzie, but he was relaxed and easy in a way Georgiana had only seen him with his true friends … and true friendship seemed to her to be more important than sparkle.

“Luncheon, ladies, if you care to join us,” Fitzwilliam called.

“Shall we?”

Georgiana smiled at her new-found sister. “Indeed we shall.”
Much Ado about the Bennets

Georgiana was far less nervous about the approach of dinner the day after meeting Jane and seeing Lizzie again than she had been about her luncheon with the two of them. The younger sisters were a far less daunting prospect. She met Charles and Fitzwilliam in the drawing room as they awaited the arrival of the Bennet party.

“This should be a most pleasant evening,” Charles remarked with his usual friendly smile. But it seemed a bit strained, and Georgiana wondered why.

“Pleasant in some ways, certainly.” Fitzwilliam was pacing the room, a half-finished letter lying abandoned on the table. “In others, less so.”

Belatedly, Georgiana remembered the comments Fitzwilliam had made about Lizzie’s family when he had first met her. “What have we to look forward to?”

He looked down at her, his eyebrows lifting. “Shall I risk being less than gentlemanly in the interest of honesty?”

“Gentlemanly or not, I would appreciate knowing what to expect.”

“I suppose you’re right.” He sighed, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. “Where shall I start?”

“They’re not so bad,” Charles said, looking anxious at the prospect of being less than completely kind.

“Your generosity does you credit.” Fitzwilliam gave his friend a fond glance. “But you know perfectly well that once Jane’s mother begins her prattle, you are put completely out of countenance and cannot get a word edgewise. You barely managed to get enough room to speak to accomplish your proposal!”

Charles laughed. “That’s true. But she means well!”

“Oh, indeed. She is kind enough, if a bit foolish, but has no sense of propriety. She says exactly what she thinks, appropriate to the occasion or not.”

Georgiana was disappointed; she had so hoped Mrs. Bennet would turn out to be something like the mother she only dimly recalled, sweet and gentle and kind. She should have known better, remembered what Fitzwilliam had said about the Bennet family from the beginning. “And Mr. Bennet?”

Fitzwilliam apparently sensed that she was disheartened, because he smiled down at her. “Mr. Bennet is the best of the family, after Jane and my Lizzie. He is a man of great intelligence and sharp wit—but sometimes it is too sharp, and either pierces or goes entirely above the heads of his hearers. And he is too easily distracted by his own pursuits. He has allowed Mrs. Bennet to exercise her own longing for excitement and advancement, to the great detriment of his daughters and their education.”

“Come now,” Charles said. “He has produced two very fine daughters by his methods.”

“Yes, and three others who are rather less so. I am more likely to imagine that the elder two were happy accidents than that any concerted system of education produced Kitty and Lydia.”
At the mention of Lydia, Charles gave a rare frown. Georgiana was surprised that he made no attempt to champion the two girls, and the excitement she had felt about meeting Kitty ebbed away. Perhaps having sisters wasn’t the source of happiness and familial joy she had imagined it to be.

“There is Mary,” Charles ventured after a moment.

“Yes, and Mary is a paragon of education. I don’t believe one can argue with that. But she has no wit—no humour at all that I can see—and no sensibility to lighten her good sense.”

“Surely they can’t be as bad as you paint them,” Georgiana said, trying to keep her voice from wobbling and betraying the intensity of her disappointment.

Startled, he turned to look fully at her, then took a seat next to her. “I am sorry, sister. I forgot, in my own apprehension, that you must not be quite easy in your mind over meeting all these strangers, and I allowed myself to be ungenerous. In truth, I believe you will find the Bennet family to your liking. The behaviours to which I object appeared largely in Mrs. Bennet’s pursuit of good marriages for her daughters. With three of them now settled, or soon to be so, I imagine her eagerness and the unfortunate consequences of it will have lessened.”

“Oh perhaps they will turn in an entirely different direction.” Charles smiled at Georgiana.

Instead of the amusement he’d intended, alarm filled her. She had not considered that Lizzie’s mother might find her, a motherless daughter about to make her debut into society, an object of maternal interest. Georgiana had no objection to Lizzie or, now, Jane placing themselves in the role of advisor in her upcoming search for a husband, but nothing she had heard about their mother predisposed her to be comfortable with that lady’s interference in such a delicate topic. But perhaps, she reasoned with herself, such trepidation had more to do with her own concerns than with any potential defect in the character of Mrs. Bennet. After what had happened with Mr. Wickham, Georgiana had ceased to look forward to being out in society, paraded about the marriage market. Certainly if anyone ever found out that she had contemplated running away with Mr. Wickham, the story would do her no credit, even though nothing untoward had actually occurred. She didn’t imagine her contemplated indiscretion would be discovered—Fitzwilliam and now Lizzie could be relied on to keep quiet about it—but it was as well to consider what would happen if Mr. Wickham, or his new wife, were to spread tales about.

“Georgiana?” Fitzwilliam was giving her a concerned look as she had failed to respond to Charles’s sally.

She forced a smile. Time enough to worry about her own marriage prospects later—now was the time to celebrate the fact that Fitzwilliam had won through when they thought he had no chance to do so. His happiness would more than secure Georgiana’s, for the next long while. And Lizzie bade fair to be the sister Georgiana had always longed for. “I am sorry; I was lost in thought.” She patted Fitzwilliam on the shoulder. “It occurs to me that my brother’s shyness sometimes keeps him from seeing the best in people, making him more critical of those who challenge his aloofness … and it sounds as though the Bennet family would challenge anyone who attempted to be solitary and reserved in their presence, as we know Fitzwilliam often prefers to be when in company.”

“Oh, that is an excellent point. I confess, I hadn’t considered it that way before, but I should have seen it myself. No family is more certain to discompose Fitzwilliam than the Bennets—one might imagine they were made for it!”

Fitzwilliam glanced from his friend to his sister with an attempt at sternness, but the tilt to the corners of his mouth gave the lie to his pose. “You have me there, sister of mine. Very well—we
will dine with the Bennets this evening and I shall attempt to be as open of countenance as Miss Kitty, as ready to share my general knowledge as Miss Mary, as sharp of wit as Mr. Bennet, and as easy with the formalities as Mrs. Bennet, and you can both tell me later how much you liked my performance.”

“Be ready to start, then,” Charles said, looking outside, “because they have arrived!”
A Surfeit of Family

Charles’s announcement of the Bennets’ arrival had not been needed—as soon as they entered the house, Georgiana could hear a loud, querulous voice and a higher giggle in response, both coming rapidly toward the room where she waited with the two young gentlemen. Of Lizzie and Jane, there was no sign, both of them being of a quieter, more modest temperament. At least in company, Georgiana amended to herself. She imagined Lizzie, at least, had the potential to be much more than modest, in the right company, and her heart lifted with happiness to think that she would be Lizzie’s sister and thus would be able to share in the liveliness of her true nature. Georgiana herself had always been rather shy and quiet—more so since the death of her parents, and even more still since the dreadful experience with Mr. Wickham—but she was drawn to the light in Lizzie’s face. Much as her brother must be, she thought, although in an entirely different way.

She shrank from the constant stream of talk being uttered by Mrs. Bennet, and the volume at which the older woman spoke, which was obvious even as far apart as they currently were. The owner of the giggle must be Kitty, she realized, thinking back on the descriptions Fitzwilliam had given her.

And then there they were in the doorway, a little plump woman in an over-fussy dress, and a taller girl with dark ringlets wearing a dress of equal busyness. The giggle was emanating from the girl. She hastily covered her mouth as she and her mother entered the room, looking about her guiltily, but her eyes were still twinkling with whatever joke had so amused her.

“Ah!” Charles went forward to greet them, and was effusively fussed over by both mother and daughter, to his evident embarrassment. “May I introduce—“

But he got no further, because the mother was bustling toward Fitzwilliam with her arms outstretched. “My dear boy, what a pleasure it is to see you again! Mind you, I was not at all certain this evening would come off. This morning it looked like rain, and I said to Mr. Bennet that I was sure you would cancel it rather than have us all come all this way in such weather …”

Over Mrs. Bennet’s shoulder, Georgiana saw Jane and Lizzie enter the room. They were arm in arm, and when they saw their mother speaking so familiarly, so querulously and ungraciously, Georgiana felt, with Fitzwilliam, they tightened their grip on each other’s arm and exchanged a glance of sympathy and support.

“But I present my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy?”

Georgiana timidly moved forward, only now realizing that she had been half-hidden behind her brother’s shoulder, and immediately the full force of Mrs. Bennet’s enthusiasm was turned in her direction.

“Miss Georgie, as I live and breathe! I have been so longing to meet you. Have you met my daughter Kitty? I’m sure you’re much of an age and will get on with each other splendidly.” Still chattering, Mrs. Bennet enfolded Georgiana into a tight embrace. “My dear, I do hope you will look on me as a mother. Having guided three daughters to matrimony—although two of them are not quite there yet, it won’t be long now, and of course the third has married a soldier and gone so far away. You won’t marry a soldier, I hope—they do go so dreadfully far off from home.” She sighed heavily, oblivious to the looks that flew amongst the assembled company and to Georgiana’s own discomfort.
“Georgiana,” Fitzwilliam said sharply, cutting into Mrs. Bennet’s next flow of talk, “come and meet Mr. Bennet.”

“Oh! Oh, yes, to be sure,” Mrs. Bennet said in disappointment. The emotion didn’t last long, however, as she turned her attention back to Charles, keeping up a lively stream of chatter as she clung to his arm.

Mr. Bennet was a tall man with a grave expression, and Georgiana liked him at once. He took her hand and squeezed it warmly. “Miss Darcy, it is a pleasure. I have heard much of you from your brother and from my daughter, and—” He glanced across the room toward his wife with a look of fond exasperation. “I hope you will forgive us any trespasses on common courtesy.”

“Oh, of course,” Georgiana murmured. She glanced at the girl who stood next to Mr. Bennet. In contrast to the other ladies of the family, Kitty and Mrs. Bennet in bright colors and much-beribboned flounces and Jane and Lizzie in pastels and a simpler, more elegant style, this girl wore a dark dress and a heavy cloak over it, both cut severely and very plainly.

Mr. Bennet took the girl’s hand and pulled her forward, seemingly by force. “My daughter Mary, Miss Darcy.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Mary said, although her tone conveyed no pleasure at all.

“Likewise.”

The three of them stood there, looking at one another in awkward silence for a long moment before Georgiana felt a slender arm slip through hers. “Miss Georgiana, do come over here and tell me all about that lovely gown you’re wearing,” Jane said softly, drawing Georgiana away from her father and sister. Lizzie waited for them in the quiet corner, smiling.

“Papa means well,” she said, “but he goes into company so seldom, and so unwillingly when he does, that he has lost the ability to tell the difference between those he wishes to charm and those he wishes to bore so they’ll leave him in peace.”

“Oh, no,” Georgiana protested, “I found him quite personable.”

The remark found favor with both of the other two young ladies—Georgiana could tell from the widening of their smiles and the warmth in their faces. She hoped they wouldn’t ask her to praise their mother; she would have been hard put to do so, thus far. Mrs. Bennet was still talking away, and poor Charles Bingley looked most uncomfortable as she clung to his arm and told him the most dreadfully personal stories of Jane’s upbringing. Georgiana wondered how Jane put up with it—she would have been mortified, had Mrs. Bennet been her mother. But perhaps they were and simply had learned to cover the emotion by pretending not to feel it. Jane’s gentle smile never changed, and Georgiana admired her for it. Better a mother who was an embarrassment than no mother at all, she thought with a pang of longing for her own lost mother.

Fitzwilliam caught her eye over Lizzie’s shoulder and gave her an encouraging smile, and she drew her thoughts away from the past and into this crowded room filled with family. This was the moment she had dreamed of since Fitzwilliam had first spoken to her of his Miss Elizabeth—she should put all her effort into enjoying it.
It was a relief when they were summoned into the dining room and seated. Charles being an informal sort, and considering this a family occasion, he had waived any attempt at the usual order of precedence. He took the head of the table, with Jane at his right and Mary at his left, and gave Mrs. Bennet the foot of the table, with Kitty at her left and Mr. Bennet at her right. Lizzie and Fitzwilliam sat between Mary and Mr. Bennet, which left Georgiana between Jane and Kitty. Jane’s attention was captured immediately by her fiance, and the two of them bent their heads toward each other and whispered and smiled throughout most of the meal. Georgiana thought it lovely that they should be so captivated by one another’s company, even if it did rather force her into conversation with Kitty, and by extension with Mrs. Bennet.

“Mama was just telling me such a story about my sister Lydia’s doings at Bath,” Kitty said with enthusiasm. “Did you know she eloped to be married from there? So romantic.” She sighed with pleasure.

Georgiana busied herself arranging her napkin in her lap, nodding politely in response to Kitty’s comments. This was clearly something she would have to get used to, Mrs. Bennet and Kitty’s constant mention of the youngest sister’s elopement and marriage to Mr. Wickham. Part of her wanted to tell Kitty what had happened between herself and Mr. Wickham, but she was wise enough to know that nothing good could come of that. Kitty would be titillated by the story, would no doubt share it with her mother, or, worse, with her sister Mrs. Wickham, and Georgiana would be embarrassed and ashamed. But then, if she did not speak, would she eventually be brought face to face with Mr. Wickham and have the whole story come out then? He had little to lose in the eyes of his new family, not after the way his marriage had been brought about, and might well find it worth while to reveal her past mistake.

Kitty was looking at her strangely, and she realized she had been lost in thought for longer than politeness allowed. Straightening her shoulders and smiling at Kitty, she decided that there was no knowing how she might be placed farther in the future. With the Wickhams stationed so far away, perhaps by the time she was forced to see them in company and court the danger of having her youthful foolishness disclosed, she would have met someone herself. She might even be married by that point. Best, she decided, to pretend to know little of Mr. Wickham for now and to accustom herself to hear his name spoken in terms of approbation by Lizzie’s mother and sister. She regretted not being placed next to Mary, although a glance at that young lady’s unsmiling face and bowed head made her think that might not have been an improvement. It was odd to think of Lizzie, with her ready smile and her wit, or Jane, so quiet and serene, having grown up in the same house as the younger two sisters.

“Miss Georgie,” Mrs. Bennet called, and Georgiana winced. To have the pet name she had saved for a sister presumed upon by this woman she scarcely knew was quite painful. But she rallied, and summoned a smile for Lizzie’s mother.

“Yes, Mrs. Bennet?”

“Do tell us about Pemberley! Oh, how I long to visit and meet all the neighbors! Do you dine with many families?”

Startled by the question, Georgiana didn’t answer for a moment, and Fitzwilliam jumped in. “We used to dine with a number of other families, while my parents were living, but I’m afraid in recent years we have kept a much quieter establishment.” He smiled at Lizzie. “Perhaps that will have to change shortly.”
“Well, I should say so! Charles, you know how to keep a good house. Do tell Fitzwilliam how it’s done. I would hate for Lizzie’s establishment to fall short of the mark.” Mrs. Bennet tittered, clearly having meant the remark as a witticism.

“Mama,” Lizzie said sharply, then softened her tone with what appeared to Georgiana to be an obvious effort. “We must take you to Pemberley, I think, so that you can see how impossible it would be to fall short of the mark while such an estate is in one’s hands. It is all that is grand and beautiful.” She looked at Fitzwilliam, a warm smile shining in her eyes. It was easy to tell she meant much more than Pemberley by her words.

There was a brief silence over the table; Lizzie’s emotion had touched them all. Mrs. Bennet, when she spoke again, did so in a far quieter tone. “No doubt it is, my dear, and I look forward to seeing it. Perhaps Miss Georgie will show me all her favourite spots.”

“I would be happy to,” Georgiana said.

“You would be welcome to come to us for a little, after the wedding,” Mrs. Bennet went on, with a wink in Fitzwilliam’s direction. Georgiana saw her brother wince and Lizzie roll her eyes, and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. “The sad truth about having one’s daughters all marry at once is that it will leave the house so very quiet, with only Mary and Kitty at home.”

There was a sorrow in the older woman’s face and a sincerity in her voice that had not been displayed previously that evening, and Georgiana couldn’t help thinking about what that must be like, to have a happy, noisy family all around and then to have so many of them so far away. Of course, Jane would be close, just at Netherfield, but Lizzie and Lydia would both require long-distance trips to see … and it would never be quite the same. It must be somewhat like what Georgiana had felt once her mother’s funeral had been completed, when all the guests had returned home and Fitzwilliam had gone to London and she was all alone in Pemberley but for the servants.

She looked shyly at Lizzie’s mother. “I think that might be nice, if you wouldn’t mind the extra company.” Catching Fitzwilliam’s eye across the table, she surprised on his face an expression of surprise, respect, and a tinge of relief. Georgiana had not considered that perhaps her brother would like to start married life with his new wife without his little sister about. She pressed her lips together to stop the sudden trembling in them—it hadn’t occurred to her that of course there would be an alteration in their relationship with one another once he married. She understood it, but she would miss being the object of his sole affection.

Mrs. Bennet waved her fork, breaking into the thoughts that threatened to ruin the rest of Georgiana’s night. “Mind? Why should we mind? You must consider yourself one of our daughters henceforth!”

“In this area, I heartily concur with my wife,” Mr. Bennet added.

“And then you must come here and visit with Charles and myself,” Jane said, smiling warmly. “Between us all, you will have no shortage of places you may call home and family to smother you.”

Kitty giggled. “Having had only a brother for so long, you must try sisters now and see which you like best!”

“I would be most ungrateful if I didn’t consider Fitzwilliam to have been the best sibling I could have asked for … but I look forward to a widening of our family connections, indeed.”

“Pemberley will always be your home,” he hastened to assure her, his expression serious. “You are not to think that because I will be getting married anything will change.”
Of course it would, but not in the way that he meant, in the deep affection they bore for one another and all the memories they shared. Georgiana nodded, seeing the smiles all around. It was odd that Kitty’s giggles, and Mrs. Bennet’s constant talking, and Mr. Bennet’s slurping of his soup, and Mary’s awkward stares, suddenly seemed so familiar and comfortable, as though she had lived with them all her life. Truly, she felt that instead of losing a brother, she was gaining an entire family.
It had been decided that both couples had waited long enough for a clear way to happiness; neither was interested in a long-drawn-out engagement. Lizzie had been determined from the first that it would be a double wedding. Jane had demurred initially, which Georgiana had found confusing, but she happened to be present when the sisters talked it through—Jane had been concerned that Fitzwilliam and Lizzie would want a grander, larger wedding than either she or her equally shy fiance would be comfortable with. Georgiana was able to assure her for Fitzwilliam’s part that he was just as shy as Charles, although he showed it in a different manner, and Lizzie convinced her sister that a small, private wedding would more than suit everyone involved, with the probable exception of her mother and Kitty.

To compensate their mother for the loss of the grand weddings she had so fondly imagined, the two brides allowed her to choose both of their gowns and dutifully attended fittings with every evidence of enjoyment. If they were uncomfortable in the much-flounced gowns Mrs. Bennet had chosen, they didn’t show it.

How could they be uncomfortable, Georgiana thought, when it was so clear how happy they each were with their choice of husband. She had thought she was in love with Mr. Wickham, but seeing Lizzie and Fitzwilliam, Jane and Charles, and even watching Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in the occasional moments when he could be induced to look up from his pursuits and focus on his wife, Georgiana understood far better what it was to be truly happy with one’s chosen partner. She was reminded inescapably of her parents. In the nursery and then the schoolroom, she had not had many opportunities to observe her parents together and form any true image of their relationship with one another, but her impression had always been that they enjoyed one another’s company and respected each other—just as Lizzie and Fitzwilliam did. She was glad for her brother that he had found a woman who truly challenged him and enlivened him to share his life with.

And somewhere deep inside her heart, a determination was growing. After the dreadful affair with Mr. Wickham, Georgiana had been more than content to settle into childhood for just a little longer, burying herself at Pemberley. Marriage had been something she thought about with a shudder, grateful for her narrow escape, not something to look forward to. As her experiences had receded into memory and she had drawn closer to the time when she knew she would have to be presented in society, she had considered marriage as a necessity, as a particularly challenging sonata to get just right. Now, watching her brother and his fiancee, she began to give serious thought to what she might want in a husband, and to what would secure her happiness instead of her comfort, well-being, and standing in society.

As the weddings drew nearer, the brides and bridegrooms appeared to increase in happiness, while all around them increased in chaos. Mrs. Bennet had her hands full rushing to and fro, always with Kitty and Mary at her sides, calling out orders to one girl, then giving a conflicting order to the other, then countermanding both to start over again. Mary worked with a will and actually was responsible for many of the plans being completed, while Kitty would start something then fall into a daydream and forget what she had begun. Mr. Bennet locked himself in his study, avoiding all of it.

Georgiana found herself rather at loose ends. She had little to do at Netherfield, no particular responsibilities for the wedding preparations, and everyone else had little time. She had offered to do more, but Mrs. Bennet told her not to worry herself, that she and her girls had it well in hand.

She was practicing away on Charles’s rather second-rate pianoforte, wishing for her own at Pemberley to make the music sound just right, one afternoon when she heard a sound behind her.
Georgiana finished the crashing chords she was in the midst of and then turned to see who was behind her.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” Lizzie said.

“Oh, no. Please. I don’t mind at all.” Georgiana carefully closed the cover over the keys and stood up. “Was I too loud?”

“No, it was lovely. I wish I could play with as much emphasis and expression.”

“You know I am always happy to practice together.”

A smile lit Lizzie’s face. “I do, and I look forward to it when we live together at Pemberley. Only a few short days now.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Nervous?”

“About the wedding.”

“Oh. Not especially. Mama appears to be the one who most wants everything to go well, and some way or another, she always seems to get what she wants.” Lizzie laughed. “Look how well she managed to get her daughters married off. Look out, Georgie, or she’ll have you on your way down the aisle as well.”

“She would have to find a suitable candidate before that could happen.”

“Well, there you’re on your own.”

They smiled at each other, but Georgiana could feel her smile fading as she looked at her soon-to-be-sister. “Lizzie, may I ask you a question?”

“By all means! At any time you like.”

“Do you mind at all …” She stopped herself. The question was indelicate.

“If we’re to be sisters, you must be willing to ask me questions that you think you shouldn’t.” Lizzie smiled. “Heaven knows my own sisters have asked me any number of uncomfortable questions, and thought nothing of it.”

Georgiana nodded, but she could feel a blush stealing across her cheeks. “Do you mind at all sharing your home with your husband-to-be’s sister?”

Lizzie looked startled. Whatever question she might have expected, that was evidently not it. “Why, of course not! What ever would make you think so?”

It was hard to explain, and the thoughts she’d had seemed to Georgiana to have been about more intimate things than she felt she could comfortably discuss with Lizzie. She shrugged.

“Oh.” Lizzie appeared to understand her reticence. She patted Georgiana on the shoulder. “Remember what I am used to, sister-to-be. A much smaller establishment than Pemberley, and one simply packed full with sisters bursting in upon me at the most inopportune times to ask questions and offer confidences and opinions. What would I do in that vast house without someone of similar intimacy? It would be entirely too quiet for me.”

“But you would have Fitzwilliam.”
“Yes. And I quite look forward to that.” Lizzie’s smile was positively impish this time. “But when one is used to being surrounded by family, one person, no matter how beloved, seems likely to make for an unusual amount of privacy. And while I cannot say I have never longed for some peace and quiet, there is a vast difference between four sisters of varying liveliness constantly underfoot and one sister of more sedate tastes and more modest behavior sharing an extremely large house. I most earnestly desire that our little family of Darcys shall not be broken up until you are ready for your own home and hearth.”

It was impossible to doubt her sincerity; Georgiana felt the little storm of uncertainty that had filled her stomach on and off since Fitzwilliam had first come home speaking of Miss Elizabeth Bennet calm itself. She reached for Lizzie’s hand. “You are generous to say so.”

“You are generous to allow me into your home, your life, and your brother’s heart. I have no wish to supplant you there; I hope you will believe that.”

“I do, indeed.” And they embraced. Georgiana truly felt that today she had gained a sister; she could hardly wait for the day that would bind them together as such for the rest of their lives.
As Lizzie pulled away from their embrace, she said, “Oh, dear. I’m afraid I have completely forgotten to fulfill my task.”

“What task was that?”

“I was sent by your brother to call you to the garden.”

“To call me? Why did he not come himself?”

Lizzie laughed. “I believe because he felt it such a refreshing experience to ask me to do it for him. He grows positively imperious.”

“I cannot imagine that state of affairs will be allowed to last for long,” Georgiana said with a sidelong glance at her sister-to-be. “You seem perfectly equipped to quash any growing imperiousness.”

There was a dreamy little smile on Lizzie’s face. “Perhaps. In time.”

“Oh, dear. You have taken the malady very thoroughly, I see.” Now that they were so close, Georgiana felt free to tease Lizzie just a little bit.

Blushing, Lizzie waved her away. “Off with you and your impertinence.” But she laughed as well, and Georgiana did, too, her heart light as she went from the room.

Fitzwilliam was standing amidst the roses, staring out across the fields in the direction of Longbourn. He turned as he heard Georgiana approaching, a smile lighting his face. “There you are.”

“I was in the piano room—surely you didn’t have trouble finding me.” She gave him an impish smile of her own.

“Indeed not. But I wanted to speak with you out of doors … and Lizzie was obliging enough to say that she would fetch you. It took longer than I had imagined it would.”

“We had some things to talk over.”

“Did you? Anything I need to be concerned about?” There was a look of panic on his face entirely out of proportion for a single conversation, and Georgiana couldn’t help laughing.

“Very concerned. Lizzie tells me that she dreads the silent and echoing halls of Pemberley where there will be no gaggle of sisters following her about, and bids me take their place.”

His face eased back into a smile. “I very much doubt you could emulate the demeanour of any of Lizzie’s sisters … other than Jane, that is. But as Jane is the sister she will miss the most, I have no doubt that your presence in Pemberley will be a great comfort to Lizzie.”

“And hers to me.” Georgiana slipped her arm through her brother’s. “Not that you aren’t an excellent companion.”

“I do understand. There are some places a brother cannot fill. But … Georgiana, have you had any cause for complaint?” He looked down at her, his eyes serious. “I attempted to fill the place of our parents in your life to the best of my ability, but I do not know that I was always the wisest or
most understanding guardian.”

“No one could have been more understanding. I am the luckiest of girls to have had your tender
guidance.” She squeezed his arm. “Truly.”

Fitzwilliam nodded, his eyes looking suspiciously wet. “As I contemplate my marriage, I cannot
help thinking of our parents, who were quite happy together. I am sorry you lost the chance to
know them better as you grew. I can only hope to be the husband our father was, to be the wise
counsel our mother was.”

“And to be as little like our aunt, Lady Catherine, as possible,” Georgiana added.

“Indeed. Perish the thought! Poor Anne,” he added, shaking his head.

“Poor Anne, indeed.” Privately, Georgiana had trouble pitying her cousin overmuch. Anne rarely
seemed displeased with her lot in life—she had been content all her life to do as her mother told
her, and would no doubt continue in such a manner until Lady Catherine passed on to her reward,
at which time Anne would find any number of men ready to take on the task of telling her what to
do with her inherited fortune.

“Perhaps we could have her to visit at Pemberley once we’ve all had some time to get used to one
another.”

Georgiana nodded, although she very much doubted Lady Catherine would ever consent to such a
scheme.

Fitzwilliam didn’t seem inclined to pursue that line of conversation either. He cleared his throat,
looking ill at ease. “Speaking of … getting used to one another …”

“What about it?”

“Mrs. Bennet has generously offered, as you know, to have you to stay at Longbourn for some
little time after the wedding, and I … that is, Lizzie and I … we thought perhaps it might be nice if …”

It was difficult to control the giggles that wanted to burst from her at his discomfiture. “Dear
brother, would you like me to refuse Mrs. Bennet’s invitation so that I may assist you and Lizzie
in starting off your married life together?”

His eyes widened in shock and he swallowed visibly. “Er … that would be most kind of you, I
daresay …”

Georgiana couldn’t hold back her laughter any longer, and Fitzwilliam’s countenance relaxed
when he saw that she had been teasing. When at last her fit of mirth had passed, she caught her
breath with some effort. “It would be my pleasure to spend some time visiting at Longbourn after
the wedding,” she assured her brother. “After all, I would not want to be in the way during the
first days of your marriage … and no doubt I would find all the billing and cooing of the pair of
you turtledoves altogether too sweet for my liking.” She nudged him in the side, grinning.

“You are an impertinent little minx … but I do appreciate your thoughtfulness and your discretion.
Rest assured, your tenure at Longbourn shall be no longer than you desire. You have but to say
the word and all of Pemberley is yours again, as it ever has been.”

“Who knows, perhaps I shall find Longbourn more to my taste and make my home there
indefinitely.”
She had meant it as a teasing sally, but Fitzwilliam’s face fell. “I am certain Mrs. Bennet would like that of all things,” he replied, “but I should be sorry not to have you return to your home at Pemberley. You are as dear to me as you have always been, despite my prospects of marital harmony. You know that, I hope, sister?” He looked earnestly into her face.

Georgiana felt her eyes sting with tears. She nodded. “I do know that. But it is good to hear it.”

Fitzwilliam’s arms closed around her and he lifted her off her feet as they embraced.
The Morning of the Wedding

The morning of the weddings dawned clear and sunny. Not that anyone had time to look at the weather in the flurry of dressing and hair-curling and finding lost pins that was taking place. Georgiana felt utterly useless, having spent a lifetime having these things done for her. She was in awe of Jane and Lizzie, who somehow managed to keep their nerves—and fingers—steady enough to manage each other’s hair, not to mention Kitty’s and their mother’s. Mary stood by watching the proceedings, her own hair smoothly drawn back in her accustomed style. She appeared to be wondering why there needed to be such a fuss.

Georgiana had been invited to stay the night before the wedding at Longbourn, that her belongings might be there ready for her longer stay after the nuptials had been concluded. She’d been torn as to which was best—would Fitzwilliam want her close by, his nearest relative, as he prepared for the arrival of his bride, or would she, a young and innocent girl, cause him discomfiture as he approached the married state? In the end, the prospect of getting dressed in the bustle of the Bennet household, with everyone getting ready at once, had proved too tempting, and Fitzwilliam had given her his blessing to take up her abode at Longbourn the night before the wedding. It had been odd sleeping in such a little house, with so many noises outside her door all night as various people got up and moved around and tossed and turned in their creaky beds and giggled and whispered beneath their covers. Georgiana had been given a room to herself, and only silence came from the room Kitty and Mary shared, but Lizzie and Jane appeared not to sleep a wink. Georgiana was kept awake for a while wondering what they were saying to each other, but eventually the happy voices acted as a lullaby, and she turned over beneath the quilt and allowed herself to fall into slumber, feeling surprisingly cozy and safe.

The following morning, the noises resumed anew, as Mrs. Bennet rushed through the rooms calling out orders to her daughters at the top of her voice. Georgiana could tell Mrs. Bennet meant her to be allowed to sleep in, but who could in all that din? Nor did she want to. This was the kind of scene she had imagined and looked forward to.

“Oh, Jane, look at you,” Mrs. Bennet was cooing, hanging over her eldest daughter’s shoulder. “He will be positively entranced.”

“I do hope not,” Lizzie murmured. “We wouldn’t want him to trip and fall over her train while he gazed at her. A very poor way to start off married life, indeed.”

“Hush, Lizzie.” But Jane smiled at her sister in the glass.

Mrs. Bennet appeared to hear none of it. Her eyes were misting over as she stood by her daughter, patting Jane’s shoulder. “Oh, if only we could all be together today. My poor dear Lydia, so cruelly far from her family. How I wish she could be here to give you both the benefit of her experience.”

Jane smothered a smile. Lizzie hurriedly stepped forward to put her arm around her mother. “Dear Mama, I should think Lydia is quite happy enough to be the first one married. I am certain she would rather be enjoying her married life than here—didn’t her latest letter say that she was becoming quite indispensable to the other wives?”

Distracted, Mrs. Bennet nodded emphatically. “That was always certain to be true. I knew my Lydia would take to marriage well. I always said so.” She squeezed Jane’s shoulder. “As will you, dear. And you, too, Lizzie. And such amiable gentlemen for your bridegrooms! They will look so well standing there in the parlour at Netherfield!”
“They certainly will,” Jane said, quietly and with satisfaction. Her smile warmed her whole face.

The special license to be married at Netherfield had been one of the few things all the parties concerned could agree upon whole-heartedly. All four of those being married preferred the quiet privacy of Charles’s home to any more public location where their intimate moment might be under the scrutiny of those outside their intimate families. The Gardiners would be there, of course, and the Philipses. Mr. Bingley’s married sister Mrs. Hurst had pled ill health and declared her intention of hosting the married couples next they were in London—a specious offer, since of course both Charles and Fitzwilliam had their own establishments in town. Caroline Bingley would be in attendance; she had arrived at Netherfield the night before. Georgiana felt a certain pang of guilt at not having been there to greet Caroline, but not enough to have made her stay and actually do so. The Bennets were, in toto, warmer-hearted and more welcoming, and Georgiana never felt there was any sort of hidden scheme in their words. Of course, she considered now, Caroline’s brother was no longer an eligible bachelor, so perhaps Caroline would have nothing more to say to a mere younger sister of a married nobleman. She certainly hoped that might be the case, at any rate. Colonel Fitzwilliam had promised to be there later in the week, but could not manage to arrive in time for the actual ceremony. And naturally, Lady Catherine deBourgh had not even been invited, much less given any thought to attending. Poor Anne would be shut out of yet another family event. Georgiana pitied her.

“There.” Jane’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “That looks quite well, don’t you think, Lizzie?” Her smiling face was more than enough to make up for any shortcomings in the style of her hair, not that there were any.

“Very good,” said Mrs. Bennet. “Now, Georgiana, your turn, dear.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly take up the time,” Georgiana protested.

“Nonsense. I shall sit here and Jane will finish my hair, and you will sit there and Lizzie will take care of you. Kitty, do go and make sure your father is ready, will you? And Mary, see to the flowers.”

The younger two girls scurried to do as their mother asked, while the elder two took on the task of the hair. Georgiana found it strange and amusing to have the two brides performing such a task, but neither of them seemed to see anything amiss with it. They exchanged smiles, no doubt considering that this would be their last morning under their mother’s roof and subject to her whimsy. Georgiana couldn’t fault Lizzie’s quick hands and deft touch; sooner than she had expected—sooner than her maid at Netherfield would have managed—her hair was neatly and prettily arranged and she was ready to go. Mrs. Bennet fussed a bit more over hers, but took only a little longer to be ready. They put the final touches on the brides’ ensembles, and then went down the narrow stairs one at a time.

“Now, Jane, do be careful!” Mrs. Bennet said anxiously. “We would not want you to fall and sprain an ankle.”

Jane paused with one foot in the air, glancing at her mother. “When was the last time I stumbled on the stairs, Mama?”

“It only takes the once.”

“I shall keep that in mind.” Jane slowed down and continued down the stairs in exaggerated state. “Better?” she asked at the bottom, with a smiling look at her mother.

“Much! Now you, Lizzie. Oh, how proud Mr. Darcy will be of you today.”
Lizzie blushed and smiled, descending the stairs with the same care that Jane had. She caught Georgiana’s arm at the bottom, as Mrs. Bennet took Jane’s train and followed her out to the waiting carriage. “Will he be proud, Georgie?”

“How can you doubt it? He may burst the buttons on his waistcoat when he sees you, his heart will swell so with pride. I am certain of it,” Georgiana assured her soon-to-be-sister. “Now, let us hurry, please. I cannot wait to see you Mrs. Darcy.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Not yet,” Lizzie said quickly. “Not until it is true.”

“Then let us go and make it so.”

The first carriage, with Mr. Bennet and the younger two girls, had already gone. Mrs. Bennet and Georgiana helped Lizzie and Jane into the second carriage, which had been sent from Netherfield by Charles, and they were off. It would have been hard to tell who was most excited amongst the four of them, but Mrs. Bennet certainly wore her exuberance most on her sleeve, barely able to sit still as she strained to look out the windows as though by the pressure of her gaze she could urge the horses to greater speed.

Georgiana was content to sit back and enjoy this happiest of days as it unfolded. The joy in the faces of the two brides was infectious, and she could only imagine the matching emotions of the bridegrooms as they waited at Netherfield.
At Last

The carriage pulled up at Longbourn. Mr. Bennet was waiting, along with Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Phillips. Mr. Bennet handed Jane out of the carriage, and then Mrs. Bennet and Georgiana. Lizzie should have been second, both from her placement within the carriage and her position as bride, but she remained in her seat, waving the others past her. Once they were all out she stood up—but didn’t move for a long moment. Then, declining all assistance, she stepped down from the carriage. Mrs. Bennet was hurrying Jane along toward the steps up into Netherfield Hall, and the two uncles followed them, but Georgiana and Mr. Bennet waited until Lizzie was ready.

“What was that?” Georgiana whispered, unable to contain her curiosity.

Lizzie blushed. “You will think me a romantic fool.”

“When is one to be allowed romantic foolishness if not on one’s wedding day?” Mr. Bennet asked. “I am quite of one mind with Miss Darcy’s curiosity. It appeared an unusually capricious moment for you, my Lizzie.” He tucked her hand more firmly under his arm, the affection between them clear to see as Lizzie lifted a smiling face to her father’s.

“Well, then, if the two of you must hear … it was in that very spot that Mr. Darcy handed me into the carriage as Jane and I left Netherfield once she had recovered from her illness, and …” She paused, the colour flooding her face again. “I seemed to see him for the first time. I was not aware of it then, but I believe my feelings for him began to grow from that moment.”

Georgiana’s smile sprang directly from the well of happiness that bubbled up inside her with Lizzie’s words. “What a beautiful story.” In the brief moments it took them to climb the steps, her imagination raced ahead a few years to a faceless young man who took her own hand and made her feel the way Lizzie described—a feeling she could just barely begin to fathom, thinking of how she had felt in the presence of Mr. Wickham, just at that first blush of emotion that had died before it could bud, much less bloom.

“A farthing for your thoughts, sister,” Lizzie whispered to her.

She could feel her face heat from the impetuousness of her own thoughts. “Just imagining your future happiness,” she assured her soon-to-be-sister.

“Indeed. And soon we shall be imagining some future happiness for you.”

“None needed. For the moment, all I ask is to see you safely wedded to my brother.”

“Hear, hear,” Mr. Bennet said from Lizzie’s other side. “If I may be truly candid, of all my sons-in-law, present and imminent, I most look forward to counting young Fitzwilliam amongst our family connection. Of course, I equally resent him, for stealing my Lizzie away from my fireside to brighten his instead.”

“Oh, Papa!” Lizzie stopped their portion of the bridal procession to throw her arms around her father’s neck. “My fireside is your fireside. You must and will come to visit us very often. Mustn’t he, Georgie?”

“Yes, he must.” Georgiana was rather in awe of Mr. Bennet, who spoke so little, and appeared so grave when he did speak, but Lizzie’s warm affection for him spoke many volumes.

“Come on, Lizzie, come on, Mr. Bennet!” Mrs. Bennet called impatiently from the doorway. “We don’t want to keep them waiting.” She ushered Jane quickly into the house through the open
doors. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Phillips had evidently gone in ahead of the two brides.

“Does she fear they’ll both run off and leave us here with both you and Jane still on our hands?” Mr. Bennet’s tone was jovial, but there were tears in his eyes as he pressed Lizzie’s small hand, which lay on his arm. “I must confess, I would not be entirely cast down by such an event.”

“Papa, you will set me to weeping next, and I swore I wouldn’t cry on such a happy day.” Lizzie handed him a handkerchief and he wiped his eyes.

“You are absolutely right, my dear. As is your mother—there is no sense in keeping two such fine young men waiting.”

Georgiana, having felt uncomfortably as though she was intruding on a most private moment, had dropped back several steps, and now she lifted the trailing end of Lizzie’s gown from the step.

“No, no, Georgie, you must walk with me, or I shall feel the symbolism all too keenly. We will walk into the room arm-in-arm, as sisters should. Bother my dress.”

Mrs. Bennet would no doubt be mortified at her daughter’s casual attitude toward her clothes. That, or she already well knew how Lizzie would respond. In which case Georgiana wondered why Lizzie’s mother had gone to the trouble and expense of fitting the wedding dress with a train at all. In either case, Lizzie’s words warmed her heart, and she let the train go and looped her arm through Lizzie’s.

“Now we are the jolliest party who ever went to a wedding.”

Inside the house, all was quiet, except for the cheerful, nervous chattering of Mrs. Bennet as she fussed over Jane. Eyes shining, Jane appeared to be aware of none of her mother’s admonishments or tearful protestations of happiness. Her fine blue eyes were fixed on the closed door to the parlour.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s go in!”

Jane swallowed, turning to her mother. “Mama …”

The two looked at each other for a moment, then Mrs. Bennet reached up and squeezed Jane’s upper arms. The silliness and the fussy nerves had fallen away for the moment. The older woman’s eyes shone with a steady, reassuring light as she looked into her daughter’s suddenly anxious face. “My darling, never say you’re nervous. We’ve all been expecting this since the moment the two of you laid eyes upon each other. You will make a fine wife, I know you will.”

“You truly think so?”

“I know it.”

Mr. Bennet gave a suspicious sniff. As if to cover his emotional response, he leaned over to Lizzie, whispering, “She will no doubt start off with the finest ideas of economy and end in being imposed upon by everyone from her housekeeper to her youngest sister.”

A shadow passed over Lizzie’s face at the mention of Lydia, but she smiled at her father’s sally, nodding a little. Lizzie’s arm, still looped with Georgiana’s, felt stiff and tense, and Lizzie held herself with uncharacteristic formality as she, too, gazed at the closed door.

Hasty footsteps approached from behind them as Kitty rushed up the steps and into the entry hall where they waited. Mary followed her sister at a more sedate pace. Georgiana was surprised to see them both, having imagined that they would be waiting inside, but she realized why they had not
been when she saw the two bunches of flowers in their hands, obviously freshly picked and held together by a trailing bit of ivy vine.

“Flowers!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “How could I have been so scatter-brained as to have forgotten those? Thank you, my dears!”

Kitty, flushed with pleasure at having thought of the flowers and managed the problem all on her own, handed her bouquet to Elizabeth. It was rather crumpled from having been gripped so tightly in Kitty’s over-enthusiastic fist, but Lizzie didn’t appear to notice, or at least didn’t care. She buried her nose in the flowers, and Georgiana felt her tense body relax a bit.

“Thank you, Kitty.”

The younger girl bobbed a shy curtsey. She hovered for a moment in front of her sister, appearing unsure of what to say, then glanced over her shoulder at Mary, who had given her neater and less luxuriant bouquet to Jane. “We should go in.”

“By all means.” Mary nodded soberly. She gave a glance each at Lizzie and Jane, apparently meaning the looks to convey her good wishes, then let herself quietly into the parlour. Georgiana could hear the hum of conversation inside rise when the door opened, and then subside again when it was clear it was only Mary.

Breathlessly, Kitty said, “Good luck!” and followed her sister into the room.

There was the sound of movement inside—to Georgiana it felt as though the occupants of the room were standing up in preparation for the door to open a final time and admit the brides to their wedding ceremony. Part of her wanted to go inside and stand by Fitzwilliam … but the other part told her that it would mean so much to her brother and his future bride if she were to accompany Lizzie, showing her approval as his closest living family member of the wife he had chosen.

“Shall I go on ahead?” she whispered to Lizzie, just to be certain.

Lizzie shook her head vehemently. “No, stay with me.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Thank you!” Lizzie smiled at her. In the entry, Lizzie and Jane looked at one another, eyebrows raised questioningly. Lizzie nodded, and Jane smiled, and Mrs. Bennet said, “Let’s get on with it, you two!”

“Yes, Mama. Shall we?” Jane turned her smile toward her mother, who sighed in relief.

Mrs. Bennet opened the door, and there was a rustling inside the room as everyone rose to their feet. Jane and her mother entered first. Over Jane’s shoulder, Georgiana could see Charles’s smile broaden until it nearly split his face in two.

Then Georgiana was moving forward, with Lizzie’s cold hand in hers. Fitzwilliam did not smile as he saw his bride approaching—to Georgiana’s fond eye, it appeared obvious that her brother was doing his best not to cry, and she loved that in him. Lizzie’s hand trembled, and Georgiana gave it a reassuring squeeze. She was overjoyed to reach Fitzwilliam and to transfer that small, cold hand to his. He bent and kissed Georgiana on the cheek before she could dart away.

“Thank you, my dear.”

She gave him a tremulous, rather watery smile, struggling against her own tears. If this kept up, all of Netherfield might float away on a river of tears underneath a sky lit up with smiles, she thought fancifully. She took her place next to Caroline Bingley, who looked bored and fretful, and Kitty
Bennet, who appeared barely able to contain her enthusiasm.

“Isn’t this such fun?” Kitty asked, tucking a confiding arm through Georgiana’s.

“It is, indeed.”

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had withdrawn from their daughters and their grooms, and were standing, hand-in-hand, watching as the minister cleared his throat and began the service.

Georgiana heard few of the words, too caught up in watching Fitzwilliam and Lizzie. Gradually, she became aware that the minister was saying gravely to Fitzwilliam, first in precedence by age and station over Charles, “Wilt thou have this woman as thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

Fitzwilliam was speaking almost before the minister had pronounced the last word. “I will.” The statement was given with all the firmness of his character behind it.

Next to Georgiana, Caroline Bingley gave a faint groan and rolled her eyes.

Charles had answered his “I will” in a soft tone that said as plainly as it could that his whole soul was bound up in the woman next to him.

Then it was Lizzie’s turn. She hung on the minister’s every word as though she were trying to comprehend everything that there was of marriage in the promise she would make. It took a moment’s silence for her to realize it was time for her to speak. “Oh! I will. I will, indeed.”

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, and Fitzwilliam’s grin lit his face as he looked down at his almost-wife.

Jane gave her answer with a strength and certainty that appeared to surprise her family, although she didn't notice, her eyes fixed on Charles's face. The Bennets confirmed that they gave their daughters to the men before them willingly, and joyfully.

Both couples stammered through their vows, nearly overcome with their emotions. And then it was time for the rings. Georgiana recognized the one Fitzwilliam held out for Lizzie to wear—it had been a favourite of their mother's. That knowledge gave his words a special meaning, as he folded Lizzie’s hands in his and brought them up to his lips. He kissed the back of both hands before murmuring, without the minister’s prompting, “With this ring I thee wed. With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

Into the hush that followed came Charles’s voice, repeating the same words. They masked the sound of Caroline Bingley’s continued displeasure next to Georgiana. Good, Georgiana thought. She’d never wanted Caroline for a sister, not by any means. Of course, loosely drawn, there was an almost sisterly connection between them now, but not so much that Georgiana would have to see the other woman on anything like a regular basis.

The two couples were kneeling now as the minister pronounced the blessing over them.

“Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder,” he said softly. The great happiness in the room had affected even him. He pronounced them man and wife, and prayed over them all for a few more minutes, and then they were rising and turning toward their friends. All four faces were lit from within by joy, but Lizzie’s seemed to shine brightest, in Georgiana’s eyes—after everything, she was Elizabeth Darcy, at last.
The two couples, each hand in hand, left the parlour and went into the dining room, where the table was laid for the wedding breakfast. Kitty, giggling as usual, clung to Georgiana’s arm as they, along with the other guests, followed the young married pairs.

“Could you have imagined anything nicer?” Kitty asked. “And to think, three sisters married in such a short period of time. Surely my turn shall come next! Or yours,” she added generously, after a pause.

Georgiana could feel herself colour, the heat rising in her cheeks. “You may go first; I cannot say I am in a particular hurry. This has been enough excitement for me for some time yet.”

“Rather too much,” Caroline Bingley remarked sulkily, although under her breath, a sop to good manners.

“I quite agree.” Mary was directly behind the three of them. She went on, unaware that Caroline was rolling her eyes and Kitty was trying to suppress another fit of giggles. “When my turn to marry comes, it shall be much more subdued than this, as befits the solemnity of the state of matrimony.”

Georgiana couldn’t help but wonder if Mary’s turn would ever come. As serious-minded as the other girl was, and as lacking in fortune and grace, there seemed little chance of her finding a suitable match. Perhaps if Elizabeth and Jane were to take her in hand … but then, if they could have done that, surely they already would have.

“Miss Georgiana, I understand that you are very diligent in your efforts at the piano. During your residence at our home, I would be pleased to play some duets with you, if you like,” Mary continued.

“Please, now that we are sisters, call me Georgiana.” The more familiar ‘Georgie’ she intended to reserve for Lizzie’s use, and Jane’s. “And I would be delighted! I should miss my playing were I to go long without it.” She slipped an arm through Mary’s. The other girl looked down at their linked arms in surprise and what appeared to be some discomfort, but Georgiana persevered. Since she would be staying with the Bennets for at least a fortnight, perhaps she could use her own influence on Mary. More than likely, it was too late, and the other girl’s manner and tastes were set already in their lifetime course, but it couldn’t hurt to try. Accordingly, Georgiana contrived to be placed next to Mary for the wedding breakfast. Fitzwilliam looked disappointed that she wasn’t sitting closer to him and Lizzie, but his bride, seeming to guess Georgiana’s motives, whispered something in his ear, after which he nodded at his sister with a more understanding smile.

“Wasn’t it a lovely ceremony?” Georgiana whispered to Mary while everyone was getting settled, for lack of anything more original to proffer as a conversational opening.

“It was certainly quiet and dignified,” Mary conceded. “My sisters showed good sense in eschewing the pomp and fuss my mother would have preferred.”

Georgiana wasn’t sure how to respond, but she didn’t want to leave it at that, either. One way or another, she wanted to draw this serious-minded girl out and see what was in the heart beneath the drab gown. “Exactly what I meant,” she said at last.

A choked snort came from across the table, where Caroline Bingley sat. Irritating as the other
woman’s affected mannerisms and open dissatisfaction with today’s events were, Georgiana couldn’t help but feel sorry for her, to a certain extent. With the double wedding today, both Darcys had been put completely out of her reach, and she had no further chance of becoming mistress of Pemberley, or of seeing her brother heir to any part of the Darcy fortune. But certainly there were other eligible men in England to whom Caroline could turn her attentions, Georgiana presumed, hoping that she would do so quickly and spare them all any further displays of discontent.

She glanced down the table at her brother, smiling more openly than she had ever seen him smile in mixed company such as this one as he leaned toward Lizzie, and felt her sympathy for Caroline Bingley increase a bit. A man of Fitzwilliam’s connections, of his stature and composure, of his genuineness … certainly such a man was not to be had for the asking, and not every day. On the other hand, Caroline had never asked, at least not that Georgiana had noticed. She had presumed upon their acquaintance, had assumed her studied attractions would be sufficient. But she quite evidently knew nothing of Fitzwilliam, or she would have known that he was not a man to be drawn so easily as that. Her pedestrian wiles had been doomed to fail from the start.

Caroline’s eyes met Georgiana’s, a contemptuous pity in them that said the other woman had not followed any of Georgiana’s thought processes, and must instead be seeing herself as safely escaped from the doom of having married a man who could settle for someone as fortuneless and infelicitously connected as Elizabeth Bennet. Georgiana resolved to waste no more sympathy on such a woman.

Turning instead to Mary, she searched for a topic that might allow her to draw Lizzie’s sister out of her shell. Mary was bookish, she understood, but Georgiana rather suspected that the type of books she was accustomed to purloining from her governess’s stash wasn’t quite the same as the books Mary read. “Do you … enjoy gardening, Mary?” she ventured, thinking it perhaps the most intellectual of her own interests.

Mary seemed startled. “Not particularly. It is difficult to truly study the earth when constantly turning it over and disturbing it.”

“What type of study can you make of the earth without disturbing it?” Georgiana asked.

“There is much to be learned from rocks, and the lichen on the trees, although I prefer to bring them inside to be able to give them more minute attention.”

“I see. And what do you do with the knowledge you gain?”

Mary looked blank. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, frowning a little. “I … suppose I use it to add to what I have already learnt, and to guide my efforts in further study.”

“Where do you expect your studies to lead, ultimately?”

“Hm.” Mary looked down at her lap. “I had considered the knowledge I gain to be its own reward. As a woman, there are few avenues open to me that would reward my studies in any formal way. But I feel it is my duty to be continually improving my mind, as it is the duty of us all.” She turned to Georgiana. “If you would find it useful, I would be pleased to help you map out a course of study for your stay at Longbourn.”

Georgiana was a bit taken aback at the suggestion. Given that Mary was only a little older than she was, she was hardly qualified to be offering instruction, and her tone didn’t indicate that she meant to study together. “I … will give it some thought,” Georgiana said.

She turned to her other side and engaged Mrs. Gardiner in conversation for the rest of the meal.
All too soon, it was over and the carriage was being drawn up, to carry Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy off to Pemberley to begin their married life together. Georgiana blinked back the tears that stung her eyes. She had willingly chosen to stay behind, she reminded herself, so that her brother and his wife could have some time to themselves. She struggled to put on a brave face as she embraced each of them and stood, waving, as the carriage pulled away.

Kitty stood next to her, bouncing up and down. “We shall have such fun!”

“What will we do?”

“Do? Oh, we’ll find something, I’m sure,” Kitty replied vaguely before moving on to tease her Aunt Phillips to be allowed to come back to Meryton with her.

Georgiana was left alone and unhappy, missing her brother’s comforting presence already and wondering how she would manage a whole fortnight constantly surrounded by these strange people. Jane and Charles were still here, to be sure, but they, too, were newlyweds, and would be off to France in two days’ time anyway.

Mr. Bennet stepped up next to her. “Don’t fret, my dear. You and I must find employment of our own for a time, but find it we shall.” He held an arm out to her. “Lizzie told me to take care of you, and I will start by taking you for a walk in the gardens here until I see the tears dried and a smile back on your face.”

Georgiana tried to do both in response to his kindness, and Mr. Bennet chuckled.

“It’s a good start.”
It was a pleasure to be at the piano, although adjusting her playing to harmonise with Mary’s was a bit of a challenge. Mary played with a mechanical proficiency that felt halting and slow in Georgiana’s ears; the other girl didn’t seem to feel the music flowing through her.

They finished the duet and Mary sat back, nodding. “Very nice.”


Mary frowned. “It is well-written.”

“Yes, but that isn’t quite what I meant. I was thinking more of how it makes you feel while you play it. I can’t help feeling like a bird, soaring through the air, especially during this passage.” She played a bit of the song, watching Mary’s face as she did so. But there was no change in the other girl’s expression. Georgiana stopped playing.

“How fanciful,” Mary said.

“What does it make you feel like?”

“Nothing in particular. I take pride in my accomplishment, but not to such an extent as to fall victim to vanity, of course.”

“Of course.” Georgiana stood up, collecting the sheet music and putting it carefully away.

Mary stayed where she was, watching Georgiana thoughtfully. “Do you often feel yourself to be a bird?”

“No. Only when I’m very happy. Usually when I’m playing a particularly lovely piece of music, or when I’m singing. When I’m in the garden I sometimes feel like a butterfly.” She gave Mary a sideways glance. “Haven’t you ever imagined what it would be like to fly?”

“I have not.” Mary was looking at Georgiana as though she was a butterfly—one caught and pinned to a card for study.

To wriggle free of that gaze, Georgiana went back to her earlier question. “If playing music doesn’t make you feel as though you’re flying, what does it make you feel like?”

There was a silence between them as Mary considered her answer. “I have never really considered what it makes me feel like. It has always been enough for me to be proficient at the notes.” She frowned a little. “I have been disappointed when my playing was not well received in company.”

“That isn’t exactly the same.”

“To many accomplished, fashionable women, I believe it is.”

Well, there was no arguing with that. Georgiana smiled. “You’re right about that. But your playing is superior to that of most women who consider themselves accomplished.” Technically, that was the truth, but there was no showmanship in Mary’s playing, no consideration of enjoyment—her own or that of her listeners. “Therefore I assume you choose to play for reasons other than the appearance of accomplishment, which leads me to ask what playing music makes you feel.” She’d all but given up on provoking a response from the other girl, but she felt it was worth one final attempt.
Mary stood up abruptly. “I must hurry; I have a schedule to keep.” Georgiana watched in surprise as Mary moved hastily toward the door. But in the doorway, she paused, looking back at Georgiana over her shoulder. “Playing music allows me to hear only the notes I play instead of the sounds of the household. Few—if any—of which are directed at me.” And then she was gone, her face turned away.

Georgiana finished arranging the sheet music, thinking about what Mary had said, and what it meant. She had noticed in her days here at Longbourn that Mrs. Bennet addressed herself almost entirely to Kitty and Georgiana, and Mr. Bennet addressed himself to almost no one. Mary was left to her own devices. Perhaps something should be done about that.

Later that afternoon, Georgiana was prevailed upon by Kitty to walk into Meryton and look at some new ribbons. Georgiana had never thought of being so enamoured of new ribbons as Kitty and her mother were. Of course, they did have to dress on a budget, something Georgiana had never experienced. Ribbons brightened a dress without being too dear in price, so she supposed it was natural to want a lot of them. And a walk into Meryton was enjoyable on a sunny day like this one.

Kitty bounced along with her typical enthusiasm, chattering a mile a minute. Georgiana listened with half an ear, absorbed in trying to figure out how to make Mrs. Bennet pay more attention to Mary. “Kitty,” she said abruptly, “have you and Mary ever taken lessons together?”

Interrupted in mid-sentence, it took Kitty a moment to shift to the new topic. Once she had, she giggled, her curls bouncing as she shook her head. “Oh, no. I haven’t taken lessons in years. Papa gave me up because he said I couldn’t pay enough attention. And Mama said a girl with my prospects didn’t need any more knowledge.”

Georgiana raised her eyebrows but made no remark in response. She felt badly for Kitty—more so because Kitty didn’t seem to understand what was wrong with her parents’ dismissal of her and of her talents. Kitty was flighty, yes, but there was no indication that she lacked intelligence … and her prospects were certainly not so grand that the basic set of a lady’s accomplishments couldn’t have improved them. Why would Mr. Bennet have given up on his youngest daughters’ education so thoroughly? Mary was, if anything, over-educated, and even Lizzie was of a more bookish turn of mind than was generally considered necessary in a lady of her station. Had the younger two proven so difficult to manage that he had thrown up his hands? Or had Kitty and Lydia been so much the apples of Mrs. Bennet’s eye that he had never had a chance to train them in more studious pursuits?

It was interesting that the two remaining single daughters of the Bennets had completely opposite gaps in their knowledge and upbringing. Georgiana wondered if something couldn’t be done to rectify that situation.

She began at once upon returning to the house. “Mrs. Bennet, do look at this lovely ribbon. Isn’t it the most charming thing you’ve ever seen? I think it might be just the thing for Mary’s new bonnet.”

Mrs. Bennet, who had been quite poised to fly off in raptures over the lustrous brown and red striped ribbon, stopped short and looked at Georgiana in consternation. “For Mary’s bonnet? My dear, Mary has no notion of ribbons or decorations. They’re quite lost on her.”

With her best smile on, Georgiana slipped an arm through Mrs. Bennet’s, drawing the older woman off into another room where they could speak quietly. “I believe,” she said, “that Mary is more interested than she seems, but has the wit to understand that she knows too little of what suits her to try. Perhaps, with a little guidance …” She let her words trail off, watching Mrs. Bennet
closely.

“Surely she would have asked me.”

“With the weddings coming up? She knew how busy you were. And Mary is so unused to asking for assistance, I think she feels strange doing so. Perhaps if you were to trim her new bonnet with a lovely ribbon such as this one, and make her a present of such an attention, you might find her more receptive than in the past.”

Mrs. Bennet frowned, looking surprisingly like Mary for a moment. “You really think so? I had quite given her up.”

Exactly, Georgiana thought, but she kept that response to herself. “She may have given herself up, as well, but it is never too late, don’t you agree?”

“Of—of course. Yes, a nice new ribbon trim on a bonnet to start, and then perhaps a new frock. And after that, perhaps we’ll set about teaching her to dance.” Once started on the line of thought, Mrs. Bennet took the bit in her teeth and ran off with it, much to Georgiana’s satisfaction.

“You know, I’m certain Mary will deny any desire for such fripperies. Perhaps if you present it to her as a new and fascinating course of study, she might be more comfortable displaying her enthusiasm,” Georgiana suggested.

“Yes.” Mrs. Bennet looked at her with a shrewd look of understanding. “You are probably right, my dear. Thank you.”

Georgiana couldn’t help but smile. Half done, she thought, hoping that her actions would allow her to leave Longbourn knowing that all its inmates were on a course to be happy with one another.

Later that evening, she sat with a book by the fire in Mr. Bennet’s study. He lounged back in his chair with another book in his hands, the crackling of the fire and the turning of the pages the only sounds in the room. She had been trying to determine how best to approach him on Kitty’s behalf, and had not come up with any particularly subtle way to turn his attention in his daughter’s direction. But as she looked thoughtfully up at him, she wondered if perhaps the direct approach might not be the best one. Mr. Bennet was not unintelligent, merely indolent and loath to exert himself.

“I was speaking with Kitty the other day,” she said before she could think better of it.

Mr. Bennet looked at her over the top of his book.

“When was the last time you tried to give Kitty lessons?”

He frowned. “Oh, she might have been eleven, possibly twelve. Entirely too prone to giggle. She and Lydia would fall against one another in fits of laughter.”

Georgiana smiled. “I can imagine that.”

“It was most vexing.” But he smiled, too, at the memory. “Yes, if only they had shown such enthusiasm for their studies.”

“Have you considered that Kitty will be much alone now, and possibly at a loss for what to do with herself without Lydia at her side?”

“I have noticed that she appears quieter these days.” He raised his eyebrows. “I think I see what
you are too polite to say directly. If Lizzie were here, she would say ‘Papa, you mustn’t neglect Kitty’s education’. And no doubt she would be right.” Mr. Bennet sighed. “I wish Lizzie were here.”

“You’ll see her soon.” Georgiana thought wistfully of Fitzwilliam. She missed him, too. “But in the meantime …”

“Yes, I can’t forget that I have two other daughters. I have not taken the trouble to learn what Kitty might be interested in for many years. I hope it is not too late.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

Two weeks later, when Georgiana climbed aboard the coach that would take her home to Pemberley, she had the satisfaction of having seen Mary submit to ordering—and having an opinion about—a new dress, and having seen Kitty and her father discuss a book, albeit for only a few sentences. The way may not be smooth for the four Bennets remaining at Longbourn, but they were a more congenial, more cohesive group than they had been when she came, and she felt quite proud of herself.
As the coach pulled up the long drive toward Pemberly, Georgiana concentrated on sitting still. She feared that if she allowed her emotions free rein she would bounce straight through the roof of the coach and end up perched on a branch high in one of the trees that lined the road. Would it have changed? she wondered. Would Lizzie’s presence have brought echoing sound to the silent hallways and light to rooms formerly closed and darkened?

A small part of her deep inside worried about her own reception. Fitzwilliam and Lizzie had had a good month to celebrate being a married couple together, and to judge from the few letters she had received from them, had enjoyed their time together immensely. What if they found her presence rather a nuisance than a joy? Or, worse, pretended to be happy to have her back but then hurried straight off to London or Bath to be alone again? Her fingers twisted restlessly, her stomach churning. She’d never in her life been this nervous about seeing her beloved brother. Even the familiar beauty of her equally beloved home couldn’t settle her racing thoughts.

Then the coach pulled up in front of the house. Georgiana resolutely refused to look out the window until the footman opened the door. With a murmured thanks, she took the gloved hand he held out to her and carefully stepped down. Only then, when her feet were firmly on the grounds of Pemberley, did she look up—and just in time, because Lizzie was running down the steps toward her, arms open wide. Fitzwilliam wasn’t far behind, showing an enthusiasm he usually reserved for moments in private. Had marriage changed him so much already?

But she had little time for questions or thought, because they both reached her at the same time, and she was caught in their embrace.

“Georgiana, you look so well!” Fitzwilliam said. “How was your time at Longbourn?”

“I do hope Mary and Kitty didn’t wear you down with gloom and giddiness,” Lizzie added.

“Not at all. Indeed, it was quite pleasant. They all send their love, and look forward to your next visit to the neighbourhood.” A giggle escaped her. “There were many hints dropped by each person about the great happiness an invitation to Pemberley would bring.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Fitzwilliam said dryly. Georgiana could tell that absence and marriage had not endeared his new relatives to him any further.

Lizzie was frowning, however. “Did you say ‘each person’? Even Kitty? I would have imagined the quiet of Pemberley would be the farthest thing from bringing her happiness.”

“She said something about using the library here to further her studies, and her interest in seeing the gallery of marbles.”

“Kitty said that?”

“Truly! Although I have to confess that she also suggested having a few of Fitzwilliam’s more eligible friends to visit at the same time.” The youngest unmarried Bennet had begun to reform, but certainly not completely.

“That sounds more like my sister,” Lizzie agreed. “But … studying? Dare I hope, with Papa?” At Georgiana’s confirming nod, she clapped her hands together. “Just what I had hoped for. Was that your doing, sister?”

Blushing, Georgiana confessed that she believed it had been.
“You see, I told you she would prosper there,” Fitzwilliam said, his eyes shining warmly on his wife. “And you were concerned.”

“I was. I thought you would be miserable and be counting the days until you could return to Pemberley.”

“Oh, indeed, I did.” Georgiana looked around her at the familiar walls and trees with a sigh of happiness. “Pemberley is my home; I love it like no other place in all of England, and ever shall. Ah, I see the two of you,” she cried, as the wedded couple smiled knowingly at one another. “Yes, perhaps I shall marry and learn to love my new husband’s home … but it can never be quite the same.”

“Wise beyond your years, my sister.” Fitzwilliam put an arm around her shoulders and began walking with her to the house.

“Your room has been aired out, bright and breezy, and your gardens have been missing you,” Lizzie said, falling into step along with them.

Georgiana barely dared to ask the next question; just thinking of putting it so boldly made her breath come short, but ask she must. “And the two of you? Shall I form one of your merry party, or am I an awkward interloper in the midst of wedded bliss?” It was foolish to ask—naturally, they would claim the first, however they felt.

But there was no hesitation in the squeeze of Fitzwilliam’s arm around her or the eagerness with which Lizzie took her other arm. “You are the last thing needed to complete our merry party, as you are pleased to call it,” Fitzwilliam assured her.

“Ah, now, husband, perhaps we shouldn’t be so selfish,” Lizzie said, although the twinkle in her eyes belied her words. “You know Lady Catherine is eager to have Miss Georgie come to Rosings, to escape the taint that has polluted the shades of Pemberley.”

He grinned. “I had almost forgotten. She wrote such a charming letter on the occasion of our wedding.”

“Don’t tell me, she has decided to approve your marriage after all?” Georgiana teased him.

“I shan’t tell you, that, indeed, for it would be a wicked lie. Rather, she has scolded me again for throwing away my future and disappointing the dearest hopes of our mama.” The smile faded from his face at the mention of their mother. “I have no doubt that Mama agreed to go along with the scheme to have Anne and myself marry, but I cannot imagine she would ever wish me to act against the dictates of my heart and happiness.”

Georgiana looked down at the ground, feeling the truth of her brother’s words.

Lizzie sighed. “I am sorry for the things I said to her—well, perhaps not sorry, exactly,” she amended when Fitzwilliam’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “But I do wish I was not the cause of your relative’s displeasure with you.”

“As I told you before, my Lizzie, I would rather have you—and my sister,” he added, giving Georgiana’s shoulders another squeeze, “and let the rest of the world pass by as it may than the approval of any relative without you.”

“As would I,” Georgiana added stoutly. “My aunt will come ‘round in time … or she will not. But either way it will be her own choice. It seems a complete waste of your time to worry about her feelings on this matter, which, after all, is not at all her concern.”
“You two are too generous with me.”

“Not possible.”

Georgiana yawned suddenly, and Lizzie took her hand. “We are keeping you from your rest, sister dear, and after such a long journey. Let us go in and let you settle back amidst your comfortable things.”

Together they climbed the steps and re-entered Pemberley, the house’s doors opening to receive them and closing again to hold them in its embrace.
Georgiana was reading in the garden … or, rather she had been reading and was now daydreaming, the book lying open in her lap as she perched on the edge of the bench, looking off into the distance. Even her now-former governess’s romances were less inspiring and heart-warming than the true love she was privileged to witness every day between her brother and his wife. Naturally they argued occasionally, as two such high-spirited and stubborn people were wont to do. Georgiana had even quarrelled with each of them, holding her breath afterward with worry that they would discuss her behind her back, or join with each other in opposition to her. But to her surprise and delight, both Fitzwilliam and Lizzie had chosen to settle their disagreements with her themselves, without a hint that they had consulted each other. Perhaps such idyllic behaviour would not last indefinitely, but as a start to their life together at Pemberley Georgiana had found the reactions reassuring.

For her part, she tried to spend part of each day on her own interests, in the garden or the little parlour set aside for her, so that she could allow her brother and Lizzie some privacy together.

That was what she had intended to do today, but as she sat dreamily watching the wind stir the leaves in the trees, a shadow fell over her. Looking up, she found Fitzwilliam standing there.

“May I join you?”

“Of course. With pleasure.” She shifted on the bench to allow him room next to her. “What is Lizzie about this morning?”

“Oh, a book, or the menus. I am not quite clear on her current pursuit.”

Georgiana glanced at him, but he seemed content with Lizzie being employed elsewhere. It occurred to her that he had certainly spent longer at Pemberley than was usual for him at a stretch; wasn’t he becoming anxious to return to his business affairs elsewhere? She asked him as much.

Fitzwilliam smiled. “My business affairs are well in hand. Concerned about your dowry, sister?”

“Not in the least. I trust you.”

“As well you should. No, I have moved much of my work here. In previous years, I spent so much time away because the memories of Mother and Father were too strong at Pemberley.”

The memories had been strong; it was one of the things Georgiana loved about her home. It helped to keep her parents alive in her memory. But being older, Fitzwilliam’s memories had been too strong, it seemed, for him to bear their intensity. “But now it is different?” Georgiana asked softly.

“It is. Finding Lizzie has made a new man of me, and I have realized how foolishly stiff and prejudiced and prideful the old one was. I wasted so much time on people I thought were suitable that I never stopped to question whether they were worthy of that time.”

“You are fortunate you met her when you did, then. Imagine how you might have turned out otherwise.” Georgiana didn’t even try to stifle her giggle, and she was pleased when he laughed with her. The old Fitzwilliam would not have. “Do you know, it was just here that we sat when you first came here from Hertfordshire, full of stories about the terrible Bennets … and their strangely bewitching daughters.”

“I never used the word ‘bewitching,’” he objected.
“You didn’t have to.”

“You predicted even then that I would not be able to give up the attachment. I had no idea I had such a wise sister, or I would have asked your advice much sooner.”

“I would say ‘you certainly should have’, except that everything seems to have turned out for the best. As for my prediction, it was no such thing. The permanence of your feelings would have been obvious to anyone who knew you as well as I do.” She glanced at him sideways. “Do you regret tying your fortunes to Lizzie’s unfortunate family?” Mr. Wickham’s name went unspoken, but it lay in the air between them.

“I regret nothing. I would do it all again if I had to. I’m sorry if my generosity there hurt you.”

“No, no. That childish affection is long over with. But you, no doubt, will continue to hear from him for a long time to come.”

“ Asking for money,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “Small price to pay for what I have gained in return, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would, indeed.” Georgiana looked up, spying a small figure coming down the steps toward them, her skirt fluttering behind her. “Here comes your bride. Shouldn’t you go and meet her?”

“Let us go and meet her together.”

And they did. As they took Lizzie’s outstretched hands, Georgiana knew that this happiness together wouldn’t last forever—she would want her own beloved, and her own home to preside over some day. But for today, the sun was shining and the breeze was warm and the very air was filled with their laughter.

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