Upon Closer Acquaintance

by queenmum

Summary

Darcy overhears a conversation between Lizzy and Charlotte at Lucas Lodge that gives him deeper insight into Jane's feeling for Bingley and Lizzy's feeling for himself. Will this change his behavior towards Lizzy and his interference in Charles and Jane's relationship? Will Charlotte be able to help Lizzy move past her injured pride to see the changes in Darcy's manners?
Chapter 1

Mr. Darcy had known Miss Elizabeth Bennet for little more than a fortnight before he was aware that no other lady had ever been quite so attractive to him. Her lively spirit combined with her wit and intellect were an intoxicating mix. No sooner had he expressed his wonder that she should be presented as a local beauty did he find himself captivated by her playful manner and her pleasing figure. These revelations were met with dismay and chagrin, and as he took a turn around the room of Sir William Lucas one evening, he was surprised to find that he had ventured much closer to Miss Bennet than he had intended. Close enough to notice the flecks of gold in her dark eyes as they caught the glow of the lamplight. So close, in fact, that he found himself catching a word here and sentence there in a conversation that both intrigued him and drew him closer yet.

"I'm very happy for her, Charlotte. She seems well pleased with him. If he continues so, she's in a fair way to be in love with him," Elizabeth exclaimed to her oldest friend and confidant.

"And Mr. Bingley? Do you think he is in love?" Charlotte's curiosity was evident and Mr. Darcy's concern heightened. Bingley was often in love, but in such a small neighborhood it was liable to invite more attention than it might have in town.

"It's clear that he likes her very much," Elizabeth stated, unwilling to presume any more and unknowingly easing some of the eavesdropping gentleman's worry.

"Then she should leave him in no doubt. She should show more affection than she feels, not less, if she is to secure him." Darcy rolled his eyes at this, contemplating how these women resembled the matchmaking mamas of the ton even with no children of their own. And yet a slight smile escaped him as he considered how often he had heard a similar position from his aunts and cousins.

"Secure him?" Elizabeth exclaimed with such force that it caused Darcy to look around and see if anyone else had turned to the conversation. He certainly did not want to find his friend the object of rumors and speculation.

Charlotte replied earnestly "Yes, she should secure him soon!"

"Before she is sure of his character and certain of her own regard for him?"

"But of course! Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. There will always be vexation and grief. It's better to know in advance as little as possible of the defects of your partner. Is it not?"

"You would never act like that yourself!" Elizabeth countered with a gentle rebuke laced with a sincerity that caused a stir in Mr. Darcy's chest he could not identify.

"Well, it seems that Jane will not. So we must hope that Mr. Bingley will. He gets little encouragement from his sisters." Charlotte gave a pointed look at the fine ladies in their feathers and silks.

"Or his friend." Elizabeth concluded with displeasure, her eyes sweeping the room in search of the disapproving friend. As it dawned on him that he was the object of her inquiry, he began to turn away in hopes of not being discovered but was promptly drawn back as he heard his name.

"Mr. Darcy looks at you a great deal."

"I can't think why! Unless to frighten me with his contempt. I wish he would not come into
society. He only makes people uneasy." The two friends leaned into one another conspiratorially, and Darcy longed to hear if they continued to speak of him and at the same time considered that there was no place in the world he wished to be further from.

Turning quickly back to his original course, he stepped out onto the balcony and let out a breath he scarcely was aware he had been holding. "My contempt?" he asked himself in confusion.

It was no small portion of the evening that Mr. Darcy spent out in the cold air battling the conflicting desires to return to the safety of Netherfield Park - or even better London - or to return to the party and face his slanderers. The lure of peace and solitude were ultimately defeated by the knowledge that, were he to flee, he would only confirm the character that Miss Elizabeth Bennet had drawn of him. He reentered the room with conviction and deftly avoided a collision with Miss Bingley, who had noticed his absence and was seeking him out, instead heading straight towards Charlotte and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth watched as he crossed the room in long, determined strides with a look of purpose and resolve, feeling the injustice that such a handsome face should be wasted on such an unpleasant man. The sentiment was quickly replaced with irritation as she considered whether he might be moving in her direction to renew a previously rejected entreaty to dance.

Both ladies startled slightly when he turned his addresses to Charlotte, "Miss Lucas, unless of course you are abstaining from dancing this evening like your friend," with a nod to acknowledge Elizabeth "I would be much obliged if you would honor me with your hand for the next set." Charlotte didn't miss a beat and responded that she was still dancing and that she would be very pleased to stand up with him.

Elizabeth did not recover from her surprise as quickly as Charlotte, yet even in her confusion she was not unaware of the credit that Mr. Darcy paid her dear friend by singling her out so. In fact, if she didn't dislike the man so much she would have been very proud of him as she watched him lead Charlotte to the dance floor.

Charlotte observed Mr. Darcy with equal parts patience and amusement as he struggled to begin a conversation. She was not surprised in the least that the first topic he should land upon would be the very same young lady that they had only moments ago removed themselves from. "You and Miss Elizabeth are good friends," he stated. Charlotte nodded. "And Miss Bennett, too." Again, Charlotte dipped her head in agreement. Troublesome girl, Darcy thought, she will not make this easy - but before he could continue in such an uncharitable direction she took pity on him. "I have been fortunate in my neighbors," she began. "Miss Bennet is so kind that I merely have to look in her direction to receive a compliment and Miss Elizabeth, in the next breathe, will turn it into a tease. As long as I have those two dear friends with me I will always be smiling and laughing." She paused for a response, and upon hearing none turned her eyes in Mr. Bingley's direction. "Your friend appears to enjoy both smiles and laughter. I do not wonder that he finds the company at Longbourn much to his tastes."

Mr. Darcy looked in the direction she had signaled to see the gentleman in question addressing both the elder Miss Bennets. "Mr. Bingley is in possession of a generous temperament that finds joy in every situation," he replied, and then begrudgingly added, "but I do believe that he finds this neighborhood exceedingly pleasant."

Charlotte rewarded this concession with a knowing look. "And how do you find Netherfield Park?"

"I admit that I do not share Mr. Bingley's open disposition and desire to be pleased with everything and everyone around me. At first I found little to approve of," at this he paused as if
only just forming the opinion that he would next voice, "but I find that it improves upon closer acquaintance." He could not resist a slight glance at Elizabeth as he uttered these words.

"It is a shame, then, that first impressions are often lasting impressions in a small country town such as this, is it not?" Charlotte challenged. Mr. Darcy's confusion was apparent in his expression, and so she continued, "for it seems that just as you are beginning to appreciate the good in our small group of neighbors, the very same have already been convinced of your dislike."

Not being able to resist, she added one last comment as the dance came to a close, "For while a neighborhood such as ours may be perfectly content with being only quite pretty in comparison to the beauty and variety of town, only imagine its mortification to find that it is instead not tolerable enough to tempt its new visitors." With this Charlotte looked up satisfied at the revelation that spread across Darcy's face and bowed in a final gesture of victory before returning to her friends as they said their goodbyes.

He watched with little awareness of his surroundings as the Bennet family curtseyed and smiled and skipped their way out of Lucas Lodge to their waiting carriage. Soon Miss Bingley was beside him anticipating the delight of an exchange of miseries from an evening so thoroughly wasted. Her expectations were not satisfied when her jabs and pokes at the ridiculousness of their neighbors was returned only by a scowl and an expression muttered under his breath that sounded very much like "she heard you, you damned fool!"
Chapter 2

Darcy woke the next morning before the rest of the household and after a quiet breakfast removed himself to the library to pen his correspondence. A judicious note to his steward was composed to resolve a dispute between two of his tenants and another to his cousin to begin planning for their annual spring visit to their Aunt's estate in Kent. A letter was also due to his sister, and he expected that she would not be pleased with anything less than two pages complete and so devoted most of the morning to her happiness.

With his usual brotherly reserve, he shared his observations of the neighborhood, describing the landscapes and the architecture as far as he thought her interest would be piqued. He gave accounts of the many dinners they had been invited to and passed along his impressions of Bingley's new neighbors. He took care to include greetings from his friends and ended with a tender affirmation of his deepest regard and assurance that he was looking forward to seeing her when he returned to London. If Georgiana found it at all curious that her brother three times stated how he found no interest in any of the ladies of Hertfordshire, she mentioned it to no one.

Just as he pressed the seal upon his final letter, Bingley entered the library and his sister followed shortly thereafter. Miss Bingley claimed to be looking for a sheet of music that she had misplaced; Bingley claimed no reason except that at Netherfield he was master and would go where he pleased, even if it did interrupt Darcy's meditations. As Darcy stood from the desk to stretch his legs, Bingley slid into the vacated seat with every intention of modeling the conduct of his friend and accomplishing some long overdue business.

A series of short reckless lines flew from his pen before he turned to Darcy again. "I will never settle my affairs until I adopt country hours. I am only just starting my day and already need to turn around and change for dinner."

Darcy laughed at his friend "I believe you have time yet to finish your work with but a little determination, and if tomorrow you still wish to play the part of Master, I would be glad to join you in the morning to ride out on your grounds."

Miss Bingley had given up all pretenses of searching for her music and settled down in the chair next to Darcy. "Do as you will Charles," she advised her brother, "but I will surely preserve the habits of town. From what I've seen so far the only claim the country can make is that, whether rising or setting, it merely does everything earlier and with much less elegance." A heated flush crept upon her as she recalled that the gentleman sitting beside her made no secret of his preference for country life. "Of course, I'm sure the quaintness of our new home will soon overtake me, and I will wish to be nowhere else than in our quiet little estate," she recovered with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

As Miss Bingley expounded upon the many delights and virtues of a small country estate her brother was soon lost in his letters and Darcy in his thoughts. Much to his dismay, Darcy found his attentions turning to the delights and virtues of a small country estate almost three miles away. He recalled hearing his first opinion of Miss Elizabeth – declared with such acrimony to Bingley, she is tolerable I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me – mimicked back to him in a manner so pointed and calculated that he could have no doubt it was anything but by design. Whether Elizabeth heard the words from his mouth or from the idle gossip of her neighbors and friends he did not know, nor could he decide which would be worse. He had only to be ashamed of his behavior and contemplate how he could ever make amends. No matter what direction his imagination took him, Darcy could find no satisfying outcome. The longer he allowed himself to ponder any future actions or conversations with the injured party the more doubtful he became of
the possibility of atonement.

He turned his mind to the other revelation that the evening had afforded him. Is my judgment so clouded that I have missed genuine signs of affection on the part of Miss Jane Bennet towards my friend? He had been determined that Bingley was showering his attentions on an object that would not easily be moved. Were this the case the only true danger Bingley was in was that of revealing too much of his feelings to the neighborhood. However, if the sister was correct - and he accepted the likelihood that she possessed the greater understanding in this case - it was a complication. Where there was unrequited affection he would not hesitate to involve himself in separating the two, but if there existed true tenderness on both parts, he worried over what he could, and what he should, do.

That Miss Bennet was a beautiful creature Darcy could not deny, even if he found that there was something left to be desired in her classical look and light, pleasing features – for her eyes held no mystery. His esteem of her increased with the understanding that her sweet, serene manner had the strength to conceal a depth of feeling and sense, still he admitted that he found an open and spirited nature more to his tastes. The lack of wealth and connections could be neither denied nor brushed aside as a matter preference. And yet he concluded that it was possible a man such as Bingley could be content - nay, even happy - despite such clear disadvantages to a match. He could not ignore the deficiencies of the Miss Bennets, but perhaps his friend could.

Darcy was drawn out of his musings as he realized that Mrs. Hurst had joined the group and was discussing with her sister the person that had lately been occupying his, and he also suspected his friend's, thoughts. Miss Jane Bennet would be joining the ladies to dine just as the men would be setting off to meet the officers. Mr. Darcy rejoiced in the escape. His friend was not nearly as contented with the arrangement.

Elizabeth was truly worried about Jane, whom her mother had sent off to Netherfield on horseback under the threat of dark clouds. The sting of her mother's neglect was felt even more strongly when Charlotte, along with her mother and sister, arrived at Longbourn by carriage as the first showers began to fall. As was custom, the ladies of Longbourn and Lucas Lodge gathered to revisit the events of the previous evening.

Mrs. Bennet exhausted her guests with accounts of Mr. Bingley dancing with Jane, Mr. Bingley looking at Jane and Mr. Bingley speaking of Jane. Charlotte remarked on Mary's new music and the great improvement in her playing since last they met. Lydia, Kitty, and Charlotte's younger sister, Mariah, sat in a far corner giggling and whispering of officers and redcoats to their content and only entered the conversation as suited their wishes.

As her spirits revived Lizzy complimented Lady Lucas, "I'm sure it has been many weeks since I have enjoyed such a pleasant evening." She then turned her attentions to Charlotte teasingly, "even if, excepting your company, I can find no reason for it. Though I expect that if I were always sitting around waiting for a reason to enjoy myself I would miss any true amusement!"

"It is unfortunate, Lizzy, that you were prevented from one amusement, for I know how much you enjoy dancing; what a mean trick you played on yourself," Charlotte returned.

"And so the proud Mr. Darcy honored you with a dance, did he?" Mrs. Bennet accused Charlotte.

"I don't know who was more surprised, myself or Eliza," Charlotte replied.

"I daresay none of my girls would dance with him if he had asked, not that he did."
Here Charlotte glanced slyly at Elizabeth, "None except Elizabeth, you mean, who did, to your satisfaction I trust, reject his offer."

"Did you?" Mrs. Bennet responded with annoyance, unsure whether she should be pleased with Elizabeth for doing what she had just declared as right, or upset at her for allowing Lady Lucas the triumph of having the first daughter in the neighborhood to dance with the disagreeable gentleman worth ten thousand a year.

"La," Lydia chimed in, "I would have turned him down also Lizzy! For who would want to dance with such a tedious, boring man? But I suppose you had not been asked by any officers. You wouldn't have rejected Denny or Colonel Forster; I'm sure."

"Well, of course, they both would have preferred the officers," her mother declared.

Here Charlotte objected, for she claimed that while he was reserved and quiet she was convinced that Mr. Darcy was quite the gentleman, and she would be honored to dance with him again. "In fact..." she noted "he nearly admitted to me that he is beginning to enjoy his time in Hertfordshire. I won't be surprised to see him ask for dances from all the Bennet sisters at the next assembly." And with a mischievous eye directed towards Mrs. Bennet added that she would not object to knowing him better.

"You may rest easy, Mama," Elizabeth responded sweetly. "I'm sure I can speak for all my sisters when I promise you that Mr. Darcy will never persuade any of us onto the dance floor, for you have given us your advice, and we should be very poor daughters indeed if we were to ignore it." Turning to Charlotte with a raised eyebrow, she concluded, "we are not so easily influenced as my traitorous friend."

Mrs. Bennet was excessively vexed with this declaration. Convinced as she now was that Mr. Darcy had at last resolved to be pleased with the neighborhood, it would only do for him to be most pleased with one of her daughters. "For shame, Lizzy, I never thought so ill of him, though others were determined to dislike him from the beginning. I'm sure if it weren't for Mr. Bingley being so very fond of my Jane, Mr. Darcy would already be half in love with her. As it is," she paused, glancing at her remaining girls before her nerves got the better of her, "Kitty, bring me my smelling salts."

And so it was that a few well-placed hints and suggestions by Charlotte did more than Darcy himself, if he were to issue a thousand apologies or profusions of remorse, could ever have done to turn the tides of the neighborhood in his favor. For none could object to finding favor with the rich, handsome gentleman, in spite of himself if Charlotte did not object. None that is, except for her closest friend.
Before anyone else in the household had stirred, Elizabeth set out towards Netherfield in a dreadful mood. The anger and frustration she felt towards her mother eclipsed only by her concern for her elder sister. She marched along the familiar path at a brisk pace that brought her to the neighboring estate earlier than she had planned. Elizabeth slowed to catch her breath and looked down at her boots and hem to discover what a spectacle she had made of herself. She grimaced as she kicked the mud off her walking boots on the trunk of a nearby oak and let down her skirt. She decided to take a turn in the garden to compose herself and delay her arrival, even if briefly.

Mr. Darcy watched in amusement from the stables, just having returned from his morning ride, as she gathered herself up and rounded the final bend in the path that brought her to Bingley's small landscaped park. Taking advantage of his early notice of Elizabeth's presence, and guessing her intentions, Darcy walked out to meet her at a nearby intersection. Quickening his stride, he chose a lane that kept him out of sight until he was within a few steps.

"Miss Elizabeth, what a pleasant surprise," he greeted her cheerfully, moving to close the gap between the two. "Do you imagine the roses of Netherfield to be better company than the residents this morning?"

"Mr. Darcy! I thought I had arrived before the family was up," she explained. "What I mean to say is that I am so anxious to see my sister that I just realized how early it is." Elizabeth looked down again and felt the heat rising to her cheeks. "I do not mean to interrupt your morning and so I..." she stammered again, annoyed at herself for being caught off guard and at a loss for words.

Darcy seized the moment and gave her an opportunity to recover. "I'm sure that Miss Bennet will be relieved to see a familiar face this morning. If you will allow it, I could take you to her room and let Mr. Bingley and his sisters know of your arrival when they come down for breakfast," he offered. "After checking on your sister, if you would care to join the family I am sure that they will be pleased to see you." Or at least Charles will be pleased, he thought to himself. "And if you do not join us, Bingley will surely blame me," he added mischievously.

"Blame you?" Lizzy questioned as Darcy opened the front doors and guided her towards the stairs that would lead them to the guest wing. "How could you be at fault if I choose not to join you?"

"I believe that he would conclude I scared you off with my brooding, ill temper - or worse - that I failed to invite you in the first place by virtue of a misguided sense of propriety." Darcy smiled openly at Elizabeth, hoping that she could see he was making every effort to keep her at ease. "Bingley's temper with me this morning rests entirely in your hands, Miss Elizabeth. But be not alarmed, if you choose to remain with Miss Bennet, he will surely have forgiven me by supper."

They walked in silence for a few moments while Elizabeth gathered her wits. Just as they reached the door to Jane's room, she quietly replied that she would be glad to join the family, but only if she was satisfied with Jane's condition and was convinced that she was out of any danger.

As Darcy turned to leave, Elizabeth caught the beginning of a smile spreading across his face. Turning the corner, he chuckled softly. Never before had he imagined that the efforts he so rarely took to be charming and pleasing would bring such satisfaction when directed towards the right audience.

Elizabeth found Jane tired from a restless night spent fighting a fever. Darcy was correct in presuming that Elizabeth's arrival would please her sister. Jane was relieved to hear that her family was not overly worried on her account and that Elizabeth would extend the most sincere apologies.
to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst for the inconvenience she had caused.

Within half an hour of arriving Elizabeth was able to ease Jane's worries and anxieties enough to coax her to take a cup of weak tea. She entertained Jane with a recounting of the previous day's visit from the Lucases and of her arrival earlier that morning. "Oh Jane, if only you could have seen my horror when Mr. Darcy came upon me in the garden. I cannot imagine what he was about, catching me by surprise like that. And to attempt to trick me into coming down so soon after I arrived, when it is clear I would not want to leave your side. He cannot think I would abandon you."

Elizabeth's protestations felt flat against the soft breathing of her sleeping sister. When she could no longer pretend that she was adding to the comfort of her sister she quietly exchanged her petticoat and boots for those of her sister, re-pinned the loose curls that had escaped over the morning, and headed down to breakfast.

The Netherfield party was in the breakfast room when Elizabeth entered, and some of them were happy to see her. Mr. Bingley could not express his pleasure often or earnestly enough that Jane would now have the company of a sister as she recovered. He insisted that Elizabeth remain for the entirety of Jane's stay and within the hour had a servant dispatched to deliver a note from Elizabeth to her family and to collect the sisters' belongings.

"I must say," Mr. Bingley said to Elizabeth, "when Darcy told me that you were here this morning I was certain it was in jest. My friend is certainly taking liberties with my hospitality assuming the role of host as I sleep away my mornings. I am surprised that he would allow himself to be caught displaying such poor manners. But seeing as how the results of such behavior are so agreeable I have decided that I will allow it in this instance at least.

Elizabeth glanced over at Mr. Darcy and, seeing a glint of humor in his eyes, gauged that it was safe to proceed. "Mr. Bingley, I caution you to keep a close eye on your guest. He appears to be making himself quite comfortable here, and I have heard stories of some gentlemen who are not contented with one, or even two, estates of their own."

At this Darcy laughed, "I assure you, Bingley, Netherfield is safe from me. I find that I am perfectly satisfied with Pemberley."

At the mention of his property, Caroline Bingley could no longer resist joining the otherwise endless discussion. "But of course, no estate can compare to that of Pemberley. I have been trying to convince my brother to find something that more closely models your estate, Mr. Darcy. I cannot say that I have ever found myself in a place that is more perfectly situated. It is a shame, Miss Eliza, that you have never seen it; Hertfordshire has nothing that can compare. However, we must excuse you for thinking that Netherfield could ever tempt Mr. Darcy, having never had an opportunity to spend time in such a grand and magnificent home as his."

"Please accept my apologies, Mr. Darcy. It appears I have laid unjust accusations upon you." Feigning repentance Elizabeth offered with a slow, deep curtsy in his direction, at the same time peering up at him with an eyebrow raised. "Mr. Bingley, clearly this man is a true friend and only seeks to assist and serve you."

Darcy later contemplated that since his arrival at Netherfield he had not enjoyed a meal more than he had that breakfast and Bingley agreed that, with the exception of Jane's absence, the morning could hardly have passed in a more satisfying fashion. Caroline could not quite identify what had gone awry, but she was certain she had never before felt such empathy for an ill friend and was determined to offer whatever assistance might be required to assure Jane's swift recovery. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst thought that the egg dish was overly salted and that the cook here certainly was nothing compared to theirs in London.
As evening arrived so did a chest from Longbourn that seemed much too large for such a short stay. Accompanying it was a note written in a hand that was unexpected, but by no means unwelcome, to Elizabeth.

Dearest Friend,

Imagine my surprise in coming to visit you this morning, only to find that both you and dear Jane have fled to Netherfield Park. Pray tell me, was it the abundance of rich, handsome gentlemen or the delightful company of their sisters and friend that has lured you away?

I will be serious here, but only for a few lines, and send my most sincere wishes for your sister's recovery. I am extremely sorry for poor Jane's illness and hope that she has begun to improve upon your arrival. I must warn you that if she does not do so quickly I may also have to visit in hopes of an extended invitation of my own.

In the meantime, I will have to settle with remaking my bonnet under Kitty and Mariah's guidance, a task of which you know the principle of my happiness depends on!

Your mother insisted that I remind you to smile sweetly and agree with everything D says. She is convinced that is the only way to catch him. While I see the merit in her advice, I sincerely hope you do not heed it. It will not be nearly so fun to witness as the alternative.

CL

P.S. I hope that you will agree with my suggestion to your mother to include your newest gown from London. I recall that only last week you complained that there should never be a reason to wear it in Hertfordshire. I am quite pleased with myself in creating an opportunity for you.

P.S.S I shall forgive you if you return engaged, but only if you promise to throw me into the path of the very many rich and unattached friends of your future husband.

"Your friend has a very elegant hand," Miss Bingley noted, peering over Elizabeth's shoulder. "She must have very few friends to grace with it if she is already insisting upon a letter to you when you have not even left the house for over an afternoon."

As instructed Elizabeth smiled sweetly, "Charlotte is the dear sort of friend whose correspondence I would cherish were it after only an hour of separation or a fortnight. And while she is a prodigious writer and keeps in touch with a great number of friends, I pride myself that she writes to me with humor and wit reserved for only a small audience."

"I suppose such a large number of correspondents will keep her company in the years ahead; considering her age and situation it seems unlikely she will ever make a suitable match." Caroline declared with a haughty laugh echoed by her sister.

Anger coursing through her Elizabeth folded the letter, placed it securely in her reticule, and rose to leave. Caroline continued, "and with so many friends I'm sure she will make an excellent governess to the children of one or another of them."

Elizabeth spun around in a rage, but the words that were on the tip of tongue were interrupted when she found Mr. Darcy at her side. "Miss Elizabeth, if you plan to return a letter to Miss Lucas, I hope that you will send her my sincere regards. I found great delight in our last conversation; it might have been one of the most enjoyable evenings I have spent since arriving in Hertfordshire."

'I suppose your letter will have to wait until tomorrow, though, for it is clear you have long been
wanting to rejoin your sister," he continued firmly, offering his arm. "Allow me to escort you back to her room." With this his only goodnight to Miss Bingley and the others, the two exited the drawing room.

A long silence followed until Elizabeth had calmed enough to speak. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I fear I was very close to expressing thoughts that would not have reflected well upon myself or our hostess."

"I'm sure there is little that you could have said at that moment that would have been worse than your provocation. Still, I hate to see Bingley made uncomfortable."

"I would be delighted to send your regards to Charlotte tomorrow if you were in earnest." Elizabeth tested.

Darcy steps slowed as he turned to look at Elizabeth. "I assure you that not only do I respect your friend. I am greatly in her debt."

"Oh?"

"When I arrived in Hertfordshire, I was determined to be displeased with everyone and everything I found, and so I inevitably was. Miss Lucas helped me to discover that I was - at the same time - making a very poor impression upon the Bingleys' new neighbors."

The two came to a stop in front of Jane's room, and Elizabeth's dark eyes examined Darcy as he pulled her ever so slightly closer. "I am afraid that I have insulted and injured the pride of some in a moment of hasty judgment, only to realize that my feelings are not at all what I initially supposed."

What seemed like another minute passed before Darcy released Elizabeth's arm and bid her a goodnight.

Confused and agitated, Elizabeth rushed into her sister's room and closed the door quickly behind her. She leaned back against the wall, and her hands rose to her cheeks. Looking across the room at her sleeping sister she worried that she too might be taking ill, for what else could explain the mixture of heat and chills that were coming over her.
Chapter 4

Elizabeth and Jane had breakfast in their room the following day, and Elizabeth stayed by her sister's side for the remainder of the morning. She was regretting her neglect of yesterday and decided that she would not repeat her poor manners today. Elizabeth experienced the many comforts to be had, knowing herself to be of the first utility to her sister. What was it to her if Mr. Darcy was only a short distance away in the dining room, making himself agreeable to the others?

The two ladies were joined by Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley for over an hour and even Elizabeth was impressed by the great tenderness and concern expressed by the sisters towards Jane. Without the gentleman present Miss Bingley found that she did not entirely regret time with her guests, even if she did find Jane a bit too sweet and Elizabeth not nearly sweet enough. She concluded that they could be useful friends to occupy her time in Hertfordshire. There were certainly no other ladies who she could tolerate above ten minutes in the surrounding neighborhood. As she left, she laughed at herself for ever thinking that the sisters could be a threat to the schemes she had laid out for herself and her brother.

Later that morning she happily joined her sister for a walk in the gardens where the two made idle gossip and ambitious plans for their return to London if only they could talk some sense into their brother. To pass the time they gathered a bouquet of flowers that were promptly handed over to a maid with instructions for an arrangement to be sent up to their guests room. It would not do to have the servants thinking that they were not caring for every last detail of the comfort of their neighbors.

Under Elizabeth's watchful eye, Jane made rapid progress towards her recovery. So much so that she was well enough to join the ladies in the drawing-room after dinner. Elizabeth was naturally pleased to see her sister's health returning; and a small, self-indulgent side of her was also glad that she would not have to face Mr. Darcy alone.

However, upon joining the ladies, Mr. Bingley immediately swept the eldest Miss Bennet away to the most comfortable chair and set himself to ensuring her happiness, monopolizing her in conversation as much as propriety would allow. A small frown turned down the corners of Elizabeth's mouth as she watched her unwitting accomplice settle into a distant corner of the room. However; to Elizabeth's satisfaction, Miss Bingley was excessively eager to assist in distracting Darcy's attentions. With steady determination, she engaged him in a conversation for no small portion of the evening that left little room for anyone else. While she was without doubt that Miss Elizabeth was no serious threat, it would not do to let things get out of her control once again.

At some point in the evening, Mr. Bingley decided that Jane must be moved closer to the fire, and a change in the seating arrangements of the room inevitably followed. Darcy gave up his spot and landed much closer to where Elizabeth had been happily reading and quietly observing the rest of the party. "It is a great relief to see your sister so much recovered," he began.

"Miss Elizabeth," Caroline interrupted from a distance. "You have been so busy today caring for dear Jane that you have neglected to return a note to your friend, please accept the use of my writing materials..." turning to a small table nearby, "...I know how much you value your correspondence and hate to see you kept from it for our sakes, don't you agree, Mr. Darcy?"

Before Mr. Darcy could protest or agree - for she did not know which to expect - Elizabeth thanked Miss Bingley and removed herself to the table.

* I am very much obliged to you for your diverting note, dear Charlotte, but hope that you will have
no need to write again and that Jane and I will soon be safe and happy at home.

You will, I trust, be relieved to know that I have cared for dear Jane beautifully, and she is recovering so well that we hope to return to Longbourn tomorrow, or tomorrow next. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to discover that if the role of governess does not suit, I will make an excellent nurse.

We have been entertained in a very elegant manner by Mr. Bingley, his sisters, and his friends. I confess, I am not certain he even notices my presence whenever Jane is in the room. To my astonishment, D has been exceedingly agreeable. You are surely not surprised by this, though. He sends you his most sincere regards and wishes to congratulate you on an enjoyable dinner last week.

It is such a pity that I do not like him, and do not mean to if I can help it. I fear I may if he continues in this manner.

I look forward to seeing the progress you have made on your bonnet; it was truly hideous and...

Elizabeth was disappointed that a delightfully witty line was prevented from being set down as a disobedient pen refused to perform its duties. Upon closer examination, she discovered that it had been very poorly mended and - in an attempt to expeditiously get back to her task - took it upon herself to perform the work that the owner of the pen had failed to. The pen knife firmly in hand she was set to make a small, but well placed, cut just as Caroline pounded out the first notes of a lively Spanish tune meant to delight and awe the room.

Unfortunately for Elizabeth, the only effect it had on her was a slip of the hand resulting in a small, but effusive, nick to her left index finger. A muffled gasp escaped her as a combination of ink and blood soiled her favorite gown, and a tear nearly betrayed her. The room turned to her, and Darcy was quickly at her side with a handkerchief to stop the bleeding. Elizabeth muttered a profusion of apologies, begging Jane to stay while she returned to the room. Miss Bingley did not miss the sincere expression of concern and grief that crossed Mr. Darcy's face as he watched Miss Elizabeth rush out of the drawing room.

Back in the room Elizabeth contemplated whether she should return at all or if she could just remain. She concluded that if she did not return in good time Jane would worry, and at this stage in her recovery Elizabeth feared any action that might set her sister back. She quickly cleaned her wound and pinched her cheeks to bring some color back to her face. She called for a maid to assist her in changing gowns, exchanging the ruined one for Charlotte's amusing selection. Within fifteen minutes, she was prepared to return to the party looking - she acknowledged - even better than she had when the evening began, but feeling considerably worse.

If Elizabeth thought that her return would be received with pleasure by all, she would have been disappointed. Miss Bingley was very put out by Elizabeth's reappearance and made no secret of it. "Miss Elizabeth, I do believe you have ruined my favorite pen," she scolded. "I am sure I will not be able to find such another such here in Hertfordshire. I'm certain your carelessness will delay my correspondence with a number of friends until I have a suitable replacement. I do wish you would have asked for my assistance, for it is well known that I mend pens remarkably well."

Not two minutes had passed before Miss Bingley was criticizing Elizabeth's book selection. "I must say I am surprised to see you reading novels, for I understood your father to be quite an intellectual from my brother. I have never been able to finish one complete; I find them so very unsatisfying. Few among my friends in town would admit to such taste."

Mr. Bingley was beginning to take notice of the tenor of his sister's expression and was trying to determine how best to put a stop to it before Miss Bennet also become aware.
"Darcy," he loudly addressed his friend, "I suppose that the novels most recently recommended by your sister no longer need to be retrieved. Please thank Miss Darcy for her consideration, though. I do wish, sister, that you had made your displeasure known to us earlier, it would have saved a great deal of inconvenience on the part of your friend," he sternly admonished and then turning to Elizabeth, added, "but you may find much delight in her recommendations. Darcy, remind me what your sister had to say about the book you recently sent her."

Darcy was proud to see his friend for the first time truly behaving as the master of Netherfield. He recalled the recent letter from his sister in which she related one particularly dramatic scene from the book, sharing a warning from her companion, "you must remember not to confuse novels with real life." He turned to Miss Bennet and inquired after her opinion of this advice, noting that having four younger sisters she must have a great deal of experience in such matters.

Jane serenely replied that while she took great delight in reading such stories - though not nearly to the extent of her sister - she found this guidance to be very sound and was pleased to know that Miss Darcy should have such a wise friend at a tender and impressionable age. With a teasing glance, she asked Elizabeth if she thought that better advice could be found even in Fordyce's sermons.

Even in her current state, Elizabeth could not help but laugh at such folly. Seeing her sister in such good spirits Elizabeth regained her cheerfulness, and the rest of the evening was spent in an exceedingly pleasant manner. Elizabeth and Jane returned to their room that night with smiles on their faces and much to talk of.

Only Caroline could not seem to recover and join in the friendly discussion that followed. Later that evening when her sister joined her in her room to enjoy in the gossips and confidences that sisters so often do, Mrs. Hurst found herself quickly bored with the conversation. It was not long before Miss Bingley was left alone to plot how best to remove from their party the impertinent lady that was interfering with her well-laid plans.

Darcy did not linger long after the ladies. As he left the room, he glanced at the table where Elizabeth had lately been writing and spotted the unfinished letter abandoned by the injured guest. He quickly folded the note and asked a maid to deliver it to the Miss Bennet's room. It is unknown whether Mr. Darcy saw any of what Miss Elizabeth had laid down for her friend; honor would certainly demand that he did everything in his power not to betray her privacy. But as he reflected on the day's events in his room later that evening he could not deny that he greatly looked forward to continuing in the manner he had recently begun.
Reflecting back on her stay at Netherfield in the weeks that followed Elizabeth was continuously surprised at how little had changed and yet how everything seemed so different. She occasionally wondered if she and her dear sister were the same two girls who had only recently stood up together in the assembly room of Meryton when there were not enough partners to be had and laughed themselves to sleep imagining with unbounded fancies and flight of mind the handsome men who would someday win their hearts.

Mr. Bingley was by now established as a regular, and excessively welcome, addition to the family party. He came as often as his schedule, and his true family, would allow. Miss Bennet blossomed under the attention, and her composed manner and gentle disposition were not always sufficient to keep her from periodically betraying signs of particular regard.

Mr. Darcy occasionally accompanied his friend, and on those occasions Miss Bingley almost always followed. Elizabeth was vaguely aware that he looked at her often, and appeared to be about to approach her on a number of occasions. But the relaxed and open conversation he engaged in at Netherfield Park was not to be had at Longbourn, and Elizabeth had to remind herself that it was a relief not to have to enter into a discussion with the disagreeable man. In spite of herself, she found increasing dissatisfaction with these visits and was determined to think of Mr. Darcy as little as possible in between them. She seemed unable to think of anything else during.

The minute details of each visit from their new neighbors were pored over and analyzed by Mrs. Bennet, and she was - on the whole - satisfied with the progress being made. There was no doubt that Bingley was in love, and with each visit the expectation of an offer grew. She was less sure of her second eldest's prospects and was convinced that if Lizzy would just make more of an effort to be pleasing she would soon also find herself nearly engaged. Still, she concluded that the prize was worth the wait and that a marriage between Jane and Bingley would be just the motivation Lizzy would need to set her sights upon the wealthy, aloof gentleman.

Fortunately for Jane and Elizabeth there were sufficient distractions in the neighborhood to keep their mother thoughts frequently occupied, not least of all being a visit from a distant cousin of their father who would one day inherit Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet could see no reason why the odious man should be allowed to set a toe on the grounds of Longbourn until the day it was rightfully his, and nothing anyone could say to explain the history of the entail or the law could bring her to terms with the idea that the day would inevitably come. Mr. Collins, himself, was the only person able to provide comfort to Mrs. Bennet's poor nerves.

"I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologize for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends, - but of this hereafter..." Mr. Bennet read to the family from Mr. Collins' letter the evening before his anticipated arrival.

Mrs. Bennet set herself to discovering the manner and variety of amends that Mr. Collins could possibly have to offer, and though her sense and wit were not always up to the task, in this instance she was able to conclude that there was only one reasonable explanation.

Mr. Collins arrived and quickly disappointed the hopes of the younger ladies in the house. Lacking in both appearance and ease of manners, Lydia and Kitty promptly turned their thoughts from the recently arrived guest to more welcome ideas, chiefly - one can presume - dresses, officers, and admiration. Mary turned to the pianoforte while keenly observing that the gentleman's apparent interest in her older sister. Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins were quickly occupied in a tête-à-tête and not long after declaring, as subtly as she was capable, that she thought
her two eldest would soon be engaged, did his attentions turn towards the younger daughters.

"Handsome is as handsome does; he is, therefore, a very ill-looking man," Elizabeth later affirmed to Charlotte while strolling in the gardens with her friend, "But mama is determined that one of us shall have him, and I fear the task shall fall on Kitty or Mary. My poor mother has more ambitious plans for Jane and me, some having merit, others less so," she sighed with a wink at her friend. "I believe she would prefer to see Lydia settled as the future mistress of Longbourn, but I am convinced that they would not suit. And I am certain Lydia would not have him."

The next morning Lydia and Kitty devised a plan to escape to Meryton and leave their fawning houseguest to their mother and elder sisters. Alas, their plan was thwarted by their very own scheming mother who had determined that Mr. Collins, having already declared himself an excellent walker, should join them. The three older sisters were content to stay behind and anticipate other visitors; or, in Mary's case, the solitude of a drawing room free of the gossip, giggling, and frenzy that followed wherever her youngest sister led. Her desire for peaceful reflection was soon met when the two older sisters were persuaded to venture out on a walk accompanied by Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy.

"How fortuitous that we should have found you still at home on such a lovely morning," Mr. Bingley declared to the sisters as they headed out of the estate, "we passed your two younger sisters headed towards Meryton and thought we may have missed you already."

The gentleman and ladies continued in easy conversation until reaching a narrowing in the path that caused the group to separate into couples. For the first time since leaving Netherfield, Elizabeth found herself a captive audience to the perplexing Mr. Darcy.

Bingley and Jane walked behind at a slower pace than Darcy and Elizabeth, and soon they were several paces behind, and deeply engaged in conversation. Elizabeth slowed her pace enough so that the couples remained in sight of one another and Darcy smiled at the caution and propriety that she was taking for both her sister and herself. He was reminded that there were other ladies who would not be so careful to protect reputations if given the chance to wander off alone with him.

"Have you had an opportunity to finish the book you were reading at Netherfield?" he asked.

"I have, and I enjoyed it immensely" she replied archly, "but please do not breathe a word to Miss Bingley."

"I hadn't imagined that Miss Bingley's high opinion held so much value to you, but of course, your secret is safe with me."

The two continued to talk of books that they had each recently read, debating with zeal the novels, literature and philosophers that they turned to for amusement and instruction. With each subject, Mr. Darcy was struck by the energy, intelligence and power of discrimination that his companion displayed. As the conversation revealed a mutual love of poetry each expressed their surprise. "I confess, Miss Elizabeth, I had always imagined your to prefer the comedies."

Elizabeth reddened slightly at the idea that he considered the direction of her tastes at all. "It is true that I prefer the ridiculous, the inconsistencies, of this life, but I hope you will not be surprised that I am capable of also loving that which is beautiful, tender and epic. I suppose that I take great delight in discovering the many ways in which the great writers can stir my passion." Elizabeth stopped herself, a blush spreading across her cheeks. "You are correct, though, I do love to laugh. I am not made for sorrow, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth found her breath quickening and her heart racing, "but you strike me as a practical and serious man, I am surprised at your appreciation for the sentimentality of verse."
"I cannot deny that I am both serious by nature and practical by necessity, but it does not strictly follow that such a man does not also experience a depth of feeling," Darcy replied, belatedly adding in a low, deep tone, "or passion."

The two continued in silence until at last Jane and Bingley began to close in on them, soon bridging the distance. Darcy was for the first time becoming truly aware of the danger he was in and was much alarmed at how little he seemed to be inclined to escape it. He steered his observations to more neutral topics as their companions joined them for the final stretch of path towards Longbourn, commenting on the weather and the scenery, his mind occupied with new revelations and his concern deepening.

When in view of the house he surprised all three companions by declaring his intent of leaving the very next day. "I'm very glad that Mr. Bingley and I had an opportunity to visit today for I will be returning to London tomorrow and am not sure when I will be able to return. It would have been a pity to have left without an opportunity to say my goodbyes." Turning towards Elizabeth, he searched her eyes for any signs of disappointment and added, "I find little pleasure in leaving new friends so unexpectedly, except in knowing that I will soon be with my dearest sister."

Elizabeth noticed a softening in his expression at this and closed her eyes briefly to compose herself before responding with animation, "There is nothing you will lose in leaving Hertfordshire, I'm sure, that you will not gain back tenfold in being reunited with your sister. And though I should not presume to know Miss Darcy's mind, I imagine she will be delighted by the return of her favorite brother!"

"I am her only brother," Darcy replied dryly, "but even so, I do hope she will be glad to see me."

With a tinge of regret at the thought of all that he would be leaving behind, Darcy bowed to the ladies before mounting his horse and returning to Netherfield Park.

Lydia, Kitty, and Mr. Collins passed the gentleman for the second time on their way home. Lydia and Kitty returned with ribbons and plaiting lace and visions of a handsome, charming new officer in the regiment. Mr. Collins' mind was filled with little besides thoughts of his lively and pretty, if young, cousin.

As they readied for bed, Jane and Elizabeth met to divulge and discuss the many events of the day. After recounting the whole of her conversation with Mr. Bingley to her favorite sister, Jane ended with a sigh, "Oh, my dear Lizzy, the more I talk of him, the warmer my feelings for him become."

Elizabeth was in earnest in her happiness for her sister. "I give you leave to like him as well as you choose. We both know him to be a gentleman. His situation in life, his character, his amiable mind, his good habits; all that you know so well to value, speak highly in his favor." Jane smiled her deepest appreciation as her sister continued, "Yes, Jane, Bingley will do very well for you. And I believe our little guest room at Netherfield Park will need only a few alterations to suit me in me into my old age."

"But Lizzy, tell me honestly, Mr. Darcy's manner towards you has improved significantly. Do you not like him at all?"

"Sweet Jane, there may have been hope for him, but with his removal to Town our indifference will soon be mutual, I'm sure. Unless his regard, which appeared to spring from knowing very little of me at first, is best supported by never seeing me again."
Chapter 6

Mr. Darcy spent his last afternoon at Netherfield preparing letters for his steward, instructing his valet on what arrangements were required for his return, and avoiding his friends. He was in no mood to try and explain his hurried departure to Mr. Bingley when he had not yet come to grips with the impulsive decision himself. There was truth in the reasons he confessed to the party at Longbourn. His steward, he was certain, would always claim that there were matters of import that could only be properly attended to by his master. And he dearly missed his sister. But the fact remained that no more than four and twenty hours ago these were not compelling enough reasons for him to consider cutting short his stay.

Supper approached, and it was acknowledged that he could no longer escape the inevitable. He headed down to the dining room where Mr. Bingley forthwith appeared and confronted his guest excitedly. "Darcy, what on earth is this sudden trip to London about? I heard nothing about it until just this morning! Pray, do not try and convince me that in the course of your stroll with Miss Elizabeth this afternoon you were thusly informed of such urgent matters that cannot be delayed." If his words alone did not express his frustration at his friend, his reddened cheeks and defiant glare left no doubt.

With a heavy sigh Mr. Darcy began, "You are right, Charles, I was only considering a trip when we set out this morning but had not settled the matter. It came upon me suddenly how much I have missed Georgiana. You have your sisters with you always, you cannot know the worry and concern that I suffer not having mine close by my side. And there are a few very important matters - or one at least - that I fear I can resolve only by leaving Netherfield."

His words were chosen wisely, indeed, for there was little argument that Mr. Bingley could use against brotherly affection and duty. Still, he was not willing to concede entirely. "I dare say, you are not running to London, but rather running from Hertfordshire! It is clear you are resigned to your course, but I insist that you return shortly. It has been decided, I shall give a ball, and you must be here to welcome my neighbors and make amends to all the ladies you have slighted."

Bingley forced a dull laugh, unconscious of the sting his words caused his friend.

Mr. Darcy experienced genuine pangs of self-remorse seeing his friend's discontent and worry and endeavored to bring more welcome thoughts to his attention. "And you are convinced that the possibility of an evening spent in the company of a beautiful lady has not influenced you in any way? You deny that you are - perhaps - thinking of more than just the happiness of your neighbors with this scheme?"

"I have no desire to deny it, Darcy. She is an angel!" Mr. Bingley set forth describing the many virtues of his object and was not happy until Darcy, himself, admitted he had never met a prettier or pleasanter lady in all of his acquaintance.

The excuse of an early morning departure freed Mr. Darcy from continuing his praise of the eldest Miss Bennet, and he soon headed upstairs. In his room, he found that all arrangements had been put in place as ordered and that there was nothing left for him to do but wait for morning.

Sleep eluded him, and he lay awake into the early morning hours meditating on a pair of dark, perplexing eyes. He mused over how they could reveal such depths of perception and wit and warmth and also conceal hidden desires and wishes and regrets. He longed to believe that those eyes had betrayed their owner with a brief flash of distress as he announced his intention of leaving, but he was determined that he should not believe it just because he wished it. He could not stop himself from imagining that even as he was held captive by the memory of those eyes, their owner might be awake and thinking of him, too. Whatever comfort he could draw from this...
reverie was lost as he recalled her words from that morning: *I am not made for sorrow, Mr. Darcy*.

Sunrise finally brought his escape, and before the family had even stirred enough to remember that they had a guest to bid farewell to, he was setting a steady pace towards London. The fresh air revived his spirits, and he drew firm in his resolution to keep his mind focused only on what was ahead. He passed through the small town of Meryton before the bustle of the day could distract or pull him in; no familiar faces looked up to shake their disappointment in his exit, no shopkeeper waved him over to ask for advice on this method or that matter. He slowed as he approached the path from Longbourn and regret again overwhelmed him.

Elizabeth gave up on sleep at the break of dawn and took to the shrubberies to clear her mind and soothe her weary spirit. A turn in the gardens soon progressed to a brisk stroll through the park; the crisp air, the familiar paths, the dew-laden foliage her source of comfort during those seldom moments of struggle that she had encountered in her generally peaceful and pleasant existence. She attributed her anguish and disquiet to the realization that she might very soon lose her dearest sister to matrimony.

To the incongruity of her emotion, Elizabeth was not unaware. She had anticipated the match from the beginning, seeing good in Mr. Bingley from the very first and feeling her estimation of him only rise with his pleasing attentions to her sister. A better, more deserving gentleman could not have been designed to match Jane's universal good-will and cheerful spirit. Elizabeth knew this to be true. But she felt deeply what the loss of her sister would mean to her, even if her removal was only the short distance to Netherfield Park. She could not think without pain of evenings spent without her dearest, closest companion.

If she were honest with herself, which she was most certainly not, she might also have acknowledged other disappointments. She might have considered whether her discomfort stemmed not from reflection on the advantages that Netherfield might soon gain, but rather from that which it must soon relinquish. It was these thoughts Elizabeth could not - would not - entertain. She could contemplate rationally her surprise in Mr. Darcy's abrupt withdrawal, and her confusion that this would be news to his friend, too. She was confident in her own objective observation that it must be some matter of importance to draw him back to London at this time of year and in such haste. She was stubbornly determined to dismiss any disappointment or concern that she might be feeling on his account.

Turning back towards the house, a bitter gust of wind brought a pink glow to her cheeks and an errant tear to her eye. She removed a handkerchief from her pocket, her thumb absently tracing the foreign needlework in the corner; deep blue flowers with a delicate golden scroll lovingly applied by a determined but novice hand. Her resolve wavered as she glanced down and recognized the ornate monogram - FD - that graced the pattern. Her thumb moved from the cloth to the faint mark on her nearly healed finger. For a fleeting moment she was transported back to Netherfield Park; she felt the heat radiating off Mr. Darcy as he came to her side, the strength of his hands pressing the handkerchief to her wound, the rush of relief his comforting gaze provided. Elizabeth pulled the wretched cloth to her eyes to mask the sobs that were now freely flowing.

Darcy steered his mount onto the path towards Longbourn, stopping to take one last look at all that he was leaving. At the farthest end, he saw her. She appeared to be lost in contemplation, turning back towards her home. He wanted so much - he desperately needed - to look into those eyes and see what they would reveal to him. He lifted his reins to guide his horse closer but stopped himself. A rush of cold air pulled him back from his thoughts, his gaze fixed on her with longing.
If you go to her now, do you trust yourself to turn back? No time was lost as he accepted that he could not. He felt the full weight of his vulnerability and weakness. At only one other time in his life did he know himself to be so little under regulation and he would not allow himself to be so guided by emotion and passion. He turned towards London and rode with an urgency that matched his distress as he declared, "I shall conquer this. I shall!"
Chapter 7

Elizabeth rushed to her room and threw herself onto her bed in a flurry of confusion and misery. Bitter tears stained her cheeks but had ceased falling, only to be replaced by astonishment and surprise at her newly discovered emotions. *You fool*, she thought, *must you be so fickle that you can only appreciate that which you cannot have!* The next half hour was spent trying to gain insight into when and how she could ever have allowed herself to stop hating the offensive man. Was it as early as her first unfortunate meeting with him at the assembly, where she quietly admired his fine figure before learning of his disapproval? Was it when he confessed his misjudgment and gave a brief - but now treasured - glimpse into his heart? Could it be that her feelings of admiration were only as fresh as the pain she experienced when he took his leave of her yesterday?

*Yesterday? Can it truly only have been one day? Surely a thousand lifetimes have passed since we last met.* Elizabeth recollected their final conversation - how she was surprised and delighted by the ease and the comfort as they discussed novels and poetry and passions - and she instantly understood. Mr. Darcy perceived her growing affection and sought to distance himself. Oh, that he should know her heart before she understood herself. Whether he shared her newly discovered feelings, she did not know. Elizabeth concluded that he must be trying to protect himself, and possible her, from an attachment that could never be anything more than a dream. Grief again overcame her as she recognized that she could not think less of him for it.

Her absence did not go unnoticed by her family and eventually Jane was rapping softly on the door and furtively stepping to her sister's side. "Lizzy, you look pale. Are you unwell?" Gently pushing aside a mass of dark curls she placed the back of her hand to her sister's forehead.

"I am well, Jane. I am only recently beginning to understand the changes that a new set of neighbors must bring. You love Mr. Bingley, Jane?" A sweet smile spread upon Jane's face and her cheeks were overspread with the deepest blush. It was all Elizabeth needed to continue, "and do you expect that he will make an offer soon?"

Jane paused and with hesitation replied, "I believe that he is may be waiting for an opportunity to speak with our father."

"Do you believe it, Jane, or do you know it?" Elizabeth accused, a twinkle in her eye as she teased her sister. Her spirit could not help but be lifted by her sister's joy, and she began giggling. Jane fought to keep her countenance and stoically address such a serious topic with grace, but soon she, too, was folded over in laughter alongside her sister, mirth overflowing as she contemplated her future happiness.

"Oh, Lizzy, I only wish you could know the joy that I feel, but I cannot find the words to do it justice. You, dear sister, would surely be able to find the expression and the tone to capture the emotion. When you find love as I have, you will not be at a loss for words."

The moment of levity ended as abruptly as it began as Elizabeth closed her eyes and turned her head, fighting back the tears that threatened to reappear. "My dear sister, do not lose hope. Things cannot remain as they always have, no matter how happy we have been. Depend upon it - one day it will be your turn -though I cannot say when."

Lizzy could not conceal the hint of sadness in her voice "Nobody ever feels or acts, suffers or enjoys, as one expects. I shall turn my mind to those things upon which I can depend - my dear sisters and friends, our meddlesome neighbors and an affectionate mother and father."
The family was entertained by Mr. Bingley and Mr. Collins so well that afternoon that no notice was given at all to Elizabeth's withdrawn temper and her unusual quiet. It was not until late that evening that any outside of her sister turned the conversation in her direction.

"And so Lizzy, what is this I hear of Mr. Darcy going to town?" Mrs. Bennet accused.

"I believe you know as much as I do. Were not we both sitting in this room when Mr. Bingley told us that he left this morning," Elizabeth replied coolly.

"But surely you must know more," her mother pleaded, searching for some insight into the terms upon which her daughter and the gentleman parted. "Mr. Darcy must have given you some idea of his intentions."

"I assure you that he did not, Mama. Does Mr. Darcy strike you as the sort of man who asks for permission or gives excuses for his behavior?" Elizabeth asked flatly before excusing herself for the night.

Jane leaped to the defense of the gentleman in question. "Mama, Mr. Bingley did say that he hoped Mr. Darcy would return in time for the Netherfield Ball."

"Yes, yes, Jane. But why should he leave in the first place, is he to be always running this way and that way and never staying in one place!"

"But his sister is in London," Jane soothed, sincerely believing that any attentions towards a beloved sister must excuse his behavior. "And I'm sure there is business that a man in his station must take care attending to; a man as rich as he is must spend a great deal of time keeping his affairs in order. There are always papers that need to be drawn up, and matters to be sorted before a gentleman enters into any significant agreement. Isn't that correct, Papa?"

Mr. Bennett looked up from his book and absently agreed with his eldest daughter. Mr. Collins, though not catching the meaning of her words, lent credibility to the seeds of hope planted in her mother's head. He declared how correct Miss Bennett was and proceeded to enlighten the party on the great number of activities that a man such as Mr. Darcy must attend to, and the great condescension that he offered to their neighborhood with his presence up to that point. His looks and words turned to his youngest cousin as he digressed from the incredible manners of the gentleman to that of his noble aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, going over in great detail the many honors bestowed by virtue of her patronage.

Later that week Elizabeth finally had the opportunity to meet the charming Mr. Wickham, who, after only one week in Meryton, had every young lady within a mile of Meryton out of their senses. He was handsome and dashing, and Elizabeth decided that he was just the sort of person to bring her out of her miseries and for the first half of the evening she was well pleased with him. However, as the end of the night approached he did himself a great disservice, broaching the one subject that Elizabeth had taken great pains to avoid.

"I understand from your younger sisters that you are much acquainted with Mr. Darcy."

"I have been often in company with him during his stay at Netherfield; he is a good friend of Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth reported with caution. She would not expose herself to the neighborhood after doing so to Mr. Darcy himself.

"And how do you find him?"
"I believe that he is generally found to be a man of sense and education." Her reserve on this subject was greatly in contrast to her earlier manners, nor did it affirm the whispers and allusions he had heard from more than one corner that there may have been an attachment between the pair.

His curiosity was piqued, and he continued in his attempt to draw Elizabeth out. "You might be surprised to hear that I am formerly much acquainted with the gentleman. We grew up as boys together before either one of us had acquired any portion of sense or education."

Elizabeth masked any surprise that this revelation brought. "I imagine then that you have the advantage and do not need the impressions and opinions of our neighborhood to draw his character."

"True, true," he conceded with a laugh. "I wonder if he will be long in London or if he means to return to the area?"

'I have heard only that Mr. Bingley wishes for him to return, but as to his wishes I have no knowledge,' Elizabeth declared, returning to topics of less interest to both: the weather, politics, and music.

Wickham turned from Elizabeth dissatisfied. The change in the lady's mien was palpable at the mention of Mr. Darcy, but he could not ascertain if her diffidence was a symptom of too much or too little interest in his former friend. That the tide of the neighborhood had not turned against the proud, cold man surprised him. He knew Darcy well enough to understand that the man only pleases where he chose, but he could not fathom what - or who - in a little country nowhere such as this would tempt him to do so. He watched as his most recent companion joined her friends, a roguish grin spreading across him even as he thought, proceed with caution, Wickham.

As much as she did not wish to, Elizabeth could not keep from drawing comparisons between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. While the latter's words were laced with compliments and an aim to please, she thought with regret that he lacked the former's conviction and acumen. She wondered with curiosity how two such men could be raised alongside one another; and - if, in fact, they were - how it could result in such different effect. She could readily admit that the man that entertained her in the drawing room of her Aunt Phillip's that evening had all the favor of appearance and happy manners. And yet, she was struck - with even deeper sentiment - by a high regard for the warmth of expression and the composed manners of the gentleman who was - at present - having similar thoughts in the library of his quiet home in London.

As the evening came to a close Charlotte and Elizabeth found a quiet corner to share their observations and laugh at the follies of their friends and neighbors.

"And so Lizzy, how did you find Mr. Wickham? Will he suffice to entertain you in the absence of your favorite?"

"I will not pretend in one meeting to dislike him. His manners are undoubtedly gentleman-like, but as to whether they are gentlemanly, I am unconvinced." Lizzy sighed, thinking that she was no longer sure that she understood the makings of a real gentleman. "He is excessively diverting, and we will meet again, I'm sure. He shall tell me comical things, and I will laugh at them, which will be a pleasure to us both."

"Well, even if he has nothing else to recommend himself, Lizzy, I suppose our neighborhood will still look upon him as a treasure. Young, handsome and a manner designed to please; we cannot also ask for virtue and riches, can we?"

"There may exist a being out there who matches my definition of perfection – combining the wit and manners that could make one such as myself happy, being the dearest friend of my sisters'
future husbands, and in possession of both a fortune and a handsome face. But even if such a man exists, I cannot imagine it likely that he may ever cross my path."

With a look of exasperation, Charlotte raised her brows. "Can you not? And to think that I have - until just now - always attributed to you the superior imagination."
An atmosphere of surprise and elation filled the halls of their London home as Miss Darcy greeted her brother, hours before she expected his return. So little had she anticipated his arrival that she was only just starting her day and sitting to breakfast when first notified of his arrival. Clearly he had ridden fast and hard, and while she was accustomed to such behavior were he exploring the woods and valleys of Pemberley, it was very unlike him to behave with such abandon in any other surrounding.

Unable to conceal her delight she rushed to him, stopping herself just as he entered the doorway and remembering that she was growing up and must now greet her brother civilly and with dignity. She struggled to regain her composure and lean into a ladylike curtsy. Darcy grinned widely and reached out to pull her into a warm embrace, sighing deeply in relief and contentment at being home with the person whom he loved most in the world. She leaned her head against her brother's shoulder, basking in the comfort that his most affectionate welcome brought.

The happy pair took breakfast in the library and talked and visited until late in the morning, at which point it could safely be said that Miss Darcy talked and visited while Darcy listened quietly with amusement and pleasure. Eventually, she was interrupted by the low cough of her companion, reminding her that there were still duties for her to perform. Darcy, too, was brought back to the present and considered that if he took the next two hours full with his steward he would have the evening to be again entertained by dear Georgiana. And while they each set to their own private work for the rest of the day they remained quietly and comfortably at home enjoying the presence, if not the company, of one another.

In the early evening, Darcy joined his sister in the music room and listened as she practiced a beautiful piece she had only recently acquired. The long, sorrowful notes soothed his weary spirit; the emotion and passion that his sister poured into each chord struck at his heart. The sleepless nights and the endless days of late had taken their toll, and his exhaustion could no longer be denied or defended against. Soon his eyelids drifted to a close and his breathing slowed into a deep, steady pattern.

Georgiana gently softened her playing until she was at a complete stop and quietly folded the cover over the keys of the instrument. She smiled as she watched her brother resting peacefully in his armchair. As she leaned over to retrieve a book from his loosening grasp he shifted slightly and for a brief moment was pulled out of his dreams. As he settled back into the deepness of sleep she just barely made out a whisper that escaped him. She blushed at the intrusion of her brother's revelry, escaping quickly to avoid hearing more. As she turned the corner towards the main hall her head was consumed with only one thought, Elizabeth?

The ease and comfort of his first day's return faded with the sun, and by the next morning Darcy found himself pulled into the habits and requirements of town. Shortly upon his return, a stream of cards and invitations began to appear at his door. He maintained his usual schedule, making visits and accepting the same from his neighbors and acquaintances. He frequented his preferred shops, making those little purchases that one can only make in town. He stopped into his regular clubs for a friendly game of cards or to practice his lunges and parries.

Nobody who was witness to these activities could claim that he was anything but the same serious, cautious gentleman who had left for a visit in the country a few short months ago. It seemed that regardless of how successfully he performed to the inhabitants of the boisterous, energetic town, he could not keep himself from realizing how frequently his thoughts drifted back
to a quaint, quiet, country estate.

He would formerly have been content to spend his mornings addressing his business affairs and afternoons engaged in forced attempts at friendly conversation. Filling his days with activity and enterprise while anxiously waiting for evenings spent in the comfort of his home surrounded only by those families and friends whom he chose. He found he preferred now to remain at all times entrenched in the diversions of the day in order that his mind did not turn with longing to those comforts which he knew he would not find at home. He deeply felt the absence of warm, rich laughter echoing through the vast rooms and halls of his quiet home, and hints of mischief and teasing when his pride escaped regulation. Not infrequently did he slip into brooding over the mystery and puzzle trapped behind a pair of beautiful, haunting eyes.

Georgiana became concerned by the enthusiastic commitment which her brother was applying to his ledgers. She could only indistinctly recall a time after the death of their father when he spent such long hours behind the desk in his study. Working up her courage one afternoon she approached the man whom she looked up to as almost a father. "My dear Brother, you are a man of sense and understanding, and there is little in this world that I would dare to argue is beyond your comprehension." Pausing to catch her brother's glance and assure herself that he was listening, she hesitantly continued, "but I am certain you are not going to find anything amiss in those books this afternoon that went unnoticed in your thorough examination this morning. Nor will you find that the status has changed by returning this evening to review them yet again."

Mr. Darcy felt the sting of his sister's assessment. For a moment, he fought the urge to tease or - even worse - scold her. He was accustomed to receiving her praise and adoration and it pained him to see the look of concern and doubt in her eyes. He could see her apprehension and took the time to recognize that her words were rooted in worry. He could not lightly dismiss them as those from a naive little sister; Georgina was growing up and was developing a keen perception. This was due in part, he surmised, from recent experiences and not merely the passing of time. "Dearest, I am finding that I cannot be too careful at present, my judgment has failed me on more occasions recently than I care to dwell on," Darcy confessed, regret lacing his words.

Days passed and Darcy grew weary of the facade he was forced to put up for the world, and now for his sister. He sighed in exhaustion one morning as he picked through his latest correspondence, despairing that removal from Netherfield had done little to clear his head from the foolish ideas he had begun to entertain while there. No sooner had the image of the quiet country estate entered his thoughts did his fingers brush over a letter addressed from the very same.

He quickly read through the note from his friend, frowning as he laid it back down. Standing abruptly, he paced the room trying to free himself of the wretched visions that were running through his mind. While he might deny it to any that asked he could not deceive himself and acknowledged that while these visions were uninvited they were not unpleasant. Even as his sense of duty and honor battled against his base desires his thoughts strayed back to a delicate, teasing smile.

When he joined his sister later that afternoon she was struck by the change in his manner. Where he had been sullen and withdrawn, he now was open and attentive. "Georgina, did I tell you that Mr. Bingley has decided to throw a ball for his new neighbors?"

"You did not, that must mean a great deal of work for his sisters." She thought with dread towards the day when she might be asked to fill the role of hostess for her brother. "I imagine his new neighbors and friends are very pleased with the decision, though."

"I believe they are. Of course, I cannot say how Miss Bingley feels about the work required to put on such an event, but I do expect that she will find great enjoyment in hosting alongside her
brother."

"Oh, I am certain you are right." Darcy watched his sister as she replied, noting a slight turn of her chin and catching - if he was not mistaken - a hint of disdain in her voice. Georgina was thinking that Miss Bingley would surely never shrink at the chance to be the center of attention. "It is clear from your description that Mr. Bingley is very fond of his new neighborhood, how do his sisters enjoy Hertfordshire?"

"I could not say with conviction that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are as enthusiastic towards the country as their brother is. But he did just write to me that they have continued to advance a friendship that he hopes will greatly add to their pleasure of the neighborhood. I'm sure I mentioned that Mr. Bingley's nearest neighbors are a family of five daughters?"

Georgina looked up in interest, finally, she thought with a great deal of anticipation. "I'm sure I would have remembered if you had," she dissented. "And have you become acquainted with any of these ladies? Are they of similar age to Miss Bingley?"

"I have, and they are, the eldest is, I daresay, a few years younger than Miss Bingley. The youngest is about your age."

Not all that Georgina could ask on the subject was sufficient to draw from her brother any satisfactory description of these neighbors. She attacked and interrogated in every variety of ways, but he eluded her with skill and no small degree of satisfaction. She learned only that they were generally thought to be quite pretty, were fond of walking, and that more than one played the piano.

Later that evening Mr. Darcy sat down to the table in his library to re-read the letter that had occupied his mind throughout the day.

Dear Darcy,

It is intolerable for me to think or your being buried in London, a place of which I know you receive little pleasure. The object of this letter is to beg of you to return within the week, for there are two important events that I insist upon you being here for.

Firstly, I have named the date for the ball (Tuesday next), I cannot tell you the excitement the entire neighborhood is caught up in, but it confirms my belief that a small country life such as this is all that I need to complete my happiness, or nearly all. Which of course brings me to the second, and most delightful, cause for celebration. I need not say more, except that I insist you be here to wish me joy when the time comes. I hope that such a conversation will be soon required.

My sisters beg that you bring Miss Darcy to visit, for their happiness will not be complete until she is at their side, or so I am told. More to the point, I do believe there are other ladies in the neighborhood whose company your sister would greatly enjoy and from whose acquaintance she might benefit. Say what you will about younger sisters; but the two eldest ladies of one particular family have greatly impressed me and I do hope that my own sisters might acquire something of their modest confidence and generous, affectionate natures, even if by accident only.

What must I say to entice you? We shall have a piano, and some books, and many evenings spent in good company. But what will be most inviting to you, you will give much, though you may receive but little, pleasure. Do not waste your time in a reply, spend it more wisely in preparations for your return.

Your ever loyal friend,
Charles

The parting line, "your ever loyal friend," was felt with great effect. If any friend could be said to be loyal, generous and willing to cede to his frequently unyielding demands, it had been Bingley. Could I deny him such a request, made out of the truest and most natural feelings of friendship, for the contemptible excuse that I am afraid of my own desires and longings? Darcy sat in silence, contemplating his turmoil. Was he really considering a return to Hertfordshire with only the motive of duty and deference to his friend? Or was he ready to admit his defeat and surrender to those feelings which had driven him to London in the first place?

Georgiana interrupted his reflection to shyly bid her brother goodnight. Darcy looked up at her, and in yet another uncharacteristic display of spontaneity made his fateful decision. "Sweet sister, how would you feel about a visit to the country?"

A flush quickly spread across her cheeks and a deep smile radiated her astonishment and wonder. 'Oh, my dear Brother, I would like that!' Her head began to spin with the possibilities of exploring the woods and wilderness of an unfamiliar countryside, seeing the pretty new estate of her brother's friends that he had written so fondly of, and meeting the mysterious neighbors of which she had heard so little but imagined so much. "Oh, yes, I would like it very much. Whenever can we leave? Tomorrow?"
Georgiana woke to a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. As she carefully laid out her favorite gowns for the trip, her mind drifted back to her brother's first day back in London. She wondered if she would ever learn more about the mysterious woman who had returned with her brother in his dreams. Elizabeth. She couldn't help but let her imagination run wild. One moment she was certain Elizabeth must be the kindest, most beautiful woman in existence; the next she was a cold, cruel vixen intent on stealing her brother away.

She knew all too well the complications that the family name and wealth created where matters of the heart were concerned. The fear that her brother was being taken in by a fortune hunter was in constant battle with the firm belief in her brother's superior mind and sense. Was it not he who recognized Wickham's intentions and saved her from a most terrible fate? Had she not herself heard the mother's of her classmates whisper about her brother's fastidious and guarded nature. A man such as he could not be fooled by some poor country Miss.

And yet she considered how little her brother truly understood of women and love. She recalled the last meeting with Miss Bingley and how her brother, though never attentive to her, allow her attentions to be directed at him almost without notice or regard. That his friend's sister might be raising expectations or even falling in love clearly had not crossed his mind. She thought back to her departure from Ramsgate and her brother's loving care and genuine concern but also to her realization that this was a man who had never allowed himself to develop such strong attachment to another. She heard his words of comfort spoken with sincerity but also with a banality that only could come from one who had never experienced such depths of emotion. She could still see the look of confusion and worry in his eyes that day that betrayed his faulty understanding of her loss and grief when Mr. Wickham so readily gave her up upon learning that her dowry was no longer within his reach.

While she accepted that her brother was not perfect, she also knew that no man on earth deserved more to find an equal match. Skipping lightly down the staircase Georgina contemplated the many characteristics and accomplishments that such a deserving woman would have to possess. She pondered how one woman could possibly be endowed with all the standard requisites that a lady in society must have and also those special little somethings that she was certain her brother was due - wit, intelligence, kindness.

She was lost in thought as she rounded the corner into the library where she expected to find her brother waiting to join her for breakfast. Much to her surprise, two gentlemen rose as she entered the room. "Richard!" She rushed past her brother and into the arms of her favorite cousin and her second guardian. "I did not know you were in town." A frown formed as she realized that this could mean a change to her much-anticipated plans. "How long do you plan to stay?"

"I do believe that neither you nor your brother are happy to see me," he replied sternly, with a wink at Darcy.

Georgina reddened with shame and attempted to mutter apologies until her brother interrupted her. "Dearest Georgiana, do not let Richard upset you. Had he the courtesy to provide me with notice of his arrival we would have been prepared and made our arrangements accordingly, but his poor manners will ever be the bane of my existence. How he can be responsible for an entire regiment is beyond my understanding." Georgiana stared at her brother, in shock as he issued this diatribe, a pink flush rising to her cheeks as he launched his criticism.

But her cousin merely laughed it off. "Angel, do not let your brother alarm you. I in no way intend to interfere with this little excursion I was just hearing of," he reassured her. "But do tell me, are
you sure you want to leave the excitement of town for a visit to a small, inconsequential village?" he queried his charge with a mischievous look towards the elder Darcy.

"Oh yes, Richard, I am so very excited. Brother has told me how beautiful the area is - and about the lovely woods and flowers. The village sounds ever so quaint, and I do look forward to seeing Mr. Bingley again." Colonel Fitzwilliam and Darcy smiled at the enthusiasm and energy of Georgiana, both thinking that they had not seen her so spirited in far too long. "And there will be a ball, and though I cannot dance - of course - I will be allowed to stay through dinner! And there will be Bingley's neighbors and five daughters. Five, can you imagine, Richard?" she asked without waiting for a response. "Oh, I hope I get to meet them all, especially Elizabeth..." Darcy paled as her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes widened and turned from her brother to her cousin and back again.

"Where did you..." Darcy softly started in confusion.

"Five daughters? And Miss..." Fitzwilliam gave a pointed look towards Darcy.

"Bennett. Miss Elizabeth Bennett. I was just telling you of her elder sister, who has been befriended by Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley."

"Ah, yes. Miss Bennet. And four younger sisters." Looking towards Georgiana with a mixture of amusement and reserve he continued, "and of course, the woods and scenery of the neighborhood are quite pretty, if I recall," with a knowing glance to Darcy. "Well, it is fortunate that I had not even taken the time to unpack my belongings before stopping to visit my two favorite people in all of London. I will have my man transfer my trunk to your carriage, exchange my horse, and I believe we can be ready by ten. Don't bother to send word to Bingley, I know how he loves a good surprise."

Colonel Fitzwilliam headed out of the library barking orders at the servants while Darcy and Georgiana were left speechless for five minutes complete.

Elizabeth's heart, though bruised, was not so heavy that she could not watch with joy and pride as her sister's relationship with Bingley blossomed and grew. She congratulated herself on being of great benefit to the pair, serving as their constant companion and chaperone. She enjoying the long walks through the woods and gardens of Longbourn and Netherfield both, keeping a pace that often left her well ahead of the two; but as they had yet to complain she reveled in the brisk exertion that kept both her body and mind active.

She regularly joined her sisters and their houseguest on walks into town, more often than not at the urging of her scheming mother. Mr. Collins continued to direct his attentions to the youngest Bennet sister, paying little notice to the fact that her attentions were equally directed towards any young man in a red coat who crossed her path. Any lack of encouragement on the daughter's behalf was more than adequately compensated for by the assistance and reassurances of the mother.

And so one fine afternoon Elizabeth found herself strolling through Meryton with Lydia, Kitty, and Mr. Collins in search of shoe-roses for the upcoming ball. Their mother was insistent that they must go out for the final laces and trims required for the ball that very day; she was sure that rain would prevent them if they delayed. Lizzy laughed as she watched her sisters plotting their escape and meeting disappointment at every corner as Mr. Collins traced their steps along each route they chose with no notice of their attempted ploy and no pause in his speech.

It was only as they moved towards their Aunt Phillips' home to deliver a note from their mother
that the younger sisters became re-engaged with their company, for it was along this path that they were joined by Mr. Wickham. Mr. Collins relished in the new company and the opportunity to expound on the thoughts and opinions of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to a new audience. Wickham gave him all the pleasure he could have hoped for, expressing his awe at the description of the fireplace in the sitting room and requesting elaboration on the manner in which the kitchen was run with such prodigious efficiency.

To the disappointment of some and the pleasure of others, the walking party split into two as they left town and returned towards Longbourn. Lydia and Kitty found themselves on the arms of Mr. Collins while Elizabeth walked ahead with Mr. Wickham. "Mr. Wickham, I was not aware that you had such interest in the paper choices for a drawing room, I'm certain that my mother will be pleased to continue the topic with you," she teased.

"Your cousin appears quite pleased with Hunsford. I should not have encouraged him, but I must admit that I have my own interest in his esteemed neighbors." A gleam in his eye signaled that he had more to share. "Your cousin has - I'm sure - mentioned that Lady Catherine has a daughter?"

Elizabeth nodded her ascent and waited impatiently to hear more.

"Did he mention to you that she is presumed to be betrothed to none other than your friend, Mr. Darcy."

The short intake of breath and her paling face were answer enough. Wickham continued with an explanation of the relationship and the wishes of Lady Catherine and her sister, Lady Anne Darcy. "I suppose it is natural that Darcy has returned to London; I imagine he will need to settle a number of affairs before his annual trip to visit his aunt and cousin. And I'm sure it would not do well for him to be seen on the arms of his friend's sisters and beautiful neighbors," he continued with a long look at Elizabeth, "while his intended sits alone at Rosings."

The two continued in near silence as they approached Lucas Lodge, where Mr. Wickham said his goodbyes to the party and headed for a visit with Sir William. As a final gesture of goodwill, he secured the hands of all three ladies for the Netherfield Ball much to the delight of the younger sisters and the uneasiness of the elder.

The Longbourn party returned home with their wares that were quickly strewn about the house as the family began in earnest their preparations for the ball. Elizabeth welcomed the rain that kept company away for the following days. She set herself to adding delicate embroidery to the neckline of her favorite ball gown with a passion that surprised even her sister, so immersed in her work was Elizabeth that Mrs. Bennet wondered if she even heard the news shared in a note to the family from Miss Bingley that Mr. Darcy had returned.

Tuesday morning brought the first sunshine to Hertfordshire in days, which was greeted with jubilation by an entire neighborhood that had seen little sleep the night before. Excitement coursed through the households of Netherfield Park's neighboring estates and nowhere was this more true than the halls of Longbourn. As curling papers were removed and pins pushed into place Mrs. Bennet's attentions were pulled in so many directions that not even her smelling salts could calm her nerves. It was beyond her ability to determine which of her daughters had the most to gain from the evening, and so she left it to them to fight over the attentions of their servants and the ribbons, jewelry, and trinkets needed to complete their dress for the evening.

Elizabeth looked to Jane as a final spray of flowers was positioned in her curls and drew her strength from the serene countenance of her dearest sister. The two clasped hands as they proceeded down the stairs to encounter the first round of judgment and inspection of the evening.
Lydia was the first to chime in her opinion "You are looking well, Lizzy. I do hope you will not keep Wickham to yourself all evening, though."

"Wickham!" their mother exclaimed in disgust, "what is Wickham to Lizzy when Mr. Darcy will be there."

Jane squeezed her sister's hand tighter and pulled her towards the entry where their father was waiting to escort his daughters to the carriages. He stepped up after Jane, Lizzy, and Mary; leaving Mr. Collins to assist and entertain Mrs. Bennet and the two youngest sisters on the short ride to Netherfield. "Lizzy, your sister, silly as she may be, was correct that you do look very well this evening. I'm not sure I understand your mother, though. Does she mean to imply that Mr. Darcy has decided you are more than tolerable? Be that the case, I do hope you will consider my feelings when he makes you an offer."

Elizabeth's mortification at the dreadful start to her evening only increased as she entered the drawing-room at Netherfield Park. Bingley greeted the family with all the graciousness and attention that one would have hoped for, but his sister's enthusiasm was clearly not matching. She curtsied stiffly and nodded her acknowledgment of the family and quickly turned to Mrs. Hurst to continue an animated conversation. Elizabeth froze, and her heart sank as she heard Miss Bingley exclaim loudly "Oh, yes, and there is Darcy's cousin with him."

The certainty of meeting him in that evening had been anticipated and considered at length as Elizabeth made her final preparations for the evening. She knew that she could not avoid the man, but was ready to greet him with coolness and poise. Within moments of entering the room her heart betrayed her, and her eyes instantly searched the room for him amongst the clusters of blue and red coats and colorful gowns and feathers.

And then she saw him.

He stood in a far corner of the room and had the advantage of height and position. Long before she saw him, he had already taken in the sight of her and was recovering his breath from the beauty that he had only dreamed about for so many nights. He watched as she entered the room, clearly in discomfort and ill at ease. He saw the cold greeting from the hostess and a sudden paleness spread across her face as her dark, unforgettable, eyes scanned the room in search of something. In search of what, of who? Is it me she is looking for? he hoped.

And then her glance landed on him and he could not turn away. Not for his pride, not for his fortune, not even for his sister. He saw the pain in the eyes, the pain that had haunted him for so long, a pain that even now burned in his chest. After a moment - or was it an eternity - he pulled his eyes away and leaned into his sister.

Jane felt her sister go weak. She looked to Mr. Bingley with concern, and he was at her side within moments. She strengthened her grasp on Elizabeth's arm. "Elizabeth, are you well?" Mr. Bingley quickly procured a glass of wine and was insisting that they find a seat as he watched Mr. Darcy speaking quietly to the tall, pretty woman on his arm who blushed and smiled at him with a look of adoration as he left her side.

Time stood still, and Elizabeth looked to the ground, ready to let Mr. Bingley lead her away, when she heard him. "Miss Bennet, you look lovely this evening." He stepped closer. "Miss Elizabeth." She looked to her sister and Mr. Bingley for rescue, but they were moving towards a pair of empty seats, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone in the crowded room.

"Mr. Darcy," she replied weakly. "I am surprised to see you back so soon."

Look at me, he pleaded. But she did not. Instead, she turned again to see a gentlemanly figure in a
red coat speaking with the woman whom Darcy had just left.

"Miss Elizabeth, may I..." he paused, hoping in vain to draw her eyes to him. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to introduce you to my sister?"

Her eyes bolted up to meet his, awash in confusion, "your sister?"

"Yes, my sister, Georgiana," he turned his head in the direction from which he had just come. "And that is my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I should very much like you to meet them both."

Darcy was not prepared for the sudden look of emotion and hope that spread over Elizabeth's face. The pain, confusion, and grief were suddenly gone, and he wanted only to take her into his arms and hold on to that moment. "Your cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam?" she softly muttered. "So you are not engaged?"

"Engaged? No, where would you..." Elizabeth was shaking, and he reached out to steady her. It took every ounce of self-control for him not to lean into her and show her - and the entire room, the entire world - that there was no one but her. "Miss Elizabeth, there is much for us to speak of. But first, my sister?"

Both Darcy and Elizabeth looked up to see that Georgiana and Fitzwilliam had been watching the entire exchange with curiosity that was developing into concern. Darcy offered his arm, and Elizabeth held on tightly as he guided her towards his family. He looked down at her as she followed his lead and slowed to take in with amazement the treasure that was at his side, looking back up at him with an expression not even he could mistake.
Chapter 10

Caroline Bingley had never been more assured of her own self-importance than on the gloomy Thursday afternoon that Mr. Darcy's carriage returned to Netherfield Park. When he arrived at the doorstep, accompanied by both his sister and his cousin, her pride swelled to marvelous new heights. She escorted the honored guests to their newly decorated rooms, her thoughts swirling with surprise and speculation into Mr. Darcy's hasty departure and equally sudden return. Mr. Darcy was - she knew - a man who did not act in haste or out of impulse. The meaning of such an abrupt turn of events could not be left undiscovered. She was convinced that he returned with a purpose and was quick to assign motives to his actions that perfectly aligned to her own desires.

With as much patience as she could muster, she waited in the drawing room while the gentlemen and young lady recovered from their travels and refreshed themselves. She spent this time issuing short orders to her brother's staff, insisting that a splendid luncheon was spread in the drawing room. Only the ripest fruits and the finest wines were to be served to their distinguished friends.

The three finally joined the family in high spirits. The gentlemen spent the afternoon devoted to the comfort of their young companion, drawing her into conversations and preventing any opportunity for Caroline to extract information from the quiet Miss Darcy. In fact, the only time she was able to have any private conversation with one of the party was for a few moments with Mr. Darcy while the Colonel accompanied his cousin in a simple duet that, she noted, was only played in the nurseries of London homes.

"Sir," said she, taking a seat next to Darcy and lowering her voice, "you have become quite a mystery to us with your sudden return. And what a surprise to see Georgiana, too."

"I imagine it cannot be so very mysterious. Your brother himself wrote to me asking - no - insisting on my return and specifically stating that you and Mrs. Hurst had extended the invitation to include my sister," he replied dryly looking up just in time to catch a cautioning look from his sister.

Much to her satisfaction and delight, at breakfast the next morning he was heard to comment to her brother that he never before had so much anticipated a ball. He explained to the party that at a private ball at the country home of a dear friend such as Bingley he saw no harm in allowing his sister to enjoy her first evening in company. He even went so far as to confess that hoped this visit might be of great benefit to Georgina as she prepared for her entrance into the London social scene, either this season or the next. His decision - he informed the family - had been influenced, in part, by Bingley himself.

Whether it ever entered her brother's mind to consider the meaning behind Darcy's words she did not know. She could imagine only one purpose behind the declaration. She contemplated Georgiana's youth and the progress still needed towards becoming a stylish, sophisticated lady. There were sufficient time and resources, she concluded, that under her guidance, Georgiana would bring more than just money and power to the union. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, was fully formed and perfect in every aspect; they only thing wanting in him was a wife.

The days that followed were accompanied by weather that delighted no one in the neighborhood but herself. The Netherfield Party were confined to the estate under the constant threat - or presence - of rain, and Caroline Bingley had a captive audience. With every intention of showing both herself and her brother in the most flattering light as possible, she busied herself playing both hostess, matchmaker and temptress. As the days passed, she was much impressed with her progress. Every possible chance to arrange for her brother and Darcy's sister to be together was used to advantage and while no look appeared on either side that spoke of particular regard she
was perfectly content to be deceived into believing her hopes justified on this point.

Monday came, and Caroline anticipated a grand evening to set into action her schemes for the ball. After meeting with the cook and finalizing the details of an extravagant dinner she joined her sister and Georgiana in the sitting room for a quiet morning visit. "I hope this rain hasn't dampened your impressions of Netherfield, Georgiana. I imagine you had hoped to see more of the country and meet some our neighbors by now, but my sister and I can attest that you will not find the same caliber of company that you are accustomed to - I am sure - in town. And while it is a pretty part of the world and will do for now, it is nothing compared to Pemberly." With less conviction Caroline added, "it is a shame that the weather should prevent the gentlemen from dining with the officers tonight. Even I might have been persuaded to join if I thought it would buy me a glimpse of the dashing Mr. Wickham that the whole town is wild about."

"Some ladies in town might consider him a catch; I'm sure he will have his pick of partners all evening. I, of course, understand that the advantages of a man such as he can only be appreciated from a distance. Still, it is too bad for the ladies of the neighborhood that there are so few eligible gentleman. Poor Charles and Darcy - how they will suffer tomorrow night. It is such a pity you cannot dance with my brother."

"Oh, sister! Stop. Georgiana will think we are quite scandalous. But surely, even she will be appalled by the lack of lace on the gowns of our neighbors tomorrow night. I'm sure of it."

Caroline and Louisa continued in this manner for several minutes before either noticed the pallor that had overtaken their young friend. She sat in silence with the look of a ghost as the two ladies attempted to elicit a response. At length, Georgiana recovered enough to ask for her brother. Caroline sent for a servant who returned quickly with a worried Mr. Darcy.

Rushing to her side, Mr. Darcy could see that his sister was physically well, but that her mind and emotions were troubled. He quietly excused himself and his sister, and they escaped to the privacy of the library where they were soon joined by their cousin. Upon hearing the news of the recent addition to Meryton society, Darcy soothed and consoled Georgiana while Fitzwilliam formulated a course of action.

Later that afternoon as Caroline set out the final preparations for dinner her attention was drawn to activity coming from the entry. She approached to find Mr. Darcy and the Colonel in a heated exchange. Rounding the corner with an entirely innocent smile, followed shortly by an expression of surprise, she found the two dressed for dinner and waiting for a carriage.

"Mr. Darcy. Colonel. It was my understanding that you would be dining at Netherfield tonight?"

Fitzwilliam was quick to provide an explanation. "Please accept our apologies, dinner with the officers cannot be avoided. I would hope that you do not think a little mud would detain an officer from duty; I am honor bound to attend. Rest assured that your brother and brother-in-law will stay with you this evening to attend to any final preparations."

"But what of Miss Darcy, can you honestly be leaving with her so ill?"

"I assure you, Miss Bingley, her brother and I have seen to Georgiana and are confident that she will be well. All she is in need of is rest and solitude. She would be touched by your concern; I am sure. Would you arrange to have dinner sent to her room this evening?"

The evening to which Caroline had attached so much hope was not to be. She accompanied the servant who delivered Miss Darcy's tray and was determined to take advantage of a few moments
along with the girl. "Sweet child, you have the most attentive and best of brothers in Mr. Darcy, notwithstanding my own dear brother, of course. I hope that you have not worried him too much this afternoon. You are feeling better?"

"Thank you, yes. All of the excitement over tomorrow's events must have been too much for me. Rest is all I am in need of," Georgiana quietly hinted.

Not to be brushed off so easily, Caroline continued, "Pray, please assure me that your little episode today won't keep you from the ball tomorrow. It would be such a shame for you to miss this, your first social event. We should all be heartbroken not to have you with us, and there is one gentleman, I'm sure, that would be loathed to miss you."

"I cannot imagine who you mean," Georgiana replied flatly, confused and concerned by the direction that the conversation was taking. "Thank you very much for such a lovely meal Miss Bingley, and for you kind words of concern. I am sure that these both, along with quiet and solitude, are all that I need to recover."

Caroline returned to the dining room, disappointed and silent, to watch as her exquisitely elegant dinner was wasted on her family. She made one last walk through the drawing room with her sister and brother after dinner to ensure that the preparations were proceeding without complications and then headed to her room to cleanse her mind and reexamine status of her ambitious scheme.

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Caroline woke the next morning more determined than ever that the much-anticipated ball should be executed to perfection. She set about her work, ensuring that every last detail was attended to. When every place setting had been inspected, and each floral arrangement refashioned to satisfy her unforgiving eye she retired to her room to ready herself. At length, she was convinced that that no other lady who entered her brother's doors could claim to be better dressed or more fashionably accessorized. Her hair was curled and coifed, her ribbons tied and her laces straightened. A final glance in the mirror confirmed that she had never looked better. All that was needed to recover from the previous day's setback was to conjure images of Darcy leading her the opening dance.

At last, all the guests has been greeted, and the task of feigning interest in her tiresome neighbors was completed. There was only one being in the room that she had any desire of entertaining, and at her first opportunity she turned to the room to seek him out. In disbelief and frustration, she watched as Darcy crossed the floor with Miss Elizabeth Bennet on his arm.
"Miss Elizabeth Bennet, this is my sister, Miss Darcy."

Georgiana was beaming as she sank into a curtsey, "I am very pleased to meet you, I have been very much looking forward to making your acquaintance since coming into Hertfordshire." She paused for breath and looked up at her brother for approval of her start. Darcy smiled back at her with warmth.

Elizabeth could not help but notice the affection between the siblings and the expression of tenderness as Darcy looked upon his sister, and oh! how ardently did she long to know whether any such feelings were also directed towards herself. She could fancy that he looked at her often and that those looks lingered longer than necessary. But, though this might be imagined, she could not be ignorant to the tightening in her chest as her eyes caught his.

"And here is my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, joining us from London." He announced with slightly less enthusiasm yet a hint of humor tingeing his words.

As she turned her attention to the unfamiliar gentleman, he took her hand and gently kissed the back of her gloves, all the while directing his eyes at Darcy. "My cousin tells me that you are one of five sisters?"

"Your cousin speaks the truth. I have four sisters. There you see my eldest sister, Jane, walking with Mr. Bingley. And my two youngest, Kitty and Lydia, are visiting with Colonel and Mrs. Forster. And there, by the pianoforte, is Mary."

"I have always wished for a sister," Georgiana stated wistfully.

Elizabeth laughed, "it has often been said that one should be careful what one wishes for. While I love all my sisters dearly, I confess that they can be a bit overwhelming - especially when taken as a whole."

"I am sure you are all very lovely; my brother tells me that you are all accomplished and that at least one of you plays the piano?" Georgiana looked to Elizabeth eagerly.

"Both my sister, Mary, and I play. She is quite the superior, I assure you, but neither of us are masters. I understand that you are fond of music and play very well, I hope that there will be an occasion to hear you while you are in Hertfordshire."

"Oh, no. I mean, I do not play very well, but I am very fond of music."

"I am sure you are too modest. Your brother thinks you do, and as you know, he is never wrong." Both ladies looked up at the gentleman in question with smiles and Elizabeth proceeded hesitantly, "I should very much like to introduce Miss Darcy to my sisters, most especially Jane and Mary?" Darcy nodded his approval and Elizabeth turned back to his sister, "Mary is almost your age and shares an affection for music."

"Oh yes, that would be delightful, but first, I had hoped I would watch you and my brother dance."

Elizabeth blushed. "I have it on very good authority that your brother rarely dances," she replied playfully.

"Miss Bennet, if you are not otherwise engaged, would you do me the honor of dancing the first
"set with me?" he asked in a lowered tone.

"Thank you, yes."

The four continued in such engaged conversation that they were blind to the attention they were drawing from their neighbors and their hostess. Finally, the dancing commenced and Darcy took Elizabeth's arm. Georgiana glowed with pride watching her handsome brother lead her new friend into position. Jane smiled with uncontained pleasure as she and Mr. Bingley met the other couple on the dance floor. Caroline's astonishment was beyond expression; she scowled, coloured, doubted, and was silent until Colonel Fitzwilliam applied for her hand.

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth danced in delicious silence for some time until Elizabeth gaily began. "We must have some conversation, Mr. Darcy. You ought to make some remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples."

He smiled and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said.

"Very well. That reply will do for the present. Perhaps by and by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones."

In a moment of inspiration, he asked, "what think you of books? When last we spoke I recall that we shared similar tastes in reading."

"No - I cannot talk of books in a ballroom; my head is always full of something else."

"The present always occupies you in such scenes - does it?" said he, with a look of doubt.

"Not at all, in fact, I believe my mind was very much caught up in the past. At our last meeting - I confess. I was much surprised by the abrupt nature of your departure from Hertfordshire."

"I surprised even myself, Miss Bennet."

"You once described yourself as a serious and practical man, I suppose only something of great importance could have taken you away from your friends on such short notice."

"It is true," he replied.

"And yet you returned?"

"As you see."

"I do hope that you were able to find satisfaction in town." Elizabeth waited for a response, but his silence was the only answer she received and so she continued, "It is particularly incumbent on those called away on urgent business to be secure in settling that business before leaving again in haste, is it not?"

"May I ask to what these questions tend?"

"To your character. I am trying to make it out."

"And what is your success?"

She shook her head. "I do not get on at all. You puzzle me exceedingly."

"I can readily believe it," he answered gravely. "I fear that my performance of late has not reflected credit on myself. I very much hope that you shall have sufficient opportunity in the future to take my likeness - if it would please you."
The effect was immediate. Elizabeth colored and missed a step as she processed Darcy’s words. After some time she looked up at him and answered in a whisper, "it would please me very much."

The partners delighted in a peace interrupted only by private glances and secretive smiles for several minutes until Darcy moved to a new topic.

"I understand, Elizabeth, that you have a cousin visiting Longbourn at present, and that he has accompanied your family this evening."

"Yes, Mr. Darcy," replied she with surprise at the abrupt change of subject."That is Mr. Collins," nodding in her cousin’s direction, "dancing with my sister, Lydia."

"I would be pleased if you would introduce me to him at the next break."

"He would be honored, I'm sure, Mr. Darcy. But let me warn you, he is a man whose company you may not find great pleasure in," Elizabeth laughingly responded.

"That may be," Darcy replied, a glint of mischief in his eye, as he watched the gentleman in question step out of place and crush the toes of his partner. "And yet, I believe the introduction cannot be avoided if I wish to have any conversation with your father or mother tonight."

Bewildered and astonished, Elizabeth tried to reconcile what Darcy could mean by such a gesture. "As fate would have it, Mr. Darcy, he does have one claim that may endear him to you. He is come from his parsonage at Hunsford where he is acquainted, I believe, with your relations of Rosings Park."

"I see," said he with understanding. "And was it Mr. Collins who perpetuated the story - the misunderstanding - you alluded to earlier?"

Elizabeth blushed and looked down towards the floor. Oh! Why must I have showed so little restraint, what must he think of me? she chastised herself. "Mr. Collins confirmed that a union was likely between you and your cousin, but I was first informed of your engagement..."

"My rumored engagement!"

"Yes, I was first informed of your rumored engagement by a new officer in town who professes an acquaintance with you, sir. A Mr. Wickham."

The change of his countenance could not be ignored as Darcy stiffened and his color heightened. "And you believed this man accounts of me?" he accused.

Elizabeth bristled at the unjust anger directed at her and responded defensively, "I had no reason to question him, especially when his claims were seconded by a disinterested party. Your abrupt departure was easily explained by this circumstance." She watched as the anger in his face gave way to pain and then confusion. Remembering her own pain, she added honestly, "but I had hoped that he was not correct."

"And what is your opinion of Mr. Wickham?" he asked warily.

"At first, I found him charming and perhaps he is. However, his manner did not strike me as that of a true gentleman." She paused as she felt Darcy relaxing. "He takes a great interest in your affairs, I noticed, and spoke of little else with me; though, I cannot say that he spoke highly of you."
The hints of distaste in her voice as she talked of Wickham brought more pleasure to Darcy than any other words she might have used to convey her thoughts on the man. It was enough for him that she, too, had not been fooled. But the possibility that she might have been prejudiced against Wickam by her feelings for Darcy was more than he could have hoped for.

"You are correct, Wickham is no gentleman. Now is not the time, but someday I will explain the connection between our families. I hope you will believe me when I say he is not a man to be trusted."

Their conversation took a less serious turn, and they spoke more of Georgiana, and Bingley, and the weather. Elizabeth expressed her regret that her regular walks had been prevented by the recent rains, and Darcy noted that Bingley was desperate to return to visiting his neighbors and ride out on his land. Without ever speaking the words, the promise of a walk through the woods and paths of Longbourn was settled upon for the very next day.

As the dance came to an end Mr. Darcy drew Elizabeth closer and spoke in a deep, low tone which she could just barely make out,"Miss Elizabeth, I cannot express fully my pleasure in seeing you again."

The rest of the evening brought her great amusement. She was delighted by Mr. Bingley's attentions to Jane, who made a point of remaining close to her throughout the night. Her mother and sisters surprised her; their words and behavior may have raised the occasional eyebrow, but through the course of the evening did little to injure her enjoyment. Lydia and Kitty spent so much of their time trying to disengage themselves or hide from Mr. Collins that she often went for half an hour without seeing or hearing the two.

She owed her greatest joy to her friend Miss Lucas, who often joined her, and good-naturedly drew her attention to those little conversations and activities in the room that brought Mr. Darcy also into sight. She, too, was not immune from Mr. Darcy's further notice; though often standing within a very short distance of her, he never came near enough to speak. She thought it likely this was the consequence of Miss Bingley's ever watchful eye but delighted in the closeness.
Mr. Darcy was much surprised the next morning, as he entered the dining room, to find that he was not the first of the Netherfield party to rise. Had he given it one moment's thought, he would remember that sitting in front of him was a soldier, a leader, a man who did not break from routines and responsibilities after one late night of dancing and diversion. But Darcy did not think about that. His mind was much more agreeably occupied.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam furtively set aside a large stack of papers he had been poring over and replaced his grave expression with feigned exasperation and indignity as his cousin joined him. "And so the dashing hero of the Hertfordshire has finally awoken. I was beginning to worry that last night had done you in, old friend. What plans do you have for the day? I imagine that after the excitement of yesterday, you will settle in for a peaceful afternoon in the library or a turn in the gardens with Georgiana?"

Darcy shifted in his seat and pushed away thoughts of his most immediate hopes for the day. "I'm expecting a response from London on that property near Shropshire that I wrote to you about and have a few other matters of business that must be seen to. If you have time, I would like to hear your thoughts on a - how shall I put it - unconventional opportunity that I have been approached with."

Soon the two cousins were lost in talk of crops and machinery. Darcy absently stood up and began slowly pacing the room. He refilled his coffee cup and drained it almost as quickly. He then collected his jacket and gloves while his cousin looked on curiously. "And where are you off to at such an ungodly hour, Darce?"

Realizing that he had already turned towards the entry, he replied with forced nonchalance, "Oh, I thought I might benefit from a little fresh air before rest of the household stirs."

"An excellent idea, I'm sure. A stretch of the legs and some vigorous activity is just what this old soldier needs." Richard rose and collected his walking stick.

Darcy faltered, "I don't want to keep you from your correspondence." He nodded towards the pile of papers on the table hopefully.

"Think nothing of it, Cousin. Now, tell me," Fitzwilliam asked cheerfully as he pushed Darcy towards the door, "which direction did you have in mind this fine morning?"

At the same time the two gentlemen passed a sturdy oak that marked the edge of the Netherfield estate, Elizabeth tiptoed down the stairs of Longbourn, pulled a bonnet over her wild curls and slipped through the kitchen entrance. She skipped past the rose gardens and removed a warm bun from her sleeve that she had snuck when the cook had turned her watchful eyes. Drawing in a delicious, yeasty breath she broke her fast as she entered the lane.

Lost in memories of the night before and hopes for the day ahead she nearly collided with Charlotte as they met at the path from Lucas Lodge.

"Lizzy! I did not think to find you out on your walk this morning; I much imagined you would be home with Jane waiting for visitors."

A blush spread over Elizabeth's cheeks, "I'm sure we are safe from any guests for quite some time this morning; I thought the whole neighborhood to be still asleep."
"You are not the only one who enjoys the precious moments of solitude that a morning walk allows. But I won't complain to have your company, dearest friend."

Charlotte took Elizabeth's arm before any protest could be made and continued down the road at a slow, but steady, pace.

The two parties chanced upon one another a quarter mile outside of Meryton where a path broke off into a lovely little area of the forest. Each expressed their surprise at finding the other out so early and on this quaint stretch of road; though Charlotte noted that both her friend and Mr. Darcy exchanged a brief look of mischief as they first met.

The four continued down the wooded aisle, Charlotte and Fitzwilliam solely taking on the task of conversation for nearly ten minutes. "Miss Lucas, my cousin here is widely known to be a silent, brooding man; but I thought your friend to be a lively, spirited sort? Tell me, what have I done to offend?" He teased.

"My apologies sir, I find myself lost in the beauty of the morning. You and Miss Lucas seem to have discovered a special appreciation of the neighborhood's goose grass. I find there was little use for my novice observations." Duly chastened, Elizabeth joined in their easy banter until the party reached a narrowing in the path that would only allow pairs to continue.

Mr. Darcy deftly secured Elizabeth's arm, and they walked ahead in silence until nearing a stream whose gentle babbling offered assurances of private conversation.

"What a surprise to find you out with Miss Lucas this morning, how lucky that you were able to secure a chaperone," the gentleman began with a smile.

"Oh, most certainly," Elizabeth allowed. "And you have found yourself with a protector this morning too, I see."

"Yes, it appears we, each of us, are not meant to be wandering the woods alone, no matter what we might have wanted."

"But that is not to say we cannot enjoy one another's company now, is it?"

"No, no it most certainly is not." Darcy leaned in closer to Elizabeth, lowering his voice. "When last we met you were attempting to sketch my character with very little success. I had hoped to help you along, and maybe I still can. Pray, what can I tell you, what questions can I answer?"

"Mr. Darcy, there is so much I want to ask of you that I do not know where to begin? I am afraid that once I start I shan't know how to stop."

The thought of never having to leave Elizabeth's side, to continue as they were without end was a welcome prospect indeed. "Then let us agree to put but one piece of the puzzle in place today and I shall return as often as needed for you to complete your assessment."

Elizabeth considered this proposal with satisfaction. With only a moment's hesitation, she revealed the one question that had pressed on her mind and kept her from her sleep for endless days and nights.

"Why did you leave? Why did you return to London so suddenly?" She asked softly, a rare vulnerability echoing through her words.

At length, Darcy recovered from the ache that pressed down on his chest as he relived the pain that had overcome him when he fled to London those many weeks ago. "You must know how ardently I love and admire you. In vain I struggled, it would not do. I am a selfish being, and I
thought I could find peace by retreating and isolating myself. That I could escape Hertfordshire and things would be as they always had been, before I met you. It was cowardly; it was weak. But it taught me one thing."

Elizabeth stood speechlessly, tears brimming her eyes. Darcy longed to reach out and brush them aside, to discover if they were tears of sorrow, of joy, of anger.

"It taught me that I cannot find answers to questions I am unwilling to ask."

"Such as?" Darcy could just barely make out the soft, raspy words that escaped her.

"If all that I have said and done, and am still but too ready to say and do, have not sufficiently proved what my real feelings are and must be ever towards you, I have no other proof to offer. Is it possible... I have insulted you, I have run from you. Still, despite this, could you care for me? Could you love me?"

The whole world went still as Elizabeth processed what she had just heard.

Finally, Darcy reached out to her and gently turned her face up towards him so that he could look into her deep, brown eyes. He did not need to hear the words that next she spoke, for those eyes revealed all that she felt and thought. "Yes. I could love you. I do love you."

Darcy's heart nearly burst as Elizabeth smiled up at him, and then laughed.

A tree branch cracked behind them, and the spell was broken. They both looked towards the sound to find Colonel Fitzwilliam and Charlotte watching with concern and relief, respectively.

In silence, they continued until they reached the end of the path and their inevitable parting. Darcy bowed deeply and raised Elizabeth's gloved hand, gently turning her palm upwards and placing a soft kiss, barely a breath, onto the inside of her bare wrist just above her white kid leather. "Until tomorrow, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth," he whispered.

Elizabeth smiled broadly, unable to tear her eyes from her still burning hand. She was thinking that she could grow accustomed to such intimate address. "Until tomorrow, Mr. Darcy."

As the two separated, Colonel Fitzwilliam was struck by the contentment in his cousin's expression and the hesitation in his farewells. The gentlemen walked in silence for some time, occasionally making a comment on the changes in the season or the predictions for the weather until Fitzwilliam voiced the concerns that had weighed on him since first seeing Miss Elizabeth Bennet approaching on the path. "Do you mean to make an offer?"

One firm nod was all that was needed for Darcy to confirm his cousin's fears.

Fitzwilliam could not keep from betraying his shock. "I am astounded! She is an exceptional creature, to be sure, but there are certain disadvantages that you cannot deny. How did you allow yourself to get so deeply caught up? You, who has always been so fastidious. I grant that these are neither generous, nor amiable feelings; but, in this world of turmoil and toil, a man should calculate upon his powers of resistance before he goes into the arena."

"This is not Rome, and I am no gladiator, Richard." Darcy laughed heartily before continuing with sincerity, "I have given this serious thought and considered both the advantages and the disadvantages of the match. I was - as you so aptly put it - neither generous nor amiable when first we met, but it was not long before I realized that Elizabeth exceeds anything I have ever beheld in beauty and mind. I have tried resisting and have learnt that though I may have the strength to continue in such a manner, I lack the will - it has only brought me misery. It may not be a popular notion, but I would much rather choose happiness."
Colonel Fitzwilliam was a man who rarely gave himself over to feelings of resentment or jealousy, but for the briefest moment he experienced the full weight of sentiments not stirred since boyhood, of the injustice and cruelty of being a second son.

"You are a lucky man, Darce. Not all men can marry where they choose and those who can rarely choose well. You will be very happy, I am sure of it."

Charlotte glowed from the exercise and excitement as the two ladies returned home. Some might even say she looked quite pretty at that moment. "What a pleasant morning, Lizzy. I am surprised how quickly the time has passed, but I suppose that is how it must be when you are in good company."

"Yes, I believe you are right, Charlotte," Elizabeth replied wistfully.

A sigh accompanied these words, which Charlotte respected in silence; but after a short pause, she continued, sharing with Lizzy the humorous anecdotes that the Colonel shared from his time in Spain and his biting impression of Miss Bingley. She was content to talk, and her friend was content to listen. In this manner, they made their way back to the Bennet's estate gratified and happy.

As Elizabeth and Charlotte passed back through the garden and pushed the gate open to Longbourn, they were nearly run over by Kitty. "Lizzy, Charlotte! You will never believe it. Mr. Collins has made an offer to Lydia, and she has refused!"

What conflicting feelings did Elizabeth take back into the house that morning.

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